EFL Learners' Attributions and Causal Dimensionality Styles in the Chinese Higher Education Context

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Abstract

Achievement motivation is a significant contributor to the foreign language learning process. This study explored the achievement perceptions of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners who were studying at different higher education institutions with dissimilar degree programs, such as a vocational college, an undergraduate program in a public university, and Sino-American university undergraduate and graduate programs in China. The study also aimed to reveal EFLs' causal attributions of success and their underlying dimensionality styles through an open-ended questionnaire and the Causal Attribution Dimensions Scale (CDSII) (McAuley et al., 1992). Findings revealed that two thirds of the participants perceived themselves as unsuccessful learners. Both in success and failure conditions the participants had similar attributions naming effort, interest, and ability as the most frequent ones. The attributions for close ended question did not show difference across school types. Qualitative data revealed more themes for failure, and the data showed some differences across the school types. Environment and relevance to life/career attributions were the most common in both success and failure conditions. Causal dimensionality analysis revealed more internal, personally controllable stable and moderately externally manageable attributional styles for success, and more internal and personally controllable attributional styles for failure. Findings were compared and discussed according to school types.

Keywords: attributions, EFL, motivation, causal dimensions, Chinese higher education

English, as the medium of instruction, has been accepted as a lingua franca (Seidlhofer, 2005) around the world, and like many other countries, China has been initiating education policies that encourage EFL learning to enhance the country's international competitiveness in the global arena. Consequently, the number of people learning English as a foreign language has rapidly expanded over the past several decades. Compared to the Western countries, the study of language learning motivation in the Chinese education context might reveal insights in terms of learner perceptions, learning context, language curriculum, and language assessment due to differences that are peculiar to the Chinese EFL milieu.

Causal attributions are known as important factors that affect learners' retention, expectation of future success, motivation, and academic success. There are qualitative and quantitative studies that focus on the causal dimensions of foreign language learners in Western settings (e.g., Faber, 2019; Kálmán & Eugenio, 2015; Soriano-Ferrer & Alonso-Blanco, 2020 Ciabuca & Gheorghe, 2014). However, there is a limited number of studies examining the attributions and causal dimensionality styles of foreign language learners in the Chinese higher education environments, and these studies appear to fall short of reflecting the current EFL education scenario as they are rather outdated. Also, these studies mostly focus on EFL learners' attributions while ignoring the causal dimensionality styles (e.g. Chen, 2011; Hu et al., 2009; Jiang, 2003; Li, 2004; Qin, 2002; Su, 2011; Zhang, 2002; Zhang; 2006; Zhang &Yuan, 2004). Therefore, obtaining detailed data on achievement motivations by examining the perceptions of success, attributions, and causal dimensions of adult EFL learners studying in different educational institutions in China can potentially make a significant contribution to the relevant literature.

Literature Review

Motivation has been the focus of a large body of research in education contexts Dörnyei, 2001; Hussain et al., 2020; Liu & Zhang, 2020; Safdari, 2021 One of the theories of motivation is educational psychologist Weiner's (1972) attribution theory. This theory is concerned with how individuals interpret events and how this relates to their thinking and behavior. In this study, attributions are defined as the reasons people give for their outcomes and the connections between those reasons and their future behavior. This definition is based on Weiner's attribution theory. The use of the term is limited to achievement motivation and educational contexts in this study. Weiner (1985) notes that there are three dimensions of attributions: locus of control (internal vs. external), stability (stable vs. unstable), and controllability (controllable vs. uncontrollable). These dimensions can be used to explain why people make certain attributions for success or failure. In an academic context, attributions refer to the ways individuals explain the causes of their academic achievements. Every one of those dimensions has unique behavioral and emotional consequences (Graham, 2020). The locus dimension mainly concerns self-esteem and emotions tied to how one is perceived. On the other hand, the stability dimension of causality primarily shapes one's outlook on future successes and failures (Graham, 2020). These attributions can influence perceptions, attitudes, future behaviors, and consequently possibility of academic achievements.

Public schools in China start teaching English in the third grade, and English is a compulsory subject in vocational high schools and general high schools, and in all universities. China regards proficiency in a foreign language as one of the fundamental skills for students in primary and middle school (Cheng, 2014). Ou and Yang (2014) point out that the status of English in the college entrance examination is equal to that of Chinese. Despite the growing body of research in numerous diverse cultural contexts (e.g. Çağatay & Erten, 2020 in Turkey; Faber, 2019 in Germany; Ciabuca & Gheorghe, 2014 in Romania;Nakamura, 2019 in Japan ;, Soriano-Ferrer & Alonso-Blanco, 2020 in Spain; Taskiran & Aydin, 2018, in Turkey; Bouchaib et al., 2018 in Morocco; Zarein et al., 2020 in Iran), China lacks a substantial body of information about attributions in situations involving achievement, particularly when it comes to learning EFL. The fact that Chinese EFL students are taught in unique cultural and academic environments that are quite different from those of their western counterparts supports the notion that studies have not looked at the peculiar language learning attributions of Chinese EFL students. Earlier attribution literature in the Chinese frame of reference includes studies conducted on EFL achievement/success, EFL motivation, and EFL attributions (e.g. Hu et al., 2009; Jiang, 2003; Lei & Qin, 2009; Li, 2004; Liu & Zhang, 2018; Qin, 2002; Su, 2011; Zhang, 2002; Zhang &Yuan, 2004; Zhang, 2006). However, the focus of such studies tends to be attributions alone. They do not address causal dimensionality styles of language learners. Furthermore, they are not sufficiently contemporary.

It is important to investigate the attributions of Chinese EFL learners because learners may have context-specific experiences and cultural backgrounds that influence their attributions in the language learning process. As for the attribution studies in the Chinese context, Qin's (2002) case study that focused on influence of attributional tendencies on motivational behavior at the university level revealed differences in attributions across different proficiency levels. Similarly, Zhang's (2002) study with college juniors revealed that maladaptive attributions, such as ability, had a negative impact on sustaining language learning motivation and self-efficacy in the failure condition. Li (2004) conducted another study that demonstrated the close connection between attributions and language learning motivation. Findings showed that most students who performed poorly in English ascribed their success or failure to luck. The author concluded that the unpredictable, unstable, and external ascription seemed to hinder learning motivation, enthusiasm, and retention in the language learning process. Hu et al. (2009) examined attributions from a different perspective by centering on the relationship between attributions and autonomy among college level EFL learners. The researchers noted that encouraging students to actively attribute and correct attribution was a crucial part of enhancing students' capacity for language learning autonomy. The links between achievement goal orientation, language learning self-efficacy, language learning anxiety, language learning strategies, and attributions were examined in a different study by Zhang and Yuan (2004). Participants held the view that inability and bad luck were not among the factors that would lead to failure, and that good luck was not relevant in the success condition. According to the authors, that attribution model helped language learners to increase their self-efficacy when they succeed, but failure did not lower it.

When the relevant literature in the Chinese context is considered, there is a need for an up-to-date attribution study in every area of education as attributions differ across cultures, contexts, and individuals. Particularly, causal dimensionality styles of EFL learners should be examined in detail as dimensionality styles are known to be significant determinants of future performance, self-esteem, motivation, and academic success (Weiner, 2012). The relationships between attributions, causal dimensional styles and emotions can be quite complex; therefore, it is important to consider both the context and the learner specific aspects when conducting an analysis (Graham, 2020; Hattie et al., 2020). As the list of potential causes of success and failure cannot be explained clearly, attribution theorists have concentrated not only on specific causes per se but also on the underlying dimensions or qualities of causes. Age and context factors have an impact on how attributions are perceived. As a result, attributional research is phenomenological, studying the causal world from the perspective of the perceiver. Attribution theorists (Nolen, 2020), hold that circumstances and context have the ability to affect causal reasoning. For instance, according to early cross-cultural studies, participants from non-Western nations like Chile and India thought that ability attribution was more unstable on the stability dimension than it was in western civilizations (Betancourt & Weiner, 1982). Furthermore, studies on development showed that most students did not think of ability as having consistent trait-like qualities until early adolescence (Stipek & MacIver, 1989).

The subject of this study was to obtain detailed data on achievement motivation by examining the perceptions of success, attributions, and causal dimensions of EFL learners in different educational institutions in China. The inquiry intended to reveal the factors that affect the motivation of Chinese EFL learners, who are the most important stakeholders in language learning, in both success and failure situations. In order to serve the purpose, the study sought answers to the following questions:

1) What are Chinese EFL learners' perceptions of success?
2) What do Chinese EFL learners attribute their success and failure to?
    2.1) What are their choices from the provided list of attributions?
    2.2) What attributions do they state for their perc eived success and failure?
3) What are the causal dimensionality patterns of Chinese EFL learners?
4) Do causal dimensionality patterns of the participants differ according to success and failure perceptions?
5) Do causal dimensionality patterns of the participants differ according to institutions and degree programs?

Method

This descriptive survey study incorporated convergent parallel mixed methods design (Timans et al., 2019) in data collection and data analysis. Two different instruments were used for gathering data. The quantitative data was collected via a valid scale, CDSII (McAuley et al., 1992) and the qualitative data was collected through a questionnaire that was compiled by the researchers. CDSII was used as a data collection tool in this study because it is the only comprehensive, valid, and reliable scale that focuses on four dimensions of attributions in the

literature. The questionnaire and the scale were presented online as the data collection instruments.

Context of the Study

For the purpose of the study, different higher education institutions in China were selected. They included Wenzhou-Kean University – a Sino-American University, Jiaxing University, Zhejiang Institute of Communications – a vocational college, Huaxin College of Hebei Geo University, and Sun Yat-sen University. The study groups included public university undergraduate and graduate programs, a vocational college program, and Sino-American university undergraduate and graduate programs. Undergraduate education is responsible for cultivating professional talents and equipping students with the abilities to continue their studies in graduate education (Yu, 2016, p.332). A vocational college education in China is an education model based on professional skills. The study period is shorter than what is required in the undergraduate program. An international education style is made possible for students at Sino-American universities (Zou et al., 2022). Compared to other traditional universities in China, the Sino-American cooperative university offers students English as a medium of instruction and more foreign staff than Chinese staff (Zhao, 2021).

Participants

The sampling procedure of the study included two different techniques. First, through convenience sampling, the researchers reached the potential participants whose WeChat contacts they had. Then, through snowball sampling technique, the researchers asked participants to share the online version of the questionnaire and the scale link with their friends. Participation in the study was on a voluntary basis and the consent forms were attached at the beginning of the data collection tool. The participants were all adults, above 18 years of age. A total of 561 participants voluntarily answered the questionnaire and the scale. Table 1 shows the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1

Demographic Information of the Participants

	Case	*N561*		*Case*	*N=561*
Participants	*n*	*%*		*n*	*%*
Age			**School Type**		
≤25	367	65%	Graduate	121	22%
>25	194	35%	Sino-American	129	23%
			Vocational College	148	26%
			Undergraduate	163	29%
Gender			**English Learning Background**		
Female	356	63%	≤5 years	16	3%
Male	205	37%	6-10 years	105	19%
			>11 years	440	78%

Data Collection

Prior to the data collection, ethics committee approval was received for this study from the Wenzhou-Kean University Ethics Committee with issue number: WKUIRB2023-046/R. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants at the beginning of data collection. The first part of the data collection instrument consisted of a questionnaire, prepared by the researchers, that included a list of questions for demographic information, such as age, education background, year of English learning experience and a yes/no question that asked if participants believed they were successful EFL learners. In order to obtain the participants' genuine opinions about their achievement in language learning rather than relying on outside factors like grades or remarks from their professors, the researchers simply asked one yes/no question concerning the participants' perceptions of success. The next question asked participants to choose from the list of attributions that were common in the literature according to their perception of success. At the end of the common attributions list, there was an open-ended question asking participants to state if there was any other reason for their success or failure. The purpose of the open-ended question was to let the students describe their attributions in an open manner, so it could be said that the study accurately represented the attributional characteristics of the participants. The data was collected online on Sojump, a suitable survey tool for obtaining nationally diversified samples in China at a low cost (Delponte at al, 2024).

As the second part of the data collection instrument, the participants were presented with the Causal Dimensions Scale II (CDSII), which is a nine-point Likert-type scale (McAuley et al., 1992) used for exploring learners' causal dimensionality patterns. According to existing research, dimensional styles differed amongst people and did not necessarily align with the researchers' subjective perceptions of dimensional attributes (Graham, 2020; Hattie, et al, 2020). The key to the motivational qualities of attributions was identified in the underlying cognitive component, which stands for the person's views about the nature of the attribution (Graham, 2020). As a result, through that scale, the participants were asked to determine the unique features of their attributions themselves. The scale had four dimensions: causal focus (items 1-6-9), external control (items 5-8-12), stability (items 3-7-11), and internal control (items 2-4-10). Two opposite statements were placed on each item on the nine-point scale, and the participants were asked to choose a number according to which statement they felt close to. The highest score that could be obtained from the three items in each dimension was 27, and the lowest score was three. High scores from each dimension indicated that the cause was internal, stable, and individually controllable. In the scale, the participants were asked to score the statements according to their causal attributions. Necessary permissions for the copyright of the CDSII had been obtained. The Chinese version of the scale was used in the study to be able to get more reliable responses. It was adopted from Wang's (2020) study, in which internal dimensions' consistencies were calculated, and the Cronbach's Alpha, known as the most widely used objective measure of reliability (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011) of source of control, stability, internal control, and external control were 0.67, 0.67, 0.79, and 0.82, respectively, which meant that the scale was found to be reliable and valid for the measure of dimensions.

Additionally, 20 Chinese students were given the Chinese version of the scale and the questionnaire for the face validity. Participants in the pilot research assessed the clarity of the instructions, the items, and the answer format. According to the feedback from the pilot study, necessary editions were made to make the data collection instruments more reader friendly. Both the questionnaire and the scale were distributed to the participants via Sojump.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analyzed differently depending on the question type. For demographic information and the list of attributions in the questionnaire, the data was analyzed with descriptive statistics, mainly with frequency percentages. For the CDSII, the data was analyzed on SPSS (IBM SPSS Software, n.d.). By computing the mean scores of each dimension individually for the success and failure groups, descriptive statistics were used to examine the causal dimensionality of the participants. Using ANOVA (Judd et al., 2017), dimensionality style comparisons between the success and failure groups were calculated. Similarly, ANOVA statistics were run to find out whether causal dimensionality styles of the participants differed according to school types in success and failure conditions.

For the qualitative data analysis, the researchers used the Constant Comparison Method (Williams & Moser, 2019) to conduct a content analysis of the data. According to this method, analysis is carried out by comparing all semantic units acquired from inductive category coding concurrently. The inductive method (Azungah, 2018) was used to identify the indicators for academic attributions in participants' responses to demonstrate the culture and context specific nature of attributions. In other words, rather than limiting themselves to hypothetical arguments, the researchers truly intended to look for genuine attributions in the participants' statements. Therefore, the coding strategy used during the content analysis was neither predetermined nor did it draw from the relevant literature. The researchers compared the codes, and they only assigned the codes after reaching consensus. After categorizing the participants' responses, all labels that emerged for success and failure conditions were tallied according to their frequency. Since the success and failure groups revealed distinct labels, the percentages of explanations for success and failure situations were compared individually. In addition, the attributions were also grouped according to school type both in success and failure conditions.

Findings

The participants answered the yes/no question in the questionnaire to express their perceived success and failure in learning EFL. The responses of 561 participants indicated that most of them believed they were not successful EFL learners. Table 2 shows the frequency percentages of perceived success and failure.

Table 2

Perception of Success

Perception of success	*f*	*%*
unsuccessful	412	73.4*
successful	149	26.6
Total	561	100

Note. * Highest percentage

Participants were asked to choose at least three attributions from the list of attributions that are common in the literature. Table 3 below demonstrates the frequency percentages of the attributions chosen by the participants in success and failure conditions. Effort, interest, and ability attributions appeared to be at the top of the list in both success and failure terms. Luck, difficulty, and the teacher appeared to be the least frequent attributions in both groups.

Table 3

Common Attributions in Success and Failure Conditions

Failure-oriented group			*Success-oriented group*		
Attributions	*f*	*%*	*Attributions*	*f*	*%*
Effort	337	**25.8***	Effort	127	**24.5***
Interest	297	22.8	Interest	124	23.9
Ability	243	18.6	Ability	120	23.1
Difficulty	220	16.9	Teacher	90	17.3
Teacher	140	10.7	Luck	43	8.3
Luck	68	5.2	Difficulty	15	2.9
Total	1305	100	**Total**	519	100

Note. * Highest percentage

When selecting attributions from the provided list, participants from various higher educational institutions tended to make selections that were similar to one another with ability, effort, and interest attributions as the most frequent ones. Particularly, the similarity appeared to be higher in the failure condition. In the failure condition, the most common attribution was found to be effort in all school types, while the least common one was luck. In the success condition, the least common attribution appeared to be difficulty for all school types. Table 4 below shows the distribution of attributions according to school types.

Table 4

Distribution of Attributions According to School Types

					School Type			
Perception	*Graduate*	*f*	*Sino-American*	*f*	*Vocational College*	*f*	*Undergraduate*	*f*
Success-oriented	**Ability***	39	**Effort**	57	**Interest**	16	**Interest**	27
	Effort	35	Ability	49	Effort	12	Effort	24
	Interest	32	Interest	49	Ability	9	Ability	23
	Teacher	25	Teacher	42	Luck	7	Teacher	16
	Luck	9	Luck	21	Teacher	6	Luck	6
	Difficulty	2	Difficulty	8	Difficulty	4	Difficulty	1
Failure-oriented	**Effort**	62	**Effort**	59	**Effort**	107	**Effort**	109
	Interest	58	Ability	45	Interest	100	Interest	103
	Ability	44	Difficulty	42	Ability	86	Difficulty	70
	Difficulty	39	Interest	36	Difficulty	69	Ability	68
	Teacher	32	Teacher	28	Teacher	38	Teacher	42
	Luck	7	Luck	10	Luck	23	Luck	28

	Attributions both in failure and success conditions				
	Graduate %	*Sino American %*	*Vocational %*	*Undergraduate %*	*Total*
Ability	22	21	20	18	20
Difficulty	11	11	15	14	13
Effort	**25***	**26**	**25**	**26**	**25**
Interest	24	19	24	25	23
Luck	4	7	6	7	6
Teacher	15	16	9	11	13

Note. *Most frequent attributions bold faced

The responses to the open-ended question revealed 17 different themes for the success condition. On the other hand, the participants had more responses for the failure condition with 25 different themes. Table 5 demonstrates the themes created by combination of codes driven from the open-ended question data both in success and failure circumstances with their frequencies. The most common theme in both success and failure-oriented groups was the environment.

Table 5

Frequencies of the Themes Driven from the Open-Ended Question

Failure-oriented	*f*	*Success-oriented*	*f*
Environment	49	Environment	9
Lack of interest	16	Relevant to life/career	8
Irrelevant to life /career	16	Ability	8
Ability	13	Learning resources	6
Lack of effort	10	Interest	5
Education system	7	Opportunity	4
Lack of time	6	Family support	4
Lack of skills	5	Persistence	2
Difficulty	5	Learning method	2
Teacher	4	Confidence	2
Persistence	4	Motivation	1
Laziness	4	Learning atmosphere	1
Lack of autonomy	3	Getting help	1
Not like	2	Experience	1
Not getting help	2	Effort	1
Lack of motivation	2	Education system	1
Lack of learning strategies	2	Background /foundation	1
Lack of learning materials/resources	2		
Social judgement	1		
Low self-esteem	1		
Learning atmosphere	1		
Lack of experience	1		
Lack of confidence	1		
Lack of background	1		
Family manipulation	1		
Total	159	Total	57

Content analyses of the responses to the open-ended question revealed fewer themes in the success condition compared to the failure condition. When themes were grouped according to school types in the success condition, the group that responded most was the Sino-American group with relevant to life/career, interest, environment, family support, and opportunity attributions as the most frequently repeated ones. None of the school group ascribed their success to luck. Table 6 below describes the distribution of the themes according to school types in the success condition.

Table 6

Distribution of the Themes According to School Types in the Success Condition

Success attributions	School Type				
	Graduate	*Sino-American University*	*Vocational college*	*Undergraduate*	*Total*
Environment	4	5			9
Relevant to life/career	3	3		2	8
Ability	6			2	8
Interest	1	3		1	5
Learning resources		2		3	5
Family support		3		1	4
Opportunity	1	3			4
Confidence		1	1		2
Learning method	2				2
Persistence				2	2
Total	18	27	1	11	57

More themes emerged from the responses to the open-ended question in failure group. When the themes driven from the responses were grouped according to school types, the most regularly mentioned attribution appeared to be environment by both graduate and Sino-American groups. Unlike the success condition, vocational college, and undergraduate groups, which were the most crowded groups, tended to respond more in the failure condition. None of the school group mentioned luck as a causal attribution behind their failure. Table 7 demonstrates the themes according to the school types with the frequencies.

Table 7

Distribution of the Themes According to School Types in the Failure Condition

	School Type				
Failure attributions	*Graduate*	*Sino-American university*	*Vocational college*	*Undergraduate*	*Total*
Environment	18	9	9	13	49
Irrelevant to life /career	0	0	5	11	16
Lack of interest	0	2	11	3	16
Ability	1	3	3	6	13
Lack of effort	0	2	5	3	10
Education system	5	1	1	0	7
Lack of time	0	0	1	5	6
Difficulty	0	1	4	0	5
Lack of skills	0	2	2	1	5
Laziness	0	2	1	1	4
Persistence	2	0	1	1	4
Teacher	2	0	1	1	4
Lack of autonomy	0	0	2	1	3
Lack of learning resources	0	2	0	0	2
Lack of learning strategies	0	0	2	0	2
Lack of motivation	0	1	1	0	2
Not getting help	1	0	0	1	2
Not like	0	0	2	0	2
Total	29	27	51	52	159

Descriptive statistics of CDSII scale revealed more internal, personally controllable, stable and moderately externally controllable attributional styles for the success-oriented group. Personal control mean score appeared to be the highest followed by locus and stability. Table 8 demonstrates the descriptive analysis results of CDSII in the success condition.

Table 8

Descriptive Statistics of CDSII in the Success Condition

Dimensions	**N**	**M**	**SD**	**Std Error**	**Median**	**Mode**	**Sam Var**	**Kurtosis**	**Skewness**
Locus	447	6.,34	2.00	0.09	7	7	3.99	-0.28	-0.57
Personal Control	447	6.53	1.94	0.09	7	7	3.76	0.07	-0.76
Stability	447	5.55	2.23	0.11	6	7	4.96	-0.99	-0.08
External Control	447	4.87	2.25	0.11	5	5	5.05	-0.83	0.08

In the failure condition, descriptive statistics of CDSII revealed relatively more internal and personally controllable attributional styles. The locus dimension mean score appeared to be the highest followed by personal control and stability. Overall, the group's responses suggest a moderate belief in stability and a modest belief in external controllability. Table 9 shows the descriptive analysis results of CDSII in the failure condition.

Table 9

Descriptive statistics of CDSII in the failure condition

Dimensions	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*Std Error*	*Med*	*Mode*	*SamVar*	*Kurtosis*	*Skewness*
Locus	1236	5.69	1.86	0.05	5	5	3.46	-0.10	-0.15
Personal Control	1236	5.29	1.81	0.05	5	5	3.26	0.07	-0.05
Stability	1236	4.92	1.92	0.05	5	5	3.72	-0.27	-0.02
External Control	1236	4.77	1.93	0.06	5	5	3.76	-0.26	-0.10

Possible differences in terms of causal dimensionality between success and failure-oriented groups were analyzed with the descriptive statistics and ANOVA group comparisons. Descriptive statistics results can be seen in Table 10, and ANOVA results can be found in Table 11. The success-oriented group appeared to have higher mean scores for all dimensions. Locus and personal control dimensions were found to have the highest mean scores in both groups.

Table 10

Descriptive Statistics of CDSII in Both Success and Failure Conditions

						95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
Dimensions	*Groups*	*N*	*Mean*	*Std. Deviation*	*Std. Error*	*Lower Bound*	*Upper Bound*
Locus	success	447	**6.34***	2.00	.094	6.15	6.52
	failure	1236	5.69	1.86	.053	5.58	5.79
Personal Control	success	447	**6.53**	1.94	.092	6.35	6.71
	failure	1236	5.29	1.81	.051	5.18	5.39
Stability	success	447	**5.55**	2.23	.105	5.34	5.76
	failure	1236	4.92	1.92	.055	4.81	5.02
External Control	success	447	**4.87**	2.25	.106	4.66	5.08
	failure	1236	4.77	1,.93	.055	4.66	4.88

Note. *Higher values bold faced

ANOVA analysis between success and failure groups revealed significant differences in locus, personal control, and stability dimensions. When mean scores were considered, the success group appeared to have more internal, personally controllable, and more stable attributions. There was no significant difference in terms of external controllability dimension as both groups had about moderate perception. Table 11 below shows the ANOVA analysis of the causal dimensions both in success and failure conditions.

Table 11

Differences in Terms of Dimensions between Success and Failure Groups

		ANOVA				
Dimensions		*Sum of Squares*	*df*	*Mean Square*	*F*	*Sig.*
Locus	Between Groups	138.134	1	138.134	38.333	<.001
	Within Groups	6057.492	1681	3.604		
	Total	6195.626	1682			
Personal Control	Between Groups	510.344	1	510.344	150.415	<.001
	Within Groups	5703.463	1681	3.393		
	Total	6213.807	1682			
Stability	Between Groups	131.558	1	131.558	32.509	<.001
	Within Groups	6802.796	1681	4.047		
	Total	6934.354	1682			
External Control	Between Groups	3.139	1	3.139	.765	.382
	Within Groups	6895.957	1681	4.102		
	Total	6899.096	1682			

The analyses of differences in terms of scopes across school types in the success condition revealed significant differences for stability and external control dime neither nsions. There were no significant differences between school types in terms of locus and personal control dimensions. Table 12 below shows the mean scores of elements for each school type and Table 13 shows the ANOVA results of the school type comparisons in the success condition.

Table 12

Mean Scores of Dimensions for School Types in the Success Condition

School Type		*Locus*	*Personal Control*	*Stability*	*External Control*
Graduate	Mean	6.37	**6.79**	**5.94**	4.84
	N	129	129	129	129
	Std. Deviation	2.008	1.840	2.072	2.252
Sino-American	Mean	6,21	6.43	5.08	4.45
	N	183	183	183	183
	Std. Deviation	2.020	2.020	2.346	2.195
Vocational College	Mean	6.36	6.24	5.78	**5.51**
	N	45	45	45	45
	Std. Deviation	2.101	1.897	1.964	2.283
Undergraduate	Mean	**6.56***	6.62	5.84	5.46
	N	87	87	87	87
	Std. Deviation	1891	1.869	2.209	2.182

Note. *Higher values bold faced

Table 13

Comparisons of School Types in Terms of Dimensions in the Success Condition

		ANOVA				
Dimensions		*Sum of Squares*	*df*	*Mean Square*	*F*	*Sig.*
Locus	Between Groups	7.422	3	2.474	.618	.603
	Within Groups	1760.541	440	4.001		
	Total	1767.964	443			
Personal Control	Between Groups	14.912	3	4.971	1.338	.262
	Within Groups	1634.897	440	3.716		
	Total	1649.809	443			
Stability	Between Groups	69.111	3	23.037	4.735	.003
	Within Groups	2140.799	440	4.865		
	Total	2209.910	443			
External Control	Between Groups	81.414	3	27.138	5.515	.001
	Within Groups	2165.010	440	4.920		
	Total	2246.423	443			

To understand exactly which school types differed significantly in terms of stability and external control factors, post-hoc Scheffe statistics were run. Findings revealed that the Graduate group had significantly more stable attributions than the Sino-American group. For external control dimension, both Vocational College and Undergraduate groups had significantly more externally controllable attributions compared to the Sino-American. Table 14 below demonstrates the comparison of the groups in terms of stability and external control dimensions.

Table 14

Comparison of the School Types for Stability and External Control Dimensions

						95% Confidence Interval	
Dependent Variable	*School Type*	*School Type*	*Mean Difference*	*Std. Error*	*Sig.*	*Lower Bound*	*Upper Bound*
Stability	Graduate	Sino-American	**.856***	.254	.010	.14	1.57
		Vocational College	.160	.382	.981	-.91	1.23
		Undergraduate	.099	.306	.991	-.76	.96
	Sino-American	Graduate	**-.856***	.254	.010	-1.57	-.14
		Vocational College	-.696	.367	.310	-1.73	.33
		Undergraduate	-.757	.287	.075	-1.56	.05
External Control	Sino-American	Graduate	-.397	.255	.490	-1.11	.32
		Vocational College	**-1.063***	.369	.042	-2.10	-.03
		Undergraduate	**-1.012***	.289	.007	-1.82	-.20
	Vocational College	Graduate	.666	.384	.391	-.41	1.74
		Sino-American	**1.063***	.369	.042	.03	2.10
		Undergraduate	.051	.407	.999	-1.09	1.19
	Undergraduate	Graduate	.615	.308	.264	-.25	1.48
		Sino-American	**1.012***	.289	.007	.20	1.82
		Vocational College	-.051	.407	.999	-1.19	1.09

The analyses of differences in terms of features across school types in the failure condition revealed significant differences for only locus dimension. There were no significant differences between school types in terms of personal control, stability, and external control dimensions. Table 15 below shows the mean scores of dimensions for each school type and Table 16 shows the ANOVA results of the school type comparisons in the failure condition.

Table 15

Mean Scores of Dimensions for School Types in the Failure Condition

School Type		*Locus*	*Personal Control*	*Stability*	*External Control*
Graduate	Mean	5.84	5.42	**5.12**	4.74
	N	231	231	231	231
	Std. Deviation	1.80	1.76	1.90	1.92
Sino-American	Mean	**6.06**	**5.43**	4.65	**5.00**
	N	204	204	204	204
	Std. Deviation	1.80	1.77	1.97	1.92
Vocational College	Mean	5.42	5.09	4.91	4.90
	N	399	399	399	399
	Std. Deviation	1.74	1.75	1.82	1.90
Undergraduate	Mean	5.67	5.33	4.94	4.54
	N	402	402	402	402
	Std. Deviation	*2.00*	*1.89*	*2.02*	*1.98*

Note. *Higher values bold faced

ANOVA results in Table 16 showed the significance of the difference between the groups in terms of the locus dimension. To understand exactly which school types differed significantly in terms of the locus dimension, post-hoc Scheffe statistics were run.

Table 16

Comparisons of School Types in Terms of Dimensions in the Failure Condition

		ANOVA				
Dimensions		*Sum of Squares*	*df*	*Mean Square*	*F*	*Sig.*
Locus	Between Groups	61.385	3	20.462	5.979	<.001
	Within Groups	4216.443	1232	3.422		
	Total	4277.828	1235			
PersonalControl	Between Groups	24.949	3	8.316	2.559	.054
	Within Groups	4003.235	1232	3.249		
	Total	4028.184	1235			
Stability	Between Groups	24.273	3	8.091	2.183	.088
	Within Groups	4565.807	1232	3.706		
	Total	4590.080	1235			
ExternalControl	Between Groups	37.650	3	12.550	3.356	.018
	Within Groups	4607.095	1232	3.740		
	Total	4644.744	1235			

Table 17 below demonstrates the Scheffe results. According to the statistics, the Sino-American group significantly differed from the Vocational college in their mean scores for the Locus dimension. That is, the Sino-American group appeared to have more internal attributions in the failure condition compared to the vocational college group.

Table 17

Comparison of School Types for the Locus Dimension

Dependent Variable	SchoolType	SchoolType	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	95% Confidence Interval Upper Bound
Locus	**Sino American**	Graduate	.219	.178	.678	-.28	.72
		Vocational College	**.635***	**.159**	**.001**	.19	1.08
		Undergraduate	.387	.159	.116	-.06	.83

Note.*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Discussion

In this study the majority of the participants perceived themselves as unsuccessful in learning English. The fact that three-fourths of the participants perceived themselves as unsuccessful is a significant highlight for several reasons. Firstly, it emphasizes the importance of understanding learner perspectives and experiences in language education. By acknowledging their perceived lack of success, educators can gain valuable insights into the challenges learners face and tailor instructional methods accordingly. Secondly, this highlight underscores the need for a learner-centered approach in EFL instruction. Recognizing that a majority of learners feel unsuccessful prompts educators to shift their focus from a one-size-fits-all approach to a more personalized and adaptive teaching style. This could involve incorporating learner interests, providing individualized support, and adopting strategies that address specific difficulties faced by learners. Moreover, this highlight emphasizes the significance of fostering a growth mindset among EFL learners. By perceiving themselves as unsuccessful, learners may develop negative attitudes and beliefs about their language abilities, hindering their motivation and progress. Educators can use this insight to promote a positive learning environment and empower learners by cultivating their self-belief, resilience, and perseverance.

Frequently mentioned attributions of this study showed similarities with the findings of relevant attribution research (Çağatay & Erten, 2020; Hussain et al., 2020; Li & Han, 2022; Safdar et al., 2023; 2022; Smith et al., 2020). Notably, the frequency of mentioned attributions did not change across the school types. Effort, interest, and ability were the top three mostly repeated attributions respectively, and luck was among the least repeated attributions in both success and failure conditions by the participants from all school types. Effort appears to be the most repeatedly mentioned attribution in both success and failure conditions by a majority of the participants, which shows similarities with the findings of studies in similar educational contexts (e.g., Chen, 2021; Chen, 2011; Lu et al., 2014. Particularly in the failure condition,

participants from all school types put effort, which is a typical attribution after experiencing failure, on the top of the list.

Ascribing success to ability is considered to be key to having an adaptive mindset as it promotes self-confidence. The findings imply that these students attribute success in an adaptive manner, with successful students believing that their accomplishments were the product of their high ability, which may relate to self-confidence and self-efficacy (Graham, 2022; Hatteberg, 2022). On the other hand, changing ability attribution in the failure condition, which refers to a maladaptive mindset, to lack of effort may increase perseverance and enhance performance (Graham & Chen, 2020). Therefore, this finding might be regarded as a healthier approach to outcomes in success but not in the failure condition. When learners ascribe their success and failure to effort, they tend to believe that they have control over their outcomes and this cause is related to themselves but not others. Likewise, stating a luck attribution as the least frequent one in success and failure conditions shows that participants have control over their performance. If the students believe that they have control over their outcomes, they might develop confidence, motivation and sense of mastery (Graham, 2022; Hatteberg, 2022). While certain attributes, like luck and ability, cannot be modified willingly by an individual, attributes like effort may (Weiner, 2000), and effort attribution is likely to result in sustained effort in the future (Anderman, 2020). Likewise, Lu et al.'s (2014) study, in which university level EFL learners in China participated, revealed effort attribution as the most frequently reported cause for failure and in success conditions. In their study, effort was significantly more important than ability attribution for the participants. Similarly, Gan et al.'s (2019) study, which focused on Chinese EFL learners' motivation to learn in the higher education context, revealed that effort received the highest mean score in comparison to other motivational aspects.

The open-ended question sought to uncover the subjective reasons of the participants for their success and failure perceptions. Participants appeared to have more responses in the failure condition than the success condition. The most frequent theme in both success and failure situations was environment. Ascribing failure to the environment, which is regarded as an uncontrollable and external factor, might lead to maladaptive mindsets, and often reveals relations to lower self-efficacy (Ngunu et al., 2019). The other most frequent theme for the success condition was relevant to life/career. The graduate group and Sino-American group are the only groups that mentioned relevant to life/career attribution as the most frequent one in the success condition. Also, these two groups were the only ones who never mentioned irrelevant to life/career attribution in the failure condition. Similarly, these two groups seem to have mentioned environment more often than the other school types in the success condition. This may be because these groups have more opportunities to interact in the target language, English might not be confined to the classroom for these groups, and they take learning English seriously for their future lives and career goals.

Lack of a language learning environment revealed to be the most prevalent cause of failure. As it was indicated the most frequent reason, this attribution did not demonstrate disparities across the different types of schools. The most frequent themes that emerged from the vocational group and undergraduate group were lack of interest, environment, and irrelevant to life/career.

Unlike graduate and Sino-American groups who seemed to closely relate English to their future career, these two groups tended not to take English so seriously. According to Lu et al. (2014), this might be because students who major in fine art and physical science find that English courses are not as necessary as those in high school after they enter universities since they are more interested in their majors. Also, considering the fact that all participants are native Chinese speakers, they might rarely get the opportunity to interact with the target language in a Chinese environment.

For the success-oriented group CDSII scale results demonstrated more internal, personally controllable, stable, and moderately externally controllable attributional patterns. In the failure condition, attributional styles were considerably more internal and personally controllable. The mean score for the locus dimension proved to be the highest, followed by personal control. These dimensional styles are considered as adaptive mindsets (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Weiner, 1985;). When the learners attributed their success to internal, stable, and personally controllable causes, they have higher expectations for having the same successful performance. In the failure condition, when learners ascribed their weak performance to internal causes and when they believed that they had control over those causes, they tended to believe they could improve their performance in the future.

Success- and failure-oriented group comparisons showed that the success group had higher mean scores across all the dimensions. This finding is also parallel with the relevant literature, and it is considered to be a healthier approach to success. Higher scores on controllability have an impact on the value of success, which has an impact on each person's level of motivation for achievement (Graham, 2022). Similarly, higher scores on stability have an impact on success expectations (Weiner, 1985). Failure that is ascribed to stable internal uncontrolled factors will lead to a decrease in the desire for more action, whereas failure that is linked to unstable external controllable causes will not result in a decrease or even an increase in this desire. In this study, the aspects of locus and personal control had the highest mean scores in both groups. The locus, personal control, and stability aspects of the success and failure groups were significantly different. Given that both groups' perception was in the range of moderate, there was no significant variation in the external controllability dimension. The success group appeared to have more internal, personally controllable, and stable attributions when mean scores were considered. Similarly, Lu et al. (2014) noted that, there were differences between successful and unsuccessful learners in the relevant literature in the Chinese EFL contexts. In their study, effective learners preferred to credit successful outcomes more to internal and unstable causes. The findings of their study and this study seem to be similar in locus dimension but differ in the stability dimension. EFL learners in this study seem to hold healthy attributional styles with more internal, personally controllable, stable dimensions in the success condition, and with more internal, personally controllable, and unstable dimensions in the failure condition.

Significant differences were found for the dimensions of external control and stability in the analysis of differences in terms of dimensions across school types in the success condition. Regarding locus and personal control aspects, school types did not differ much from one

another. Compared to the Sino-American group, the graduate group exhibited much more stable attributions, which is accepted as a healthy mindset when success is experienced. Both the Vocational College and Undergraduate groups showed significantly higher externally controllable attributions than the Sino-American group in terms of the external control component. It can be inferred that the higher the education level, the healthier the attributions were in the success condition. Also, the Sino-American context appeared to make learners believe that they had more control over their success outcomes, which is considered a healthier mindset. In contrast, the vocational college and undergraduate groups tended to owe their achievements in English to the externally controllable factors, which might signal less hope for future success because external ascription seemed to hinder learning motivation, enthusiasm, and retention in the language learning process (Li, 2004).

Only the locus dimension showed substantial variations in the failure condition. The Sino-American group had significantly higher internal scores than the Vocational School group, who had the highest scores for the external control dimension, for their ascriptions to failure. It can be concluded that the Sino-American group holds healthier attributional styles compared to the other group. The learners in the Sino-American context are aware that they are experiencing failure due to themselves, not something external and uncontrollable. Therefore, they might have positive expectations regarding their future performance. Internal ascriptions after experiencing failure give learners chances to change their future behaviors in a way to improve their performances. The reason behind this significant difference between these school types could be related to contextual factors.

In general, the findings of the nine-point-Likert CDSII revealed moderate scores both in failure and success conditions. The scores ranged from 4.77, as the lowest score in the failure condition for external control, to 6.53, as the highest score in the success condition for personal control dimension. The reason why there were no high scores like 9 or 8, or low scores like 2 or 3 might be due to the cultural factors. Similarly, significantly higher perception of failure might reflect cultural aspects. Tian (2012) noted that Lao Tzu and Confucius and other thinkers' humble ideas demonstrated modesty as a classic Chinese virtue. They were always humble and believed that their standing was quite low when they received praise from others. They frequently exhibited a reserved and modest demeanor when it came to academics and interpersonal interactions. Similarly, Zhou (2006) pointed out that modesty was viewed as the manifestation of politeness in cross-cultural communication. One should depreciate oneself and be modest while talking about himself or herself, other people, or items that are connected to them. Respect is lifted when referring to the listener or to individuals or objects associated with the listener. The speaking party in Chinese typically addresses himself in a modest manner and refers to the other party using honorifics to convey respect. Honorific and modest words are significant manifestations of humility in Chinese. Unlike Western cultures, Chinese culture emphasizes the need for perfect morals, modesty, and caution. Despite the remarkable accomplishments, the standards are still far from optimal (Zhou, 2006). Being modest, prudent, and moderate are essential characteristics of this culture. While humility helps people advance, boasting hurts since it causes people to lag behind (Bi, 1996).

Implications

The causal explanations that students gave for their success and failure outcomes, particularly in the context of language learning, could be used to forecast the actions they will take in their subsequent learning process and their future success. This is only conceivable if educators can distinguish between failure brought on by lack of ability and failure brought on by lack of effort (Graham & Taylor, 2022). As attribution theory integrates correlates of motivation constructs within the theoretical model, it may be able to offer direction at this stage (Anderman, 2020).

This study might offer implications for language instructors. Language instructors are more likely to be able to observe each student's behavior individually, so they can place more attention on individuals in the classroom rather than groups since students' attribution and learning motivation is a complicated psychological habit. Chinese English learners are diverse (You & Dörnyei, 2016), and their motivational factors change depending on the learning environment (Xu & Gao, 2014; Li, 2014;). Therefore, different institutions might have different effects on learners' perceptions of success and causal dimensionality styles. EFL instructors should be more aware of these factors and provide assistance for their learners accordingly. The instructors might encourage and help students to do self-reflection and retrain attributions in a supportive learning environment. Perry et al. (2014) as well as Graham (2020) highlight the significance of viewing academic successes as controllable and failures as unstable. Doing so helps with motivation, emotion, persistence, and performance. At this point, attribution retraining provided by the instructors might reveal positive outcomes. It is important to note that causal dimensions can provide clear instructions for retraining attributions (Graham, 2020). Language instructors should reassure their students that they genuinely have influence over their results by being aware of their students' maladaptive attributional practices (Zhang et al., 2021).

There are limitations in this research. First, answers to open-ended questions only provided a limited amount of information regarding the participants' unique attributions. For in-depth information on the attributions of EFL learners, future research may employ a phenomenological approach via one-on-one interviews with the participants. Furthermore, it is limited to circumstances related to higher education. However, English is taught to EFL students in China from a young age. In this regard, the study ignores the possibility that attribution patterns may be shaped by early experiences of the learners of English in diverse contexts.

In conclusion, this study provides comprehensive insights on the perceptions, attributions, and causal dimensionality patterns of EFL learners, which are essential for understanding the motivational factors behind language learning. A significant percentage of participants thought they were unsuccessful English learners, even though success was more often attributed to healthy traits like effort and interest and rarely to outside variables like teachers or luck. The qualitative analysis underscores the significance of the environment and relevance to life and career in shaping learners' attributions while learning English. A closer look finds different attributional patterns for different school types, with Sino-American and graduate groups

strongly associating English skill with future employment. Furthermore, attributional style variations reveal how the educational atmosphere affects learners' thinking, with the Sino-American group displaying healthier attributional patterns. The moderate scores in the causal dimensionality scale across conditions underscore the influence of cultural factors. All things considered, these results highlight how critical it is to take cultural factors and educational settings into account when developing more positive attitudes and motivation for language acquisition.

Declarations

Competing interests

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial conflicts of interests to disclose.

Data Availability

The electronic data is stored in private Google Drive folder of the researchers. Data will be available via e-mail to the corresponding author.

Ethical Approval

Name of the committee that made the ethical evaluation: Wenzhou-Kean University Ethics Committee. Date of ethical review decision: 09.06.2023. Ethics assessment document issue number: WKUIRB2023-046/R

Author Contributions

Ayse Taskiran contributed to the manuscript by designing the study, reviewing the literature, writing the research questions, preparing the data collection instruments, analyzing the data and writing the findings, discussions, and the implications.

Hong Pan contributed to the manuscript by reviewing the literature, preparing the data collection instruments, analyzing the data and writing the findings, discussions, and the implications.

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