

☰ MENU

🖨️ PRINT VERSION

❓ HELP & FAQs

Student Perceptions of the Causes of Failure and the Need to Raise Mastery Expectations

Peter Burden

Okayama Shoka University

It is better to be thought a fool than open one's mouth and remove all doubt (Covington, 1992)

This paper attempts to shed light on ways in which Japanese learners interpret and construct reasons for failure in learning English, and how they make sense of their learning situation. This research analyzes the learners' views of their learning of English up to the present time, and examines the perceived key attributions for failure to stimulate

ideas teacher approaches to encourage classroom learning. Emerging data from an open-ended questionnaire of 231 University students in Japan suggest that learners need co-operative rather than competitive goal structures to create positive interdependence to overcome failure acceptance or "learned helplessness".

本稿は、英語学習での失敗の理由を日本の学生がどのように理解した上で言い訳しているのかを明らかにするものである。また同時に、学生が自らの学習状況についてどのように理解しているのかも明らかにする。その理解しようとする自体が成功もしくは成功へとつながる‘活力源’となり、また自らが努力して達成感を伴うことはタスクの継続には重要である。つまり、学習者は達成目標やその目標を達成するためにしなければならないことを自ら選ぶのである。本研究では、現在に至るまでの学習者自身の英語学習観を分析し、失敗を招く原因の手がかりを検証し、教師が取り組むべき教室での学習を促すアイデアを引き出す。日本の大学生231名に記入式のアンケート調査を実施し、そのデータから、学習者は競争感を煽る目標よりもむしろ互いの協力を得るような目標を要しており、お互いに助け合って失敗を受け止め、‘落ちこぼれ’を克服しようとしていることが示唆されている。

Introduction

The origin of attribution theory is seen to lie in the observation that people are not satisfied to simply observe events happening around them, but have a need to understand the causes. People are rational, but by no means infallible “information processors” (Hewstone, 1983, p.9) whereby we are expected to make correct decisions unless “distorted” by

social and motivational influences. Motivation is a by-product of cognitive and rational processes and a sense of pride or shame is engendered depending on how learners interpret success or failure. How we interpret is a central assumption of Attribution Theory in that “the search for understanding is the (or a) basic ‘spring of action’,” and is centered upon achievement concerns (Weiner, 1979, p.3). This search for understanding leads to attributional questions in learning of “why did I succeed or fail?” It is not so much failure itself, or even the frequency, but the meaning of failure (Covington, 1992) that is connected with self-esteem and self-concept. For some students, failure encourages a renewed striving for success. For others it is merely a further confirmation of incompetence. This search for meaning involves ascribing causes to our actions and the actions of others (p.51). The developing conceptions of the self are the center of the learning process as perceptions influence persistence in classroom activities how learners grasp stimuli and assimilate new knowledge.

Attribution theory

Weiner’s (1979, 1992) theory of the locus of causality explains how a learner’s approach to a learning task is based upon attributions of success and failure and whether learners can see the main cause of success or failure as coming from within themselves or from outside influences. These include ability, effort, task, and luck. *Doing well* and *doing badly* can be attributed to:

- a) ability: *my ability let me do the task* or *I’m not very smart*
- b) effort: *I worked hard* or *I didn’t try enough*
- c) task ease: *anybody could have managed it* or *no one could have done it*
- d) good luck: *I was lucky* or *I was unlucky*

Usually, success and failure at skills tasks are attributed to ability and effort with cognitive thought processes governing the quality of achievement. This suggests that learners’ perceived success or failure is attributed to either ability or effort as internal attributes from within a person as they reflect inherent characteristics of the individual. Task difficulty and luck are from outside the self, beyond the individual’s immediate capacity to control and thus an external attribute.

These attribution inferences are often retrospective, and are closely tied to self-esteem and self-concept. These personal beliefs will affect both subsequent actions and the self-appraisal of what can be managed and affect to what degree the learner will strive for achievement in the future (Dörnyei, 1994).

Aims of the present study

Williams, Burden and Al-Baharna’s (2002) study suggests that students from a western culture tend to equate success to internal attributions coming from within the self such as effort expended, while Asians are more likely to note external attributions such as task ease or good luck. It is also claimed that Asian students attribute failure to internal causes such as lack of ability or effort. Covington (1992, 1998) suggests that much evidence points to Asian immigrants into USA acting in more success-oriented ways with the tendency to attribute academic success to effort. Georgiou (1999) also observed the parameters of achievement between Western and Eastern cultures noting that the former emphasises ability, task difficulty and mood. Georgiou also mentions a study by Ichikawa-Fukumi who in 1986 observed that in Japan the key factor in success is hard work or effort. Yet we need to explore how people from different cultures explore their social world, being “careful

to refrain from creating their world in the image of our own” (Bond, 1983 p.157). Similarly, Schmidt, Boraie and Kassabgy (1996) note that as values and belief systems are often culturally conditioned, the authors of motivation theories are similarly conditioned and thus “theories of motivation typically reflect culturally based metaphors” (p.169). Therefore further studies of various cultural backgrounds are one of importance in the field of attributions and motivation.

Many earlier studies focused on Weiner's restricted model of four attributions often based in laboratory or controlled conditions and thus attribution programs may not take into account actual classroom conditions. Therefore I decided to adapt Williams, Burden, Poulet and Maun's unpublished (2002) survey (see Figure 1), which I adapted to:

- a) understand learners' perceptions of the success or failure of their learning up to the present time,
- b) to gain an insight into attributions of failure

Methods

Participants

231 students at one private and one national university in Western Japan took part in a questionnaire survey. None of the students were English majors and were studying English as either a requirement or as an elective. Most of the students were studying Commerce or Law, while others were studying Engineering, Economics or Tourism. 156 males and 75 females took part. Four native English speakers administered the questionnaire during an “English conversation” class towards the end of a 15-week single semester program. Students were asked to describe their level of success in studying English, and to list the attributions for feelings of perceived success and failure.

Data analysis

The students' responses to the open questions were analysed qualitatively to reveal patterns in the data using a key word analysis of categories generated from the statements made by the students (see Nunan, 1992). Categories *emerged* from the data, and categories were then grouped together with reference to attributions of failure. The findings were not submitted to inferential statistical analysis, as the focus of the study was to stimulate ideas for teaching practice and transferability to other contexts. Simple statistics of percentages and means were used as a way of aiding description. For the purposes of this paper, I will concentrate on the stated attributions of failure as listed by the students.

Results

How do learners view their learning of English?

Table 1. Sample

	Number of males	Number of females	Sub total	Percentage of total
Never feel successful in English	5	3	8	3.46
Rarely feel successful	50	14	64	27.71
Sometimes feel successful	85	30	115	49.78
Usually feel successful	16	28	44	19.04
Total	156	75	231	100

As can be seen in Table 1, nearly half the students saw themselves as being *sometimes successful* with approximately 28% seeing themselves as *rarely successful*, 19% as *usually successful* and around 3% thought that they were *never successful* at studying English. The students were also asked to list attributions for failure and we can see that those students who usually or sometimes feel successful cited proportionately fewer attributions for failure than students who rarely or seldom feel successful. For example, the 64 respondents who rarely feel successful listed 90 attributions, while the 115 students who sometimes feel successful listed 72.

Table 2. Attribution for failure according to level of success

	Number of attributions	Number of respondents
Never feel successful in English	15	8
Rarely feel successful	90	64
Sometimes feel successful	72	115
Usually feel successful	17	44
Total	194	231

Attributions for failure

Ten attributions for failure emerged from the data (See Table 3) with *lack of ability* mentioned in 71.6% of attributions, or 139 times out of a total of 194 attributions. Typically, students replied in the open questions that they were *poor at English*, that English was their *weak point*, they did not *know the basics*, and had an *inability* to pronounce, speak, read, or catch meaning or the listening. They felt unable to understand the grammar and complained of words *not coming out*. Many

Table 3. Attributions for failure (n = 231)

Attribution	Number	Percentage
(lack of) Ability	139	71.6
(lack of) Effort	18	9.3
(lack of) Mastery	10	5.2
Task	6	3.1
Teacher	5	2.6
Strategies	5	2.6
Interest	4	2.1
The class	4	2.1
Japanese	2	1.0
Translation	1	0.5
Total	194	100

answers emphasized being *unable to remember vocabulary* which is maybe linked to poor strategy use but are classified as a perceived lack of ability as students do not see it as a concrete tool to be utilized.

A lack of effort was noted by 9.3% of students including *not preparing* or *not participating*. They *do not know English* (and therefore do not try), and *do not study after class*. Lack of *mastery* attributions include feelings of resistance, stress, embarrassment, confusion, being lost and lapsing into silence. Other comments stated that there were too many difficult words in tasks; they had not had English classes (until now) that required a verbal response, being unable to understand or catch what the teacher said, being unable to translate and that Japanese sentence structure was too different to allow comprehension.

Looking at the results of Table 4 below, we can see that across the perceived ability range students attributed *lack of ability* to failure at learning English followed by *a lack of effort* and *mastery*.

Among the 44 students who *usually feel successful*, this perceived lack of ability was noted in 82% of citations. Of the 115 students who *sometimes feel successful*, it was mentioned 50 times, or 69% of the total attributions for failure. For those students who are *rarely successful* or *never successful*, ability received over 70% of citations.

Table 4. Attributions for failure named by students

	Students who usually feel successful (n=44)		Students who sometimes feel successful (n=115)		Students who rarely feel successful (n=64)		Students who never feel successful (n=8)	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
(lack of) Ability	14	82.4	50	69.4	64	71.1	11	73.3
(lack of) Effort	1	5.9	10	13.9	6	6.7	1	6.7
(lack of) Mastery	1	5.9	1	1.4	7	7.8	1	6.7
The task	0	0	3	4.2	3	3.3	0	0
Teacher	0	0	0	0	5	5.6	0	0
Strategies	0	0	1	1.4	4	4.4	0	0
Interest	0	0	2	2.8	0	0	2	13.3
Japanese	0	0	2	2.8	0	0	0	0
Translation	1	5.9	0	0	0	0	0	0
The class	0	0	3	4.2	1	1.1	0	0
Total	17	100	72	100	90	100	15	100

Discussion

Limitations of the study

While the results do have implications for learning foreign languages it must be noted that the number of attributions cited by the 231 respondents was low, with only 194 for lack of success. This low number of attributions may have implications for how learners articulate their English education, and how to create a successful learning environment. Reid (1987) and Hyland (1994) studied learning style preferences noting that Japanese speakers as a group did not identify a single major learning style. English is seen as an academic *pursuit* (Hyland, 1994, p.58), and learners cannot explain their lack of success beyond having little or no perceived ability in the subject. This in turn leads to a poor motivation to learn, or a tendency to think that classroom activities have little meaning and a lack of persistence in on-task behavior.

Meanings attached to failure

Failure confirms feelings of incompetence

Attribution theory shows that it is not so much failing but the *meaning* that is attached to failure that is important. If there had been more attributions for failure to *lack of effort* the results would have been less worrying. If learners attribute failure to lack of effort, they are more likely to be optimistic about future learning. Many students showed in this study that the highest priority is the protection of the sense of ability. If students see failure as “confirming suspicions of incompetence, it can only be paralyzing” (Covington, 1992, p.62). Therefore, if learners believe they lack the ability to learn a language, with ability being a stable, internal and uncontrollable factor, some students

may actually “handicap themselves by not studying in order to have an excuse for failing” (p.16). Through doing so, failing does not reflect on ability but on lack of effort, which is internal to the learner but controllable. Therefore we can perhaps see unreceptive, passive students as being “over motivated” as opposed to somehow “lacking” motivation: the absence of behavior should be viewed as just as motivated as “a lively, abundance” of behavior (p.16). The estimation of task difficulty often depends on the degree of expected similarity to previous tasks and how the student fared at them. Many students explain successes or failures on the basis of habitual learning patterns, without noting the actual causal factors (Good and Brophy, 1990). “I failed because I’m dumb (sic), rather than because I got frustrated and gave up too easily” (p. 383) is a frequent attribution to a stable factor outside one’s control. Similarly, poor language learners claim to not having *an ear for language*, which is a saving-face action through ascribing failure to a physical disposition (McLaughlin, 1981, p.155). Covington (1992, p.88) adds a further dimension, called “the academic wooden leg” which is where a student *admits* to poor performance but states the cause as *no ear for language* in order not to disclose the more damaging perceived weakness, a feeling of *incompetence*.

If the cognitive side of our nature controls motivation, then it is necessary to analyse causes of success and failures among students: what are the reasons that learners construct for their successes and failures in learning a new language? If ability is thought as fixed, self-perceptions of incompetence will trigger humiliation, which will lead to a spiral of not trying, as individuals are able to minimize information about ability through making little effort in the classroom. Similarly, there is the idea of keeping one’s mouth shut so as not to confirm one’s own suspicion of inability, as noted in the introductory quotation on page 1.

Improving the emotional climate

As Covington (1992, p.63) notes “educators should arrange learning so that falling short of one’s goals, which inevitably happens to everyone, will be interpreted in ways that promote the will to persist.” There is therefore a need to change motivation from an emphasis on uncontrollable aptitude, to a belief in failure due to a controllable lack of effort.

A belief in one’s own efforts

A belief that success is due to hard work will lead to an intention to work hard again. Covington (1998, p.71) suggests that there is a need to “ascribe one’s failures to inadequate learning strategies” thus focussing on not only inadequate but the poor quality of effort. Through doing so, the “concept of learner strategies bridge the domain of effort and ability so that trying hard but in sophisticated strategic ways is tantamount to increasing one’s ability to learn” (p.71). Those who experienced some kind of success were more likely to continue studying. In order to increase feelings of success and motivation to learn, students need concrete ideas about how to reach learning goals, which has obvious connections with strategy training and the fostering of intrinsic motivation.

Strategies

Dörnyei (1994) also adds that learners’ self-efficacy can be raised to achieve learning goals by teaching learning and communicative strategies, which help them to develop realistic expectations of what can be achieved. Crookes and Schmidt (1991) add that some students need to develop the belief that events are under their control, and that repeated efforts will lead to success. If students are able to analyze problems, identify

areas of difficulty and create necessary actions to overcome difficult obstacles, then when a task is initially seen as being difficult, the student can adopt an alternative explanation of perceived causes of failure besides ability. However it is important to remember that exhorting learners to try harder is insufficient. The students need to have strategy-related messages to encourage task-appropriate methods.

Self-acceptance through intrinsic interest

Receptive learning should be introduced recognizing that learners have needs for exploration, manipulation, activity, stimulation, knowledge and ego-enhancement which should be encouraged for sustained attention. As humans we all possess innate predispositions to probe the unknown, control our environment and to build self-esteem. The search for self-acceptance is the highest human priority and one’s worth depends on the ability to achieve competitively.

Pair or group work

Gardner and Lalonde (1990) add that comparisons of capability are “operating at a more comfortable level” (p. 219) as learners are compared with peers rather than the focus of comparison being the teacher. The teacher should not call on students randomly as the unpredictability of talk would heighten performance fears. Long and Porter (1985) show that stress is heightened in the “public arena” (p. 211) of the lock-step classroom and pair work provides a relatively stable environment to nurture skills without the absolute necessity for accuracy. Using co-operative rather than competitive goal structures and creating positive interdependence through which all parties have certain information is important (Crookes and Schmidt, 1991) so all students must collaborate equally if the task is to be completed successfully.

Interaction between students

Another benefit of collaborative work is the social interaction between students which leads to individual development. Learner interaction is drawn into and operates within the space of the more advanced student's language knowledge. Students can provide a scaffold by which they together manage parts of the problem (Donato, 1994) to produce something they want to say in the target language. If learners have the opportunity to help each other they are observed to create a context for shared understanding in which the negotiation of language form and meaning co-occur.

Teachers' roles

Teachers also need to be aware of the "Pygmalion effect" (Dörnyei, 2001, p.35) whereby if the teacher has low expectations of students, they "will probably live down to them." Dörnyei (1994) talks of developing learners' self-confidence by projecting the belief that they will achieve their goal through praise, encouragement, and reinforcement. The teacher needs to make sure students regularly experience success and sense of achievement. A key aspect of the paper has been an attempt to shed light on ways in which learners interpret their success and failure, and on how learners make sense of their learning situation.

Conclusion

Teachers need to create a motivational condition encouraging internal attributes of ability and effort to enhance the values, attitudes and to develop learners' ability to learn effectively. If students can achieve a successful outcome to a task, self-estimates of ability will be higher, and if learners can attribute

their failures to a lack of effort, or trying, they can rightly feel reasonably optimistic about later success. However, if failure is seen merely as further confirmation of incompetence, the students may not even try at tasks because to do so and fail anyway adds to the devastating, crushing sense of failure. Teachers need to foster in the students the belief that the learner can perform future tasks and develop a sense of autonomy to encourage task persistence.

Parts of this paper were also presented at the regional seminar of the Japanese Association of Language Teachers (JALT) held in Okayama in May 2003 and at the Special Interest Group of College English Educators (CUE-SIG) Annual Conference held in Kobe in October 2003.

References

- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Bond, M. (1983). A proposal for cross-cultural studies of attribution. In M. Hewstone (Ed.), *Attribution Theory* (pp. 144-157). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Covington, M. (1992). *Making the grade: A self-worth perspective on motivation and school reform*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Covington, M. (1998). *The will to learn. A guide for motivating young people*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Crookes, G., & Schmidt, R. (1991). Motivation: re-opening the research agenda. *Language Learning*, 41(4), 469 - 512.
- Donato, R. (1994). Collective scaffolding in second language learning. In J. Lantolf & G. Appel (Eds.), *Vygotskian approaches to second language research* (pp.33-57). Norwood: Ablex Publishing.

- Dörnyei, Z. (1994). Motivation and motivating in the foreign language classroom. *Modern language Journal*, 78(3), 275-284.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational strategies in the classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gardner, R. & Lalonde, L. (1990). Social psychological considerations. In D. Crookall & R. Oxford (Eds.), *Simulation, gaming and language learning* (pp.215-223). New York: Newbury House.
- Georgiou, S. (1999). Achievent attributes of sixth grade children and their parents. *Educational psychology*, 19(4), 399-411.
- Good T., & Brophy, J. (1990). *Educational psychology*. New York: Longman
- Hewstone, M. (1983). Attribution theory and common-sense explanations. In M. Hewstone (Ed.), *Attribution Theory* (pp. 1-9). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hyland, B. (1994). The learning styles of Japanese students. *JALT Journal*, 16(1), 55-72.
- Long, M. & Porter, P. (1985). Groupwork, interlanguage talk and second language acquisition. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19(2), 207-228.
- Nunan, D. (1992). *Research methods in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Reid, J. (1987). The learning style preferences of ESL students. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21(1), 87-110.
- Schmidt, R, Boraie, D. & Kassabgy, O. (1996). Foreign language motivation: internal structure and external connections. In R. Oxford & J. Shearin (Eds.), *Language learning motivation: pathways to the new century* (pp.9-71). Honolulu: University of Hawaii, Second Language Teaching and Curriculum Center.
- Weiner, B. (1979). A theory of motivation for some classroom experiences. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 71(1), 3-25.
- Weiner, B. (1992). *Human Motivation*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Williams, M., Burden, R. & Al-Baharna, S. (2001). Making sense of success and failure: The role of the individual in motivation theory. In Z. Dörnyei, & R. Schmidt (Eds.), *Motivation and second language acquisition* (pp. 171-184). Honolulu: University of Hawaii, Second Language Teaching and Curriculum Center.
- Williams, M, Burden, R. Poulet, G, & Maun, I. (2002). Learners' perceptions of their successes and failures in foreign language learning. *Manuscript submitted for publication*.