

Promoting Effort Attributions to EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

Attribution describes an explanation that learners provide for the progress of their second language learning and reasons they attribute to their success or failure in the process of learning a target language. This paper explicates three practical ways to promote effort attributions based in Dornyei's (2001) motivational teaching framework to the learning process of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. The explications are elaborated with relevant literature and my reflective learning experiences as a language learner in Indonesia. This paper will be an interest of EFL teachers who are looking for practical ways in enhancing motivation and academic achievements of their students. In essence, this paper encourages constructive collaboration between parents and EFL teachers in taking an active role to promote the effort attributions to students.

Keywords: attributions, attribution training, effort attribution, effort, EFL teachers

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to provide some details about three practical ways on how to perform an attribution training, namely effort attribution in a learning process of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. Those three ways are [1] modeling effort-outcome linkages, [2] providing effort feedback, and [3] encouraging learners to offer effort attributions (Dornyei, 2001). The ways can be seen as strategies that teachers can use to enhance the students' motivation (Dornyei, 2001), regarded as one of primary determinants to their learning achievement (Dornyei, 1994; Harmer, 2007; Reid, 2007), including a success of their language learning (McDonough, 1983; Ellis, 1994; Kimura, Nakata, & Okumura, 2000; Gass & Selinker, 2001; Alsayed, 2003; Lifrieri, 2005; Khamkhien, 2010).

The practical discussions of the paper will be an interest of EFL teachers who are looking for practical ways in enhancing motivation and academic achievements of their students,

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particularly in EFL settings. To achieve the objective and to provide clear understanding of the attributional issues, the paper continues to discuss related definitions of attributions, findings of previous attributional studies, and some concerns of the attribution training in students' learning.

WHAT IS ATTRIBUTION?

Literature clarifies related ideas of attributions. For instance, attribution is defined as an explanation that learners provide for the progress of their second language learning (Ellis, 2008) and reasons they attribute to their success or failure in the process of learning a target language (Gonzales, 2011). In educational fields, attribution has been pervasively cited as a determinant of students' learning motivation and academic achievement. Attribution becomes an essential factor in classroom learning and performance (Weiner, 1972) and influences students' motivation (Ellis, 2008). Moreover, attribution made toward the success or failure in studying will affect motivation that individuals have for their learning academic achievement (Lei, 2009) and can significantly impact on their future performance of academic tasks (Banks & Woolfson, 2008).

Attribution can also be described from the lense of psychology. As explanations people have on why they succeeded or failed in the past (Dornyei, 2001), attribution is related to four types of causal explanations, namely (a) ability, (b) effort, (c) luck, (d) task difficulty (Weiner, 1976 as quoted in Farid & Iqbal, 2012; Weiner, 1985; 1986 as cited in Rasekh, Zabihi, & Rezazadeh, 2012). Furthermore, in the theory of motivation, attribution is described as a causal structure covering three main dimensions: (e) locus, (f) stability, and (g) control (Weiner, 1979 as cited in Mori, Gobel, Thepsiri, & Pojanapunya, 2010), "along which particular attributions can be measured" (Banks & Woolfson, 2008, p.1).

With regards to Weiner's attribution theories (Weiner, 1979 in Mori, et al., 2010; Weiner, 1986 in Banks & Woolfson, 2008; Weiner, 1980), the locus of causality concerns whether people perceive a particular cause as being internal (such as abilities) or external (not having enough preparation for a test or completing a particular task) to them. The stability dimension explains whether a particular cause is something fixed and stable, or variable and unstable over time. Meanwhile, controllability refers to how much control a person has over a particular cause. These three main dimensions (e-g) can form a basis for taxonomies to classify causes of any success or failure in students' learning (Mori, et al., 2010).

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It is documented that Vispoel and Austin (1995) successfully integrated the main dimensions (e-g) with Weiner’s causal attributions (a-d) in their classification scheme for causal attributions, which appears to be adapted widely by a number of attributional studies (see among others: Mori, et al, 2010, Thang, Gobel, Mohd. Nor, & Suppiah, 2011; Farid & Iqbal, 2012; Gobel, Thang, Sidhu, Oon, Chan, 2013, Phothongsunan, 2014). Table 1 depicts the classification scheme.

Table 1. Dimensional Classification Scheme for Causal Attributions
(as cited in Vispoel & Austin, 1995, p.382)

Dimensions			
Attributions	Locus	Stability	Controllability
Ability	Internal	Stable	Uncontrollable
Effort	Internal	Unstable	Controllable
Strategy	Internal	Unstable	Controllable
Interest	Internal	Unstable	Controllable
Task difficulty	External	Stable	Uncontrollable
Luck	External	Unstable	Uncontrollable
Family influence	External	Stable	Uncontrollable
Teacher influence	External	Stable	Uncontrollable

PREVIOUS ATTRIBUTIONAL STUDIES IN EFL CONTEXTS

In English a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, a situation in which people learn English in a formal classroom with limited opportunities to use the language outside their classroom (Richards & Schmidt, 2010), some studies have revealed some possible attributions that students perceive to success and failure in their EFL learning. For instance, in their study on how EFL university students in Thailand and Japan judged their success and failure to their language learning tasks, Mori, et al. (2010) found that the students regarded their teacher’s influence and classroom atmosphere as primary factors for their success. Meanwhile, their lack of ability was one of the causes of their failure.

Another study is by Yilmaz (2012) who involved ninety-one undergraduate EFL university students and focused his analysis on the attributions that students made for their reading comprehension. The study found that the students attributed their success to their good learning strategies, positive mood, interest in reading, good teachers’ feedback, and positive environment. Meanwhile, they attributed their not doing well to the lack of interest in reading, lack of time, negative mood and environment.

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In a more recent year, Mali (2015a) conducted an in-depth interview with three university students in Indonesia to explore their attributions to failure and success in their EFL learning process. His study appears to prove that negative environment, time management, and negative habits become the attributions to the failure. Meanwhile, the students regard learning strategies and family support as the primary attributions to success in their EFL learning. To sum, these three studies found that the students still attribute their failure to stable and uncontrollable factors, such as a lack of ability (Mori, et al., 2010), and negative environment (Yilmaz, 2012; Mali, 2015a). In that case, teachers need to encourage their students to explain their failures to facts that they did not make any sufficient effort and employ appropriate strategies (Dornyei, 2001). These changeable and controllable causes can enhance students' learning motivation, encourage them to build a logical conclusion that they will work harder, and facilitate their future achievement. On the other hand, attributing the failures to a stable and uncontrollable cause named students' ability is dangerous as it can conceivably reduce self-confidence in their potential, make the students not try to be successful anymore, and not believe that they can do better.

ATTRIBUTION TRAINING: EFFORT ATTRIBUTIONS

Therefore, with regard to the findings of the previous studies, I reinforce Dornyei's (2001) view that calls upon attribution training to prevent students from making any deliberating attributions and to change negative attributional styles. Attribution training is "a process that involves improving a person's beliefs in the causes of his or her own failures and successes to promote future motivation for achievement" (Robertson, 2000, p.111). The training is also designed to enhance motivation and encourage students' achievement by altering how they perceive their academic successes and failures so that their beliefs facilitate, rather than discourage, their future chances of academic success (Kallenbach & Zafft, 2016). Among types of attribution training, this paper focuses on "promoting students' effort attributions" as the attribution training based on Dornyei's (2001) motivational teaching framework. In essence, he states that "if we can make students believe that higher level of effort, in general, offer a possibility for success, they will persist in spite of the inevitable failures that accompany learning" (p.120). Nevertheless, some people appear to express their pessimism towards the attribution training. For instance, the training is time-consuming, perhaps not be the most effectual way to motivate students to learn (Pearl, 1985), and not easily translated to the classroom (Robertson, 2000). I also consider a view that

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attributions of causality may be various due to individual, tasks, culture, and social group differences (Graham, 1991).

DISCUSSION

The paper continues to discuss the ways to promote the effort attributions and elaborates them with related literature and my reflective learning experiences as a language learner in Indonesia.

Modelling Effort-Outcome Linkages

In modeling an effort attribution, EFL teachers can detail their personal experiences when they tried hard to complete a particular task. Subsequently, they can ask their students to share related experiences (also proposed by Kallenbach & Zafft, 2016). The teachers can also model confidence that their students can be successful if they find better learning strategies to deal with difficulties in performing classroom activities or in completing particular tasks. Nevertheless, it is important to note that “adult models may be effective but only if they are believable” (Robertson, 2000, 131).

In Indonesia, these activities are possibly workable as teachers are “viewed differently from their Western counterparts and perhaps those in other EFL contexts” (Zacharias, 2014, p.3). Guru, the Indonesian word for a teacher, stands for “sing digugu lan ditiru,” which means the ones to be listened to and to be emulated (Gandana, 2015). Importantly, Gurus are considered as an ideal model of a member of the society, so they need to instance good manners and behavior that should be imitated by members of society in their daily practice (Widiyanto, 2005). In the country, Gurus are also the ones who should educate their students about morality, ethic, integrity, and characters (Wiwoho, 2015). However, this is not to say that EFL teachers from different contexts cannot model the similar effort attributions. Rather, I regard the ideas as an encouragement for the teachers to participate actively in modeling the attribution to their students.

Another way to model the effort attribution is by using true stories and biographies of individuals who made a satisfactory achievement due to their effort. As a real example from Indonesia, Setianingsih (2015) explicitly narrates hard work done by Maria Harfanti, the 2nd runner up of Miss World 2015, as a key factor for her win. Another similar story is from Marthen Sambo (Kick Andy Enterprise, 2014). He successfully finished his undergraduate study though he was from a very humble family and had to work as a private teacher and

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shop keeper to be able to finance his study. Then, the teacher can discuss with students practical reasons behind the success of the individual.

The true stories of related efforts made by the teacher can also be a good start. For example, I always remember what my teacher has said to all students in her classroom that there is nothing free in this world. We have to pay for everything we want. She, for instance, always reminds us that if we want to be successful in our study, we have to pay the success by doing our very best in completing every task we get from our teachers.

I also see possibilities to involve parents in modeling the effort attributions by constructively telling their children of any hard work, efforts, and struggle they have done in life. Carlyle (2014) clearly writes that not all children are going to find inspiration in their school. Therefore, it is an opportunity for parents to provide the inspiration. Further, Carlyle provides some data that 80 per cent of a child's achievement is based on inspirations coming from their parents. Similarly, Krisbergh (2016) believes that "children repeat any positive behaviors they see in the parents. For instance, children whose parents have healthy self-esteem tend to be more confident and hold themselves in higher regard" (n.p).

My personal reflection on what my father likes to tell when we have a dinner can help to illustrate that idea. In brief, my father is from Ende East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia and grown up in a family with a low financial condition. He lives in Wologai, a small village that is forty kilometers away from his Senior High School in Ende city. He describes how difficult it was to study at that time, for he had to live in the school dorm with its far-from-luxurious conditions. Interestingly, he also mentions that when the holiday came, he had to walk home without taking any public transportation due to his financial condition. He could cope with the situations and keep studying hard every day to achieve his goal of getting a better life.

After telling his stories, he always reminds me to struggle and not to give up easily in this life. When I study, I have to do it seriously and be responsible for it. How difficult my condition was, I had to finish my study. He has repeated the same stories since I was a child. At first, I did not clearly understand the meaning behind his stories until I gradually can reflect the essence of his hard work and implement it in my daily life. Other similar stories can be drawn from students' parents who indirectly can take an essential role in modeling the effort attributions.

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Providing Effort Feedback

Another practical way to promote effort attributions is by providing feedback to students. In teaching, feedback refers to comments that students get dealing with their success on learning tasks either from a teacher or other persons (Richards & Schmidt, 2010) and needs to be given respectfully (Harmer, 2007). Essentially, the teacher should emphasize low effort as the primary factor in their students' underachievement in learning, so s/he can encourage them to do better in the future. It is also necessary to tell the students that they need to complement their effort with learning strategies, described as behavior and techniques that students adopt in their effort when they learn a second language (Troike, 2006), and with sufficient skills, which they can master (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996, as cited in Dornyei, 2001).

The literature discusses some characteristics of good language learners that can help to illustrate the learning strategies and skills that students can reflect on and cultivate to promote their effort attributions. Some of them are [1] trying to find all opportunities to use the target language, [2] being prepared to experiment by taking risks, which perhaps makes them look foolish, [3] developing a strong task motivation (students respond positively to particular learning tasks they have to complete) (Ellis, 1986). Other characteristics include “[4] being able to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning, [5] active and speak out (Renandya, Lee, Wah, & Jacobs, 1999, p.48), [6] unafraid of making mistakes, [7] confident in his/her ability to learn, and [8] aware why s/he wants to learn” (cited in Hedge, 2000, p. 82).

To delve more learning strategies, teachers possibly can role as sources (Harmer, 2007) who share their experiences on useful strategies to complete particular tasks and to cope with learning difficulties. Another possibility is by inviting students to share their experience of learning strategies that they usually do in their language learning. It is always necessary, therefore, to encourage students to keep developing a proper learning strategy for their language learning (Mali, 2015b).

Encouraging Learners to Offer Effort Attributions

Besides two previous ways, students need to be encouraged in explaining any effort they have done to be successful in their class. Ushioda (1996) believes that “the motivational belief in the value of individual effort will have a stronger foundation if students express it using their words” (as cited in Dornyei, 2001, p.122). In that case, the teacher can ask his/her students to reflect and provide some details about challenges about their language tasks,

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strategies to deal with the challenges, and things they can learn from the experience (Dornyei, 2001). These activities can be done, for instance, by writing a reflective journal (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, 2010), personal diary (Neuman, 2006), or completing a guided journal (Nunan, 2002). Importantly, when students attribute failure in learning to their low ability (thought that they are not good at languages), teachers should refuse those related reasons.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed three applicable ways to promote the effort attributions, which encourage EFL teachers to model particular effort-outcome related stories, provide effort feedback, and encourage their students to reflect and detail any efforts done to be successful in their learning. Nevertheless, these ways should not be translated in isolation, as they are open to necessary modifications based on specific situations that EFL teachers are dealing with. Moreover, considering that the attribution training is primarily based on Dornyei's (2001) motivational teaching framework, I encourage future studies to explore other possibilities for the training from more diverse perspectives and settings. Future empirical research is also needed to justify the effectiveness of the training particularly in EFL contexts and to provide a better understanding of a correlation between promoting the effort attributions and students' learning achievement. Eventually, this paper endorses that "teachers and parents should know to what their children attribute their learning and academic performance so they can provide necessary guidance and support" (Solar, 2015, p.37) and, therefore, encourages constructive collaboration between EFL teachers and students' parents in taking an active role to promote the effort attributions to the students.

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