Causal Attributions for Failure and the Effect of Gender among Moroccan EFL University Learners

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Abstract

This paper reports a study that sought to investigate Moroccan university learners' perceptions of failure. 333 subjects studying English at university ranked their perceptions of failure in a Causal Attribution Scale of University Failure (CASUF). The results show that Moroccan learners attribute their failure to teachers' attitude, effort, interest and pressure. Factors like social problems, lack of teachers' help and ability were not important. The study also investigated the link between gender and causal attributions of failure. Overall, male and female students reported similar causes. Still, some gender differences were detected.

Keywords: Causal attribution, Self- efficacy, Failure, Gender, Higher education

1. Introduction

Although educational research and teaching approaches have long been pointing to the importance of the learner as the center of the learning process, learners have rarely been consulted about the best ways to learn or given the opportunity to cast their say about the way they have been taught. Recently a number of researchers emphasized the necessity to study learners' perceptions about their learning and the great insight that can be gained through students' reactions and critiques of the educational practices they are subject to (Nieto, 1994; Cook-Sather, 2002; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004, Burden et al., 2007). In an article that argues for 'authorizing students' perspectives', Cook-Sather (2002) made this strong statement:

> *As the pace of life accelerates, the population becomes increasingly diverse, and the media through which we teach, learn, and work become more complex, more than ever before, we educators and educational researchers must seriously question the assumption that we know more than the young people of today about how they learn or what they need to learn in preparation for the decades ahead. It is time that we count students among those with the authority to participate both in the critique and in the reform of education... Authorizing student perspectives introduces into critical conversations the missing perspectives of those who experience daily the effects of existing educational policies-in-practice. (cook- Sather 2002, p3)*

Similarly, Karns (2005) puts emphasis on the central importance of considering students' perspectives on the teaching process and how they can help teachers gain invaluable insights and understanding of the effect of different activities on reaching specific learning outcomes.

Research based on causal attribution theories focuses on learners' perceptions of and reactions to their learning and achievement. Using a psycho-social perspective, models of causal attribution scrutinize students' explanations of their success and failure. The main reason behind studying causal attributions of success and failure in social psychology is the belief that attribution influences subsequent behavior. Based on empirical evidence, Weiner (1972, 1980, 1986, 1996, 2000) and many other researchers (Kelly, McMahon, 1973, Williams, M., Burden, R., Poulet, G., & Maun, I., 2004) reached the conclusion that perceptions about success and failure affect learners' expectations and goal setting. Attributing failure, for instance, to external, uncontrollable factors is a barrier to developing learner autonomy and responsibility. Within the same stream, Ormrod (1998) claimed that erroneously attributing failure to stable uncontrollable causes is likely to jeopardize the learners' chances to achieve success. More importantly, Peacock (2010) stated that Learners' perceived causes of success and failure have received little attention in ESL/EFL research (p 184). Building on this perspective, this study set out to Investigate Moroccan university students' reactions to their performance at university and their perceptions about failure. Besides, the effect of

gender on learners' causal attributions of failure was researched.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1 Introduction

The following study draws on two psycho-social theories of perception. The first one is causal attribution theory and the second one is Self- efficacy Theory. In addition, some conclusions and implications reached here are analyzed through inspiration from Self- regulated Learning Models. In the next chapter, a brief overview of these theories and models will be introduced.

2.2 Causal attribution theory

The importance of seeking explanatory causes to human behavior dates back to 1739 when David Hume In his essay A Treatise of Human Nature claimed that "understanding the causes of events is an essential part in all our reasoning" (p. 93). However, causal attributions had never been empirically studied before 1958 when Fritz Heider developed the first theory of attribution. Attributions refer to "people's explicit and implicit understandings of the causes of events and of responsibility for the outcomes of events" (Heider 1958). Heider claimed that people frequently make attributions about others and about themselves. These attributions help them arrange their worlds and thoughts in an attempt to make sense of the reality around them and to achieve harmony and balance. In addition, Heider believed that people explain an action either by attributing it to external, controllable factors or to internal uncontrollable ones.

Building on Heider's interesting conclusions, Weiner (1969, 1972, 1980, and 1992) developed and elaborated a model of causal attributions by identifying three causal dimensions that underlie people's perceptions of event and event outcomes. These three factors are stability, controllability, and locus of causality.

The locus of control dimension has two poles: internal versus external locus of control. The stability dimension captures whether causes change over time or not. For instance, ability and effort are both internal factors; but while ability, or aptitude, can be classified as a stable construct, effort; on the other hand, is unstable. Controllability contrasts causes one can control, such as skill/efficacy or effort, from causes one cannot control, such as aptitude, mood, others' actions, and luck. Later, Weiner (1986, 1992) added other factors to the ones cited before. He found out that learners also invoke task difficulty, health, peer influence and fatigue as factors affecting their failure and success. Recent studies have added more factors and focused on constructs like interest, stress and learners' readiness (Siegle, Rubenstein, Pollard, & Romey 2010).

Weiner (1980) identified ability, effort, luck and other people as the dominant causal attributions. Based on these attributions he established four affect- attributions for success and four others for failure. The linkages for success are: ability-competence and confidence; effort-relaxation; others-gratitude; and luck-surprise. For failure, the attribution-affect links are: ability–incompetence; effort-guilt and shame; others-anger, and luck-surprise and frustration. On the other hand, internal attributions of failure intensify feelings of guilt: while external attributions give rise to anger and surprise. Stability, the other dimension in Weiner's framework, also has direct influence on people's affective life. Weiner concluded that emotions like depression and resignation would be triggered by internal and stable attributions of failure. He also assumed that attributing failure to stable uncontrollable factors would stimulate feelings of helplessness and surrender.

2.3 Self-efficacy theory

Self efficacy is a variable that has received considerable attention in research about failure and success. Bandura (1977, 1997) defines self-efficacy as 'an individual's own perception of his or her ability to carry out the necessary actions to reach a certain outcome'. His model of self efficacy posits that learners form perceptions about their ability to carry out a particular task or deal with a particular situation based on past experience and observation. Many other studies established strong links between academic control, which describes a student's belief about his capacity to influence achievement outcomes, and scholastic performance (Perry 1991, Ruthig, Perry, Hall, and Hladkyj, 2004; Struthers and Perry, 1996). In a similar vein, Bandura (1993) posits that high self-efficacy beliefs can improve outcomes by increasing students' motivation and persistence to master challenging academic tasks and by fostering the efficient use of acquired knowledge and skills. Therefore, learners with high self- efficacy are more likely to try challenging tasks and pursue their goals no matter how hard they seem to be (Bandura, 1986). For these learners, obstacles and problems are challenging and worth experiencing. They know they can overcome them and they have enough self confidence that they are capable of reaching their objectives. Learners with low self- efficacy, on the other hand, perceive difficult tasks, especially novel tasks, as daunting and intimidating. Instead of trying them, they resort to avoidance strategies because they are afraid of failure. Stressful situations distract these learners and hold them back. Therefore, they back off and fail to generate necessary efforts to deal with the tasks at hand

(Bandura 1997, Jerusalem & Shwarzer 1992).

Efficacy beliefs play a major role in shaping people's behavior. Bandura (1995) states that Efficacy beliefs 'influence how people think, feel, motivate themselves, act'. Therefore, helping students reshape their efficacy beliefs can positively influence their performance. Bean and Eaton (2000) claimed that:

students who are academically at risk and who, despite past difficulties, watch others succeed and begin to believe that they can succeed in academic tasks are more likely to invest the emotional energy necessary to achieve academic goals. (pp. 52-53)

The construct of self efficacy is of central importance to learning because it has the ability to predict learners' persistence and future performance (Martin & Marsh, 2006; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2004). Research provides substantial evidence attesting to the strong links between learners' self efficacy beliefs and their readiness to invest the efforts required for a given task. Murphy and Alexander (2001) believe that high self efficacy beliefs ignite students' motivation to perform better.

2.4 Self- regulated learning

Self regulated learning entails learners becoming masters of their own learning (Zimmerman 1990). More importantly, self-regulated learners display special metacognitive skills. They are consciously aware of their skills and their abilities and approach learning tasks with resourcefulness and confidence. In research, self regulated learners have been commonly defined as metacognitively, behaviorally, and motivationally active participants in their own learning. In his model of self- regulated learning, Pintrich (2000) came up with four phases that describe self-regulatory processes: a) planning; b) self-monitoring; c) control; d) and evaluation. These are sequences that learners go through as they are carrying out some important learning tasks. During the evaluation phase which is linked to the objectives of the present research, high achievers use self-reflection skills to monitor their attributions of the reasons that help them towards achieving their goals or those that stand as barriers to optimal learning outcomes. On the basis of what has been said, it appears critical to ESL/EFL learning to develop intervention activities to help learners regulate their own learning. To be able to do this at the motivational level, it is a pre-requisite to study these learners' causal attributions with an aim to reflect on and assess these perceptions. Eventually, this kind of research will help practitioners take accurate measures to reframe their learners' perceptions about the causes that lead to successful language learning through adequate training. In this perspective, we conducted an investigation of Moroccan English learners' perceptions of failure and measured gender differences in learners' attributions.

2.5 Causal attributions and gender difference

A considerable number of research in causal attributions for success and failure has focused on the effect of gender on learners' attributional styles. Some studies have established a link between gender and learners' perceptions of success and failure. For example, Lightbody, Siam, Stocks, & Walsh, (1996); and Georgiou, (1999) demonstrated that girls tend to give more emphasis to effort while boys attribute their achievement more to ability and luck. Postigo, Pérez, & Sanz, (1999) found that, unlike boys, girls tend to make external attributions for success and failure. Besides, they focus more on ability than on effort when they make internal attributions. Smith, Sinclaire, & Chapman, (2002) reported that boys attribute their failure to unstable external causes like luck or internal causes like effort; and rarely explain failure through lack of ability so as to enhance their self-image. On the other hand, male students report stable internal causes such as ability to explain their successes. Some informal interviews with Moroccan university teachers show that they believe that female students achieve better results than their male counterparts and make more efforts to be successful. This pushed us to include gender as a variable in this study, to investigate whether it influences learners' attributional patterns or not.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research questions

This study aimed to answer two research questions.

1) What causal attributions of failure do Moroccan learners' of English hold?

2) Are there any significant gender differences in these learners' attributions of failure?

3.2 Participants

333 Moroccan University students took part in this study (171 females and 162 males). They were randomly selected from four universities. These learners are from three different levels: first year, second year and third year in order to have a representation of the three levels that learners have to go through to get a BA degree in English literature.

3.3 The instruments

A causal attribution scale for University Failure (CASUF) has specially been designed by the researcher for the purpose of this study. It has been adapted from causal attributions literature and previous research in the same field (Weiner 1992, Fraser and Killen 2003, Siegle 2010). The students had to answer a five likert- type scale questions. The items are based on research in many psycho-social theories mainly Weiner's theory of attribution and Burden's Theory of Self-efficacy. Using self-report is the most common measure for studying learners' perceptions. It is also easier to design and analyze.

3.4 Data collection

The "CASUF" questionnaires were distributed by teachers during class time. The researcher explained the objectives to these teachers who took time to explain the purpose of the questionnaires to the students. They also pinpointed the importance of the study and the learners' contributions as well as the need to provide accurate answers. To reach genuine answers, the students were also asked to think about times when they failed to get good grades and how they reacted to that.

3.5 Data analysis

The SPSS software has been used to analyze data for this research paper. Data was analyzed first by using descriptive statistical measures like cross-tabs. Then, chi-square measures and a series of t-tests were conducted to check for differences between the answers of male and female students.

4. **Results, Discussion and Limitations**

4.1 Results

The results show that Moroccan learners of English attribute their failure to teacher attitude, effort, interest, unfair grading, and pressure. Intrinsic motivation, Lack of teachers' help, difficulty of the school subject, ability and social problems were reported the least influential. The subjects of this study are divided in their perceptions about the influence of luck, teachers' abilities, and difficulty of tests (see Table 1).

The findings were overall similar for males and females. However, Significant Differences can be noticed in ranking two factors: ability and task difficulty. Female learners attribute failure to ability (38%) and difficulty of school subject (41%) more than males (ability 23%, Difficulty of school subject 26%). There are gender differences also in attributing failure to effort. Male students attribute failure to effort more than female learners (72% for males & 63% for females). Still, The Chi-square and t-tests proved that the differences in attributing failure to effort are not significant.

4.2 Discussion

Based on the above results it can be concluded that Moroccan English learners attribute their failure to external factors more than internal ones. It was not expected, though, that these learners won't rank ability among the main causes of failure. Reporting effort as one of the main causes behind failure might show some awareness on the part of these learners about the role of effort in outcome achievement. However, when some participants were asked about an explanation in the interviews, they reported that teachers' attitude, difficult tests, and previous failure due to unfair grading discourage them to make efforts to succeed in subsequent tests. The participants, therefore, stress the big importance of external uncontrollable factors in accounting for their failure which shows their maladaptive attributional patterns. The interviews that were carried prior to the transcription of the questionnaires proved that these learners believe that they are capable of performing better but their performance is short-circuited by their teachers' attitudes and the harsh grading system they are subject to.

Clearly enough, variables like negative teachers' attitude and unfair grading generate emotions of despair and lead to reluctance to invest more efforts in learning. In this respect, Weiner (2000) explained that learners attach a value to the cause they perceive responsible for their successes and failures. When learners think that their failure is due to unfair grading (an uncontrollable variable) they will refrain from working harder because they think that working hard is of little value as it would be short-circuited by a variable beyond their own control.

In line with these results, research on the effect of students' beliefs on their performance outcomes provided significant evidence that attributing failure to insufficient effort will drive less successful learners to develop negative self- beliefs (Usuki 2007). Lack of sufficient effort on the part of the participants of this study can be explained by the conclusions advanced by Bandura (1986) in his model of self efficacy beliefs. Bandura emphasized that strong self- efficacy beliefs help generate greater efforts towards reaching previously set goals. This might imply that these learners lack adequate self-efficacy beliefs. Therefore they need training in how to regulate these beliefs and adapt them to their learning goals so as to improve their performance.

The participants also reported ability as one of the least influential factors on their failure. To account for this result, it might be important to refer to the relationship established between cognition and emotion in causal attribution research. In this context, weiner (2000) concluded that 'behavior depends on thoughts as well as feelings' (Weiner 2000, p4). In his recent update of his theory Weiner claimed that subjective expectancy of future performance and self directed emotions related to self- esteem, guilt, pride, shame and others are strong predictors of task persistence. Hence, "personal feeling states influence which cause is selected" (weiner 2000, p4). In consistence with this claim, Smith et al., found that boys tend to attribute failure to insufficient effort and not to ability because they want to protect their self-image. They do not want to undermine their pride by reporting incompetence as the cause of their underachievement. The same explanation can apply for Moroccan learners. It might be probable that they didn't attribute their failure to insufficient ability in order to avoid shame and underestimation. In the same line Burden (2003) mentioned that attributing failure to incompetence will trigger humiliation. He gave the example of students trying to hide their inability in classrooms by avoiding participation and hence by making little effort.

Another important result provided by this study is that students downplayed the impact of social and academic factors and capitalized on the effect of psychological factors such as effort, pressure and interest; and psycho-social factors such as teachers' attitudes. This substantiates recent research findings that suggest that psychological indicators of failure are more salient than academic and social factors in explaining college failure. Beyefeld, Hugo, & Struwig (2005), for instance, found that students tend to make less effort on a subject or course that they don't enjoy or are not motivated to learn.

Ranking lack of interest as the most important factor behind failure corroborates recent research findings that report the importance of interest in boosting or undermining performance (Bray & Barron, 2004; Hidi, 1990; Hidi & Anderson, 1992). In a recent study, Siegle et al., (2010) claimed that although interest is a determinant factor in academic achievement it hasn't been studied in the EFL context. In their study, Siegle et al. found out significant relationships between students' interest in talent area and their assessment of their skill in that area. In a similar vein, Schiefele (1992) found that students who rated a passage as interesting engaged in more elaboration during reading the passage and were better able to answer challenging questions than students who rated the topic as uninteresting. More importantly, Sansone and Thoman (2005) suggest that regulating the interest experience can be just as, if not more, powerful than regulating and monitoring motivation.

The results also showed that female learners give greater importance to external factors than boys. This is consistent with previous research on gender differences and attributional styles. Similar findings were reached by Misra(1986) who found that within college students from India, successful females tended to show greater attribution for their performance to external causes such as luck and task difficulty than successful Males.

4.3 Limitations

It should be mentioned at this stage that although the results of this study are interesting, they must be interpreted with caution. It is true that the number of participants is fairly representative, yet these results cannot be generalized beyond this sample. Another important point to consider is that Self-reported data are always suspect to reporter bias, although the participants were anonymous to encourage honest responses.

5. Implications and Conclusions

5.1 Implications

5.1.1 Practice implications

The results reached by this research have interesting implications for teachers of English as a second/foreign language. The first one is that teachers have to include in their curriculum activities to help their learners make more efforts to succeed. The fact that the participants of this study reported interest as one of the main causes behind their failure implies that making the learning activities more interesting and appealing to learners is another task incumbent on curriculum designers and teachers as well. Helping learners make more adaptive attributions and focus more on internal controllable factors other than uncontrollable ones like luck and teachers' grading is also critical to enhance successful outcomes. There is also urgent need to integrate self- regulation activities with learning activities in Moroccan Universities to help students use appropriate strategies to monitor their learning behavior; regulate their interest; and adapt to different learning situations.

5.1.2 Directions for future research

Very few studies have sought to investigate ESL/EFL learners' causal attributions of success and failure. This makes it hard for us to compare our results to other results in the same context. Therefore, the important results found here call for more investigations of learners' causal attributions of failure and success. It would also be insightful to study the effect of variables like proficiency level, perceived level of success and cultural differences on students'

perceptions of success and failure. Future research should also try to answer the question why Moroccan learners of English do not make enough effort to succeed and why they lose interest in their studies. Besides, Perfecting the research methodology and measuring instruments is also important to reach better results. More research is needed to shed more light on gender differences in causal attributions and give more explanations about ESL learners' perceptions of failure and success.

5.2 Conclusion

The interesting results reached by the present investigation stress the importance of learners' attributions of failure and self regulated learning to the ESL teaching/ learning process. It was mentioned that learners' attributions affect achievement outcomes. Controllable attributions give students a sense of more personal control over their academic performance, and in turn, more motivation to achieve better results; while uncontrollable attributions cause less motivation to succeed. The findings also point to the need of teaching Self-regulated learning skills to helps learners develop efficient strategies to monitor cognitive abilities and behavior. As reported above, the results of this study show that learners tend to focus more on external uncontrollable factors, even though they reported effort among the major causes of failure. The results also revealed some gender similarities and differences. On the whole, these results imply that there is urgent need for interventions that aim at reframing ESL/ EFL learners' causal attributions and help them gain insight into the internal controllable factors that lead to failure.

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Table 1. The causal attributions of failure ranked in terms of frequencies reported in the questionnaire

Teachers attitudes	72%
Effort/ hard work	70%
Interest	67%
Unfair grading	61%
Pressure at home and in university	59%
Luck	50%
Difficulty of tests	47%
Teachers' abilities	40%
Intrinsic motivation	39%
Social problems	37%
Lack of Teachers' help	35%
Difficulty of subjects	33%
ability	31%