



## Causal Attribution and its Conceptions by Non-English Major Postgraduates in China: A Case Study

Hui Yan

School of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao 266061, China

E-mail: magyan@sohu.com

Xiaohua Li

School of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao 266061, China

E-mail: ydlxh16@sohu.com

### Abstract

This article reports a case study, in which causal attribution in SLA and learners' conceptions of causal attribution were examined. 2 high achievers and 2 low achievers completed a 7-day diary about their daily activities concerning English learning inside and outside English class, and subsequently they were interviewed about their causal attribution and SLA motivation. Data analysis indicated that (a) the two groups were not qualitatively differentiated in causal attributions of learning environment, effort, teacher's role, and language ability; (b) lower achievers tended to have a more concordant conception of causal attribution than their counterparts; and (c) variations in causal attribution and its conceptions accounted much for the individual differences in motivational behavior.

**Keywords:** Causal attribution, Case study, Second language acquisition

### 1. Introduction

After years of theoretical and empirical research, it has been widely recognized that motivation plays a very important role in second language acquisition (SLA) worldwide. Arnold (1999, p.13) states that "what we see as the causes for our past successes or failures will affect our expectations and, through them, our performance". In China, motivational issues concerning the vast majority of Chinese ESL learners are gaining more attention of scholars. Nevertheless, the focus is mainly on college ESL students, with little attention paid to other groups such as children and teenagers, least to postgraduates. Therefore, with the help of a case study, this article aims to draw people's attention to the causal attribution and its conceptions by non-English major postgraduates in China.

### 2. Literature Review

Weiner (1974) developed the attribution theory by suggesting that learners tend to attribute their success and failure to either internal or external causes. The central tenet of attribution theory is the learner's perceptions of the cause of his or her success or failure and the influence on perceptions of future performance. Weiner (1986) identified four main sets of causal attributions: ability, effort, luck and perceived difficulty of the task, of which the first two are considered the most dominant causes. Weiner (1992) also suggested three dimensions of causal attributions: locus of causality, stability and controllability. Research has been done home and abroad on both motivation and motivation stimulating, with little empirical study done on non-English major postgraduates in China. Chinese scholars have been studying motivation from different aspects. Liu and his colleagues studied "The Main Determinants of English Majors' Language Learning Situation" (1990). Qin and Wen (2002, pp.51-58) made "An Investigation into the Internal Structure of EFL Motivation among Non-English Majors". Qin and Wen (2002, pp.51-58) study "Internal structure of EFL motivation at the tertiary level in China", specifying 13 motivational variables in English learning --- cognitive individual needs and affective individual needs, 3 motivational antecedents including prior L2 proficiency, casual attribution, and interest in English, 5 affective/cognitive mediators such as anxiety, self-efficacy, valence, learning purpose and goal orientations, motivational behavior like efforts, cognitive learning outcomes and affective learning outcomes. Qin examines "Causal Attribution and Its Conceptions by EFL Learners at the Tertiary Level: A Case Study" (2002, pp.1-11). The results show there are qualitative differences in the attribution of learning environment, classroom teaching, language ability and efforts among learners of different English levels.

Gao and her team (2003, pp.29-38) identify among college students in China seven motivational types: intrinsic interest, test score, going abroad, learning situation, social responsibility, individual development, and communication medium. Results also show that college major and English proficiency had significant effects on motivation. These studies have

all contributed to both the motivational studies and the practical EFL teaching in China. Nonetheless, the research mainly concerns the college students, with a little attention paid to the postgraduates. Similar results are also found in the team's research on "The Relationship between Types of English Learning Motivation and Motivational Intensity", "Relationship between English Learning Motivations and Self-Identity Changes among Chinese Graduate Students", "The Relationship between Types of English Learning Motivation and Motivational Intensity" and "Motivation Types in English Learning Among Chinese Graduate Students". However, most of them concentrate on the issues of motivational types, motivational intensity and self-identity changes, little on those of causal attribution in SLA, its impact on motivational behavior, and learners' conceptions of causal attribution. Therefore, the author intends to have a case study on 4 postgraduate students of science from Qingdao University of Science and Technology in China.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Subjects

Four graduates of first grade were divided into two groups of low achievers and high achievers. They were grouped so not only because of their scores on CET-6 but also of their own conceptions of their command of English with regard to their classmates and their classmates' opinions about them. Low achievers, Wang Na and Lu Ming scored 61 and 63 in CET-6 whereas high achievers Liu Jun and Li Fang scored 81 and 84 respectively. Since the focus of this study is to find the differences about causal attribution among them, subjects are carefully chosen with respect to the similar learning environments in female students and in male students to diminish the unavoidable influence of gender differences. The two female students are from cities and two male from the countryside.

#### 3.2 Instruments

Research instruments include interview and diary. The interview is for their conceptions about their causal attributions of their success and failure in learning English. Students are expected to write diaries for 7 continuous days, specifying the inside and outside learning activities, causal attribution and SLA motivation. The interviews were conducted mainly in Chinese to avoid misunderstandings and misrepresentations. They were recorded and accordingly written down.

### 4. Results and Discussion

In the interview students are asked about their causal attribution including the learning environment, English teacher's role, language ability and effort, and their explanations about causal attribution and their success and failure.

#### 4.1 Learning environment

When asked about the relationship between their command of English and the learning environment, the subjects of two groups demonstrate obvious differences in causal attribution of past success and failure not only between groups but also between themselves. In Group A, Li Fang attributes her past success to the learning environment whereas Liu Jun thinks it depends. Both students of Group B attribute most of their failure to the bad learning environment.

Li Fang says definitely that the learning environment is very important. "When I was five years old, my mother started to teach me English. It was so fun. I began to love it. So I always watched English cartoons and listened to English songs and it was so easy to learn English well. However, most of my classmates thought English was very difficult. I think it's because they didn't have my learning environment when they were young."

Liu Jun, however, doesn't attribute his success to the learning environment. "I had many classmates and we were living on the same campus, taking the same English teacher's class, studying the same English book, yet I was much better than most of them in English. Maybe people will say it is necessary to go abroad to learn English well. I think it depends. I had many English teachers who spoke English with strong accent though they had studied abroad. Yet Li Yang didn't go abroad to learn English. He studied all by himself! Nevertheless, he speaks perfect American English."

From their remarks we can see clearly that both groups made the causal attribution based on their own learning experiences as well as their friend's or relative's influence. Different supplies of learning environment made them have different evaluations of its importance. High achievers show different opinions about the relationship between success and the learning environment while low achievers demonstrate similar opinions. From the psychological point of view, low achievers tend to attribute their failure to the external factors. In addition, this is a handy and decent excuse difficult to be changed for most people in China. In doing so they will be easily be understood and forgiven. Liu Jun confesses that when he realized that he could hardly change the learning environment, he had to depend on other factors to learn English well.

#### 4.2 Effort

Liu Jun believes effort is the key to success. "The only reason that I'm good at English is that I study very hard. Comparatively speaking, I spend most of my time on English instead of my major mathematics, yet I'm just good at English in my class but one of the few best students in Math on campus. Besides, if you don't make up your mind and study hard, you will never be good at English whether you're in China or in USA". Li Fang, on the contrary, thinks

effort is not important. "I find many of my classmates are working so hard on English but I don't know why they are still lagging behind. I didn't take much effort but I'm always the best. They are always complaining that this is unfair." In Group B, both Wang Na and Lu Ming agreed that effort didn't help them to be good at English. Wang Na complains, "I spend most of my time on English but I'm still worried about it. I had never been good no matter how hard I have been working on it." Lu Ming also pined, "I have no confidence to learn it (English) well because my diligent effort seems to be useless. There are endless new words to learn. English is so difficult."

However, by reading their diaries the author finds that these students have different understandings about their so called "hard effort". Every day Liu Jun spends at least two hours either to read English texts and do exercises, or read articles relevant to his major, which he believes not at all hard, but "essential effort". Li Fang spends about an hour a day for text and exercises, at least another hour reading English newspapers or magazines. She always listens to English songs when she gets up, before going to bed, occasionally after lunch. Usually she watches English movies during the weekend. When asked whether she was doing so to practice her listening abilities she denies with surprise, "It is just for fun, to relax myself." It's obvious though both two high achievers do not admit there is much effort they are studying English really hard.

On the other hand, Wang Na and Lu Ming do not study as hard as they have imagined. On the days when they have English classes, they would not spend any more time on it. Wang Na says, "Having English class is so tiring that I need a good rest that day." It's true that they take their English books with them every evening when they go to the classroom to learn by themselves, however, they can hardly spend half an hour on it except during the nights before the English class when they would spend three or four hours on it. Wang Na seems very sad, "When my classmates go to bed, I often have to sit up for hours because there're so many new words to remember and so many exercises to do." When suggested that she might finish them bit by bit in other days, she became irritated, "But I'm so busy. I have to study my major subjects and I have some social activities. I can't find time to learn English". Lu Ming agreed, "I always take my English book with me but I can't find time. I have to study my major first. When I really start with an English book, I find it so boring and so difficult that I would switch to another book with pleasure." It's evident that their behaviours are far away from being "hard effort".

From the analysis we can understand that high achievers and low achievers have different standards for hard effort. When asked about the possibilities of becoming high achievers if they spend as much time as high achievers, both answer "Maybe". In other words, they admit that real effort is important in SLA.

#### *4.3 Teacher's role*

Group A confirms that teachers play a positive role in improving their English. In Group B, Wang Na thinks that the teacher helped her a bit but Lu Ming accuses one teacher of being partially responsible for his failure. "When I started to learn English in Junior High School, my English teacher was a very strict woman who spoke broken English, humiliating, scolding and beating students who could not recite the text or answer her questions. I was so scared that having English class became a nightmare. Later when I went to college, I could hardly understand what the English teacher said. She smiled at good students but looked unhappy at bad students. It's not her fault. Maybe I just had prejudice against English teachers."

Though different groups attribute different roles to their teachers, it is agreed unanimously that teachers can have a profound influence on their students, either positive or negative. Lu Ming's first English teacher meant well by urging them to learn, but she scared her students with the help of physical and mental punishments, leading to a contradictory effect. In China especially in small counties there is a prevailing misconception that teachers must make students being afraid of them; otherwise students would never learn well. Therefore, many teachers force students to learn and get high scores by all means: threats to tell their parents about their naughty behaviors, threats to dismiss them, resorting to physical punishments and mental torture, with little attention on making students interested. In fact, those teachers misbelieve that external forces and drives play a far more important role than internal motivations in SLA. The lesson from it is that English teachers should be organized and lectured upon periodically about theoretical achievements in SLA research, thus guiding them directly and helping the students indirectly, eventually benefiting SLA in China.

#### *4.4 Language ability*

In Group A, nevertheless, there exist different opinions. Liu Jun doesn't think he has much language ability. "I know that I'm not language talented though some classmates are saying so. But since every child learns to speak a language well no matter he's language talented or not, I believe my hard work could make it up." Li Fang, on the contrary, announces proudly that her language ability helps and determines her success. "Learning English is always so easy and so fun. I don't need to pay much effort to remember new words and practice my listening abilities. I enjoy myself by listening to English songs and watching English movies. English makes me feel so good. I believe that I really have a talent in learning language." Her language ability leads to her interest, which makes the learning environment and teachers so friendly and her effort so enjoyable.

Both students of Group B believe that they don't have much language ability, which also determines their failure. Both express their helplessness about it. Wang Na shakes her head, "I can do nothing about it. I'm just so slow." Lu Ming says, "I feel stupid. I lost my face and confidence in learning English though I'm so good at my major. I'm not good at learning language."

In reality, language ability is just one factor in SLA. Linguists hold that every person has inherent language abilities which lead to every one's ability to learn their mother tongue. In order to acquire a second language, many factors are at play.

#### 4.5 Implications

Though high achievers didn't have any agreement upon the role of learning environment, effort, teacher's role and language ability, both are highly internally motivated and become successful. Liu Jun attributes it to unstable and controllable effort and Li Fang to stable and unchangeable language ability. Low achievers, on the other hand, attribute their failure to both internal factor ability and external factors such as learning environment and teacher's influence. Low achievers have low self-efficacy of themselves. Santrock (2005, p.423) states that a student's perception of success or failure as due to internal or external factors influences his or her self-esteem. Students who perceive their successes as being due to internal factors are more likely to have higher self-esteem than those who believe that their successes were due to external factors. In the failure situations, internal attributions lead to decreased self-esteem. When students attribute failure to unstable factors, they might expect that they will be successful in the future because they perceive the cause as changeable. With the understanding of their perceptions of causal attribution, teachers could teach accordingly to help postgraduates motivated both internally and externally.

#### 5. Conclusion

The analysis of the interview and the diaries of those postgraduates indicate a) Group A and B were not qualitatively differentiated in causal attributions of learning environment, effort, teachers' role and language ability; b) higher achievers tended to attribute more of their success to internal factors like language ability and effort whereas their counterparts to external factors like learning environment, teachers' influence and so on. Group B have a more concordant conception of causal attribution than their counterparts; and, c) variations in causal attribution and its conceptions accounted much for the individual differences in motivational behavior.

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