

Foreign Language Attributions and Achievement in Foreign Language Classes

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between EFL learners' attributions for success and failure in learning a foreign language and their achievement in foreign language classes. To this end, the Causal Dimension Scale (CDS-II), and the Language Achievement Attribution Scale (LAAS) were administered to 209 EFL learners studying at English language institutes in Mashhad, a city in north-eastern Iran. Six causal attributions (ability, effort, task difficulty, mood, luck, and teacher) together with four attributional properties (locus of causality, stability, personal control, and external control) were compared with learners' English language achievement. To see whether there is any significant relationship between learners' attributions and their English language achievement, Pearson product-moment correlation was applied to the data. The results showed significant correlations between LAAS as well as CDS-II subscales and learners' final scores. Results from Regression Analysis (using LAAS) revealed that effort attribution was the best predictor for achievement, indicating that students who attributed the outcome of their test to effort received higher grades on the final exam. Moreover, results from Regression Analysis (using CDS-II) indicated that only stable and personal attributions significantly predicted students' foreign language achievement. Finally, statistical results were discussed, and implications for English language teaching were suggested.

Keywords: Attribution theory, Questionnaire, Foreign language achievement, Correlation, Regression analysis

1. Introduction

As an approach to motivation, attribution theory (Weiner, 1985; 1986) focuses on people's beliefs about themselves and how they explain their perceived successes and failures. The theory, therefore, lies within the constructivist framework and deals with the ways by which individuals construct their own views and meanings from the world around them (Williams & Burden, 1997). Williams and Burden (1997) proposed attribution theory as an area that could be explored to reach a better understanding of individuals. It relates to motivation in that the attributions of success and failure can influence people's motivation to tackle future tasks (Jarvis, 2005). For example, the extent to which a person attributes their failure to be due to lack of ability or lack of effort affects that person's future actions (Williams & Burden, 1997). In the following conversation (taken from Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008, P. 38), for instance, each speaker is describing the cause he or she attributes to the same action:

Sheryl: Hey, did you see how Professor Smythe looked at me when I asked him that question?

Theo: Yeah, he looked like he was really confused!

Sheryl: Really? I thought he looked like he thought I was the dumbest student ever.

Theo: No way. I'm sure he was just trying to figure out the answer.

Kyle: I thought he was coming down with the flu.

The above conversation clearly displays how individual students attribute an action (the way the professor looked at Sheryl) to different causes (confusion, opinion, flu) each of which is likely to affect the way students might respond to it.

Weiner (1986) introduces four sets of attributions, namely ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck, to which people tend to hang on their perceived successes and failures. These attribution factors are related to three dimensions of locus of causality (internal versus external), stability, and controllability (Weiner, 1985, 2006). Locus of causality refers to whether individuals perceive the causes of events as internal or external to the self. Stability indicates whether or not the perceived causes of success or failure will be constant in the future. Controllability refers to the extent to which individuals have control over different causes.

As Graham (1991, p. 7) points out, causal attributions, i.e., ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck, are "classifiable within one of the eight cells of a Locus \times Stability \times Controllability dimensional matrix." Ability, for example, is internal, stable, and uncontrollable; Effort is internal, unstable, and controllable; Task difficulty is external, stable, and controllable; Luck is external, unstable, and uncontrollable. Table 1 compares some examples of causal attributions placed within different cells of such a matrix:

Table 1. Attributions classified by dimensions of locus, stability, and controllability.

	<i>Internal</i>		<i>External</i>	
	<i>Controllable</i>	<i>Uncontrollable</i>	<i>Controllable</i>	<i>Uncontrollable</i>
<i>Stable</i>	Long-term effort	Aptitude	Instructor Bias	Difficulty of school requirements
<i>Unstable</i>	Situational effort	Health	Help from others	Chance

* From An Attributional Theory of Motivation and Emotion by B. Weiner, 1986, New York: Springer-Verlag.

2. Literature review

Most of the studies investigating the relationship between attributions and achievement have been conducted in the areas of mathematics and sports (Basturk & Yavuz, 2010; Bempechat, Ginsburg, Nakkula, & Wu, 1996; Boruchovitch, 2004; Green & Holeman, 2004; Powers, Choroszy, Douglas, & Cool, 1986).

Only a few studies have been conducted to date to study learners' attributions for success and failure in the area of learning second or foreign languages (Gray, 2005; Pishghadam & Modarresi, 2008; Tsi, 2000; Williams & Burden, 1997; Williams, Burden, & Al-Baharna, 2001; Williams, Burden, Poulet, & Maun, 2004). These studies mostly focus on *identifying* second or foreign language learners' attributions for success and failure. However, the *role* of attributional factors has not received enough attention in second or foreign language learning achievement.

To the researchers' best knowledge, only two studies have attempted to date to design a scale for the specific measurement of foreign language learners' attributions (Hsieh, 2004; Pishghadam & Modarresi, 2008). Pishghadam and Modarresi (2008) designed and validated a questionnaire of Attribution Theory for Foreign Language Learners (ATFLL) comprising four subscales of *emotions*, *self-image*, *intrinsic motivation*, and *language policy*. Then, they applied the questionnaire to students in Ferdowsi University of Mashhad. The results indicated that students attributed success and failure more to *intrinsic motivation* and *language policy*. Hsieh (2004) also examined the relationship between foreign language learners' attribution and their foreign language achievement. The results indicated that those learners who made more internal, stable, and personal attributions received higher grades in foreign language classes than those who made more external, unstable, and non-personal attributions. In a similar vein, Hsieh & Schallert (2008) observed that ability attributions strongly predicted foreign language achievement. In another study, Kun and Liming (2007) investigated the role of achievement attributions on self-regulated language learning behaviors. They observed that those learners who attributed success to internal factors, such as ability or effort, demonstrated more self-regulated language learning behaviors. They recommended that foreign language teachers help learners shape positive beliefs about the causes of success and failure in learning a foreign language. Moreover, Lei and Qin (2009) explored the relationship between Chinese EFL learners' attributions and their English learning achievement. The results revealed that two attributional factors, i.e. teacher and effort, strongly predicted success in learning English as a foreign language.

Having reviewed the literature which concerned the role of attributions in second or foreign language learning (e.g., Hsieh, 2004; Hsieh & Schallert, 2008; Kun & Liming, 2007; Lei & Qin, 2009), the researchers came up with quite divergent findings. Therefore, they sought to investigate the relationship between causal attributions as well as their properties and Iranian EFL learners' foreign language achievement.

2.1 Purpose of the study

As noted earlier, research in the field of language learning has focused mostly on identifying second or foreign language learners' attributions (e.g., Tsi, 2000; Williams & Burden, 1997; Williams, et al., 2001; Williams, et al., 2004). Due to the importance of attributional factors in language learning, this study pursues the role of learners' attributions in their foreign language achievement in the Iranian EFL context. Therefore, this research is conducted to find out answers to the following questions:

Q1: What are the predictors of foreign language attribution (when measured by LAAS) in EFL learners' foreign language achievement?

Q2: What are the predictors of foreign language attribution (when measured by CDS-II) in EFL learners' foreign language achievement?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Participants for this study consisted of 209 EFL learners studying at five private language institutes (College, Ferdowsi Language Institute, the Iran Language Institute, Kish Air, and Jihad-e-daneshgahi) in Mashhad, a city in north-eastern Iran. These institutes were selected because they were among the most creditable private language institutes in Mashhad. The participants were 166 females and 43 males whose age varied from 10 and 33 years old (mean = 18.39, standard deviation = 3.89), and their language proficiency varied from elementary to advanced level.

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 Causal Dimension Scale (CDS-II)

Developed by McAuley, Duncan, and Russell (1992), this questionnaire was designed to measure causal attributions for performance. It comprises 12 items measuring four attribution dimensions, namely, locus of causality, stability, personal control, and external control that are scored on a likert scale of 9-points. Subscales scores can range from 3 to 27, with higher values representing attributions that are more internal, stable, personally controllable, and externally controllable. The reliability estimates for the four dimensions are as follows: locus of causality, $r = .60$ to $.71$; stability, $r = .65$ to $.68$; external control, $r = .71$ to $.91$; personal control, $r = .71$ to $.90$ (McAuley, Duncan, & Russell, 1992). In this study the reliability of the whole items (i.e. 12 items) estimated by Cronbach Alpha was $.74$.

3.2.2 Language Achievement Attribution Scale (LAAS)

This self-report instrument, designed to measure causal attributions for success and failure in learning a second or foreign language, was developed by Hsieh (2004). The questionnaire consists of eight questions that are scored on a 6-point scale. Firstly, students are asked their score on the last English language test they had taken and how satisfied they were with the result. Students were then being asked to rate the degree to which they believed the result of their test was due to their ability, effort, task difficulty, mood, luck, and teacher. In the present study the reliability of LAAS estimated by Cronbach Alpha was $.45$. The relatively low

reliability of the scale is acceptable because it comprises only 6 items each measuring a different attribution and, thus, its length has affected its reliability coefficient.

3.3 Procedures

The two instruments mentioned above were distributed among 209 EFL learners. The administration phase occurred during class hours by prior arrangement with the instructors. The instruments were administered to students in one session and they were asked to fill them out under standard conditions. Students were asked not to mention their names on the questionnaires; rather, in order to receive reliable attributions for success and failure on the part of learners, the questionnaires were coded numerically. On average, the responding duration was fifteen minutes. At the end of the semester, the respective teachers were asked to report their students' scores on the final exam.

The data gathered from the two questionnaires was analyzed by utilizing SPSS version 16.0. To examine the normality of the distribution, descriptive statistics was employed. To investigate the role of learners' attributions in their English achievement, Pearson product-moment correlation was applied to the data. To find out to what extent attributions might have predictive power in learners' foreign language achievement, regression analysis was run.

4. Results

4.1 The results of correlation between all students' attributions (LAAS and CDS-II) and English achievement

Table 1. Correlations between learners' attributions and their English achievement

	Achievement
Ability	0.141*
Effort	0.450**
Task Difficulty	-0.084
Mood	-0.058
Luck	-0.223**
Teacher	-0.053
Internal locus of causality	0.154*
External control	0.058
Stability	0.290**
Personal Control	0.262**

** Shows the existence of significant relationship at the level of 0.01

* Shows the existence of significant relationship at the level of 0.05

To examine whether there is any significant correlation between the learners' attributions and English achievement, Pearson product-moment correlation was employed. The results revealed that there is a significant correlation between English achievement and effort attributions ($r = 0.450$, $p < 0.01$), ability attributions ($r = 0.141$, $p < 0.05$), and luck

attributions ($r = -0.223$, $p < 0.01$). Moreover, significant correlations were found between achievement and internal locus ($r = 0.154$, $p < 0.05$), stability ($r = 0.290$, $p < 0.01$), and personal control ($r = 0.262$, $p < 0.01$) (see Table 1).

4.2 Prediction of English achievement by LAAS factors

To further analyze the data, the researchers conducted the regression analysis with a Stepwise method. The results reveal which variables are important in predicting foreign language achievement. English achievement explained 25% of the total variance, (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.25$, $p < .05$) using a combination of effort attribution, luck attribution, and mood attribution. Effort attribution was the best predictor for achievement (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.20$, $p < .05$), indicating that students who attributed the outcome of their test to effort received higher grades on the final exam. On the other hand, luck attribution and mood attribution were the best predictors of lower grades on the final exam. Table 2 presents the results for English achievement being regressed on the variables of interest in this study (LAAS).

Table 2. The results of regression analysis for learners' attributions (LAAS) and their English achievement

Predictors	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	P	B
<i>English Achievement</i>						
Effort	0.451	0.204	0.200	52.462	0.00	0.471
Luck	0.504	0.254	0.246	34.677	0.00	-0.221
Mood	0.518	0.269	0.258	24.873	0.04	-0.124

4.3 Prediction of English achievement by CDS-II dimensions

Table 3 presents the results for English achievement being regressed on the variables of interest in this study (CDS-II). The results reveal which variables are important in predicting foreign language achievement. English achievement explained 10% of the total variance, (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.10$, $p < .05$) using a combination of stable and personal attributions. Attributing success and failure to stable and personal factors was the best predictor for achievement (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.08$, $p < .05$), indicating that students who attributed the outcome of their test to these factors received higher grades on the final exam.

Table 3. The results of regression analysis for learners' attributions (CDS-II) and their English achievement

Predictors	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	P	B
<i>English Achievement</i>						
Personal control	0.305	0.093	0.089	20.632	0.00	0.210
Stability	0.340	0.115	0.106	13.029	0.02	0.176

5. Discussion

As stated earlier, the dearth of research has led us to undertake an application of Weiner's attribution theory to university EFL learners in the context of Iran. Therefore, the present study sought to find out, in the first place, if there was any relationship between Iranian EFL learners' attributions and their achievement of the English language in private Language Institutes.

As far as causal dimensions (CDS-II) are concerned, the present study indicated that attributing success or failure to stable and personal factors has a significant positive effect on EFL learners' achievement scores: a combination of stable and personal factors explained 10% of the variances in English achievement (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.10$, $p < .05$). This finding is similar to that obtained in Hsieh (2004).

With regards to attribution factors (LAAS), the results of the present study revealed that there was a significant positive relationship between effort attributions and foreign language achievement. This finding is in line with that obtained by Lei and Qin (2009). Because effort attribution was found to be positively correlated with ($r = 0.450$, $p < 0.01$) and strongly predictive of (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.20$, $p < .05$) foreign language achievement, it is important for teachers to recognize the influencing role that attributing success and failure to effort on the part of learners play in their success in learning a foreign language. Reminding learners that their failure in learning a foreign language is due to their own lack of effort helps them recognize that they did not actually make sufficient effort on the task and, consequently, makes them compensate for their failure the next time they are faced with the same task. Fortunately, as Williams and Burden (1997) correctly point out, learners' attributions for success and failure are "changeable" (p. 108), and teachers can intervene either to modify, change, or even reinforce learners' perceptions. However, as Hong (2008, p. 66) states, "students' attributions for success or failure evolve over a long time and are difficult to change. On the way to the second language learning, teachers should ensure that students experience meaningful successes with teaching strategies by providing authentic, appropriately challenging tasks and by teaching strategies explicitly so that students know how to apply them. Teaching strategies can be quite powerful in building students' motivation for the second language acquisition."

Therefore, as Lei and Qin (2009, p. 46) point out, "effort is very important in learning, without which learners could achieve nothing." The learner who attributes failure to lack of effort, i.e. to their own actions and characteristics, feels more responsible for their actions; teachers, thus, should remind learners of the value of effort. According to Hsieh (2004, p. 143), "when learners feel that they are responsible for the outcome of their grades, they tend to become more involved and active in the learning process."

Also, *ability* attributions were significantly correlated with foreign language achievement ($r = 0.141$, $p < 0.05$). This finding is partly in line with that obtained in Hsieh (2004) who concluded that ability attributions had the strongest correlation with learners' language achievement, and Hsieh and Schallert (2008) whose results indicated that ability attributions were significantly predictive of learners' achievement.

On the other hand, attributing success or failure to *mood* proved to be associated with lower achievement scores, though only marginally. Likewise, *luck* attributions were associated with lower scores on the final exam ($r = -0.223$, $p < 0.01$). Therefore, those learners who attribute their successes or failures to *luck* are recommended to change their attitudes since luck is an external and unstable factor over which learners have very little control.

Since, in the present study and other studies, different attributional factors induced different achievement levels in learners, a change in learners' attribution patterns would produce a change in achievement scores. Therefore, language teachers are recommended to emphasize the value of learners' effort in learning a foreign language, despite the fact that language learners have self-perceptions of whether they have foreign language learning aptitude or not.

6. Conclusion

This study has tried to achieve three goals: First, to put it conservatively, the study has tried to fill the gap in the Iranian collectivist culture by approaching attribution theory from a foreign language teaching perspective. Second, it has tried to take into consideration a "dimensions + reasons" approach to measuring attribution. Otherwise stated, the role of attributional dimensions (locus of causality, stability, and controllability) as well as causal attributions (ability, effort, task difficulty, mood, luck, and teacher) were explored in learners' English language achievement which, according to Hsieh and Schallert (2008), provides us with more information about learners' attributions than when we consider only one approach. Last but not least, the present study has given credence to the study conducted by Hsieh (2004), who hypothesized that attributing success or failure to stable and personal factors might have a significant and positive influence on foreign language learners' achievement. However, unlike the studies conducted by Hsieh (2004) and Hsieh and Schallert (2008), the results of the present study indicated that effort attributions, more than ability attributions, took responsibility for higher scores in foreign language achievement. It may be because the study was conducted in the Iranian collectivist culture; as Smith and Bond (1998) point out, "a tendency to make effort attributions may be a characteristic of all collectivist cultures" (as cited in Brown, Gray, & Ferrara, 2005, p. 6). On the other hand, Hsieh's (2004) study had been conducted in the American individualist culture in which ability is highly praised. Moreover, while Hsieh and Schallert (2008) found ability attribution as the only predictor of language achievement, in the present study a combination of effort, luck, and mood attributions proved significant in predicting learners' achievement grades.

Since attribution factors are changeable from culture to culture (Brown, Gray & Ferrara, 2005) and from context to context (Yang, 2009), it is suggested that the study be replicated in different cultural contexts, with different subjects, and using a variety of instruments, in order to ascertain whether there is a pattern in learners' attributions of success or failure across different cultures in the field of second or foreign language learning. In what follows, the researchers have considered limitations of the present study and also some suggestions for further research:

1. In the current study, learners' gender was not considered. The relationship between learners' attributions and English achievement could be investigated in terms of gender.

2. This study was carried out only in language institutes. Further research could be conducted in high schools in order to compare the results.
3. In the present study, learners' attributions were assessed solely based on the data gathered through questionnaires. Other researchers could add a qualitative component to this study (e.g. talking to students and teachers), which may give us more information about learners' attributions. A combination of questionnaires and interview could be used by researchers in subsequent studies.
4. A final area for future research would be to replicate this study in other cultural contexts in order to gain a solid understanding of the role of culture in learners' foreign language attributions for success and failure.

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