

Learners' perceptions of their successes and failures in foreign language learning

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Research into learners' attributions for their successes and failures has received considerable attention. However, very little research has been carried out in the area of learning foreign languages. This study is timely in view of the current interest by the government in promoting foreign languages.

The aims of the study were (1) to investigate secondary students' attributions for their success and failures in learning foreign languages and (2) to examine the ways in which these vary according to age, gender, perceived success and specific language studied.

The sample consisted of 285 students between the ages of 11 and 16 studying French, German and Spanish in five secondary schools in the UK. A simple open questionnaire was administered by language teachers, consisting of a personal evaluation by students of their perceived level of success as learners of specific foreign languages and their attributions for success and failure in those domains.

The resulting responses were analysed by means of a grounded theory approach allowing categories to emerge from the data. The resultant categories were then tabulated according to student age/gender and language learnt, together with perceived level of success.

Over one thousand attributional statements gave rise to 21 attributional categories for doing well and sixteen categories for not doing well at language learning. A far wider range of attributions were identified than is generally shown in the research literature, six of which were most commonly cited as reasons for both success and failure. Clear differences emerged between boys and girls, year groups, perceived success and language studied. These results and, in particular, the lack of clarity in the learners' comments about strategy use and the lack of focus on metacognitive strategies, have important implications for policy-makers and for teachers of foreign languages in UK schools. In addition, there are important implications for future research in this area.

LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR SUCCESSES AND FAILURES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

ATTRIBUTION THEORY AND ITS RELATION TO LANGUAGE LEARNING

The search for ways of understanding why some learners are more effective than others has turned increasingly in recent years towards ways in which the learners themselves make sense of the tasks with which they are faced (Williams & Burden,

1997), the messages which are transmitted by their teachers (Feuerstein *et al.*, 1991), the nature of the learning environments (Fraser, 1998) and their own perceived capabilities (Bandura, 1997). A theoretical perspective which has begun to produce particularly interesting data in this respect is that of attribution theory (Weiner, 1986). Basically, this approach suggests that people attribute different causes to those areas of their lives in which they perceive themselves to have succeeded or failed. Whether, for example, a person attributes their failure in some form of endeavour to lack of effort or ability on their part or to some action on the part of another, is likely to affect that person's subsequent actions. It will also be likely to produce different emotional reactions and subsequent motivation.

In the academic domain, much of the research thus far has been carried out in the field of sport (Biddle, 1993) or under strict laboratory conditions (Weiner, 1992). However, a small-scale study by Williams and Burden (1999) revealed a tendency amongst primary and secondary students in the UK to identify internal effort as the main reason for success in learning a foreign language, together with help from others and a growing sense of competence. By contrast, external factors such as distraction by others, difficulty of work and poor teaching were most often cited as reasons for failure. Other research has identified such variables as age, gender, general behaviour, family influence, teacher influence, and like or dislike of a particular school subject as being widely used success and failure attributions (Little, 1985; Vispoel & Austin, 1995).

In his early writings, Weiner suggested that people tended to draw mainly upon four attributions for their successes and failures in achievement situations, namely, ability, effort, task difficulty and luck. However, Little (1985) identified eighteen different causes invoked by children to explain academic outcomes. Other more recently recorded attributions include such factors

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as intrinsic motivation, interest, teacher competence and mood (Weiner, 1992).

In his later writings Weiner extended his theory to suggest that it was not only the reasons that people constructed for their successes and failures that were important but whether they saw these as due to internal or external factors, as changeable or unchangeable, controllable or uncontrollable. Thus, if an attribution is seen as external, unchangeable and outside of the individual's control it will be likely to have a more consistent effect than one which is perceived as internal, changeable and within the person's control. For this reason, attribution retraining is likely to focus upon altering negative feelings, such as a sense of 'learned helplessness', to positive feelings of personal control.

A recent study into the attributions of students in Bahrain for their success and failure in learning English (Williams, Burden & Al-Baharna, 2001) revealed that practice, support from family and teachers, exposure to the language and a positive attitude were the most frequently cited reasons for success by these students. By contrast, inadequate teaching methods, lack of support from family and teachers, poor comprehension and a negative attitude were the most commonly cited reasons for failure. Of particular interest here was the wide range of both positive (11) and negative (18) attributions cited by the relatively small sample of 25 students.

McQuillan's (2000) study of 81 students studying a foreign language in the USA produced a different set of attributions. Motivation, a comfortable pace, a good teacher, ability, time and effort, level and atmosphere were the most common explanations of success. On the other hand, lack of time and effort, poor study strategies and atmosphere were most frequently cited for failure. Similarly, Tse (2000), in her qualitative study of university students learning a foreign language whilst studying the USA, found success attributed to the teacher, the environment, the community and personal motivation. Those who did not feel successful tended to blame themselves for lack of effort, lack of motivation, the teacher and the course.

There are a number of possible reasons for the wide variations in findings from attribution studies. One is that in the case of a quantitative study such as that of McQuillan, the responses are mainly determined by the categories provided in the questionnaire. Another explanation is that attributions will be situationally and culturally determined. Thus, in the case of the Arab students in the Williams, Burden & Al-Baharna (2001) study, family influence played an important part. A third possibility is that perceived success or failure in different areas of endeavour, particularly within an educational context, may be accounted for in different ways according to the school subject or learning activity. Thus, one's explanation for poor performance in a sporting activity may be very different from one's explanation for failing in

mathematics or having difficulties in learning a new language.

An important issue underlying all studies in this area is that attributions do not necessarily reflect the 'true' reasons why any individual may succeed or fail on a given task. Rather, it is the perceived (i.e. interpreted) explanations that individuals construct for why they do or do not perform well that are considered by attribution theorists to be even more powerful than the actual reasons. In this sense attribution theory can be considered to be an aspect of the constructivist approach to learning as opposed to one which reflects the transmission of knowledge. If such a premise is accepted, then it follows that a very helpful source of information is likely to be contained within students' personal explanations for their successes and failures.

The other potentially useful outcome of taking such an approach is that, whilst syllabus context or student abilities may well be fixed and even unchangeable, perceptions are not. Thus, if a student develops an unhelpful set of attributions to account for why they have failed on an educational task, it should be possible by means of attribution retraining to enable them to think and act in more positive ways.

It is our belief that attributions drawn upon in schools and classrooms are most likely to be socially constructivist in nature, i.e. that there will be a shared discourse amongst students to account for why they feel more or less able to learn. It is even possible that such shared understandings may be context-specific in so far as they relate to particular subject areas within the curriculum and even specific aspects of classroom organisation.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The purpose of this study is to build upon emerging research into aspects of students' attributions for their perceived successes and failures in learning a foreign language. In particular, we are concerned with examining the ways in which attributions vary according to age, gender, perceived success and specific language to be learnt. A particular focus of the study is the different attributional patterns demonstrated by students who consider themselves normally successful in learning a language compared to those of students who perceive themselves as normally unsuccessful. We emphasise the notion of 'perceived' success or failure here in contrast to any form of external rating because the basis of attribution theory itself is that of personal self-perception. A further focus is the notion of 'locus of control' and the extent to which students feel capable of exercising any form of strategic control over their language learning.

METHOD

We constructed a simple questionnaire consisting of two open-ended statements and a personal evaluation of the respondents' level of success.

“retraining is likely to focus upon altering negative feelings, such as a sense of ‘learned helplessness’, to positive feelings of personal control”

Figure 1 shows the version of the questionnaire relating to learning French. Similar questionnaires were produced for learning German and Spanish.

We defined success operationally as 'doing well', as our previous study (Williams & Burden, 1999) showed that students understood this more easily than 'succeeding'. In this article, therefore, the terms 'success' and 'doing well' are used interchangeably, as are 'failure' and 'not doing well'.

Figure 1. The questionnaire

1. Tick one answer [•]

- I usually do well in French
- I sometimes do well in French
- I don't often do well in French
- I never do well in French

2. When I do well at learning French the main reasons are:

- (1)
- (2)
- (3)
- (4)

3. When I don't do well at French the main reasons are:

- (1)
- (2)
- (3)
- (4)

We opted for open-ended statements so that the data would not be influenced by pre-determined categories.

This questionnaire was administered in class time by trainee teachers engaged in school-based teaching practice as part of their Postgraduate Certificate of Education in Modern Foreign Languages. The participants were assured of confidentiality and given the choice of whether or not to participate.

An opportunity sample was employed in five schools in the South West of England. A total of 285 students between the ages of 11 and 16 participated in the study, studying French, German and Spanish.

Details of the sample are shown in Table 1.

School A is a mixed-sex, rural comprehensive school of 214 students, with a large catchment area, situated in a quiet seaside resort. School B is also a mixed comprehensive school of 1400 students in an economically deprived area. School C is a highly academic independent single sex girls' school. School D is a mixed specialist sports college of 710 pupils, with a similar background to that of School B. School E is a small comprehensive school of 460 students in a rural environment.

Table 1. Sample

School/ Subject	No of pupils	Y7	Y8	Y9	Y10	Y11	Total
A German	Boys	9	26	13	12	8	68
	Girls	9	13	16	14	17	69
	Total	18	39	29	26	25	137
B Spanish	Boys	-	13	-	-	-	13
	Girls	-	12	-	-	-	12
	Total	-	25	-	-	-	25
French	Boys	-	-	-	11	-	11
	Girls	-	-	-	13	-	13
	Total	-	-	-	24	-	24
C French	Boys	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Girls	13	16	11	8	-	48
	Total	13	16	11	8	-	48
D German	Boys	-	-	12	-	-	12
	Girls	-	-	17	-	-	17
	Total	-	-	29	-	-	29
E French	Boys	-	-	8	-	-	8
	Girls	-	-	14	-	-	8
	Total	-	-	22	-	-	16
TOTAL		31	80	104	58	25	285
Total Boys = 118							
Total Girls = 167							

We analysed the students' responses using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We attempted to interpret the meanings that the respondents intended, and to allow categories to emerge from the data. We tried as far as possible not to impose our own pre-determined categories from the theory. While all data is inevitably subject to the researchers' interpretations, the fact that we came up with a different categorisation from past studies suggests that to some extent we avoided imposing our own pre-determined categories. Three different researchers checked the emerging categories independently and labels were assigned only when agreement had been reached. We used the method of constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1968), where we continually re-analysed the data in the light of emerging categories. The resultant categories were then tabulated according to student age, sex and language learnt, together with level of perceived success.

“We attempted to interpret the meanings that the respondents intended, and to allow categories to emerge from the data”

RESULTS

Attributions for doing well

Twenty-one attributions for doing well emerged from the data (see Table 2). Of the 957 reasons cited for success almost a third were concerned with *effort*. This category included statements such as: I listen, do my homework, concentrate, work hard, try, pay attention, do my work, and take time. In other words, it involved a sense of trying hard, but contained little indication of exactly what this effort entailed. There was also a lack of any sense of direction to this effort.

The next attribution to emerge was termed *strategy*. It was not always easy to differentiate between strategy and effort, and we finally defined strategy operationally as directed effort, even though the sense of direction was not always very clear or purposeful. This included items such as using a vocabulary book, asking when I need explanation, talking to German people, drawing pictures to remind me what to revise, and revising. It was noteworthy that 119 citations (12.4% of the total) were found, despite the general lack of sense of direction.

The attribution *ability* was referred to 112 times (11.7%). This category included understanding, being clever, being able to, knowing x, being a fast learner, having a good ear, and having a good accent. As expected also, the *teacher* was seen to be relatively important, cited 99 times (10.3%). Included here were liking the teacher, the teacher is good/the best, the teacher explains well, the teacher is nice to me, the teacher makes language interesting, the teacher is helpful, and the teacher controls.

Interest was cited 77 times (8.0%) and included wanting to learn, liking, enjoying, and statements such as learning French/German/Spanish is great/fun/interesting. It was not altogether clear whether respondents saw interest as an internal aspect, e.g. I am interested in the subject, or, as an external aspect, e.g. the subject itself is interesting. We therefore categorised this grouping separately as both internal and external (I/E).

The *task* itself was mentioned 76 times (7.9%). Respondents attributed success to being presented with a wide range of different tasks, including cassettes, computers, videos, games, saying things aloud, speaking, writing, listening, bookwork and “fun tasks”. Closely linked to the task is the notion of *ease* mentioned 38 times, as this implies that the individual task, or alternatively the whole task of learning the language is easy. If the task and ease attributions are amalgamated, this gives 114 citations (11.9%), implying that both the nature and ease of the task are important aspects of learners’ success attributions.

Peers were mentioned 35 times (3.7%), including working with others, in groups, or with a partner. Some, however, attributed their success to *not* sitting with friends and not being distracted by peers.

These eight categories were those mentioned most. There were a further thirteen that were cited

infrequently. Personal organisation was a particularly interesting category, not noted elsewhere in the literature, which included remembering books and glasses and handing work in on time. There was surprisingly little mention of teaching materials or other people such as parents, indicating that parents are perceived to play a very small part, while rewards (house points) were mentioned only twice and luck once; (“fluke”).

As shown in Table 3, there were twice as many internal attributions for success as external ones, indicating that, in general, learners tended to see themselves as more in control of their learning than dependent upon outside forces.

Table 2. Attributions for doing well (N = 285)

attribution	number	(%)	internal/ external
effort	297	31.0	I
strategy	119	12.4	I
ability	112	11.7	I
teacher	99	10.3	E
interest	77	8.0	I/E
task	76	7.9	E
ease	38	4.0	E
peers	35	3.7	E
mood	17	1.8	I
behaviour	16	1.7	I
personal organisation	11	1.1	I
need/importance	11	1.1	I
environment	11	1.1	I
circumstances	9	0.9	E
independence	7	0.7	I
teaching materials	5	0.5	E
time	5	0.5	E
other people	5	0.5	E
(lack of) distractions	4	0.4	E
rewards	2	0.2	E
luck	1	0.1	E

TOTAL 957 attributions cited

Table 3. Internal and external attributions for doing well

	Number	(%)
Internal	590	61.7
External	290	30.3
Internal/external	77	8.0

“in general, learners tended to see themselves as more in control of their learning than dependent upon outside forces”

Table 4. Attributions for not doing well (N = 285)

attribution	number	(%)	internal/ external
(lack of) effort	239	24.9	I
(lack of) ability	155	16.1	I
(lack of) interest	119	12.4	I/E
behaviour	92	9.6	I
teacher	80	8.3	E
(lack of) strategy	54	5.5	I
task	46	4.8	E
mood	39	4.0	I
peers	36	3.7	E
difficulty	28	2.9	E
distraction	26	2.7	E
personal organisation	22	2.3	I
environment	16	1.7	E
circumstances	7	0.7	E
teaching materials	1	0.1	E
time	1	0.1	E

TOTAL 961 attributions cited

Table 5. Internal and external attributions for not doing well

	Number	(%)
Internal	601	62.5
External	241	25.1
Internal/external	119	11.6
TOTAL	961	

Attributions for not doing well

Sixteen attributions for not doing well emerged from the data, corresponding to sixteen of the categories for doing well. (See Table 4). Again *effort* was the major category (here indicating a lack of effort), comprising a quarter of the attributions cited. Comments included: I can't be bothered, I'm careless, I don't take time/I rush, I don't do my homework, I don't try/work hard/listen/concentrate, and, I'm lazy. This was followed by perceived lack of *ability*. Here 16% of the learners felt their failures were due to limitation in their own *abilities*, including poor memory, not understanding ..., not remembering ..., not knowing ..., not good at ..., don't get it, poor accent/pronunciation. "I'm thick", "I'm no good", "I'm rubbish at German", and, "I can't even speak English properly yet".

Lack of *interest* was cited 119 times (12.4%) as a reason for not doing well, indicating that this factor was more often used to explain failure than success. The comments included: it's boring, I fall asleep, I hate languages, it's no fun, I don't enjoy

languages, it's gobshit/crap, and, "learning German is more boring than watching paint dry".

Misbehaviour was another frequently mentioned attribution for not doing well (9.6%), which included messing about, talking, taking the Mickey, shouting out and laughing. The *teacher* also emerged as a significant perceived cause of not doing well (8.3%). Comments included: not liking the teacher, the teacher speaking too fast, making it boring, not liking me, not caring, not helping me, nagging and lacking control.

A lack of appropriate *strategies* was used to explain not doing well only 54 times (5.5%) compared to 119 references to the use of strategies as reasons for success. This category included not practising, not revising, not reading the questions/checking work/asking/participating. Similarly the *task* itself (4.8%) was seen as less significant for explaining failures than success, whereas *mood*, mentioned 39 times (4.0%), was more frequently cited for failure than for success. Finally, *peers* were again relatively infrequently mentioned as a reason for not doing well.

Table 5 shows that 62.5% of attributions for failure are internal, which is almost the same as those for success. Only 25% are external, which is slightly less than those provided for success.

Gender differences

The differences between boys and girls regarding their attributions for doing well are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Boys' and girls' attributions for doing well

attribution	boys		girls		total
	no.	%	no.	%	
<i>internal</i>					
effort	133	32.7	164	29.8	296
strategy	49	12.0	70	21.1	119
ability	49	12.0	63	11.5	112
mood	8	2.0	9	2.2	17
behaviour	7	1.7	9	2.2	16
need/ importance	4	1.0	7	1.7	11
organisation	6	1.5	5	1.3	11
independence	3	0.7	4	1.0	7
<i>external</i>					
teacher	32	7.9	67	39.4	99
task	37	9.1	39	7.1	76
difficulty	19	4.7	19	3.5	38
peers	13	3.2	22	4.0	35
environment	5	1.2	6	1.1	11
circumstances	2	0.5	7	1.3	9
materials	2	0.5	3	0.5	5
time	3	0.14	2	0.4	5
others	3	0.14	2	0.4	5
<i>internal/external</i>					
interest	28	6.9	49	8.9	77

The main difference in their internal attributions was that a much higher proportion of girls attributed their successes to using appropriate strategies than did boys. A slightly higher percentage of boys than girls attributed their success to their own efforts, but no other

"62.5% of attributions for failure are internal, which is almost the same as those for success"

significant differences emerged. When it came to external attributions, on the other hand, a significantly higher proportion of girls attributed their success to the influence of the teacher, whereas slightly more boys than girls saw the nature of the task as an important factor in their success. As far as interest in the work was concerned, this seemed to have a slightly greater bearing for girls than for boys in contributing to doing well.

The differences between boys' and girls' attributions for not doing well in language learning are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Boys' and girls' attributions for not doing well

attribution	boys		girls		Total
	no.	%	no.	%	
<i>internal</i>					
effort	90	21.9	149	27.0	239
ability	56	13.6	99	18.0	155
behaviour	48	11.7	44	8.0	92
strategy	15	3.6	39	7.1	54
mood	17	3.9	22	4.0	39
organisation	10	2.4	12	2.2	22
<i>external</i>					
teacher	38	9.2	42	7.6	80
task	19	4.6	27	4.9	46
difficulty	13	3.2	15	2.7	28
peers	16	3.9	20	3.9	36
distraction	11	2.7	15	2.7	26
environment	13	3.2	3	0.5	18
<i>internal/external</i>					
interest	61	15.8	58	10.5	119

“girls showed a greater tendency than boys to attribute their failures to lack of effort ... [and] to lack of ability”

Here it can be seen that girls showed a greater tendency than boys to attribute their failures to lack of effort on their part, to lack of ability and to lack of deployment of appropriate learning strategies, whereas the one internal attribution for failure that was more significant for boys than for girls was poor behaviour.

With regard to external attributions for failure, boys tended to blame poor teaching slightly more than did girls, and, although the actual number referring to the environment as a causal factor was small, a significantly larger proportion of boys than girls drew upon this attribution also. Similarly, a much higher proportion of boys than girls referred to lack of interest in the subject as being a cause for failure.

Table 8 shows the differences between boys and girls in terms of internal and external attributions for doing well.

Table 8. Boys' and girls' internal and external attributions for success

	internal	external	internal/ external	Total
	no. (%)	no. (%)	no. (%)	
Boys	259 (63.6)	120 (29.5)	28 (6.9)	407
Girls	331 (60.2)	170 (30.1)	49 (8.9)	550
Total	590	290	77	957

Both boys and girls attribute their success more to internal than external factors. There were no notable differences between the genders in this respect.

Table 9 shows gender differences in terms of internal and external attributions for not doing well.

Table 9. Boys' and girls' internal and external attributions for failure

	internal	external	internal/ external	Total
	no. (%)	no. (%)	no. (%)	
Boys	236 (57.6)	113 (27.6)	61 (14.9)	407
Girls	365 (66.2)	128 (23.2)	58 (10.5)	551
Total	601	241	119	961

Again, both boys and girls attributed their failures more to internal than external factors. However, girls were considerably more internal than boys in their attributions for failure, while boys were more external. If we compare Figures 9 and 10, boys were less internal and girls more internal for failure than success, reflecting much of the literature (Fennema, 1983). Conversely, girls were considerably less external for failure (23.2%) than success (30.1%).

Changes in attributions with age

Each attribution category was calculated for each year group as a percentage of all the attributions cited in that group. For the purpose of this analysis, comparisons will be drawn only between Year 7, when the students first begin to learn a foreign language, and Year 11, when they are in the process of leading up to external public examinations (GCSE). Mention will be made, however, of any particularly interesting trends that appear to emerge across the first 5 years of secondary schooling.

Only the more frequently cited attributions will be shown in the following tables. Table 10 shows differences between year groups in attributions for doing well.

Table 10. Differences between year groups in attributions for doing well

attribution	Y7		Y11		difference %
	no.	%	no.	%	
<i>Q2</i>					
effort	45	46.39	14	16.47	-29.92
ability	10	10.3	9	10.58	0.28
strategy	8	8.24	18	21.17	12.93
interest	7	7.21	18	21.17	13.96
teacher	5	5.15	5	5.8	0.73
task	9	9.27	2	2.35	-6.82
peers	1	1.03	6	7.05	6.02
others	12		13		
Total	97	100	85	100	

These data reveal that the overall percentage of students attributing their success to effort dropped by a large amount (30%) between Years 7 and 11. In fact, by the time the students were approaching their General Certificate of Secondary Education examinations (GCSE), effort was cited as only the

third most important reason for success, after strategy and interest. No change occurred in the students' attributions of ability, but by Year 11 strategy and interest were seen as playing a much more important role.

Differences in the percentages of attributions cited for failure are shown in Table 11. Again, only those that are mentioned by a year group quite frequently are tabulated. Lack of ability was cited as a reason for failure less by Year 11 students than those in other year groups. On the other hand, lack of interest was mentioned more by Year 11 as a cause of their failures. In addition, the influence of peers as a factor contributing to failure is mentioned significantly more by the older pupils (Years 10 and 11). Unlike their success attributions, about a quarter of the attributions for failure in each year group were related to effort:

Table 11. Differences between year groups in attributions for failure

attribution	Y7		Y11		difference
	no.	%	no.	%	
effort	21	22.5	20	25.0	2.5
ability	15	16.1	6	7.5	-8.6
strategy	5	5.4	6	7.5	2.1
behaviour	7	7.5	8	10.0	2.5
interest	10	10.8	15	18.8	8.0
teacher	10	10.8	6	7.5	-3.3
peers	3	3.2	8	10.0	6.8
Total	93	100	80	100	

Differences according to language studied

Comparisons were drawn between attributions for success and failure according to language studied. Table 12 shows the results for French, German and Spanish where 8% or more of the total attributions for each language is accounted for.

Table 12. Attributions for doing well in French, German and Spanish

attribution	French	German	Spanish
	no. (%)	no. (%)	no. (%)
effort	86 (28.9)	187 (33.0)	24 (26.4)
ability	36 (12.1)	56 (10.0)	16 (17.6)
strategy	34 (11.4)	78 (13.8)	7 (7.7)
teacher	44 (14.8)	49 (8.7)	6 (6.6)
task	25 (8.4)	32 (5.7)	19 (20.9)
Total	298	566	91

As the equivalence of the groups of students studying each language cannot be guaranteed, it would be unwise to attempt to draw too many inferences from this data or that presented in Table 13 which follows. However, we can note that effort is clearly the main attribution for success in all three languages (roughly 30% in each case). It is intriguing that those studying Spanish appear to view aspects of the task as much more important to their success than it is for other subjects, followed closely by ability. For French, on the other hand, the influence of the teacher, ability and strategy use are seen as relatively important. In German, strategy use is followed by ability as perceived contributors to success.

Table 13 shows students' attributions for failure across the three languages.

Table 13. Attributions for not doing well in French, German and Spanish

attribution	French	German	Spanish
	no. (%)	no. (%)	no. (%)
effort	68 (23.4)	159 (27.5)	22 (22.7)
ability	71 (24.4)	64 (11.1)	20 (20.6)
interest	43 (9.6)	75 (13.0)	12 (12.6)
behaviour	15 (5.2)	71 (12.3)	6 (6.2)
Total	291	578	97

Again, lack of effort was an important attribution for not doing well across all three languages. However, lack of ability was seen as important in French and Spanish, in contrast to German, where ability was cited relatively infrequently. Lack of interest comes to the fore also in all three languages. Only in German was the students' identification of their own poor behaviour seen as significant.

Differences in attributions according to perceived success

Tables 14 and 15 compare those who perceive that they usually do well with those who view themselves as not usually and never doing well. Only those most frequently cited (comprising over 8% of the citations provided in that category) are reported.

Table 14. Differences in attribution for success between those who perceive themselves as usually successful and those who perceive themselves as usually unsuccessful

attribution	usually do well	don't often/ never do well
	N = 427 no. (%)	N = 71 no. (%)
effort	138 (32.0)	15 (21.0)
strategy	59 (13.8)	7 (9.9)
ability	57 (13.3)	4 (5.6)
task	31 (7.3)	15 (21.1)
teacher	37 (8.7)	5 (7)
interest	42 (9.8)	4 (5.6)
peers	8 (1.9)	7 (9.9)

Table 15. Differences in attribution for failure between those who perceive themselves as usually successful and those who perceive themselves as usually unsuccessful

attribution	usually do well	don't often/ never do well
	N = 427 no. (%)	N = 71 no. (%)
effort	96 (23.6)	24 (23.5)
ability	54 (13.3)	23 (22.5)
teacher	34 (8.4)	6 (5.9)
interest	45 (11.6)	21 (20.6)
behaviour	35 (8.6)	9 (8.8)
strategy	34 (8.4)	0 (0)

The success-oriented group cited the internal attributions of effort, use of appropriate strategies and ability as reasons for success significantly

“lack of interest was mentioned more by Year 11 as a cause of their failures”

more than did those who were failure-oriented (59.1% as opposed to 36.5%). On the other hand, failure-oriented students attributed success far more to the nature of the task than did their success-oriented counterparts. Interest was provided as a reason for success more by success-oriented students, while it was noteworthy that about 10% of those oriented towards failure attribute their success to help from peers.

Attributions for failure followed a different pattern (see Table 15). Here, lack of effort was reported equally by both groups. Lack of ability, however, was cited far more by failure-oriented students, as was lack of interest. Bad behaviour was seen equally by both groups as a cause of failure, while lack of appropriate strategies was cited only by the success-oriented group.

DISCUSSION

The results of this relatively small-scale study, employing three simple questions, are surprisingly complex. Despite the efforts we have made to ensure the reliability of the categorisation procedures, we are nevertheless reluctant to submit these findings to formal statistical analysis. We prefer instead to focus on what appear to be interesting trends which are hypothesis-generating, and thereby provide indicators for future more extensive and/or in-depth research. At the same time, we do consider that some statements can be made about the nature of young people's attributions for success and failure in learning foreign languages in secondary schools.

First, it is clear that secondary school students find questions about their success and failure attributions meaningful and are more than willing to respond to these. The fact that we obtained nearly one thousand attributional statements from 285 students attests to this. Our groupings of these statements into attributional categories was carried out carefully by means of a commonly accepted qualitative technique which makes us confident about their validity, but it may well be that further collapsing of these categories would be possible, for example, of the areas of effort and strategy, task and ease/difficulty, circumstances and environment, interest and need/importance.

Nevertheless, we are confident that our data reveals a considerably wider range of attributions were called upon to account for both success and failure than is usually shown in the research literature (e.g. Little, 1985; McQuillan, 2000; Tse, 2000). Of these categories, however, effort, ability, strategy use, interest, the contribution of the teacher and the nature of the learning task are clearly shown to be the most commonly employed. Rewards and luck play virtually no part at all. This latter finding casts considerable doubt upon one of Weiner's original attribution categories (Weiner, 1986), at least where learning

languages is concerned. This emphasises the need for caution in generalising the results of attribution studies in one domain across other domains (see also Vispoel & Austin, 1995).

Effort stands out as being the most widely cited attribution for both success and failure. This is in line with most previous attributional research in schools (Bar-Tal *et al.*, 1984; Whitley & Frieze, 1985; Williams & Burden, 1999). Clear differences emerge with regard to the effort attributions of male and female students in that boys appear to attribute doing well more to their own efforts than do girls, whereas girls attribute their failures more to lack of effort than do boys. This evidence of male self-serving bias is in line with previous findings (Farmer & Vispoel, 1990; Gaeddert, 1987; Marsh, 1986).

Of particular significance here is the very marked drop in the percentage of attributions to effort as a reason for doing well between Years 7 and 11, whilst as a reason for failure the proportion of attributions to lack of effort remained fairly constant across the age range. In addition, students who saw themselves as usually doing well attributed their success to effort more than did failure-oriented students. However, lack of effort as a reason for performing poorly was almost identical in both groups.

Although ability was cited far less frequently than effort, it was nevertheless one of the next most common attributions. It was cited slightly more often as a reason for failure than for success – particularly by girls, by younger more than older students and by those who saw themselves as less successful language learners. A result worth further investigation here is that those studying German appeared to see ability as a less important factor in their lack of success than did those studying French and Spanish. This, in turn, raises interesting questions about the nature of the interaction between conceptions of ability and specific language learnt, which may have implications for decisions about the order in which languages might be taught.

The use of strategies was also cited relatively frequently as an attribution for success. However, lack of strategy use was much less commonly identified as a reason for failure. Girls made more frequent reference to the latter attribution than boys. Older students cited strategy use more frequently than did younger students. Here again, those who saw themselves as successful learners cited strategy use more frequently for both success and for failure than did failure-oriented students.

Some interesting variations emerge in relation to students' perceptions of the importance of teachers in their successes and failures. A tenth of the attributions for doing well referred to the teacher, with a slightly lower proportion seeing teachers as a reason for failure. Girls tended to cite the teacher as a reason for doing well more than did boys, whereas boys were more inclined to blame poor teaching for their failures than were

“students who saw themselves as usually doing well attributed their success to effort more than did failure-oriented students”

girls.

The importance of making a subject interesting has often been emphasised in the motivation literature (Dörnyei, 2001) as well as in the language teaching literature (e.g. Brumfit, Moon & Tongue, 1991). What emerges in this study, however, is the complexity of the term 'interest' in that it can be interpreted as both an external attribute (e.g. this subject is interesting) or one that is internal (e.g. I am interested in ...). Interest (or lack of it) appeared to play a more significant part as a reason for failure than as a reason for success, no matter which language studied. This finding was even more striking in boys' attributions for failure than in girls' and is strongly supported by the qualitative data in our previous study (Williams, Burden & Lanvers, 2002).

Across the secondary school age range, however, interest takes on a growing significance as a factor in perceived reasons both for doing well and not doing well. One further finding worth noting was that amongst those who perceived themselves as usually doing well, interest was more likely to be seen as a reason for their success than it was by those who perceived themselves as not usually doing well. When it came to attributions for failure, however, failure-oriented students were much more likely to attribute their lack of success to lack of interest than were those who usually performed well.

The notion of 'task' is again more complex than might first appear. Our data revealed that a distinction was often drawn by the students between the nature of the tasks they were required to perform and their ease or difficulty. The nature of the learning tasks set appeared to be more significant as a reason for success than as a reason for not doing well. Particularly intriguing here was the finding that those studying Spanish cited the nature of the learning tasks to be much more relevant to their success than did those studying French or German. Moreover, those perceiving themselves as unsuccessful learners were much more likely to see the nature of tasks as contributing to their success than did successful learners.

The influence of the peer group is often cited as a potentially important factor in student learning (Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998). However, this was found to be of relatively minor importance in the present study, receiving only just under four percent of the attributions for both success and failure. No differences were found between boys' and girls' attributions in this respect, and, although some potentially interesting findings emerged with regard to both age and self-perception, the actual numbers involved were too small to draw any conclusions. Further study, however, might profitably focus on whether peers do come to have a greater influence as students move through secondary school, or, see themselves as more or less successful learners.

When it came to reasons for not doing well,

the negative influence of one's own misbehaviour was seen to play a small but significant part, particularly by boys. This seems to apply equally across age levels and no matter what one's self-perception as a learner.

It is perhaps worth commenting finally on some attributions that were notable by their absence. The lack of reference to the influence of any form of reward system or feedback certainly provides food for thought which might be followed up by an investigation of exactly *how* teachers are seen as influencing students' successes and failures. Of equal significance is the lack of reference to significant others such as parents. Perhaps most disturbing of all, however, is the fact that very few of the attributions cited by these students related to the importance of learning foreign languages. This is a finding that we would expect to run counter to similar investigations into perceived success and failure in learning English as a foreign language in other contexts.

One slightly unexpected finding was the extent to which the students in our study were prepared to accept personal responsibility for their successes and failure in language learning. More than twice as many internal as external attributions were cited for both success and failure, although it is clear that the gender self-serving bias occurs across the whole of the internal/external divide. Boys are more likely than girls to cite internal reasons for doing well, whilst girls are much more likely to blame their failures on themselves.

Taken as a whole, therefore, these findings offer several exciting possibilities for further research, together with some potentially helpful implications for language teachers.

IMPLICATIONS

It is clear that the kind of methodology employed to investigate success and failure attributions is likely to have a profound influence on the results obtained. Our use in this study of an interpretative approach to analysing data gathered by means of a simple, open questionnaire, has strengthened our belief in the value of such studies as compared with more statistically based methods. More in-depth interpretative research, possibly employing interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying reasons for learners' attributions, would certainly seem to be warranted.

There is a paradox here in the apparent contradiction between the constructivist perspective that each individual will construct his or her own personal attributions for success and failure and the more normative view that such attributions can be conveniently grouped in terms of their commonality. Our own approach lies somewhere between the two extremes. We need further research to identify where those commonalties lie, but also to demonstrate the different meanings and values that individuals

“very few of the attributions cited by these students related to the importance of learning foreign languages”

attribute to such concepts as effort and ability, strategy and interest.

The value of such knowledge for teachers should be to enable them to understand better the ways in which their students are seeking to make sense of their educational experiences and for language teachers in particular to reveal the way in which learners make sense of their language learning experiences within the school context.

The current study revealed a wider range of attributions than is generally reported and suggests a need for a larger-scale investigation into reason for success and failure in language learning in order to confirm and shed further light on these categories. Perceptions of success and failure are inevitably context-specific, as our study in Bahrain revealed (Williams, Burden and Al-Baharna, 2001). This leads to a call for more attribution studies in different cultural contexts.

There is scope, also, for further exploration of the attributions provided for successes and failures in learning different languages in order to help schools to make informed decisions about the choice of languages offered. In a previous study (Williams, Burden & Lanvers, 2002), we found that secondary-level students in England, and boys in particular, were more motivated to learn German than French on a range of different motivational measures, which raises questions about the usual practice of teaching French as the first foreign language in the UK.

The ways in which girls and boys differ in making sense of their successes and failures in learning foreign languages would appear to bear out findings obtained from attributional studies in other domains (Bar-Tal *et al.*, 1984; Farmer & Vispoel, 1990). If confirmed in a larger-scale study on language learners, this will add helpful complementary data to that which is currently emerging on language learner motivation (Williams, Burden & Al-Baharna, 2001; Williams, Burden & Lanvers, 2002).

The findings revealed a number of significant differences between success- and failure-oriented students. More specifically, they showed that success-oriented students were considerably more internal in their attributions for their success than failure-oriented students. This leads us to suggest that there is scope for deeper investigation into attributions given by learners who perceive themselves as not doing well, as such students might well profit from mediation of an internal locus of control and attribution retraining (Hastings, 1994).

In spite of the relatively frequent mention of strategies in this study, the lack of focus on metacognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring and evaluating learning reflect our previous findings (Williams, Burden & Lanvers, 2002). There are implications for teachers of foreign languages with regard to the value of strategy training in the language classroom to enable students to learn to learn more effectively.

We suggest that the door is now open for the development of further studies into attributions for success and failures in language learning in order to build up a more coherent picture of this area in relation to learning foreign languages.

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