

Attributions for Success and Failure: Gender and Language Proficiency Differences among Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract—The study examined the attributions of Iranian English language learners for their successes and failures in learning English as foreign language and to determine the relationship between learners' gender and attributions. Moreover, the relationship between their proficiency level and attributions was investigated. To this end, the Attribution Theory for Foreign Language Learners Questionnaire (ATFLL) was administered to 200 English language students studying in different private language institutes of Kerman and Mashhad, Iran. A theoretical framework adopted from Weiner (1986) was applied to categorize students' responses based on attributions (ability, effort, task difficulty and luck). To analyze the data, SPSS 22.0 was employed. The results of the study indicated that learners attributed their success and failure to both internal and external factors but giving more priority to external factors. Furthermore, it was revealed that there were significant relationships between learner's gender, proficiency level and attributions.

Index Terms—attribution theory, ATFLL questionnaire, gender difference, proficiency level

I. INTRODUCTION

Attribution theory as a topic in social psychology is a relatively renewed notion and has attracted the attention of a lot of researchers in different disciplines, ranging from sports psychology to first and second language education. One area in naïve psychology that specifically deals with the causes of success and failure is attribution theory. Weiner (1979) said, "Attributions are the perceived causes that individuals select or construct for events in their lives. A basic assumption of attribution theory is that a person's understanding of the causes of past events influences his future actions". Weiner (1986) as the initial developer of attribution theory believed that the main factors impacting attributions are ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck (Graham, 1991).

Attribution Theory contends that in general, students attempt to defend their motivation or use a self-protective bias by explaining away failing regarding external and uncontrollable factors including bad luck or maybe weak teaching or maybe internally as a result of their own deficiency effort. Concurrently, they make an effort to sustain a good self-image or maybe self-enhancement by attributing accomplishment for their own hard work and ability. Hence, these learners able to activate the self-enhancement and self-protective biases effectively as well as they will be more hands-on, more chronic along with self-directed even facing duplicated failing. On the other hand, poor achievers ascribe success to external factors such as luck and failure to lack of ability. These kinds of learners presume failure and inadequate success and persuade themselves that more attempt will be ineffective because they do not think they have the essential characteristics to succeed (Smith, 2012). It also seems that the process of attribution is at the heart of crucial innovations occurring within the educational systems and the way learners tend to learn the immediate material, therefore, it needs to be studied thoroughly in order to inform any further changes that might be useful and needed. Afterwards, the impact of internal and external factors in the EFL context of attribution should be investigated through more researches because for the EFL learners, internal as well as external factors become the major source of hindrance or improvement in the process of attribution.

In the present study, the researcher aimed at finding out to what Iranian EFL learners attribute their success and failures. Besides, the role of gender and proficiency level was considered to see whether they could be influential factors.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Attribution theory is the internal along with external explanations connected with what exactly is taking place at the rear of your own as well as other people's behaviors. This specific concept deals with "why" and "whats" that people understand the events, judge and act on them (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008).

Heider (1958) was the initial to offer a psychological theory of attribution. He introduced the "Naive Psychology", he assumed that people behave on the basis of their thinking. As a result, thinking must be considered in the event that psychologists have been to be able to be the cause of man behavior. This will be accurate whether the thinking were logical or definitely not. Heider (1958) also recommended that you may find out quite a lot through psychology. This individual considered that people are naive psychologists seeking to sound right on the social earth. People have a tendency to discover cause as well as effect associations actually in which there is probably none.

According to Weiner (1986) in school accomplishments scientific studies the particular four almost all mentioned causes are ability, effort, task difficulty and luck (Weiner, 1986). Weiner's causal construction possesses three dimensions, such as locus of cause, stability of cause and controllability of cause. By means of locus of cause he intended if it is internal or external. As an example, ability is an internal cause. The second dimension of Weiner's causal structure is stability of the cause. For example, in the event that intelligence is recognized to become fixed, it is a stable cause. However, if intelligence is usually thought to be growing based on considered to be increasing on the basis of learner's knowledge, it is really an unstable cause. The final dimension is controllability. By way of example, luck is definitely an uncontrollable factor, even though effort is a controllable cause (Pishghadam and Motakef, 2011). According to Oxford (2002) attribution theory is significant, even so, it has not been researched adequately within the domain of language learning (Pishghadam, Fatemi and asghari, 2012).

Williams, Burden and also Al-Baharna (2001) investigated learners' attributions of achievement and also failure within learning English by means of displaying the role of attribution inside learners' motivation along with cultural history (Pishghadam, Fatemi and asghari, 2012). Williams, Burden, Poulet and Maun (2004) suggested that some factors such as gender, age and perceived success can be influential in ascribing success and failure to attributions. Takahashi (2003) focused on the relationship between reading proficiency level of university students and their attribution. In this way, Peacock (2010) tried out to analyze the connection among attribution, proficiency, gender, and academic discipline. Furthermore, Wu (2011) researched students' attribution preferences and also gender difference throughout learning English. Involving these kinds of scientific studies Pishghadam and Modarresi (2008) created and validated a questionnaire named ATFL to look into the particular factors English language learners attribute their achievements and breakdowns to (Pishghadam, Fatemi and asghari, 2012). The study exhibited that college students largely attributed their own successes along with failures throughout language learning to intrinsic motivation and language policy Pishghadam and Motakef (2011) used ATFL questionnaire to examine the attributions of high school students with different majors. The results showed that university students from different majors attributed their successes and failures to different factors. In the same year, Pishghadam and Zabihi (2011) investigated the role of attributional dimensions and causal attributions in learners' English language successes and failures. They illustrated that effort and stable attribution have an important role in predicting students' achievements. In the same vein, Burden, Poulet and Maun (2004) found that the larger part of attributions for both success and failure were considered internal. Additionally, Hassaskhah, and Vahabi (2010) believed that effort was the most cited reason for failure in language finding out.

In educational psychology, considerable awareness has been offered to the learner's attributions with regards to their achievements and failures, on the other hand, little study have been carried out in the area of foreign language learning (Williams, Burden, Poulet, & Maun, 2004).

Having reviewed the literature, the researchers realized the importance of attributional factors in language learning among EFL learners. Thus, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

Q1: What do Iranian EFL learners attribute their language successes and failures to?

Q2: Are there any significant differences between attributional responses of Iranian EFL learners with regard to gender?

Q3: Are there any significant differences between attributional responses of Iranian EFL learners with regard to proficiency level?

III. METHODOLOGY

A. *Participants*

Participants were 200 language learners studying at different private language institutes in Kerman and Mashhad, Iran. They were both males and females with the age ranging from 17-32 and their language proficiency varied from elementary to advanced level. , 127 of whom were female and 73 male

B. *Instrumentation*

Theory for Foreign Language Learners Questionnaire (ATFL) designed and validated by Pishghadam and Modarresi (2008), was used to measure students' attributions. Thorough this questionnaire, questions analyze four factors: ability, effort, luck, and task difficulty that suggested by Weiner (1974) because four units of attributions. This particular 30-item list of questions is in the 5-point Likert-type scale using "strongly agree" at one conclude and "strongly disagree" at the other and it is in Persian language. The reliability for this questionnaire was 0.84 as it was reported.

C. Procedure

The above mentioned questionnaire distributed among EFL learners during class hours by prior arrangement with the instructors. It took about 10 to 15 minutes for the respondents to complete the questionnaire.

The data were analyzed utilizing SPSS software 22.0. They were calculated and interpreted in terms of descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation and standard error of mean). To examine the relationship between learners' proficiency level, gender and attributions, Independent Sample Test was employed.

D. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework chosen for this study was that of Weiner (1979). He believed that ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck are the most important attributions which can be classified as internal and external.

TABLE 2.
ATTRIBUTIONS

Internal	External
Ability	Task difficulty
Effort	Luck

The above scheme (Table 3.2) was adopted from Weiner (1979) to categorize the students' responses from the questionnaire.

IV. RESULTS

As mentioned, ATFL questionnaire was used to explore the factors to which EFL learners attribute their failures and successes in learning English. The differences in means and standard deviations for external and internal attributions are reported in Table 3.

TABLE 3.
EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL ATTRIBUTIONS

Variables	Mean	Maximum	Minimum	Std. Deviation
External	3.48	4.29	2.53	0.33
Internal	2.84	4.38	1.85	0.52

The finding demonstrated a significant difference between internal and external attributions among students without regarding their level and gender-.

TABLE 4. 15
DIFFERENCES IN ATTRIBUTIONS

Variables	Mean	Maximum	Minimum	Std. Deviation
Ability	3.64	4.86	2.71	0.4
Effort	3.36	3.4	1.9	0.42
Task difficulty	2.67	4.6	1.4	0.63
Luck	2.29	4.63	1.75	0.62

Moreover, the above Table (4. 15) revealed the differences in means and standard deviations for subdivisions (ability, effort, task difficulty and luck) of internal and external attributions. It was shown that students attributed their success and failure more often to ability ($M = 3.64$) and less often to luck ($M = 2.29$).

In order to answer the second research question, an Independent Sample Test was computed to examine the relationship between gender and attributions.

TABLE 4. 7
GENDER AND ATTRIBUTIONS

	Gender	N	Mean	Std.Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Ability	Male	73	3.7965	.37185	.04352
	Female	127	3.5523	.38993	.03460
Effort	Male	73	3.4082	.46120	.05398
	Female	127	3.3331	.37986	.03371
Task difficulty	Male	73	2.6466	.61057	.07146
	Female	127	2.6913	.64378	.05713
Luck	Male	73	3.1147	.52653	.06163
	Female	127	3.8553	.65964	.05853

Group statistics

INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST

		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Ddifference	%95 Confidence Interval of the Ddifference	
								Lower		Upper
Ability	Equal variances assumed	1.718	.191	4.335	198	.000	.2442	.05632	.13311	.35524
	Equal variances not assumed			4.392	156.135	.000	.2442	.05560	.13435	.35400
Effort	Equal variances assumed	2.923	.089	198	1.244	.215	.0751	.06041	-.04398	.19428
	Equal variances not assumed			127.978	1.181	.240	.0751	.06364	-.05077	.20107
Task difficulty	Equal variances assumed	.614	.434	-.482	198	.630	-.0448	.09281	-.22779	.1382
	Equal variances not assumed			-.489	156.826	.625	-.0448	.09149	-.22547	.13595
Luck	Equal variances assumed	5.955	.016	2.874	198	.004	.2594	.09027	.08140	.4374
	Equal variances not assumed			3.052	177.813	.003	.2594	.08499	.09168	.42714

Table 4.7 highlights the results of t-test that there is a significant difference in scores for males (M= 3.7, SD= 0.37) and females (M= 3.5, SD= 0.38); (p = 0.00 < 0.05) in ability; moreover, there is a significant relationship between males (M= 3.1, SD= 0.52) and females (M= 3.8, SD= 0.65); (p = 0.003 < 0.05) with regard to luck.

However, the above Table depicts that there is no significant difference in scores for males (M= 3.4, SD= 0.46) and females (M= 3.3, SD= 0.37); (p = 0.215 > 0.05) with respect to effort. In the same way, a significant relationship (p = 0.630 > 0.05) between gender (males (M= 2.6, SD= 0.71) and females (M= 2.6 SD= 0.57)) and task difficulty was illustrated.

Another interest of this study was to determine if there were any significant relationships between the level of proficiency and attributions. For this aim, Independent Sample Test was applied.

TABLE 4.11
PROFICIENCY LEVEL AND ATTRIBUTIONS

	Level	N	Mean	Std.Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Effort	Elementary	101	3.2901	.47990	.04775
	Advanced	99	3.4323	.31488	.03165
Ability	Elementary	101	3.5262	.34813	.03464
	Advanced	99	3.7590	.41707	.04192
Task difficulty	Elementary	101	2.5267	.60115	.05982
	Advanced	99	2.8263	.62704	.06302
Luck	Elementary	101	2.9121	.41666	.04146
	Advanced	99	2.9886	.78411	.07881

Group statistics

INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST

		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Ddifference	%95 Confidence Interval of the Ddifference	
								Lower		Upper
Effort	Equal variances assumed	23.724	.000	-2.473	198	.014	-.1422	.05752	-.25565	-.02880
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.483	173.066	.014	-.1422	.05729	-.25529	-.02915
Ability	Equal variances assumed	1.451	.230	-4.290	198	.000	-.2329	.05428	-.33989	-.12581
	Equal variances not assumed			-4.282	190.494	.000	-.2329	.05438	-.34011	-.12559
Task difficulty	Equal variances assumed	.251	.617	-3.449	198	.001	-.2995	.08685	-.47080	-.12826
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.447	197.236	.001	-.2995	.08689	-.47088	-.12818
Luck	Equal variances assumed	55.944	.000	-.864	198	.389	-.0765	.08855	-.25112	.09811
	Equal variances not assumed			-.859	148.600	.392	-.0765	.08905	-.25247	.09945

The above Table (4.11) reveals a significant difference between elementary students (M= 3.2, SD= 0.47) and advanced students (M= 3.4, SD= 0.31); (p = 0.014 < 0.05) in effort. Similarly, it shows that there is a significant relationship (p = 0.000 < 0.05) between ability and the proficiency level of students (elementary students (M = 3.5, SD = 0.34) and advanced students (M = 3.7, SD = 0.41)). Additionally, the results demonstrates a significant relationship (p

= 0.001 < 0.05) between the proficiency level of students (elementary (M= 2.52, SD = 0.60) and advanced (M= 2.82, SD = 0.63)) and task difficulty.

On the contrary, there was no significant relationships ($p = 0.392 > 0.05$) between students' proficiency level (elementary (M = 2.91, SD = 0.41) and advanced (M = 2.98, SD = 0.78)) and luck as an external attribution.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As previously mentioned, Weiner's framework (1974) (ability, effort, luck, and task difficulty) was implemented in this study. Considering the manipulation of the data, the researcher came up with different results and findings. Apparently, the finding demonstrated a significant difference between internal and external attributions among students without regarding their proficiency level and gender. In other words, EFL students attribute their achievements to external more than internal factors in the process of learning English. Additionally, it is suggested that regarding the attribution sub-constructs or regarding attributions in separate (ability, effort, task difficulty and luck), students attributed their success and failure more often to ability (M = 3.64) and less often to luck (M = 2.29). In this manner, William and Burden (1999) conducted a qualitative analysis to obtain the main factors of learners' attributions, how various people assemble different factors to attribute their achievements and failures to (Fatemi and Asghari 2012). They presented that students attributed their success to external factors more than internal attributions. Additionally, they suggested that attribution regarding success and failure can be impacted by individual's age, social interactions, contexts, feelings, and environment (Fatemi and Asghari 2012). Mynatt and Doherty (2002), and Ushioda (2001) reported that people attribute their bad performances to external attributions and good performances to internal factors. Boruchovitch (2004) claimed that students attribute their success and failure to ability more than other attributions.

The results revealed that there were significant differences between males and females in ability as an internal attribution and luck as an external attribution. It seems that male students attribute their success and failure to ability more than female students. In other words, females attribute their success and failures to luck more than male learners. In similar way, Felder, Felder, Mauney, Hamrin and Dietz (1995) believed that men are more likely to attribute their success and failure to ability than women. Beyer (1998, 1999) found that males ascribed their successes to ability more than females. Sweeney, Moreland and Gruber (1982) highlighted that females attributed their failures to external attributions, while males ascribed to internal attributions. Nevertheless, some other researchers point to the fact that there are no significant differences between male and female learners in their attributions for their achievements (Travis, Phillippi & Henley, 1991; Hyde, 2005; Wu, 2011; Pishghadam & Motakef, 2011)

According to the third research question, there is a meaningful relationship between proficiency level and attributions. Elementary students attributed their achievements to ability, effort and task difficulty less than advanced student while, there was no significant difference between learners' proficiency level and luck as an external attribution. This means that the learners attributed part of their success to their proficiency level which is highly influenced by factors such as trying hard, and their inner ability as well as how difficult the immediate exam is. The results confirmed some other researches. According to Adiba (2004), students with high level of proficiency attributed their good and bad performances to ability and effort as internal attributions and students with low level of proficiency attributed their achievements to task difficulty and luck as external attributions. In a study carried out by Edwin and Talif (1990), it was shown that there is a significant relationship between proficiency level of students and their attributions. Peacock (2010) conducted a research which showed a close correlation between proficiency level, gender and attribution. On the contrary, Yilmaz (2012) investigated that there is no meaningful correlation between the learners' proficiency levels and their perceived attributions in general.

Applying the findings of this study and other studies in this area, some consciousness-raising programs can be designed to make learners as well as teachers more aware of the potential influence the internal as well as external factors may have on their life style in general and their language achievements in particular. The results are also essential for teachers as the ones who carry over the perspectives of English in an EFL context. This means that teachers who are carrying the responsibility of teaching and providing the needed input, should be aware of other surrounding factors (internal and external) which directly and indirectly put the learning process and the students' achievements under influence. It can be claimed that if they get to know the attribution difference between boys and girls as their students, it can have pedagogical implication in that teacher's awareness of this difference can help them treat both sexes accordingly (Tulu, 2008). Moreover, the findings of this study could be of great benefit for ministry of education as well as all those who have a role in providing the foundation and basis for teaching and learning English as a foreign language. They can think of developing ways and contexts in which the negative boundaries to learning and teaching a language is minimized and teachers as well as learners perform at their outmost, so that a balance between the two is maintained.

Further studies can be planned to check the effects of one or more of these internal or external factors on how well students perform on different tasks or examinations. Furthermore, it would be interesting to investigate the role of the majors EFL learners are studying on minimizing the extent of the impact the internal as well as external factors might have on students' learning process.

As a matter of fact, internal and external factors in the process of attribution are two concepts that have a lot of capacity for being explored from different aspects in the realm of language teaching and learning.

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