Research Digest

Attribution Theory and Learner Motivation: Can Students Be Guided Towards Making More Adaptive Causal Attributions?

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Attribution theory investigates the ways in which people seek causal explanations for events in their lives, other people's behaviour or their own behaviour. Such lay explanations are derived from a process of causal attribution whereby individuals attribute outcomes, events or behaviours to particular causes. These are the causes *as perceived by the individual* and can have significant psychological and behavioural consequences, regardless of their accuracy (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996).

For the past four decades, attributions have been researched in a wide range of psychological disciplines: social, educational, experimental, clinical, organisational and motivational (Försterling, 2001). The topic of attributions in foreign or second language learning is a relatively unexplored area, though in recent years, the role of attributions in language learning motivation has increasingly been examined (McLoughlin, 2004; Tse, 2000; Williams & Burden, 1999; Williams, Burden, & Al-Baharna, 2000; Williams, Burden, & Lanvers, 2002; Williams, Burden, Poulet & Maun, 2004). This reflects the fact that research into motivation in foreign language learning has begun to focus increasingly on cognitive factors in motivation (Dörnyei & Schmidt, 2000; Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Williams & Burden, 1997),

moving away from

> more traditional views of motivation as a fairly static mental
> or emotional state . . . to a more process-oriented approach in
> which individuals' thoughts and beliefs play the predominant
> part (Williams, Burden, & Lanvers, 2002, p. 505).

The growing interest in attributions in the field of language learner motivation arises because attribution theory offers an insight into how learners' perceptions of the reasons for past performance can affect their future motivation and achievement. So, in a language learning context, someone might want to know why he or she did badly in a grammar test and seek reasons for this outcome. According to attribution theory and the concept of motivation outlined above, it is not only the failure outcome itself that may affect the individual's future behaviour, motivation, and performance; that person's *thoughts and beliefs* about the causes of failure also have consequences on motivation. This leads to the insight that learners can make attributions that are maladaptive (having negative consequences for future motivation and achievement). This in turn raises the question of whether teachers can direct learners towards making more adaptive attributions. In this paper, I will present an overview of attribution theory and offer some ideas about how teacher intervention might help students make more adaptive attributions.

Overview of Attribution Theory

Research seems to show that people do engage in spontaneous attributional search (Weiner, 1985). Attributional search is more likely to occur when an event or outcome is unexpected or uncommon (Wong & Weiner, 1981). Moreover, failure may trigger more causal search than success (Wong & Weiner, 1981), giving attributional search an adaptive function.

Potentially, there is a vast number of different attributions an individual could make. However, certain attributions appear to be prevalent. Ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck have traditionally been cited as the most common (Weiner, 1979), although some recent studies in language learning contexts (Tse, 2000; Williams et al., 2004) have found a greater range of attributions.

Weiner et al. (1971) classified attributions along certain dimensions. The *locus dimension* categorizes attributions according to whether they are seen as internal or external to an individual. The *stability dimension* is concerned with the temporal nature of a cause. So, a cause may be seen as fixed or likely to change with time.

This original classification (Weiner et al., 1971) was a relatively simple one. Ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck were identified as the principal attributions. Ability and effort were both classed as internal, with ability being perceived as stable and effort as unstable. Task difficulty and luck were both external; task difficulty was classed as stable and luck as unstable. Today, ability covers innate aptitude as well as skills or knowledge that can be acquired and can therefore be seen as either stable or unstable; effort can be dispositional or temporary; task difficulty takes into account objective task characteristics as well as an individual's perceptions of the task; and, finally, chance is the term used more often today instead of luck since being lucky could be seen as a stable, dispositional trait.

Weiner (1979) postulated a third dimension: *controllability*. Controllability reflects the degree of volitional influence people feel they have over a cause (Weiner, 1983). For example, people tend to feel they have control over effort but not over aptitude; therefore, effort can be seen as internal and controllable, while aptitude is internal and uncontrollable.

The relevance of attribution theory to the study of motivation, and therefore to language learning, stems from Weiner's attribution theory of motivation and emotion (2000). This asserts that each dimension is

associated with certain psychological consequences (Weiner, 1979; 1983): affective states and expectancies for future success. These can have a bearing on an individual's subsequent behaviour (Weiner, 1992).

Each causal dimension is thought to be linked to particular affective states (Weiner, 1985). The locus of causality dimension maps onto changes in pride and self-esteem. The stability dimension is linked to feelings of hopelessness or hopefulness. The controllability dimension links to emotions such as anger, gratitude, guilt, pity and shame. All of these affective states can have subsequent behavioural consequences.

Of more direct relevance to the topic of this paper is expectancy for future performance, which is connected to the stability dimension. Weiner (1985) suggests that, for failure, it would be better to make internal, unstable and controllable attributions than internal, stable and uncontrollable ones. If a person attributes failure to an internal, but unstable, factor (namely, lack of effort), there is every reason to expect a better performance in the future as long as the unstable factor is altered i.e. more effort is expended. On the other hand, if an individual ascribes failure to an internal, and stable, factor (lack of ability), the very stability of this cause makes it seem unlikely that any future outcome will be a radical improvement.

The central point, therefore, of the attribution theory of achievement motivation and emotion is this: the cognitive processes that produce attributions have consequences on the learning process because they affect individuals' expectancies for future success, their affective states, and their subsequent behaviour and performance. Therefore, individuals' perceptions can at times lead to attributions that have negative consequences (maladaptive). The question is: might it be possible for educators to direct learners towards attributions that would have a more desirable effect on future learning?

Attribution Retraining

Attribution retraining is one technique that has been used to achieve this (Försterling, 2001). It is concerned with converting maladaptive into adaptive causal attributions. Attribution retraining "focuses on inducing effort attributions for failure and related unstable, controllable causes, thereby increasing students' perception of control over their academic performance" (Ruthig et al., 2004, p. 713).

The whole premise of attribution retraining is based on the assumption that we can tell if an attribution is realistic or not. Is this a valid assumption? According to Försterling (2001), it is. Attribution theories propose that people assess consensus, distinctiveness and consistency information to reach realistic attributions. For example, if a student fails a class test, a teacher can use available information to make a realistic attribution. So, if all other students had done well in the test (low consensus), and the student had always failed similar tests (high consistency) and other tests in different courses (low distinctiveness), then an internal attribution (either effort or aptitude) would be more realistic than an external one (task or teacher).

Attribution retraining has had its successes (Försterling, 2001), leading to enhanced motivation, an increase in perceived control and improved academic performance (Ruthig et al., 2004). As a specific example, Ruthig et al.'s study (2004) concluded that attribution retraining had improved academic achievement, lowered test anxiety and reduced course withdrawals among first-year college students in the U.S.

Attribution retraining, however, requires intervention in a learning process, which is time consuming. Learner attributions have to be gathered and analyzed, maladaptive attributions need to be identified, and candidates for retraining have to be chosen. The retraining process then takes place, in which learners are shown the possible effects of maladaptive attributions and are encouraged to make more adaptive ones. Finally, the effectiveness of the intervention has to be evaluated

(Försterling, 2001). In many educational contexts, this may not be practical. However, individual teachers can help their own learners through the feedback they give.

Implications for the Classroom - Teacher Feedback

Failure is more likely to lead to attributional search on the part of the learner than success. After failure, therefore, it is important for a teacher to ask the learners why they think they failed. It is also important for teachers to then say why *they* think the learner failed. At this point, the teacher has to be careful to maintain positive beliefs about students' abilities. This essentially means that it is advisable not to attribute learner failure to stable dispositions such as laziness or inability. Rather, emphasis should be placed on unstable situational factors that the learner may have some control over, like effort. However, beliefs about learners' abilities, as well as the feedback given to them, need to be realistic. Feedback is not simply an opportunity to encourage the learner. This is important, of course, but the feedback also needs to be accurate because this can help learners themselves to make more accurate and more adaptive attributions in the future.

Sometimes students do try hard and still fail. What other adaptive attribution can those students make? In these cases, a teacher may have to focus on lack of ability. This focus, however, does not have to be on ability as aptitude; instead, the teacher can target certain skills, learning strategies or knowledge areas that he or she feels the student lacks. Like effort, such attributions are unstable as skills can be developed and knowledge can be attained. Teachers can help students become more aware of skills and learning strategies they may need to develop; furthermore, teachers can encourage students to seek effective ways of developing those skills and strategies. As Graham (1991) notes, it is the instability of a cause that is important, not the cause per se, so any self-attribution that the learner sees as unstable

could have the same positive effects as an attribution to lack of effort.

As well as being realistic and adaptive, attributional feedback should be specific. Attributing a learner's failure to lack of effort may be better than ascribing it to lack of ability; however, the student may not derive much benefit if he or she is simply told: "You didn't work hard enough." If students have only a surface level of metacognitive awareness of their language learning, they may be unable to target highly specific areas where they lack ability or where they need to expend greater effort. With students like these, it is up to the teacher to indicate such areas, possibly helping to raise their metacognitive awareness in the process.

To conclude, by knowing what types of attributions are adaptive or maladaptive, teachers can assist learners in perceiving their past performances in ways that will positively affect their future learning. For educators in Japan, where effort is seen as important (Holloway, 1988), and persistence is admired, it may be particularly helpful to get students to pinpoint lack of effort as a cause of failure. Knowledge of learners' causal attributions and their consequences can aid educators' understanding of learner motivation and achievement.

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