An Investigation into Turkish EFL Students' Attributions in Reading Comprehension

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Abstract—Learner attributions, perceived causes of success and failure, have received considerable attention. However, very little research has been carried out in the area of learning foreign languages. This empirical study investigated Turkish EFL students' attributions in reading. The aims of the study were (1) to investigate university students' attributions for success and failures in second language reading and (2) to examine the ways in which these vary according to gender, proficiency and teacher opinions. Student questionnaires identified 13 common attributions. Also, 17 EFL teachers were asked to what they attributed student success and failure in reading. Many statistically significant differences were found between attribution and gender, proficiency, and between student and teacher opinions. The study concludes with a set of pedagogical implications for the teaching and learning of English reading.

Index Terms—attribution theory, reading comprehension, gender, proficiency

I. INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that reading is a vital skill for English language learners in today's world; it enhances the development of overall proficiency and provides access to valuable information at work and in school. Reading is often characterized as a receptive skill in which one looks at and attempts to understand what has been written. According to Grellet (1987), understanding a written text means extracting the required information from it as accurately and efficiently as possible. It is not only the process of recognition, perception, and interpretation of written materials, but an active one in that it includes the cognitive abilities such as guessing / predicting, checking, and asking questions. As Carrell (1989) puts, "for many students, reading is by far the most important of the four skills in second language, particularly in English as a second or foreign language." This is the case for Turkish university students as well. English reading has been, as it were, a sine qua non in the process of English language learning on the grounds that students often consider it as the means of English learning, thereby attaining their instrumental goals such as getting a job, reading a foreign journal, and passing an examination. The recognition that reading is probably the most important skill for second language learners to master in academic contexts has been a contributing cause in this respect (Carvell, 1989a; Lynch & Hudson, 1991; Grabe, 1991). To this end, the ability to read proficiently in English has become the first and foremost requirement for the university students throughout the world.

However, reading comprehension is not an easy task. According to Lyon (1995), reading disabilities constitute the most prevalent type of learning disability, affecting over 80% of the population. As such, many Turkish University students do not feel comfortable with the effective use of the reading skill. In spite of the great attention paid to the reading-based course of instruction in Turkish Universities, the educational mainstream involving the reading proficiency of the students in English is not up to the mark or is very unsatisfactory. Still, quite many undergraduates view reading as the least proficient language skill which they acquire even though they have made great efforts for it. This concern with reading has resulted in numerous studies aimed at investigating the variables that might influence second language reading (e.g. Grabe, 1991; Alderson, 2000; Carroll, 1993; Nation, 2001; Coxhead, 2000). As part of these surveys, this study proposes the use of attribution theory in order to highlight suggestions for teaching and improving English reading.

A. Attribution Theory and Its Relation to Language Learning

Attribution beliefs are important factors that affect students' reading performance (O'Sullivan and Howe, 1996). Attribution theory suggests that students interpret their achievement outcomes, particularly, how they explain success and failure, by attributing causes to them (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002; Weiner, 1985, 1994). Psychologists also maintain that attribution is how students learn about themselves and impose order on uncertain environments (Graham, 1994, p. 32). Weiner (1985) proposed that the four main attributions are ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. He (1995) added that student attributions for success and failure can influence their expectancy of goal attainment, cognitive behaviours, emotion and academic performance. In addition, a considerable number of studies have shed light on the critical role of students' attribution beliefs in reading achievement, and differences in attribution can be associated with readers of different abilities and across different ages. O'Sullivan and Howe (1996) argued that high achievers tended to believe

that ability was related to success in reading, whereas low achievers were more likely to believe that lack of ability accounted for their poor reading.

In a large-scale study, Williams, Burden, Poulet, and Maun (2004) investigated secondary students' attributions for their success and failure in learning foreign languages. The study also examined the ways in which these vary according to age, gender, and perceived success. The sample consisted of 285 students studying foreign languages. Over one thousand attributional statements gave rise to 21 attributional categories for doing well and 16 categories for not doing well at language learning, six of which were most commonly cited as reasons for both success and failure. These attributions were effort, strategy, ability, task, teacher, interest, and peers.

A recent study into the attributions of students in Bahrain for their success and failure in learning English revealed that practice, support from family and teachers, exposure to the language and a positive attitude were the most frequently cited reasons for success by the students (William & Burden, 2001). By contrast, inadequate teaching methods, lack of support from family and teachers, poor comprehension and a negative attitude were the most commonly cited reasons for failure. In order to elaborate upon the origin of student attributions, teachers were also asked to answer the reasons for success and failure in English. Teachers attributed success to practice plus teacher and family, whereas they attributed failure to only inadequate materials. McQuillan (2000) asked 81 students why they succeeded in a foreign language: they produced a different set of attributions. Motivation, a comfortable pace, a good teacher, ability, time and effort were the most common explanations of success.

The other researchers speculate about EFL attribution. For instance, Dörnyei (2001a) suggests that attribution has an effect on proficiency (p. 57, 134). Williams and Burden also speculate that gender may be a significant factor, as do Holschuh, Nist, and Olejnik (2001). Research into the relationship between attribution, proficiency, and gender is of particular interest because teachers should become aware of these varying attributions in order to cope with them. It follows that EFL attributions are part of a framework of interrelationships in that, as this study would propose, teacher attributions are also important because they may affect both student and teacher behaviour. Peacock (2009) asserts that research is needed here because this may help teachers better understand EFL students and intervene to avoid undesirable attributions (p. 185). In this context, Tollefson and Chen (1988) theorize that when teachers attribute student failure to a low level of effort, they might withhold help from students, reinforcing student beliefs and behaviour (p. 264).

B. Purpose of the Study

Considering these findings that suggest the multidimensionality of EFL attribution, this study attempted to investigate what comprises Turkish EFL students' attributions in reading, albeit with a different sample. This study was designed to fit an EFL context, drawing upon the model proposed by Williams, Burden, Poulet, and Maun (2004). Consequently, the aims of the study were (1) to investigate university students' attributions for their success and failures in reading comprehension and (2) to investigate whether student attributions differ from teacher attributions and (3) to examine the ways in which these vary according to gender and proficiency.

II. METHOD

A. Participants

A total of 91 undergraduates (22 males & 69 females) studying EFL and 17 EFL teachers at Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Turkey with an average 7 years of English participated in the study. We ensured that all the participants had taken the required advanced reading course in the previous academic year. Subjects' performance on the previous final-English reading comprehension tests of the 2010-2011 academic year was used for proficiency data.

B. Materials

First, we interviewed 30 students, mixed by gender and proficiency level, and asked them to what they attribute EFL success and failure in reading comprehension. For this purpose, we constructed a simple questionnaire consisting of two open-ended statements, which was adapted from Williams, Burden, Poulet and Maun (2004) as the following:

1. When I do well at reading comprehension, the main reasons are:
a) ----------------------------------
b) ----------------------------------
2. When I don't do well at reading comprehension, the main reasons are:
a) ----------------------------------
b) ----------------------------------

Students' responses were analysed using a grounded approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in that we tried to interpret students' intended views and to allow the resulting categories to emerge from the data. Students gave 10 reasons for success and 13 for failure. We constructed a questionnaire with totally these 13 attributions (see Table 1 & Table 2) using a scale with yes / no choices.

Second, we collected questionnaires from 91 students in class. Respondents were asked to write their Advanced Reading test results on the questionnaire so that we could investigate the relationship between attribution and

proficiency. Students were also asked to write their names on the questionnaire in order to seek the possibility of a relationship between attribution and gender.

Finally, we modified the questionnaire to collect EFL teacher opinions. The same questionnaire was administered to 17 university EFL teachers and asked to what teachers attribute student success and failure in reading comprehension.

As for the data analysis, percentages of yes / no were calculated for questionnaire items and the resultant categories were tabulated according to the perceived success and failure. We identified the connections between attribution and gender, and proficiency using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The level of reliability of the student questionnaire was calculated using SPSS at a high 0.73 and the teacher questionnaire at 0.81.

III. RESULTS

A. Students' Attributions for Doing Well in Reading Comprehension

Thirteen attributions for doing well in reading comprehension emerged from the data (see Table 1). We then elaborated students' and teachers' attributions for success in ranked order.

TABLE 1:
ATTRIBUTIONS FOR DOING WELL IN READING COMPREHENSION
(N=91 FOR STUDENTS AND N=16 FOR TEACHERS).

Students' attributions	F	%	Teachers' attributions	F	%
Good strategies	75	82.4	Good strategies	15	93.7
Positive mood	74	81.3	Liking for reading (interest)	13	81.2
Liking for reading (interest)	73	80.2	Sense of achievement	12	75
Teacher (good feedback)	66	72.5	Try very hard (effort)	11	68.7
Having cultural background	66	72.5	Having cultural background	11	68.7
Positive environment	65	71.4	Teacher (good feedback)	10	62.5
Sense of achievement	57	62.6	Good at that thing (intellectual ability	10	62.5
Good at that thing (intellectual ability)	51	56.0	Sense of achievement	5	31.2
Try very hard (effort)	7	7.6	Positive environment	3	18.7
Teaching materials	5	5.4	Positive mood	2	12.5

As was underlined in Table 1, the overwhelming majority of both students (almost 83%) and teachers (almost 94%) attributed students' success in reading to *good strategies*. This category included statements such as: I use a vocabulary book, look up words outside class, ask when I need explanation, take notes to remind me what to revise, make use of contextual clues. Even though these statements do not point to a clear or purposeful sense of direction pertaining to reading strategies, it is noteworthy that there is close link between students' and teachers' perceptions of the prominence of good strategies in reading.

The next attribution to emerge was termed *positive mood*. Students strongly attributed their success in reading to positive mood, while teachers did not. This category involved feeling motivated to read, being drawn into the pages of the book, being able to concentrate on the work. Students appear to acknowledge that the affective factors as well as cognitive abilities are also important aspects of learners' success attributions in reading.

Students rated the attribution *interest in reading* third out of nine attributions, whereas teachers rated it as the second most prominent attribution for success in reading. It included wanting to read, liking, enjoying, and statements such as reading English is great/fun/interesting. Of course, it is not clear whether students see interest as an internal or external aspect. Therefore, we assumed that students' statements referred to both classroom reading activities and outside class reading activities.

Another prominent attribution cited by 72.5% of the participants was *good feedback* provided by teachers in reading class. In contrast, teachers themselves did not perceive their feedback as a vital component that would make contribution to the success of student in reading. Included here were liking the teacher, the teacher facilitates the reading process, the teacher helps, the teacher controls, the teacher clarifies, the teacher checks understanding. As expected, the students tended to see themselves as more dependent upon teacher's guide than develop a sense of autonomy in acquiring reading skills which, in fact, proved to be the ultimate outcome in the process of teaching reading.

Significantly, there was strong agreement on the attribution *having cultural background* between students' views (72.5%) and teachers' (68.7%) views. This category included being able to comprehend the reading text better along with the cultural knowledge, linking own culture with another, making the reading task challenging with cultural analysis.

Closely linked with *positive mood* was the attribution *positive environment* which 71.4% of students cited, together with 75% of teachers who also rated it as important. Students relied on the internal factors for evaluating the first attribution, while they relied on the external ones for the latter. It included statements such as the positive teaching atmosphere helps focussing on reading, the proper organization of classroom leads to active participation in reading tasks.

The last two categories frequently cited by students (62.6%) was *sense of achievement* (62.6%) and *the intellectual ability* (31.2%). Teachers also rated the sense of achievement as the third out of ten categories in order of importance. It

involved feeling comfortable/successful. This category has relevance to the attribution *positive mood* in the way that they are internal factors and likely to add to students' motivation to engage in reading. Conversely, teachers perceived the intellectual ability as less significant reason for success in reading than did students. This category included comprehending, being proficient in reading, being clever, having a good deal of experience in reading.

These eight categories were those mentioned most. There were a further two that were cited infrequently by students. These were the attributions *effort* and *teaching materials*. There was strong disagreement between students' and teachers' perceptions in this respect. Teachers partly attributed students' success to effort and teaching materials in reading, while students did not. The attribution *effort* indicated statements such as: I read, do my reading assignment, work hard in reading, pay attention to reading tasks, and take time in reading. In other words, it involved a sense of trying hard in reading. Overall, there was surprisingly little mention of effort and teaching materials, indicating that the extent of effort and the kind of teaching materials available to students are perceived to play a very small part.

B. Students' Attributions for Not Doing Well in Reading Comprehension

TABLE 2:
ATTRIBUTIONS FOR NOT DOING WELL IN READING COMPREHENSION
(N=91 FOR STUDENTS AND N=16 FOR TEACHERS)

Students' attributions	F	%	Teachers' attributions	F	%
Lack of interest in reading	65	71.4	Lack of interest in reading	15	93.8
Lack of time	64	70.3	Lack of time	14	87.5
Negative mood	55	60.4	Poor strategies	12	75
Negative environment	52	57.1	Having no cultural background	12	75
Don't try very hard (lack of effort)	50	54.9	Don't try very hard (lack of effort)	11	68.7
Difficult work (task)	18	19.7	Negative mood	7	43.8
Poor strategies	14	15.3	Difficult work (task)	6	37.5
Distraction	14	9.89	Distraction	4	25
Having no cultural background	13	7.69	Bad at that thing (intellectual ability)	4	25
Inadequate teaching materials	11	12.0	No sense of achievement	4	25
Teacher (inadequate feedback)	10	1.09	Negative environment	3	18.7
Bad at that thing (intellectual ability)	10	1.09	Inadequate teaching materials	3	18.7
No sense of achievement	9	9.89	Teacher (inadequate feedback)	1	6.2

As displayed in order of importance in Table 2, twelve attributions for not doing well emerged from the data, corresponding to nine of the categories for doing well together with three new categories *lack of time*, *distraction* and *difficult reading task*. Significantly, the major categories frequently mentioned by students and teachers were *lack of interest in reading* and *lack of time*. 71.4% of students and 93.8% of teachers attributed failure to lack of students' interest in reading skill. The comments included: It's boring. It's no fun. The chosen text doesn't fit into my reading tastes. Similarly, both students (70.3%) and teachers (87.5%) viewed the lack of time as a significant reason for failure in reading, implying that reading skill requires students to allocate enough time to do extensive reading outside classroom. Notably, *negative mood* (60.4%) was relatively frequently used to explain not doing well in reading. Finally, there was little mention of *distraction* which both students and teachers rated it as less significant for explaining failures than success in reading comprehension. It included losing sight of work/task during reading, not concentrating on reading properly.

C. Gender Differences

Data obtained from t-test revealed that there were totally three statistically significant differences at the 0.05 level. Females were significantly more likely to attribute success to the following factors, which are ranked with the largest difference first:
1. Good at that thing (intellectual ability)
2. Having cultural background

These two attributions are internal and controllable. Apparently female students were significantly more likely to attribute success to their own efforts to achieve the ultimate goals in reading skill than were male students. Given the reasons for failure in reading, another meaningful difference was found between male and female students in relation to the attribution *teacher*. Accordingly male students were more likely to see the inadequate teacher feedback or poor teacher in reading class as the potential reasons for their failure than were female students.

D. Connection between Attributions and EFL Proficiency

In order to uncover the link between students' EFL proficiency levels and their perceived attributions once again the results of t-test were evaluated statistically. The results showed that the level of proficiency did not have a strong effect on the students' perceptions of attributions for success and failure in second language reading. Meaningful difference between proficiency and attribution was found with reference to only one category *sense of achievement* in favour of, surprisingly, less proficient students. This category involved, for example, 'Feeling successful in reading adds to my interest in reading 'and 'grades influence the way I read.' Thus we can see that while less proficient students attributed

success primarily to the extent of success in reading, this was not the case with more proficient students, who attributed success and failure to other factors.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study drew upon the attributional theories derived from empirical research done by (Weiner, 1986; Williams & Burden, 1997; Peacock, 2009; McQuillan, 2000; Tse, 2000). However, most of the questionnaire items included in the attribution questionnaire differed from previous research due to the differences in the classification of attributions and context. To be specific, our data revealed a considerably wider range of attributions than was usually shown in the research literature (Peacock, 2009; McQuillan, 2000; Tse, 2000). Of these categories, however, ability, interest, strategy use, the contribution of the teacher and the kind of learning task are clearly shown to be the most common used; the context where these studies are conducted involve the language classes in order for students to acquire all basic language skills. In contrast, the focus in the present study is on the reading aspect of language learning as well as on the exploration of a possible link between attribution and reading behaviour.

The use of reading strategies stands out as the most widely cited attribution for success in reading comprehension, which is backed up by both students and teachers. Given the domain of the reading strategies, we took it for granted that all students had already learnt and practiced the type of reading strategies ranging from cognitive to metacognitive strategies. Therefore, strategy use was a general term and thus intended to entail any of these reading strategies in this study. In any case, the effective use of reading strategies proves to be the key to the success in reading.

Another point of accord between student and teacher attributions for success related to the importance of having cultural background in reading. It is assumed that the readers' background knowledge is largely associated with their previously acquired knowledge structures like culture, and these structures are called schemata (Collins, 1979; Rumelhart, 1980). Carrell (1989) maintains that 'according to schema theory, efficient comprehension requires the ability to relate the textual material to one's own knowledge' (p. 76). Thus equipping students with essential cultural background prior to reading can enrich students' capacity to cope with the challenge of reading tasks and in turn make them feel at ease with these tasks.

Importantly there was strong agreement on the category *lack of interest in reading* between student and teacher attributions for failure in second language reading. In fact, this result can be informing in the way that it enables us to establish a sound link between one defining characteristic of Turkish students and their attributions. As the results indicate, Turkish students, for some reason, are reluctant to read in both L1 and L2, and teachers tend to support this. It follows that alternative approaches to teaching reading in Turkish context should be catered for, which would range from the selection of interesting reading texts (e.g. pleasure reading texts) to the introduction of intensive and extensive reading.

The results of this study gave rise to a better understanding of the contradictory aspects of student and teacher attributions in second language reading. Our student and teacher opinions differed significantly: teachers attributed student success to effort or interest in reading, while students attributed success, respectively, to the feedback of teacher and positive mood. Some students do not see any link between success and interest levels in reading; some think that reading is not interesting; some think that the psychological and social factors determine the way they study reading; some do not waste time making much effort with the study of reading. There is a possibility that students tend to differ, to a great extent, from each other in the distribution of their opinions on attribution probably due to the diversity of students in Turkish education system. In any case, it appears quite difficult to follow a general pattern on the basis of student attributions. Instead, one can construe that all student attributions are also closely related with students' perceived usefulness of improving second language reading in English.

As underlined in Weiner's (1992) influential book on attributions, one sound way of going about the categories of attributions cited by students with different sex and English proficiency level in reading is attempting to evaluate attributions in terms of whether they are internal (for example effort) or external (for example distraction) and whether they can be controlled (for example effort is controllable, whereas distraction is not). This may help explain the results of the study: for instance, it is striking that less proficient students attributed success in reading to sense of achievement being an attribution which is labelled as both internal and controllable. This finding can help facilitate the learning in reading skill, underscoring the need to assist particularly the less proficient students in building up their sense of achievement in reading.

This raises the question of whether students' undesirable attributions in reading can be modified. As Peacock (2009) suggests, once attributions are identified they can be modified. This is the case with Turkish students' attributions in reading class where some students may not see the point of working hard and therefore make less effort than is desirable. The modifications would in turn lead to profound changes in student behaviours in reading. Weiner (1992) described his theory of attributional change-changes in attribution produce changes in behaviour-and other writers agree with this, making further suggestions (p. 264). Dörnyei (2001b) proposes encouraging students' effort attributions and playing down ability attributions (p. 120-121). Bruning (2004) suggests discussing the effects of different attributions with students, and help them concentrate on controllable attributions (p. 125).

The findings of the study provide room for the identification of the origins of a wide range of student and teacher attributions in second language reading. As the results indicate, the common attributions stem from students' individual

experiences and observation undertaken in reading class, none of which teachers can prevent. On the other hand, it might be advantageous for teachers to identify the source of student attributions in reading, thereby promoting certain attributions among students as this may lead to improved proficiency, effort and beliefs. This has valuable implications for learner training, teacher training and teacher action to be taken in the process of reading instruction.

This study is limited to Turkish context as well as to second language reading. However, it could provide insights into attribution in other contexts, covering the all language skills. We suggest using more in-depth student interviews in order to improve the research. Finally, questions for further research are: What attributions in reading are prevalent elsewhere? How does failure attributed to uncontrollable factors hinder achievement in reading comprehension?

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