

Attribution for self-evaluation in learning English

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Abstract

This paper considers the causal attributions of 121 Japanese university students as to whether they think they did well or not in English language courses by evaluating their own class performance and achievement. The results imply respondents think teachers and classmates influenced their learning outcomes more than other factors. Those who think of themselves as successful are significantly higher than those who think of themselves as having failed in effort and interest. This indicates 1) building up appropriate rapport among learners, and between learners and teachers, 2) providing motivating learning materials, and 3) reminding learners of the necessity of effort are important to help learners feel they are successful language learners.

Key words : Attribution theory, causal attributions, effort, interest

1. Introduction

This paper investigates English language learners' affective aspects regarding perceived causes of success and failure. For what reasons do they think they are successful or unsuccessful? How do they explain their success or lack of it? Why do they think they did not make enough progress? Educators need to focus on causal attributions if there are some differences among reasons why they succeed or fail, and investigate how these affect learners' subsequent learning. It is meaningful to acknowledge learners' perceived causes of achievement, and help them to enhance their learning, and reflect on failure. This will eliminate some potential factors hindering their learning.

2. Learners' motivation and attributional causes

Attribution theory enlightens understanding of learners' motivation in the learning environment. Research on motivation for learning a second language was initiated by Gardner and Lambert (1972) who introduced integrative and instrumental motivation. In the 1990's, Deci and Ryan (1985) brought a more educational psychological aspect of learners to explain motivation with intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for learning foreign languages. Dörnyei (2001, 2003a) used psychological elements more extensively in the foreign language education field with expectancy value theories, achievement motivation, self efficacy theory, social motivation, and so forth. Attribution theory is a part of these diversified motivational theories.

Attribution theory is not used only in the field of language learning. Weiner (1979, 1986)

investigated causal attributions for hyperactivity, mastery, parole decisions, loneliness and affiliation, and depression. Also, an Internet search using Eric shows 3,350 results and Science Direct provides 60,432 hits with the keywords “attribution theory” (retrieved on Nov. 27, 2010). This indicates how widely affective aspects of individual behaviors are accepted and used in various fields.

As for academic settings, a number of studies have been conducted. Fry and Ghosh (1980) studied cross-cultural differences between Asian and Caucasian children in achievement tasks and found opposite attributional patterns. Caucasian students took personal credit for success and attributed failure to luck, while Asian students felt personal responsibility for failure and attributed success to luck. Mizokawa and Rickman (1990) who analyzed the ethnic differences of six different Asian Americans wrote that language arts and social studies engendered greater effort at work more than math and science studies and that effort more than ability as attributional choice would explain academic performance. They concluded data patterns were complex and called for more detailed motivational descriptions of Asian Americans and specific attention to each ethnic group to clarify causal attributions. Birenbaum and Kraemer (1995) also examined gender and ethnic differences and found more ethnicity than gender differences indicated larger effect in causal attributions. Kanazawa (1992) studied outcome and expectancy as antecedents of causal attribution. His experiment showed expectancy has an independent effect on spontaneous causal thinking but outcome also has effect on non-spontaneous cause search. As these studies would indicate, research on attribution causes covers a wide range of not merely study fields but also subjects' personal backgrounds such as gender, cultural and ethnic differences.

Research methodologies on causal attribution have been changing and developing. Early stages of research looked into subjects' responses about hypothetical scenarios or contrived laboratory tasks, whereas Vispoel and Austin (1995) studied subjects' recollections of naturally occurring successes and failures at junior high school. Later there was more and more research scrutinizing subjects' responses about successes and failures in their real life, but not reactions about hypothetical situations.

Mainstream research in this field seems to focus on differentiated categories of attributions. Many studies documented that success and failure are attributed to seven factors: ability, temporary and sustained effort, the difficulty of the task, luck, mood, family background, and help or hindrance from others (Graham, 1994).

Vispoel and Austin (1995) explain their dimensional classification scheme as having eight causal attributions based on Weiner (1979) who discerned three central causal dimensions: stability, locus, and control. This scheme shows attributions with locus* stability* controllability. Locus of ability, effort, strategy, and interest are internal, and among them only ability is stable and uncontrollable but the rest are unstable and controllable. Task difficulty, luck, family influence and teacher influence are external and uncontrollable, and luck is unstable but

the other three are stable. For example, according to Weiner (1979, 1986), when subjects think that causes of failure are due to lack of ability or task difficulty, their expectations for subsequent learning become low, because these are uncontrollable for the subjects. However, since effort is unstable and controllable, their expectancy level will rise if they believe they can be successful with effort. This indicates that high expectancy exerts one to put more effort to learn better for higher achievement. As learning and its peripheral issues vary, attribution theory is outcome and situation dependent and is characterized by a self-serving effect regardless of the methodology used (Vispoel and Austin, 1995).

This paper deals with learners' subjective importance they place on attribution for self-evaluation, to see which dimensions of causality they attribute their success or failure to. As conceivable causes are infinite, underlying properties of the causes need to be identified. Learners' self-evaluation will be assessed because test results and final grades done by teachers can not be controlled by learners directly. Dimensions of causality here used are the eight factors that Vispoel and Austin (1995) explained and peer influence. Since there are peer-work and group work inside and outside the classroom for particular language courses the learners took, classmates' influence may affect their subjective attributions. Also, whether or not their subjective attributional causes affect achievement motive for their future learning will be discussed, too.

3 . Method

Research was conducted in February 2011, at the end of the second semester 2010 school year, after a semester course from October 2010 to January 2011. Participants were 121 first year students at a private university in Tokyo, Japan, taking English language courses as general education units. Sixty four of the students were male and the rest were female.

Participants answered a survey (Appendix 1), answering basic background information such as gender or overseas experiences as well as whether they think they were successful in learning English in the past one year or not. Then, they rated their anticipated learning effect, via a 4-point Likert scale on 9 factors: 8 traditional causal attributional factors and peer influence. The reason for not using an odd numbered scale (e.g. 5) is so that participants may choose a neutral position without thinking about the questionnaire (Dörnyei, 2003b). The responses in categorized fields were tabulated.

Participants were divided by their self-evaluation on whether they think they were successful or felt they had failed, but not on the basis of their experimental situation or on test results and grades. They also chose whether they expected to be either successful or unsuccessful in their future English learning. The mean scores were eyeball tested, and then, analyzed with one-way ANOVA.

4 . Results

The subjects were divided into four groups as follows. Those who evaluated themselves as successful and expect themselves to be successful for the next course again were unified as group SS. Those who felt they were successful and think they will be failures next were group SF. Ones who assessed themselves to be failures and expect themselves to be successful next are group FS. Ones who felt they were failures and think they will be failures again next are group FF. With these four groups, distributions according to nine causal attributions were analyzed.

The satisfactory responses are 109 out of 121. There was a respondent who answered “Successful” for the self-evaluation, and “I don’t know” as to the expectation for the next course. Another answered “Failure” for the self-evaluation, and “I don’t know” about the expectation for the next. These two answers were excluded from the total and 107 responses were tabulated (Appendix 2).

Since the scale is from 1 to 4, neutral point is 2.5. Therefore it is plausible for us to deduce that, if each value is 2.5 or more, the subjects consented to a particular item, that is to say that they attributed their success or failure to the specific dimension of causality. While if each value is less than 2.5, they were against an item.

One can safely infer that subjects believe that their teachers and peers have a strong influence on their learning no matter whether it is successful or not, as only two items of “teacher” and “peer” elicited mean scores 2.5 or more. This indicates that the subjects are more greatly affected by the surrounding people than the level of the learning itself or internal causality such as the subjects’ effort made and/or knowledge of learning strategy.

It seems that the subjects are likely to think that they will succeed next time if they feel they have “ability” and “strategy” to learn English. They might perceive that they failed this time but they will succeed next time if they have know-how to learn. As for “difficulty,” participants consider that it is not very much related to the result this time, although they think it might be for the next time. However, since the scores of “strategy” and “difficulty” are both under 2.5, the subjects sense “strategy” and “difficulty” are not directly connected to the result.

They are more likely to conclude that they succeeded because they made an effort to some extent. Likewise they expect themselves to be successful for the next time with the same reason. Also, those who succeeded feel, regardless of the expectation for the next time, that “interest” is crucial.

With regard to “luck,” it looks as if they feel some luck is needed in order to be successful either this time or next time.

Subjects in every group perceive the considerable amount of “teacher” influence. Yet it remains vague with regard to whether they feel that the influence is upon their own learning, or they perceive the impression of authority their teachers bear as the ones who grade them. What is explicit, however, is that teachers have some influence on students. In addition they

believe that cooperation with fellow students plays a huge role in succeeding in this time and in the future.

From one-way ANOVA (Appendix 3), significant differences were observed only in “effort” and “interest.” In both of them, the mean scores of the group of those who evaluate themselves to be successful are significantly higher than those of the group who evaluate themselves to be failures. This allows us to roughly summarize that making an effort and interesting content are the keys to success.

Post-hoc tests reveals that the mean scores of the successful group regarding “effort” and “interest” are significantly higher than those who considered themselves failures, whether or not they think they will succeed or fail in the future (Appendix 4).

5 . Discussion

Educators should acknowledge that learners tend to think that teachers and/or friends can be affective factors with regard to their learning’s success and teachers should not neglect effort in making a good rapport among learners and between learners and teachers.

Another thing teachers should show explicitly is effort, strategy, and interest, which are internal and learners can amend these things themselves and improve themselves for a potentially better learning experience. Language learners should be advised not to have a biased view that their learning achievement is only influenced by teachers or other learners around them too much. More or less, learning is an individual matter, and teachers should help them see that it is possible for them to be able to control learning outcomes to a certain extent.

This study shows that those who think they succeed rate “effort” and “interest” significantly higher than those who think they failed. This may indicate that successful learners acknowledge they can do well as long as they put effort into learning something and find something interesting enough to be motivated to learn. It may be important to guide learners who think they have failed so that they acknowledge that effort can direct them to successful learning. They should be informed that effort, strategy and interest can help them to improve, too, so that they may try harder the next time.

It is important for university students to examine actual feelings of achievement and satisfaction in learning as well as to consider grades and evaluations. Teachers should try to make a better learning environment for students, especially if there are any factors which can be improved, and help them to improve things which the students have scope to control for themselves.

There might be a drawback in analyzing only self-evaluation, as it is difficult to see its validity. Often, in fact, self-evaluation merely concerns itself about satisfaction and about likes and dislikes. Also, subjects may answer in order to make themselves look better and to protect themselves. However, even in such cases, it might be meaningful to examine their likes and dislikes, as the results can sometimes provide clues on how to improve classroom management.

Further research with more data collection concerning various aspects of self-evaluation is desirable and should eventually allow one to explore causal attribution with more definiteness and clarity among different groups, such as differences among learners with regard to gender, past overseas experience, English language proficiency levels, or with any combination of the above or with grades and other self-evaluation surveys. Also, it will be meaningful to see if there is any correlation among the 9 factors surveyed. Hopefully, this will clarify learners' thinking about their success and about the failure of educators, so that they might be enabled to support learners more effectively.

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Appendix 1

Table 1. Questionnaire Regarding Perceived Causes of Attribution

<p>1) どちらかに丸をつけてください。 過去一年間の英語学習を振り返り英語学習を自分で、<u>成功</u> (すべき学習をした&それなりに上達した)か<u>失敗</u> (すべき学習を十分にできなかった・出来なかった&上達したと思えない)かを判断し、どちらか選んでください。</p>	<p>成功・失敗</p>
<p>2) 以下の9つの質問に、1～4の数字で答えてください。 1. strongly disagree 2. somewhat disagree 3. somewhat agree 4. strongly agree.</p> <p>a) 私には英語学習の能力があると思う。 1 2 3 4 b) 私は昨年度に英語能力を伸ばす努力した。 1 2 3 4 c) 私は英語学習の適切な方法を知っている。 1 2 3 4 d) 私は昨年度に英語に興味をもって学習した。 1 2 3 4 e) 昨年度の英語科目は難しかった。 1 2 3 4 f) 昨年の英語科目の結果に関しては、私は運が良かった。 1 2 3 4 g) 英語を学習する上で家族の影響があると思う。 1 2 3 4 h) 英語学習をする上で先生の影響があると思う。 1 2 3 4 i) 英語学習をする上でクラスの友達の影響があると思う。 1 2 3 4</p>	
<p>3) 第2学年次は少しだけ歯学分野の英語に踏み込みます。今までとは少し違う内容の英語の学習になるかもしれません。さて、あなたはこの分野の英語学習(歯科英語)の成功者・失敗者のどちらになると思いますか?どちらかを選んでください。</p>	<p>成功・失敗</p>
<p>4) その他:好きなことを書いてください。</p>	

Appendix 2: Successful*Failure

Self-evaluation	Successful (n=51)				Failure (n=56)				Total (n=107)	
	Successful (SS) (n=45)		Failure (SF) (n=6)		Successful (FS) (n=38)		Failure (FF) (n=18)		mean	SD
Expectation for the next course	mean	SD	mean	SD	mean	SD	mean	SD	mean	SD
1. ability	2.49	0.82	1.83	0.75	2.32	0.81	1.89	0.90	2.28	0.84
2. effort	2.53	0.76	2.67	0.52	2.00	0.74	1.56	0.92	2.18	0.84
3. strategy	2.18	0.81	2.17	0.41	2.47	0.76	2.28	0.89	2.29	0.79
4. interest	2.73	0.78	2.67	0.52	2.29	0.69	1.78	0.73	2.43	0.81
5. difficulty	2.22	0.82	2.17	0.41	2.37	0.75	2.28	0.96	2.28	0.79
6. luck	2.51	0.92	2.50	1.05	2.58	0.83	2.17	0.79	2.49	0.88
7. family	2.42	1.06	2.67	1.03	2.55	1.08	2.06	1.11	2.43	1.07
8. teacher	3.22	0.79	2.67	1.37	2.71	0.98	2.89	0.96	2.97	0.95
9. peer	2.80	0.87	2.67	1.03	2.61	0.92	2.61	1.14	2.68	0.94

Appendix 3: Univariate ANOVA for attribution causes on SS, SF, FS, & FF, and descriptive statistics for univariate ANOVA on SS, SF, FS, & FF

Factor	Source	SS	Df	MS	F	P
Effort	SSSFFSFF	15.28	3.00	5.09	8.61	0.00
Interest	SSSFFSFF	12.85	3.00	4.28	8.01	0.00

Appendix 4: Post-hoc Tukey HSD and Scheffé's Test on "effort" and "interest"

#	Factor	Group (I)	Group (J)	Mean (I-J) difference	Std. error	Significance (Tukey HSD)	Significance (Scheffé)
1	Effort	SS	FS	0.53	0.17	0.01	0.02
			FF	0.98	0.21	0.00	0.00
2	Effort	SF	FF	1.11	0.36	0.01	0.03
3	Interest	SS	FF	0.96	0.20	0.00	0.00

($P < 0.05$)