



# An application of Weiner's attribution theory to the self-perceived communication competence of Iranian intermediate EFL learners

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between EFL learners' attributions for success and failure in learning a foreign language and their self-perceived communication competence. To this end, having homogenized the learners via the Interchange Objective Placement Test (IOPT), the Causal Dimension Scale (CDS-II) and the Language Achievement Attribution Scale (LAAS) were administered to 72 EFL learners studying at two English language institutes in Iran. Six causal attributions (ability, effort, task difficulty, mood, luck, and teacher) together with four attributional properties (locus of causality, stability, personal control, and external control) were compared with learners' self-perceived communication competence. To see whether there is any significant relationship between learners' attributions and their self-perceived communication competence, Pearson product-moment correlation was applied to the data. The results showed significant correlations between some of the LAAS, but not CDS-II, subscales and learners' scores on the SPCC scale. Results from Regression Analysis (using LAAS) revealed that task difficulty attribution was the best predictor for low SPCC scores, indicating that students who attributed the outcome of their test to the difficulty of the task received lower grades on the SPCC scale. Finally, statistical results were discussed, and implications for English language teaching were suggested.

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## Introduction

Contemporary research has been very much concerned with predicting individuals' academic behavior. Accordingly, lots of theories have been developed and a considerable body of empirical research has been carried out to test each theory. Among these, Attribution Theory, which was pioneered by Heider (1958), and Rotter (1966) and later furthered by Weiner attribution (1985, 1986, 1992), has smoothed the way for a considerable body of research in various domains of education. The theory relates to the ways people perceive the causes of their own behavior. When it comes to education, the theory refers to the ways through which individuals perceive the reasons for their academic success or failure. Weiner (1985, 1986) identified individuals' beliefs about why particular events have taken place in their lives.

Henceforth, the theory has thus mostly been associated with Bernard Weiner. His theory rests in the frame of constructivism and takes care of the ways through which individuals mold their own vistas about the world that surrounds them (Williams & Burden, 1997). Attribution theory was put forth as a domain of study which could be inspected to yield a better understanding of individuals and their perceptions. Weiner's model (1979, 1985, 1986) is more veritable than frameworks proposed by other scholars (Graham, 1991). Consequently, many research studies have been conducted to apply the theory, as their frame of reference, in various academic disciplines (e.g., Bempechat, Ginsburg, Nakkula, & Wu, 1996; Boruchovitch, 2004; Lei, 2009; Meyer & Koelbl, 1982; Ong, 2006; Pishghadam & Modarresi, 2008).

As Weiner (1992) has put it, individuals' attributional beliefs tend to affect their future performance; put another way, these beliefs may have an impact on people's motivation to cope with future tasks (Jarvis, 2005). As a case in point, whether individuals perceive that their success or failure is because of their own ability and effort or due to some external factors such as luck, teacher bias, and the difficulty of the task they have faced, their performance outcomes tend to differ the next time they approach the same or similar tasks.

Fortunately, Weiner's attribution theory of motivation has not remained untouched by professionals in the field language learning because, as Dornyei (2001) contends, the notions of success and failure are the most familiar terms among second/foreign language learners and, consequently, the way individuals perceive the cause of their successes and failures has a can have a long-lasting effect on their ensuing performance. Nonetheless, the professionals of the field of ELT have not been able to reach a unanimity regarding the role of learners' attributions in their language learning outcomes (e.g., Gobel, & Mori, 2007; Hsieh, 2004; Hsieh & Schallert, 2008; Kun & Liming, 2007; Lei & Qin, 2009). Hence, in the present study the researchers have tried to implement Weiner's attributional framework in the foreign language context of Iran.

## Theoretical Framework

### *The application of Attribution theory in general psychology*

Weiner (1985, 1986) has identified four attribution factors namely, Ability, Effort, Luck, and Task Difficulty, to which people tend to pin on their success and failure. Accordingly, several researchers (e.g., Bruning, Schraw, & Ronning, 1999;

Dornyei & Murphey, 2003; Hsieh & Schallert, 2008) have taken these factors into consideration in their studies.

Later on, in order to put individuals’ perceptions on a more concrete footing, three attributional dimensions namely, Locus of Causality, Stability, and Controllability were added to the above-mentioned attribution factors (Weiner, 2006). In what follows, we briefly consider these dimensions and illustrate their interaction with other attribution factors:

- (a) *Locus of Causality* refers to the extent to which individuals consider the causes of events to be internal or external to them (Rotter, 1966). As a case in point, luck and task difficulty are deemed to be external attributions; on the other hand, ability and effort are seen as internal attributions.
- (b) *Stability* relates to the degree to which the causes of events are definite/indefinite and stable/unstable through the passing of time. For example, while effort and luck are supposed to be unstable factors, ability and task difficulty are regarded as stable attributions (Weiner, 2006).
- (c) *Controllability* refers to the extent to which people have control over a cause. For instance, unlike ability, luck and task difficulty which are uncontrollable factors, effort is thought of as a controllable attribution. Table 1 (adapted from Vispoel & Austin, 1995) summarizes the alignment of Weiners’ attributional factors and dimensions.

**Table 1**  
**Interactions among attributional factors and dimensions**

Factors	Dimensions		
	Locus	Stability	Controllability
Ability	Internal	Stable	Uncontrollable
Effort	Internal	Unstable	Controllable
Task Difficulty	External	Stable	Uncontrollable
Luck	External	Unstable	Uncontrollable

**The application of Attribution theory in education**

Weiner’s attribution theory has been implemented in a variety of educational contexts. These studies (e.g., Basturk & Yavuz, 2010; Bempechat, Ginsburg, Nakkula, & Wu, 1996; Boruchovitch, 2004; Lei, 2009; Meyer & Koelbl, 1982; Marsh, 1984; Ong, 2006; Powers, Choroszy, Douglas, & Cool, 1986) have mostly examined the role of individuals’ attributions in their performance on a variety of academic tests.

To give but some examples, Bempechat, et al. (1996) explored the nexus between students’ attributions and their mathematics achievement. The results of their study revealed that, among other variables, ability was significantly influential in students’ high achievement grades. In the same vein, Boruchovitch (2004) investigated the effect of students’ attributions of success and failure on their math grades. The results of interviews showed that internal locus of causality was the most important variable which explained the difference between success and failure. Moreover, Ong (2006) explored the effect of students’ attributions and South Asian students’ achievement scores. They utilized the Revised Causal Dimension Scale (CDS-II), yet found that internal and personal attributions were negatively related to, and predictive of, students’ Grade Point Average.

**The application of Attribution theory in ESL/EFL contexts**

More specifically, Weiner’s theory has been studied by many researchers in the field of second/foreign language learning (e.g., Gao, 2008; Gray, 2005; Gobel & Mori, 2007; Mori, Gobel, Thepsiri, & Pojanapunya, 2010; Peacock, 2010; Pishghadam & Modarresi, 2008; Taskiran, 2010; Tsi, 2000; Williams & Burden, 1997; Williams, Burden, & Al-Baharna, 2001; Williams, Burden, Poulet, & Maun, 2004; Yazdanpanah,

Sahragard, & Rahimi, 2010). Nonetheless, the majority of these studies have been carried out with the aim of identifying language learners’ attributions, while only few of them have considered the impact of learners’ attributional perceptions on their language-related outcomes.

Recently, some researchers such as Hsieh (2004) and Pishghadam and Modarresi (2008) have made attempts at devising scales for the specific measurement of language learners’ attributions. For example, Hsieh (2004), inspired by Weiner (1985), developed a scale called “the Language Achievement Attribution Scale (LAAS), for the purpose of measuring EFL learners’ causal attributions. The items on this questionnaire require that learners rate the degree to which they reckon that their language-related outcomes are related to their ability, effort, luck, task difficulty, mood or teacher. Moreover, McAuley, Duncan, and Russell (1992) devised a self-report questionnaire which was intended to measure attribution dimensions for performance, i.e. Locus of Causality, Stability, Personal Control and External Control. Moreover, in 2008, Pishghadam and Modarresi tried to develop a scale for specifically measuring learners’ attributions, utilizing Weiner’s (1986) attributional framework. Their scale comprised four subscales of Emotions, Self-image, Intrinsic motivation, and Language policy.

Hsieh (2004) applied his own instrument in order to investigate the effect of foreign language learners’ attributions on their achievement. He concluded that those learners who made internal, personal and stable attributions more often obtained higher English grades than those who attributed their success or failure to external, unstable and non-personal factors. In collaboration with one of his colleagues, Hsieh afterwards re-examined the effect of EFL learners’ attributions on learners’ achievement grades (Hsieh & Schallert, 2008). They found out that those who attributed their success or failure to their own ability received higher achievement grades in a foreign language course. Furthermore, Lei and Qin (2009) found significant relationships between language learners’ teacher and effort attributions and their English language achievement. Not surprisingly, Peacock (2010) has also found significant relationships between language learning attributions and EFL learners’ proficiency-based outcomes.

In another study, however, Yazdanpanah, et al. (2010) narrowed down the study on attributions to the measurement of merely one attributional dimension, i.e. Locus of Control (LOC). The results of their study revealed that locus of control had a significant relationship with Iranian foreign language learners’ academic achievement.

Although other similar studies have shown that ability (Gobel & Mori, 2007) and ability alongside effort (Kun & Liming, 2007) have significant positive effects on language learners’ language learning behaviors, there are studies such as that carried out by Cochran, McCallum and Bell (2010) whereby it was shown that language learners’ attributions could not significantly predict foreign language learning.

As was mentioned above, previous research in the realm of psychology of language has mainly focused on indicating the types of attributions language learners are more likely to make (e.g., Pishghadam & Modarresi, 2008; Tsi, 2000; Williams & Burden, 1997; Williams, Burden, & Al-Baharna, 2001; Williams, Burden, Poulet, & Maun, 2004). Granted the fact that attribution factors have now gained momentum in language learning (Dornyei, 2001), we made attempts to test the impact of

EFL learners' attributions for success and failure their self-perceived communication competence. Accordingly, this study was conducted to find out answers to the following four questions:

#### **Research questions**

Q1: Is there a significant relationship between EFL learners' foreign language attribution factors and their self-perceived communication competence?

Q2: Do EFL learners' foreign language attribution factors affect their self-perceived communication competence?

Q3: Is there a significant relationship between EFL learners' foreign language attribution dimensions and their self-perceived communication competence?

Q4: Do EFL learners' foreign language attribution dimensions affect their self-perceived communication competence?

#### **Research hypotheses**

HO1: There is no significant relationship between EFL learners' foreign language attribution factors and their self-perceived communication competence.

HO2: EFL learners' foreign language attribution factors do not affect their self-perceived communication competence.

HO3: There is no significant relationship between EFL learners' foreign language attribution dimensions and their self-perceived communication competence.

HO4: EFL learners' foreign language attribution dimensions do not affect their self-perceived communication competence.

#### **Method**

##### **Participants**

Seventy-one Intermediate EFL learners who study at private language institutes in Mashhad take part in the present study. They will be selected from two private language institutes in Mashhad, a city in north-eastern Iran (Khalaghan-e-Javan Institute and Ferdowsi Language Institute). These institutes are selected because they are among the most creditable private language institutes in Mashhad. Having assured learners of the confidentiality of the results, the researchers will select the subjects based on their agreement to take part in the study.

##### **Instruments**

##### **Interchange Objective Placement Test (IOPT)**

The Interchange Objective Placement Test was employed to test learners' listening and reading comprehension, and also language use. It is a 70-item multiple-choice test, designed by Lesley, Hansen, and Zukowski-Faust (2005), and primarily measures the receptive skills, i.e. listening and reading, and grammar components. The test consists of three sections: listening (20 items), reading (20 items), and language use (30 items). The administration of and answering the Objective Test requires 50 minutes.

The Listening items assess learners' ability to understand main idea, context, and supporting details in a conversation, as well as the speaker's intent. The Reading questions, likewise, measure learners' ability to understand main and supporting ideas in written passages, vocabulary, and also the author's intent. Moreover, the Language Use section investigates learners' ability in recognizing contextually appropriate and grammatically correct statements.

As Lesley, Hansen, and Zukowski-Faust (2005, p. 5) have pointed out, the different components of the test may be administered to individuals or to groups, and in any order. In the present study, the researchers have utilized the total Objective Placement Test containing three subcomponents of

proficiency, i.e. listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and language use.

##### **Language Achievement Attribution Scale (LAAS)**

The first instrument used in the present study was a self-report questionnaire designed by Hsieh (2004) to measure foreign language causal attributions for success and failure. It comprises 8 questions that are scored on a 6-point Likert scale. Firstly, the students are asked their score on the last English language test they had taken and how satisfied they are with the result. Students are then asked to rate the degree to which they believe the result of their test is due to their ability, effort, task difficulty, mood, luck, and teacher. In the present study the reliability of LAAS estimated by Cronbach Alpha was 0.53.

##### **Causal Dimension Scale (CDS-II)**

Developed by McAuley, Duncan, and Russell (1992), this questionnaire was designed to measure causal attributions for performance. It comprises 12 items measuring four attribution dimensions, namely, locus of causality, stability, personal control, and external control that are scored on a Likert scale of 9-points. Subscales scores can range from 3 to 27, with higher values representing attributions that are more internal, stable, personally controllable, and externally controllable. The reliability estimates for the four dimensions are as follows: locus of causality,  $r = .60$  to  $.71$ ; stability,  $r = .65$  to  $.68$ ; external control,  $r = .71$  to  $.91$ ; personal control,  $r = .71$  to  $.90$  (McAuley, Duncan, & Russell, 1992). In this study the reliability of the whole items (i.e. 12 items) estimated by Cronbach Alpha was 0.69.

##### **Self-Perceived Communication Competence Scale (SPCC)**

The Self-perceived Communication Competence scale (SPCC) was designed by McCroskey and McCroskey (1988) and later revised by Richmond and McCroskey (1998) to gain information regarding the extent to which people feel confident to communicate in a variety of interactional contexts and with a variety of interlocutors. The purpose of this instrument is to let the learner express their perception of their own communication competence. The learners are expected to indicate how competent they believe they are to communicate in each of the situations described in the questionnaire such as public, meeting, group, acquaintance, friend, stranger, etc. Therefore, it is important that learners recognize that this is not a measure of actual communication competence; rather it is a measure of perceived competence. Surprisingly, in spite of the low number of items, this measure has generated a very high alpha reliability estimate of 0.97 in the present study.

##### **Procedures**

Having homogenized the learners via the administration of the Interchange Objective Placement Test, the aforementioned instruments were administered to 70 intermediate EFL learners studying at English language institutes in Mashhad. In order to receive reliable measures of attribution factors, learners were asked not to mention their names on the questionnaires. Rather, the questionnaires were coded numerically.

The data gathered from the three questionnaires were analyzed by utilizing the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 16.0. Firstly, to explore the relationship between the learners' foreign language attribution factors and their self-perceived communication competence, Pearson product-moment correlation was employed. Next, the researchers ran the regression analysis to find out the extent to which attribution factors might have predictive power in learners' scores on the self-perceived communication competence scale.

Finally, in order to examine the relationship between the learners' foreign language attribution dimensions and their self-perceived communication competence, Pearson product-moment correlation was employed. In order to find out the degree to which learners' attribution dimensions may predict their self-perceived communication competence, the researchers ran the regression analysis.

### Results

#### *The results of correlation between all students' attributions (LAAS and CDS-II) and self-perceived communication competence*

To examine whether there is any significant correlation between the learners' attributions and self-perceived communication competence, Pearson product-moment correlation was employed. The results revealed that there is a significant correlation between self-perceived communication competence and task difficulty attributions ( $r = -0.344$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and luck attributions ( $r = -0.324$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). However, no significant correlation was found between self-perceived communication competence and CDS-II subscales (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

#### **Correlations between learners' attributions and their self-perceived communication competence**

	SPCC
Ability	0.280
Effort	0.033
Task Difficulty	-0.344*
Mood	-0.039
Luck	-0.324*
Teacher	0.125
Internal locus of causality	0.131
External control	0.098
Stability	0.170
Personal Control	0.122

\*\* Shows the existence of significant relationship at the level of 0.01

\* Shows the existence of significant relationship at the level of 0.05

#### *Prediction of self-perceived communication competence by LAAS factors*

To further analyze the data, the researchers conducted the regression analysis with a Stepwise method. The results reveal which variables are important in predicting self-perceived communication competence. Self-perceived communication competence explained 8 % of the total variance, (Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Task difficulty attribution was the best predictor for self-perceived communication competence (Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ), indicating that students who attributed the outcome of their test to task difficulty received lower grades on the SPCC scale. Table 2 presents the results for self-perceived communication competence being regressed on the variables of interest in this study (LAAS).

**Table 2**

#### **The results of regression analysis for learners' attributions (LAAS) and their self-perceived communication competence**

Predictors	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F	P	B
SPCC						
Task Difficulty	0.325	0.105	0.084	4.953	0.03	-0.325

#### *Prediction of self-perceived communication competence by CDS-II dimensions*

Since there was found no significant correlation between learners' self-perceived communication competence and the subscales of CDS-II, it was senseless to conduct the regression analysis.

### Discussion and Conclusion

As it was mentioned earlier, the lack of research has made us conduct a study to examine one application of Weiner's theory of attribution to Iranian EFL learners in private language institutes. Accordingly, this paper intended to determine if there was any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' attribution factors and dimensions and their self-perceived communication competence in Iran.

In the first place, regarding the attribution factors as measured by LAAS, this paper unveiled that attributing success or failure to task difficulty has a significant negative effect on EFL learners' self-perceived communication competence: task difficulty attributions explained 8% of the variances in self-perceived communication competence (Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

However, when it came to causal dimensions, the results indicated that there was no significant positive or negative relationship between the subscales of the causal dimension scale and learners' self-perceived communication competence. Granted that task difficulty attributions were found to be negatively correlated with ( $r = -0.344$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and strongly predictive of (Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ) low communication competence scores, it is vital that teachers raise the consciousness of the learners that attributing success and failure to task difficulty, which is an external and unstable factor, might deteriorate their communication competence.

Instead, they should encourage learners to attribute their success and failure to more internal factors such as their own *ability* and *effort*. Fascinatingly, as Williams and Burden (1997) have contended, perceived attributions are 'changeable' phenomena (p. 108); therefore, teachers can come to the scene with the aim of modifying or revising these attributions. Therefore, granted the fact that attributions are important in setting different levels of self-perceived communication competence in learners, language teachers are expected to put emphasis upon the role and value of learners' internal attributions and on the demerit of their external ones.

Nonetheless, as Hong (2008) points out, "students' attributions for success or failure evolve over a long time and are difficult to change. On the way to the second language learning, teachers should ensure that students experience meaningful successes with teaching strategies by providing authentic, appropriately challenging tasks and by teaching strategies explicitly so that students know how to apply them. Teaching strategies can be quite powerful in building students' motivation for the second language acquisition." (p. 66)

All in all, considering that learners' attributions vary from culture to culture (Brown, Gray & Ferrara, 2005), it is recommended that other researchers from other cultures replicate the same study in order to shed more light on the cross-cultural significance of Weiner's theory of attribution.

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