

# Attributional Patterns with Respect to Major and Attendance in Private Language Schools: A Case of EFL Context

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**Abstract**—This study examined the attributions of high school students for their success and failure in learning a foreign language. To this end, the Attribution Theory for Foreign Language Learners Questionnaire was administered to 708 EFL learners studying in high schools in Mashhad, and villages around Mashhad, a city in the north-east of Iran. The aims of the study were to find out the factors to which students majoring in Humanities, Sciences, and Math ascribe their successes and failures and to see whether attendance in private language classes makes any difference in attributional patterns. To analyze the data, Multiple Independent t-test and One-way ANOVA were employed. Findings suggest that different majors attribute differently. Likewise, significant differences emerged in attributions regarding attendance in private language classes. Findings provide some suggestions for teachers and educators.

**Index Terms**—Attribution Theory, ATFL factors, major, high schools

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing tendency towards learning English as a foreign language among Iranians, especially young people. The desire comes from several factors such as increasing access to the Internet, satellite TV, films and music which are mostly in English. Furthermore, migration to foreign countries, especially for academic purposes has been growing rapidly. More importantly, in order to be accepted in MA and PhD courses and to get some jobs, one needs to have good language proficiency. Another reason which has influenced the rising fashion in learning English is the social prestige that it carries with it which is perhaps alluring for some, especially youngsters. Thus, students are seemingly motivated to acquire English in Iran.

However, in spite of the seemingly good sources of motivation, EFL learners' failures in learning language is still common either in private language institutes, or in English classes at schools in Iran, but definitely to a more alarming degree. Given the fact that English learning has become increasingly important for achieving academic and business purposes, EFL researchers need to explore the causes of successes and failures of language learners. The starting point can be investigating the explanations learners themselves provide for their language outcomes. Although what one perceives as the cause does not necessarily mean what is 'really' the cause, attributions are more powerful than the truth in influencing one's future behavior. One of the psychological frameworks which trace learners' problems in acquiring a second or foreign language is that of attribution theory. Through the kinds of explanations learners provide for their perceived successes and failures in their language outcomes, attribution theory can determine if they make healthy attributions or not. Healthy attributions can be empowered and unhealthy ones can be retrained by the kind of feedback teachers provide to students.

In addition to giving appropriate comments on students' explanations for their language achievements, one can pinpoint the reasons that affect learners' attributions to empower (if they have positive effect) or change (if they have negative impact) the influential factors. For example, if learners attribute their failures to lack of parent support, the first step is to change this kind of endorsement, since it is an external factor over which the learners have little control. As Weiner (1985) argues, in the case of failures, it is better to make an internal, unstable and controllable ascription. If individuals make an internal attribution like effort, they feel more responsible for their outcomes. If they make an unstable and changeable attribution, it seems to be promising for them to change it. Second, a large body of research (Sirvani, 2007; Domina, 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005) has documented the role of parent engagement in students' academic achievement. Thus in parent-teachers associations, the role of family support in learners' language achievement can be highlighted.

In this study, the researchers aimed at finding out to what high school students attribute their successes and failures with regard to students' majors, i.e., Humanities, Sciences, and Math. We hypothesize that there might be differences in attribution patterns of different majors. The claim comes from Williams, Burden, Poulet, and Maun (2004) who argue that attributions are socially constructive in nature and individuals from the same background tend to make similar attributions. In doing so, we hope to realize primarily whether the groups make healthy attributions, or they need any attribution retraining. Then, we go one step further, and try to locate the problematic areas and make some suggestions to educators, particularly language teachers.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Attribution theory of Weiner is originated in the work of Heider (1958). He believed that people act on the basis of their beliefs. Attribution theory mainly concerned with the reasons people attribute to their perceived successes and failures in academic and other achievement-related situations (Weiner, 1986). The importance of realizing the causes of outcomes is that they provide an understanding of why individuals behave in a particular way and how they are expected to behave in future (Weiner, 1979).

Individuals' attributions can have impact on their later motivation (Jarvis, 2005; Williams, et al., 2004; Williams, Burden & Lanvers, 2002; Dornyei, 2001); their affective states (Weiner, 2000; Oxford & Shearin 1994; Crooks & Schmitt, 1991; Graham & Folkey, 1990), and also the degree of effort they will invest in their future efforts.

In academic achievement studies the four most cited causes are ability, effort, task difficulty and luck (Weiner, 1986). Weiner's causal structure has three dimensions, namely locus of cause, stability of cause and controllability of cause. By locus of cause he meant if it is internal or external. For example, ability is an internal cause. The second dimension of his causal structure is stability of the cause. For instance, if intelligence is perceived to be fixed, it is a stable cause. However, if intelligence is considered to be increasing on the basis of learner's experience, it is an unstable cause. The last dimension of Weiner's causal structure is controllability. For example, luck is an uncontrollable factor, while effort is a controllable cause.

The most adaptive type of causal inference comes from effort. When people attribute success or failure to the amount of effort exerted on an activity, they are usually more motivated to make great efforts on later situations, because it is an internal, unstable, and controllable factor (Jarvis, 2005).

Attribution theory is also important in the area of language learning, because as Dornyei (2005) stated failure is common in learning a language and learners do not usually achieve the desired level of proficiency. Yet, very few studies have been carried out in the EFL, ESL domain. Pishghadam and Modarresi (2008) conducted their research in Ferdowsi University of Mashhad. Their findings revealed that university students mostly attributed their successes and failures in language learning to intrinsic motivation and language policy. Likewise, Pishghadam and Zabihi (2011) in their quantitative study of Iranian EFL learners found that effort attribution was significantly related to language achievement. Moreover, they suggested that learners with higher scores made more stable and personal attributions. As for the relation between age and attributions, the research findings by Hasankhah and Vahabi (2010) showed that attributions for successes and failures differed among different age groups of English learners, namely children, teens and adults. Their study also showed that effort was the most cited reason for failure in language learning among all participants.

In a similar vein, Hsieh and Schallert (2008) observed that undergraduate Spanish, German, and French students who perceived themselves as unsuccessful gave their lack of effort as a reason for their failure. Hsieh and Schallert stated that students seemed to make healthy attributions. Similarly, Williams et al. (2004) explored attributions among high school students of both sexes, different age groups, and language studied (German, Spanish, and French). The results of their study illustrated clear variations among different language groups; all students tended to cite internal reasons more than twice as many as external ones. However, they showed that males more than females ascribed their success to internal causes, while girls attributed their failure to internal reasons. Having reviewed the literature, the researchers realized that the study of attributions among high school students in EFL contexts deserve more investigation. Therefore, the present research aims at finding the answers to the following research questions:

1. Does major play any role in the attribution patterns of high school students in Iranian EFL context?
2. Is there any significant difference between the attribution patterns of high school students in Iranian EFL context, based on learning language in language institutes?

## III. METHOD

### A. Participants

708 Iranian students who were in the last year of high school were the participants. They were studying Humanities (N=225), Sciences (N=266) and Math (N=217) in Mashhad, and some villages around it, a city in the northeast of Iran. Participants were 312 females and 396 males with the age ranging from 18-19. According to the program requirements these students have to study English 4 hours a week. 44.2% of all students reported that they attended language institutes. 55.1% reported that they had not attended language institutes and 4.1% did not answer the question.

### B. Measure

Students completed a questionnaire including demographic information. The Attribution Theory for Foreign Language Learners Questionnaire (ATFLL) was designed and validated by Pishghadam and Modarresi (2008) and comprises 30 items measuring four constructs, namely, *Emotions*, *Self-image*, *Intrinsic motivation*, and *Language policy* that are scored on a Likert scale of 5-points. Subscales' scores can range from 1 to 5, with higher values representing attributions that are more positive regarding participants' Emotions, Self-image, Intrinsic motivation, and Language policy towards their language achievements. The alpha reliability was .83. In this study the reliability of the whole items (i.e. 30 items) estimated by Cronbach Alpha was .76.

### C. Procedure

The data collection started in fall, 2010 and finished in winter, 2011. In order to be administered in high schools, the questionnaire needed to be appraised by the Central Education Organization in Mashhad. Then, the researchers received official approval from the organization which is in charge of supervising research-related issues in all schools and organizations administered by the Ministry of Education. After that students completed the measures during scheduled classes. Students were asked not to record their names. They were briefly told about the aim of the study and instructed on how to complete the questionnaire. The completion of the measure took about 10 to 15 minutes.

After collecting the data, it was entered into and processed with SPSS 16.0 program. The fundamental statistics in the current study were Independent Sample t-test, and One-way ANOVA. To examine the degree to which the participants' attributions vary regarding their major, One-way ANOVA was used. To locate where the differences were, Scheffe Post Hoc test was employed. Independent Samples t-test was utilized to determine the differences of attributional patterns between those who participated in private language classes and those who did not.

## IV. RESULT

The findings in Table 1a indicate that there are significant differences among three groups regarding emotions ( $F = 10.616$ ,  $P < .05$ ). Also, according to Table 1.b which shows the results of Scheffe test, students of Math (mean: 2.7235) more than students of Sciences (mean: 2.5886) attributed their language learning achievement to emotions, though the difference is not statistically different. Furthermore, students of Humanities (mean: 2.3788) less than the other two groups, received the lowest ranking in attributing their successes or failures in language learning to emotions.

**Math>Science>Humanities**

TABLE I.A  
RESULTS OF ONE-WAY ANOVA FOR EMOTIONS

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	13.401	2	6.700	10.616	.000
Within Groups	444.965	705	.631		
Total	458.366	707			

TABLE I.B  
RESULTS OF SCHEFFE POST HOC TEST FOR EMOTIONS

major	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05	
		1	2
Humanities	225	2.3788	
Sciences	266		2.5886
Math	217		2.7235

As Table 2.a shows, there are significant differences among the three groups with regard to self-image ( $F = 12.131$ ,  $P < .05$ ). Given the differences, Scheffe Post Hoc test was employed to locate the differences among means. Scheffe Post Hoc test (table 3.b) revealed that Math students (mean: 3.6711) received the highest ranking in ascribing their language learning outcome to self-image. Sciences students (mean: 3.4023) received the second ranking and Humanities students (mean: 3.3471) was rated as the lowest in attributing their success and failures to self-image.

**Math>Science>Humanities**

TABLE II.A  
RESULTS OF ONE-WAY ANOVA FOR SELF-IMAGE

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	13.394	2	6.697	12.131	.000
Within Groups	389.188	705	.552		
Total	402.582	707			

TABLE II.B  
RESULTS OF SCHEFFE POST HOC TEST FOR SELF-IMAGE

major	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05	
		1	2
Humanities	225	3.3471	
Sciences	266	3.4023	
Math	217		3.6711

As the results of Table 3 show, there is no significant difference ( $F = .557$ ,  $P > .05$ ) among three groups with regard to intrinsic motivation.

TABLE III.  
RESULT OF ONE-WAY ANOVA FOR INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.505	2	.252	.557	.573
Within Groups	319.386	705	.453		
Total	319.891	707			

The result of one One-way ANOVA (see table 4) shows that findings is not statistically significant for language policy ( $F=1.550$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

TABLE IV.  
RESULT OF ONE-WAY ANOVA FOR LANGUAGE POLICY

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.912	2	.956	1.550	.213
Within Groups	434.802	705	.617		
Total	436.714	707			

Furthermore, to examine if there is any significant difference, in attribution patterns, between those students who study English in language institutes and those who do not, t-test was run. As Table 5 demonstrates, participating in language classes plays statistically significant role in attributing learners' success and failures to emotions ( $t=7.582$ ,  $p<.05$ ), self-image ( $t=5.414$ ,  $p<.05$ ), and language policy ( $t=-3.596$ ,  $p<.05$ ); however, it does not have any influence on learners' intrinsic motivation attribution ( $t=-.005$ ,  $p>.05$ ).

TABLE V.  
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES T-TEST FOR LANGUAGE CLASS ATTENDANCE

Variables	t	df	Sig.	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
emotions	7.582	476	.000	.48017	.06333
self-image	5.414	526	.000	.31821	.05877
intrinsic motivation	-.005	676	.996	-.00026	.05275
language policy	-3.596	564	.000	-.21925	.06096

## V. DISCUSSION

The primary goal of the present research was to identify the attributional pattern of high school students from different majors in learning a foreign language. Then, we were to investigate the variations in attribution patterns of high school students who learn English in language institutes and those who do not.

With regard to the participants' major, considerable differences emerged. This finding is compatible with that of Pishghadam and Modarresi (2008) who reported that university students from different majors attributed their successes and failures to different factors. As far as emotions and self-image factors are concerned, students of Math ranked highest in ascribing their successes and failures in language learning to these two factors. Both emotions and self-image are external, unstable and uncontrollable factors over which learners have control. Thus it does not seem to be an unhealthy attribution.

If Math students attribute their language outcomes to negative or positive emotions and self-image, by changing (in the case of negative ones) or by enforcing (in the case of positive ones), they can expect better performance in English in future. There is a plethora of research showing that positive emotions and attitudes can make language learning much more effective and enjoyable. As Oxford (1996) stated, one of the domains of great influence on language learning success or failure is the emotional side of the learners. Likewise, positive self-image can have desirable impact on academic achievement. According to Dornyei (2005), students with positive view of themselves might perform better in school. Furthermore, there is a linkage between self-image and self-esteem. Many scholars (Heyde, 1979; Watkins, Biggs & Regmi, 1991; Brodkey & Shore; Gardner & Lambert 1972, cited in Brown 2000) have demonstrated that positive self-esteem affects language performance.

However, a closer look at the data reveals that they do not seem to have developed negative emotions and self-image. This can be due to several factors. Students of Math are usually labeled as the best ones at schools, because generally they get better grades; they observe class rules and regulations; and they meet school standards and teachers' expectations. That is why, school officials and teachers like them, respect them and encourage them especially in front of other students. In class, there is a warm and encouraging relationship between the teacher and students, regardless of the subject matter being taught.

Moreover, as demographic information obtained from participants shows, 63% of Math students participate in language classes in private language institutes where there is a friendly relationship between teachers and students. In addition, teaching materials in language classes is based on humanistic approaches to language teaching (Khazaefar, Pishghadam & Motakef, 2008). Humanistic psychology recognizes language learning as a process that includes more than just the language itself. It considers learners' feelings, emotions, and social experiences as integral to educational process (Williams & Burden, 1997). Thus, welcoming and encouraging atmosphere, both at schools and language classes, goes hand in hand to create more positive emotions and self-image towards their language outcomes.

On the other hand, students of Humanities ranked lowest in attributing their successes and failures in language learning to emotions and self-image. This can be explained by the fact that unlike Math and Sciences students, students whose average is low are guided, by school counselors, to choose Humanities. Because of their low school average and their liveliness which is often misinterpreted by teachers and school officials as being problematic, they are often labeled as lazy and troublemakers. For the same reasons, these students are sometimes degraded, humiliated and embarrassed. Lack of social support and social acceptance by the teachers and school officials may affect students' self-efficacy, anxiety status and their self-image (Weiss, 1974). What is more, teachers, including language teachers, are usually strict about misbehaviors and learners' errors which may lead to emotionless and stressful environment. Research shows that if learners feel anxious, they may attribute it to personal difficulty with the task which may lead to reduced self-efficacy (Jarvis, 2005), while positive emotions are related to self-efficacy and achievement (Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002).

Regarding the relationship between attribution patterns and private language class attendance, the findings were significant for three ATFL factors i.e., emotions, self-image, and language policy. Results of descriptive statistics illustrate that those students who learn language in language institutes scored higher in attributing their success and failures to emotions and self-image. As Khazaefar, Pishghadam and Motakef (2008) suggested the texts used in the language institutes have employed new findings in the field of language learning which address learners' needs and interests, and the reading materials value emotional aspect of language learners. Besides, there is a very close, positive, emotional and interactive relationship between language learners and teachers. Likewise, language ability they have acquired in language classes perhaps contributed these students viewing themselves as more capable ones. However, this group of students ascribed their language outcomes less to language policy factor, compared to the ones who reported they learn English just at schools. This seems logical, since private language classes provide opportunity for them to compare language materials, class activates and climate with those of schools.

In contrast, students who reported they did not attend language classes ascribed their successes and failures more to language policy. Language policy is an external, unchangeable factor over which learners have no control. Thus if students attribute their failures to language policy, it may lead to disappointment and underachievement. However, any kind of feedback to students' attributions should be given cautiously since attributions are situation specific.

In sum, the attributional pattern of high school students from different majors seems to be rather alarming for educators. From what we found, we can conclude that the educational system in Iran seems to conform to the

transmission model of education in which transmitting pieces of knowledge is more important than students as whole persons whose cognition as well as emotions and feelings are engaged in learning. In transmission model of education, there are some criteria set by the system. The criteria dictate teachers to cover thick books to the end of the academic year, regardless of students' interests or capabilities. The best teachers are the ones whose students get the best grades in their exams, and especially in the university entrance examination, so teachers have to teach to the test. This system needs students who are obedient and conforms to school standards. Math students usually obtain the best grades in school not questioning norms and standards. For the same reason, they are labeled as sharp and intelligent and favor teachers' and school officials' respect. On the other hand, students of Humanities generally rank lowest in their school scores. At schools, they frequently resist school norms and standards. That is why, there is a tendency to call them as lazy and label them as deviations and abnormal. For this reason, they are deprived of warm atmosphere in class and emotional and respectful behavior, what they need most because of their emotional nature. Needless to say, one can find interpersonal, intrapersonal, social and emotional intelligence more, among Humanities students than among the other two groups. Math students are bestowed with logical-mathematical intelligence. Nevertheless, the way teachers behave students shows that there is a tendency towards valuing IQ at the expense of EQ.

Williams and Burden (1997) argued that learning which engages feelings as well as cognition is more probable to be permanent and persistent. Other scholars such as Goleman (1995, cited in Brown, 2000) put EQ at the center of intellectual functioning. He placed emotions at the highest level of hierarchy of human abilities. Having high IQ in traditional sense can make one successful in acquiring high test score. But having high EQ is far more important than any other factor in learning a language (Brown, 2000).

In terms of emotions, EFL lecturers and teachers should be aware that their actions, behaviors and speech have great influence on shaping students' emotions towards language learning. So, they are recommended to utilize strategies that reduce students' stress and anxiety, and make them feel relaxed and confident in class. EFL students should not be discouraged by temporal failure. Any types of discriminations against learners by instructors are advised to be avoided. The instructors and teachers are recommended to discourage negative competition among students while collaborative and cooperative learning should be encouraged so that students enjoy an alive, warm and friendly atmosphere where students' strengths are boosted and their weaknesses are removed by the kind and intimate help of their instructors and peers. In fact, EFL lecturers and teachers are suggested to establish a supportive and encouraging environment for language learning.

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