

The Relationship between Iranian University Students' Scores on Their English Language Final Exam and Their Attributions

Mehrdad Rezaee^{1*}, Majid Farahian² and Saeed Rezaee³

¹Department of Foreign Languages, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

²Department of English Language Teaching, Kermanshah Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kermanshah, Iran

³Alborz Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Alborz, Iran

Accepted 29 September 2014, Available online 14 October 2014, Vol.3, No.1 (October 2014)

Abstract

To investigate the role of attribution of success among English as foreign language (EFL) learners, the present study explored the possible relationship between the scores of Iranian university students gained in their English language final exams and the factors that they used as attribution for their success and failure. Having this purpose in mind, some 85 Iranian EFL learners at university level were selected based on their general English score. The participants were required to answer a questionnaire. As findings revealed, learners at different levels and fields of study attribute their successes and failures to different factors ranging from hard-work to difficulty of the task. It has also been revealed that one's understanding of his physical and mental abilities has undoubtedly a great impact on his final learning and also on his achievements. Moreover, it has been found that sex has no effect on the attribution of the learners.

Keywords: Attribution, Motivation, EFL Learners, Success, Failure.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning a second/foreign language is a very complex process and different schools of psychology have dealt with it from different perspectives. (See Brown, 2000, 2007; Ellis, 1994, 2008; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Mitchell & Myles, 2004; Williams & Burden, 1997 for a complete overview). Meanwhile, the way a person learns/acquires a second/foreign language is influenced by a lot of factors such as cognitive, affective, personal, social, biological, etc. It has also been suggested by different scholars (Gass & Selinker, 2008; McLaughlin, 1987; Richards & Rodgers, 2001 to name but a few) that affective factors are much more important than cognitive ones and if they are not met well enough, language learning will be delayed and even impeded. Attribution of learners among affective factors deserves attention since human beings attribute their successes/failure to different factors which are important in their achievements.

During 1960s, the cognitive revolution occurred and as a consequence, a number of influential cognitive-motivation theories, such as self-determination and attribution theories emerged in the mainstream psychology (Al-Sibai, 2005). As it was put forward, attribution theory is an approach to motivation which concentrates on people's ideas about themselves and the way they explain their successes and failures. Thus, the theory is part of the

constructivist framework and has to do with the ways by which human beings construct their own views and meanings in relation to their surroundings (Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2011). According to Williams and Burden (1997), attribution theory can be considered an area that could be investigated in order to gain a better understanding of individuals. It is pertinent to motivation in that the attributions of success and failure can affect people's motivation to tackle future tasks. For instance, the extent to which a person attributes their failure to be due to lack of ability or lack of effort influences that person's future actions (Williams & Burden, 1997). Along the same line, Fulcher and Davidson (2007) believe that "attribution theory describes motivated behaviour in terms of the causes to which the individuals attribute or ascribe their own and other people's performance: their own ability, effort, intention or others' ability, effort and intention, luck and so on" (p. 226).

To be more specific, Richards and Schmidt (2002) give a broad category of attribution. As they state,

Attributions has been classified on the basis of locus of control (internal factors such as effort vs. external factors such as the textbook or teaching method), stability (stable factors such as personality vs. unstable factors such as mood), and controllability (controllable factors such as effort vs. uncontrollable factors such as language aptitude). (p. 38) based on

	<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 requirement
<i>Unstable</i>	Situational effort	Health	Help from others	Chance

Adopted from Pishghadam and Zabihi (2011, p. 2)

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

such a perspective, Pishghadam and Zabihi (2011) have provided a comprehensive classification of attribution theory. To do so, they have provided a table in which they categorize attribution theory into different parts.

As it can be seen in Table 1, attribution is classified by dimensions of locus, stability, and controllability. It is also divided into stable and unstable ones from one point of view and then into internal and external ones from another viewpoint. Finally, they divide each of the internal and external ones into controllable and uncontrollable categories. Based on Table 1, 'Long term effort' and 'Aptitude' are placed in the 'internal stable' attribution, while 'Instructor bias' and 'Difficulty of school requirement' are placed in the 'external stable' attribution. In the meantime, 'Situational effort' and 'Health' are considered in the 'internal unstable' attribution, whereas 'Help from others' and 'Chance' are deemed under the category of external unstable attribution.

1.1 The role of attribution in L2/FL learning

Attribution theory was originally used in areas other than second/foreign language learning. Put another way, most of the studies investigating the relationship between attributions and achievement have been conducted in the areas of mathematics and sports (Dörnyei, 2005). Along the same line, Williams and Burden (1997) state that 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. These studies mostly focus on identifying second or foreign language learners' attributions for success and failure. However, the role of attribution factors has not received enough attention in second or foreign language learning achievement. (Pishghadam & Modarresi, 2008). Only a few studies have been conducted to study learners'

attributions for success and failure in the area of learning second or foreign languages. In one of the studies, Hsieh (2004) investigated the relation between FL learners' attribution and their final learning and achievement. She came to the conclusion that those learners with more internal, stable, and personal attributions got better grades in FL classes than those with more external, unstable, and non-personal attributions. In another study, Kun and Liming (2007) studied the role of achievement attributions on self-regulated behaviours of language learning. They came to the conclusion that those learners, who attributed their success to internal factors, like ability or effort, showed more self-regulated language learning behaviours. They offered that FL teachers help learners to make positive beliefs and ideas about the causes of their success and failure in FL learning. In the meantime, Lei and Qin (2009) investigated the relation between attributions of Chinese EFL and their English learning final achievement at the end of the course. The results showed that two attribution factors, (teacher and effort) strongly predicted success in learning EFL. Last but not least, Pishghadam and Zabihi (2011) did a research in which they examined the relationship between EFL learners' attributions for success and failure in learning a foreign language and their achievement in foreign language classes. The results showed significant correlations between Language Achievement Attribution Scale (LAAS) as well as (Causal Dimension Scale) CDS-II subscales and learners' final scores.

Having reviewed the above-mentioned literature concerning the role of attributions in L2/FL learning, the authors of the present study decided to conduct a research concerning the role of attribution in foreign language learning in the context of Iran recruiting Iranian university students. It should be mentioned that the present study is different from those reviewed above since the participants were in different levels of university thus increasing the

external validity of the findings. As such, the major preliminary assumption in the study was that Iranian university students might attribute their successes/failures and in particular their scores in their English language final exam to different factors such as luck, hard work, ability, or knowledge. Thus, the following research questions were proposed:

1. Is there any relationship between Iranian university students' scores on their English language final exams and their attributions?
2. Is there any significant difference between female and male EFL learners' attributions?

2. METHOD

2.1 Participants

Some 85 students were selected purposefully for this study. They were all university students (in courses other than English, such as art, engineering, social sciences, literature, etc.) who attended extra curricular English classes at JahaadDaaneshgaahi of Tehran University. They were in different levels of university ranging from sophomore to postgraduate students (studying at MA/MSc levels). There was no freshman in those classes. The criterion for their selection for the present study was based on their general English scores (ranging from 14 to 19 on a scale of 20) for all of the subjects. (That is why no freshman was used in this study). The students were in 4 different classes as follows: (Class A: 20 students; Class B: 20 students, Class C: 22 students; and Class C: 23 students). Of the 85 students, 45 of them were female and the other 40 were male. Since the classes were not co-educational and were held separately on even and odd days, the authors had to choose classes in both days of the week. The two classes of A & B, each with 20 members (a total of 40) were for male students and the two classes of C & D with 22 and 23 members (a total of 45) were for female students. The same teacher taught all four classes with the same teaching materials and with the same amount of class hours but at different times of the day. That is, the classes were held in a subsequent order of timing (from 8:00 AM to 12:00 PM for class 1, and from 1:00 PM to 5:00 PM for class 2 on even days for male students, and the same class hours with the same teacher on odd days for female students, respectively). Meanwhile, as mentioned before, the materials used for teaching and the students' language level were all the same as the authors had purposefully chosen the students as subjects for the present study based on their general English scores. The scores ranged from 14 to 19 out of a scale of 20 at the university. The age range of all the students was between 20 to 33 years old.

2.2 Data Collection

A questionnaire constructed and validated by Pishghadam and Modarresi (2008) was adopted in this study (See Appendix A).

The language of the questionnaire was Originally Persian and it was administered to subjects in the same language for this study. Meanwhile, an English translation/version of the questionnaire has also been prepared by the authors but it is not included in this paper.

2.3 Data Analysis

To analyse the relation between the students' attributes of success/failure and their scores in the final test, a correlation was made between the overall answers given to the questionnaire by each participant, and their score in the final test.

It should be noted that since the answers given to the questionnaire were on a 1 to 5 Likert Scale, (with 1 deemed as Completely Agree and 5 as Completely Disagree) and because the authors of the present study intended to make a Pearson correlation between the two sets of data (the results of the questionnaire and that of their scores gained in the final test), they decided to change the data gained from the Likert Scale into interval data so that the aforementioned correlation would be applicable. For this purpose, in the first 20 questions, which consisted of the two factors of "Emotions" and "Self-image" and which had negative senses and each of the answers had an ordinal value of 1 to 5 (with 1 deemed as Completely Agree and 5 as Completely Disagree) the authors decided to deem these very ordinal value as interval values. In other words, the authors assumed that since the questions have negative structures (used with the word "NOT" or "n't"), choosing "Disagree" (Number 4) or "Completely Disagree" (Number 5) would mean that the participants don't agree with the negative concept and so, it has a positive concept. That is, they believe otherwise. In the meantime, for questions 21, 23, 24, 25, & 26, (which dealt with "Intrinsic motivation") this was the other way around. That is, since their structures were positive, in the idea of the authors, a value of 5 could be used for "Completely Agree", 4 for "Agree", 3 for "No Idea", 2 for "Disagree", and 1 for "Completely Disagree", respectively. Then, the total of the answers given to these 30 questions of the questionnaire for each of the participants was correlated with the score of that participant in the final test gained at the end of the course together with the answers he/she had given to the five interview questions.

3. RESULTS

Taking a look at Table 2, one can see that the mean of both classes of male students is 85.37 with a standard deviation of 7.31. However, Table 3 shows a mean of 79.82 and a standard deviation of 10.93 for female participants. From these four pieces of information, it can be inferred that male students had a better performance than female ones. In the meantime, the male students were more homogeneous than the female ones as they had a smaller standard deviation.

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Men	40	31.00	67.00	98.00	85.3750	7.31590	53.522
Valid N (listwise)	40						

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for male participants.

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Women	45	33.00	64.00	97.00	79.8222	10.93221	119.513
Valid N (listwise)	45						

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for female participants.

		Proficiency	Questionnaire
Proficiency	Pearson Correlation	1	.876**
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.000
	N	85	85
Questionnaire	Pearson Correlation	.876**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	
	N	85	85

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

Table 4: Correlation between students' proficiency score and their answers to questionnaire.

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Diff.	95% confidence interval of the difference	
									Lower	Upper
Questionnaire	Equal variances assumed	1.043	.310	1.810	83	.074	1.56111	.86237	-.15412	3.27634
	Equal variances not assumed			1.815	82.488	.073	1.56111	.86030	-.15015	3.27237

Table 5: Independent paired t-test between male and female participants' response to the questionnaire.

Too, by looking at Table 4 (The correlation between students' scores in the final test and their answers to the questionnaire), one can infer that there is a very high correlation (.876) between students' ideas about themselves (their ability and their effort) and the results gained at the end of the course. Put it differently, it can be inferred from Table 4 that those students who thought more positively (the concept of their answers was positive) about the answers to the questionnaire had a better gaining and achievement and thus, gained a higher score in the final test at the end of the semester. In other words, those students who believed that they were able to succeed were more successful, they made good effort to learn because they were highly motivated, they ignored other people's idea about their inability to learn, they felt that they could learn English, they believed in their English language teacher, they didn't believe in the hardship of learning English language, they didn't believe in mistakes as barriers to learning etc. On the other hand, those students who believed that they didn't have enough ability to learn the language, deemed that they were not able to do the assignments, and thought that they were wasting their time and effort for learning, etc., were not successful in their score in the final test. Put in a more tangible way, it can be mentioned that, in the questionnaire, questions 4, 12, 9, 17 which were related to effort, were answered mostly by higher ability students. The second rank was for questions, 6, 7, 8, 12, 18 which were related to teacher characteristics, and then came questions 10 and 15 which were related to ability. The next ranks were for questions 19 and 5 (related to mood), and question 3 (related to task difficulty).

To see if gender of the participants has any effect on their attribution, the researchers of the present study made a comparison between the two groups' (male and female) responses to the questionnaire. Table 5 shows that the observed of the two groups is 1.810. Since there was no specific direction deemed by the researchers regarding the superiority/inferiority of the genders in this regard, a two-tailed t test was made with a df of 83 and .95% confidence. Taking a look at the table of t-critical value, one gets to 1.988 for a two-tailed test, with a df of 83, and .95% confidence. Since the t-critical (1.988) is bigger than the t-observed (1.810), it can be said that there is no specific difference between the two groups regarding the means of their responses to the questionnaire. That is to say, male and female participants are not different as to their attribution. It should also be stated that nothing was mentioned to the participants concerning the correlation which was going to be made between the answers they had given to the questionnaire and their scores on the final test.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Looking for any relationship between Iranian university students' scores on their English language final exams and their attributions, one can see that considering oneself as an able person with a high motivation, together with a

sound belief in his/her knowledge and effort leads to better achievement. Furthermore, ignoring what others believe about one's ability would result in a higher and better test result. On the contrary, lack of belief in one's own inability, the hardship of the home assignments, lack of motivation for learning and not believing in the teacher and his/her ability to teach would most probably lead to a lower score in the final exam. Interestingly enough, those who were soon **got** disappointed by the slightest negative reaction of the teacher (probably to their wrong answers) did not get a good result in their final exam because they didn't believe that they could try harder the next time and succeed in their efforts. In the meantime, those students who deemed that they have to try hard and not to rely solely on the class hour studies, together with those who had a good feeling in learning English and didn't consider it a waste of time, gained a higher score in their final exam. Overall, one can come to the conclusion that one's understanding of one's physical and mental abilities would undoubtedly have a great impact on one's final learning and the results he/she gains. In other words, if a person believes in his ability (both mental and physical), he will gain much more success than when he doesn't have that much belief.

Apart from the above mentioned findings, it was found out that participants' gender shows no specific impact on the answers given to the questionnaire by male vs. female participants. This means that, there is no significant difference between male and female participants regarding their answers to the attribution questionnaire. This might be indicative of the fact that gender differences in Iranian EFL settings is diminishing, that is to say, girls and boys are similar in learning FL and their type of attribution. This is in tandem with the view proposed by the scholars who do not find any differences in male and female learners' attributions (see Fatemi & Asghari, 2012).

The implication drawn from this study could be useful in raising awareness of EFL university instructors. Since learners attend EFL courses with their specific perceptions and they hold various beliefs regarding their abilities as well as the factors which affect their achievements, instructors should be aware of the conceptions their learners develop. EFL learners should also become aware of the type of their attribution and establish some degree of control over their lives.

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