THE EFFECTS OF ATTRIBUTION RETRAINING ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract. This paper elaborates on the role of attribution style in successful foreign language learning. Attribution style, frequently associated with motivation, is considered to belong to individual learner factors. Its type, either external or internal, determines learners' attitudes to the reasons of their successes or failures. It is believed that appropriate attribution training may contribute to students' development of more favourable attitudes to their progress (or lack of it) in language learning. The research reported in this paper presents an example of such retraining procedure. One group of 15-year-old secondary school students (36 subjects) underwent the retraining treatment and a significant improvement could be observed both in their perceptions of achievement and their progress in English. The study proved that adolescent learners can profit from attribution training in their perception of success in foreign language learning.

Key words: foreign language learning, attribution style, attribution training, internal attribution, external attribution, success, failure

INTRODUCTION

The notion of attribution comes from Fritz Heider (1944; 1958), who observed people's beliefs about their successes or failures. People generally attribute success or failure either to external (situational or environmental) factors or to internal (personal) factors. Although Heider (ibid.) was mainly concerned with examining how we evaluate other people, not ourselves, and what traits of character we tend to attribute to others on the basis of analyzing their behaviour, his ideas were revolutionary and gave rise to many future investigations in the area of attribution. Julian Rotter (1966) was another psychologist who contributed to the development of the theory of attribution. His idea of the *locus of control* describes the degree of control people believe they have over their life events. Rotter (ibid.) places people on a continuum from very external to very internal. Those with a strong internal locus of control feel in power to control anything that happens to them, they also hold responsibility for the events. They believe that the amount of their own effort can significantly determine whether they succeed or fail. On the other hand, there are people who feel the amount of reinforcement they receive is due to chance, luck or powerful others. Therefore, they do not see any straightforward connection between the effort they put into an activity and its outcome. Most people, however, can hardly be described as strongly internal or external. Only certain tendencies may be observed in their behaviour.

The next essential contributor to the attribution theory, Bernard Weiner (1986), drew together aspects of achievement motivation and locus of control theories. He applied his findings to academic and other achievement situations. He distinguished four main elements in people's attribution styles: ability, effort, luck, and the perceived difficulty of the task. These can be grouped into external (task difficulty, luck) and internal (ability, effort). Another classification could be into stable (ability, task difficulty) and unstable factors (effort, luck). There are special tests constructed to establish to what extent a person has internal/external or stable/unstable attributional style.

More contemporary research on attributions focuses, among others, on their application in changing attitudes to stress and to interpersonal relations (Fösterling, 2005) and on attribution-related emotional profiles of students (Biedroń, 2008).

Many researchers stress the superiority of internal attributions over external. However, one of the most important specialists in this aspect, Martin Seligman (1990) claims that each dimension has its positive and negative sides. He emphasizes that people who always blame themselves for negative events in their lives (high internality) have low self-esteem, think they are worthless, untalented, and do not deserve anyone's admiration or love. On the other hand, those who blame external factors when confronted with failures or other negative events, do not lose faith in themselves, and their self-esteem remains untouched. It seems to be different as regards positive events. Seligman (ibid.) points out that those who consider themselves the cause of positive events (internality) tend to like themselves more than those who look for the cause in others or in luck. It appears, then, that it would be most convenient to have an internal attribution for successes and external – for failures. Such individuals seem to be the most optimistic in their approach to life.

Both Rotter (ibid.) and Seligman (ibid.) represent an optimistic view on personality with possibilities for changes to take place, i.e. we can change our attributions to more desirable ones as a result of training. Consequently, we may talk about chances for learners, for whom being an internal and an optimist are the most desirable features for their academic success. The following part will focus on how to change people's attributional style, i.e. on different ways of attribution retraining.

1 ATTRIBUTION RETRAINING

There has been much research concerning attribution retraining. Researchers have employed a variety of techniques to achieve a similar goal – a positive change in students' attribution styles with all its advantages. Some ideas of training are very simple, consisting of easily applicable procedures, while some are more complex creating whole separate programs. The following list presents a few most important training models.

1. *Adaptive Learning Environment Model* (Wang, 1983). The main element of this model is instruction in how to practise self-management skills, creating opportunities to actually practise them. Such skills involve:
    - planning and carrying out routine classroom management tasks rather than expecting the teacher to organize this,
    - ways of searching for ordering and organizing information to be learned and remembered,
    - breaking complex tasks into meaningful and manageable subparts,
    - setting realistic personal learning goals,
    - estimating the amount of time and effort that will be required to complete a task (Williams and Burden, 1997: 102-103).

2. *Attribution versus persuasion.* This model of attribution training consisted of short statements providing one group of students with internal explanations for their successful achievements, e.g. 'This is a very neat classroom. You must be very neat and clean students'; 'You really work hard at maths'. Another group had persuasion and argumentation instead, e.g. 'You should try to keep your classroom clean'; 'You should try to be better at maths'. The results of the experiment proved exceptional effectiveness of attribution training both in the area of maths achievement and self-esteem enhancement (Booth-Butterfield, 1996).

3. *Strategy training of students with learning disabilities.* In this training students can clearly see the connection between causality and consequence. Students are asked to observe a connection between the strategy they choose, the effort they put into the task and the outcome. They are advised to use special graphic organizers to see over a longer period of time the relationship between proper strategy use and its outcomes. This training gives students the power of control and autonomous decision-making (Fulk and Mastropieri, 1990).

4. *Attribution retraining of children with disruptive behaviour* (Nelsen, 2000). This procedure was aimed at convincing the student that his/her problems were not due to the lack of ability to behave properly, but due to the lack of effort to do so. The following series of steps were followed:
    - setting reasonable goals,
    - giving specific feedback connected with student's behaviour,
    - training student's responsibility,
    - reinforcing behaviours being trained,
    - giving the student a chance to show his new gained strengths.

5. *Seligman's ABCDE method of changing attribution styles.* The ABCDE means respectively: adversity, belief, consequence, disputation, energization. Seligman (1990) believes that pessimists can learn to

look at events in an optimistic way, improve the quality of their lives and achieve more success. The method is based on the conviction that our beliefs can be questioned by ourselves and that we can use this skill in practice. This is done along the following procedure:

- Identify the adversity that you are experiencing or have experienced, i.e. what bad event has happened to you?
- Identify the beliefs you are using to explain that bad event. What attributions do you have about the event? Frequently we use automatic explanations, which may be ruled out.
- Examine the consequences of having that belief. What do you do as a result of the belief? Do you quit? Do you try to escape instead of facing the bad feeling?
- Dispute with yourself about the belief. Are there any other explanations? What is an alternative explanation of the event? What may be its consequences?
- Changing the beliefs leads to energization, i.e. good feeling about the things we are doing, looking forward to doing them.

Seligman (ibid.) states that newly acquired optimism is not merely a simplistic positive thinking. It is rather the process of thinking non-negatively. The training procedure described above proved to be beneficial for people suffering from depression.

6. *Success training vs. attribution training* (Dweck, 2000). She worked with two groups of helplessness-oriented students. In one of the groups she introduced success training with an assumption that a series of successes would build the students' expectations of future successes and would allow them to perform better if they experienced failures. In another group attribution retraining was introduced, which consisted in teaching the students new explanations for failures (e.g. too little effort, not too little ability). The group with attribution retraining improved significantly in maths. It is clear, then, that attribution retraining is a more successful and more promising procedure in dealing with helpless students than success training.

Clearly, all different experiments described above prove that attribution training gives a lot of new opportunities to motivate students better and achieve improved learning results. The research described below will concentrate on the role of attribution retraining in foreign language learning.

2 RESEARCH ON THE ROLE OF ATTRIBUTION RETRAINING IN LEARNING EFL

2.1 GROUP DESCRIPTION AND RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

The small-scale research to be described in this part intended to examine the influence of a special kind of learner treatment (attribution retraining) on

changing their explanatory style, particularly for failures. The whole procedure aimed at learners' feeling more in control over their learning process and in consequence at increasing their motivation. The researchers (Rałowska, 2003) modelled their retraining process on the one suggested in detail by Seligman (1990), which will be presented in the next part below. Rałowska's (ibid.) research report was prepared as part of the requirement for obtaining Master's Degree in TESOL at the University of Wrocław. The research was planned and analysed under the supervision of the author of this paper.

The study was carried out in a lower secondary school in Wrocław, Poland. The research method applied could be described as quasi-experimental because the requirement of random group assignment could not be observed. The research group consisted of 36 students altogether: 20 in the quasi-experimental group and 16 in the control group. The students were 15 years old. Both groups had three lessons of English per week, and learners were at the same level of language competence, as was estimated by their English teacher. The experimental group received attribution retraining; in the control group no change in classroom instruction was introduced. Consequently, the independent variable of the research was the presence or absence of attribution retraining, whereas there were two dependent variables. The first one was the amount of optimism in learners' attribution styles measured by the test adapted from Seligman's Attribution Style Questionnaire, translated into Polish (the questionnaire and the scoring grid are included in the Appendix). The second dependent variable was the foreign language achievement, measured by classroom achievement tests, prepared by the researchers. The tests were divided into five major parts checking the students' progress in English vocabulary, grammar, writing, reading and listening. There were, in fact, two such tests: one was given to the students before the treatment and another – after the treatment. Each time the contents of the test corresponded to the language material covered in the lessons and the students had 90 minutes to complete the test.

The Attribution Style Questionnaire consists of 48 questions measuring 6 different dimensions:

Stability of failure – SF
Stability of success – SS
Range of failure – RF
Range of success – RS
Personalization of failure – PF
Personalization of success – PS

There are 8 questions referring to each dimension and the dimensions are treated separately for successes and failures.

Scoring is relatively simple. For a more stable explanation, either for a success or for failure, a student receives one point; for a more unstable explanation – no point is gained. General score is obtained by subtracting the total number of points for negative events from the total number of points for positive events. The

possible range of scores is from –24 to +24. The interpretation of the scores looks as follows:

-24 – 0 points – deep pessimism

1-2 points – moderate pessimism

3-5 points – balanced score

6-8 points – moderate optimism

8 and more points – great optimism.

Each dimension can be analysed separately for the purpose of potential retraining. It took about 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The second distribution of the questionnaire took place after the training of the experimental group was completed, i.e. after 2.5 months.

2.2 ATTRIBUTION RETRAINING PROCEDURES IN THE EXPERIMENTAL GROUP

Seligman (1990) suggests that in order to make people responsible for what they do and to increase their feeling of control, first of all we need to make sure that they consider their failures as temporary, and that no matter what the causes of unsuccessful events are, they can be changed. Therefore, the focus of this research was basically on changing the attributions of failures from stable to unstable. Only then could we proceed to personalization of successes and failures and, finally, to changing their range from universal to limited or from limited to universal. The whole range of procedures, suggested by Seligman, is presented in the table below.

Table 1 **Seligman's procedures of attribution retraining (1990)**

Attribution style	Required change: from pessimistic to optimistic	Attribution training procedures
Stability of failure (SF)	From stable to unstable: 'This time I got a bad mark' instead of 'I usually get bad marks'	Getting the learner to reflect on his failures, to find unstable causes of such failures (lack of effort), finding ways to prevent or minimize such failures in the future.
Stability of success (SS)	From unstable to stable: 'I succeeded because I'm talented' instead of 'I succeeded because I was lucky'	Discovering the learners' talents and cognitive strengths and thus increasing their self-confidence and belief in the contribution of his/her own abilities to the success in learning.
Personalisation of failure (PF)	From internal to external: 'This exercise is too difficult' instead of 'I'm not good enough'	Pointing out to students the difficulty and complexity of some aspects of the language learning material and tasks instead of emphasizing the lack of learners' abilities.

Attribution style	Required change: from pessimistic to optimistic	Attribution training procedures
Personalisation of success (PS)	From external to internal: 'I did this exercise well' instead of 'This exercise was easy'	Emphasizing the contribution of the students' effort as well as abilities into each, even the smallest success; getting students to keep a record of their successes, getting them to set realistic goals in learning English.
Range of failure (RF)	From universal to limited: 'This grammar problem is difficult' instead of 'English is difficult'	Requesting learners to list the most difficult aspects of learning English and getting them to look for possible ways of making them easier and more understandable; making the learning process more pleasant.
Range of success (RS)	From limited to more universal: 'I'm good at English' instead of 'I'm good at tests'	Emphasizing that any skill the learners have is a part of their general knowledge of English; fostering in the learners a holistic perception of the learning process.

To follow the suggested procedures, the first retraining technique used in the research was asking the students to write a special kind of diary. The diary was divided into several parts, which corresponded to the attribution dimensions that were meant to be changed. This is the outline of the diary:

Part one: Successes

List of my successes in learning English. What was my personal attribution to these successes.

Part two: Talents

List of my talents. How do they help me to learn English?

Part three: Failures

List of my failures. What was the cause of the failure (emphasis on lack of effort)? What could be done to avoid such failures (emphasis on effort)?

Part four: Goals

List of realistic personal goals. Realization plan: time way, effort, strategies. Report on the realization of goals.

Part five: Difficulties

List of difficult things to learn in English. What can I do to make these things easier, what strategies can I use?

Part six: Easy things

List of pleasant and easy things to learn in English. What makes them easy (emphasis on talents and effort)?

The diary was supposed to direct the students' thinking in a specific way. Filling in each part regularly for 2 months was expected to result in a desired change in different attribution dimensions of the learners' style.

Together with the diary, a few complementary techniques were used. One of them was writing short notes on the students' tests and essays, emphasizing the role of efforts in improving scores. Another technique consisted in writing short notes to the students at the end of each piece of work, however tiny it was. In the notes, the researchers commented on the students' successes and failures in the task and at the same time suggested the attribution of that event. It was always important to attribute the learners' successes to hard work and high abilities, and failures – to the lack of effort or other changeable factors. It was essential to comment on the students' former successes, even if that time they failed, to emphasize their potential abilities, which they could use to a better effect with a little more effort and good will. After 2.5 months of such training, the Attribution Style Questionnaire (ASQ) was given to the students again and they wrote the second achievement test.

3 PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

After 25 sessions of attribution retraining, positive changes in the learners' attribution style were observed in the experimental group. Generally, the students changed their attitude into more optimistic. In the experimental group, the mean value for the ASQ for success total was 12.15 before and 18.35 after the training. It means that the optimistic attribution increased significantly by 6.2 points. In the control group, the total increase for success was only 0.43. Similarly, the mean value for failure total in the experimental group decreased by 2.55 points, whereas in the control group the decrease equaled 0.53. The percentage of optimists and pessimists in the experimental group before and after the training had changed significantly as well. The percentage of optimists had increased from 49% before the training to 95% after the training. The difference was enormous. The percentage of pessimists had decreased by 25%. The students with the balanced score who constituted 30% of the group changed into optimists after the training. In the control group changes from pessimists to optimists were practically insignificant, about 6% in favour of optimists.

On the basis of the observed results of the English achievement pre-test and post-test in both groups, it can be clearly seen that there has been a remarkable increase in the test scores in the experimental group. This can be better illustrated in a table.

Table 2 **Students' language test scores**

Group	Mean pre-test	Mean post-test	Difference	SD pre-test	SD post-test	Difference
Experimental	95.9	131.22	35.32	20.61	14.43	6.18
Control	131.81	133.03	1.22	27.72	34.02	6.03

The total number of points a student could get on the test was 150. It can be noticed that the control group did significantly better on the pre-test than the experimental group. However, the increase in test scores is practically insignificant – their progress was slower. As their standard deviation shows, in two months time the control group had become even less homogeneous than 2.5 months before. Subsequently, it could have been possible to count the pre-test in order to compare the means of the control and experimental group. This, however, was not really necessary as the difference on the post-test was visibly too small to be of any statistical significance. What was essential was the enormous progress of the experimental group who was much weaker on the pre-test than the control one. The score of the experimental group increased by more than 35 points, and they became more homogeneous as their level of standard deviation decreased considerably.

CONCLUSIONS

The question remains whether the results of the experimental group will show the same significant gains several months after the treatment or perhaps the effect is only temporary. I presume that the training would have to be repeated over a longer period of time as people tend to fall back on their formerly established schemata of attitudes and behaviours.

The study presented in this paper proves that almost anyone can profit, at least temporarily, from attribution training. Students with some potential who do not use their talents fully because of certain psychological barriers can find hope in the training programme and make more progress in learning a foreign language.

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APPENDIX

The Attribution Style Questionnaire and scoring grid (based on Seligman, 1990)

Circle only one statement, A or B, as your comment to the described situation.

1. You received a very good grade from the English grammar test.
   A I am good at English.
   B I am good at grammar.

2. Your teacher gives you very little time to write a very difficult essay but you succeed nevertheless.
   A I am a good student.
   B I am good at English.

3. You have completed a group task unsuccessfully.
   A I can't work very well with these people.
   B I can't work very well in a group.

4. You have problems with correct English pronunciation.
   A I don't know pronunciation rules very well.
   B I don't know English very well.

5. You pass an important test.
   A I was well prepared for that test.
   B I am always well prepared for tests.

6. You succeed in an English oral exam.
   A I always succeed in these exams.
   B I was very confident during that exam.

7. You don't understand a grammar problem your teacher explains to the class.
   A I wasn't paying enough attention
   B I have problems with understanding English grammar.

8. You received a weak grade on the test.
   A My teacher always gives difficult tests.
   B That test was difficult.

9. You did your part of the group task best.
   A Other group members are not that good at English.
   B I am good at doing such types of tasks.

10. Your grades in English are very good.
    A I have a talent for languages.
    B English is a simple language to learn.

11. You get a bad mark in English.
    A I am stupid.
    B The teacher is unfair.

12. Some of my colleagues say that they don't like me.
    A My colleagues are not always nice to me.
    B I am not always nice to my colleagues.

13. You manage to get a better semester grade.
    A I devoted a lot of time and effort to achieve that.
    B I always try to do my best.

14. You win a competition in English.
    A Sometimes I do my best.
    B Sometimes I do my best to win.

15. The teacher shouts at you.
    A He shouted at the first person he had seen.
    B That teacher shouted at many students today.

16. You don't understand a recorded text in English.
    A I am not good at listening.
    B I am not good at English.

17. You have good relations with your English teacher.
    A It's easy to reach an agreement with me.
    B Sometimes people can reach an agreement with me.

18. Your grade in English is the best in your class at the end of the year.
    A I am a talented student.
    B I worked very hard.

19. You give a wrong answer to the teacher's question.
    A I get upset when I am to answer a question.
    B I was quite upset that day.

20. Your grades in English are weak.
    A Recently I've had problems with learning English.
    B I have problems with learning English.

21. The teacher compliments you on your written work.
    A I managed to write a good piece of work.
    B The teacher liked my work.

22. You were exceptionally praised by the teacher.
    A I managed to solve the problem nobody else could.
    B We are frequently praised by the teacher.

23. Your results in English have become worse recently.
    A The material covered recently was very difficult.
    B There has been something wrong with my English recently.

24. You can't remember long lists of English words.
    A The teacher did not teach me appropriate strategies.
    B A have weak memory.

25. You win the main prize in an English competition.
    A I am talented.
    B I have good language aptitude.

26. The teacher introduces a song of your favourite singer in the lesson.
    A There are some things the teacher does to make the lessons more pleasant.
    B The teacher likes to make our lessons more pleasant.

27. You are trying to convince your friend to have a conversation with you during
    the English lesson but he doesn't want to.
    A That day he just didn't want to do anything.
    B That day he just didn't want to talk in English.

28. Your teacher says that you are naughty.
    A The teacher doesn't like our group.
    B The teacher doesn't like students.

29. All your friends get a bad grade in English. You don't.
    A I was prepared for the lesson that day.
    B I am always prepared for the lesson.

30. The teacher praises your good behaviour.
    A I was a well-behaved student that day.
    B I almost always behave well.

31. You copied a text wrongly from the blackboard and then you made a mistake
    at the test.
    A I am careless.
    B I've been a bit careless recently.

32. The bus was late and you were late for school.
    A The buses have often been late recently.
    B Buses are always late.

33. You made friends with a colleague from your group.
    A I am nice.
    B I meet nice people.

34. You did very well at an English competition.
    A The competition was easy.
    B I am good at English.

35. You make a presentation at the English lesson but nobody listens to you.
    A I am a terrible bore.
    B They never listen when I speak.

36. Your parents are not happy about your progress in English.
    A My parents are frequently dissatisfied.
    B I haven't been studying hard recently.

37. I went on a school trip to England with my class and had a good time.
    A Everything was just perfect.
    B The weather was beautiful.

38. There was a pleasant atmosphere at the English lesson.
    A The teacher was friendly that day.
    B Both the teacher and the class were friendly towards each other.

39. You resign from the English club meetings because you can't cooperate with people there.
    A I find it difficult to communicate with people.
    B I find it difficult to communicate with people from that club.

40. The teacher gives you a bad mark which, in your opinion, you do not deserve.
    A This teacher is unfair.
    B All teachers are unfair.

41. You prepare a humorous role-play in English together and your friends are having a good time in your company.
    A I am naturally cheerful.
    B Sometimes I am cheerful.

42. Your teacher tells you that you look well.
    A The teacher just wanted to pay somebody a compliment that day.
    B This teacher usually pays compliments to students.

43. Your teacher tells you that you are naughty.
    A The teacher doesn't like us.
    B The teacher has a bad day.

44. Due to your recklessness your group loses a competition in English.
    A I didn't work hard enough that day.
    B I hardly ever work hard enough.

45. I am doing very well in English today.
    A I am trying hard today.
    B It's my lucky day.

46. Your teacher expresses his satisfaction with your progress in English.
    A The teacher likes me.
    B I am a good student.

47. You are telling a joke in English but nobody is laughing.
    A I can't really tell jokes.
    B This joke is so old that it doesn't make anybody laugh.

48. You brought a poster for the English lesson but the teacher refuses to accept it.
    A I didn't prepare this poster carefully.
    B Many students have brought their posters recently and the teacher doesn't want to take any more.

Table 3 **The ASQ scoring grid**

No	Answer	RS	RF	SS	SF	PS	PF
1.	A	1					
	B	0					
2.	A	1					
	B	0					
3.	A		0				
	B		1				
4.	A		0				
	B		1				
5.	A			0			
	B			1			
6.	A			1			
	B			0			
7.	A				0		
	B				1		
8.	A				1		
	B				0		
9.	A					0	
	B					1	
10.	A					1	
	B					0	
11.	A						1
	B						0
12.	A						0
	B						1
13.	A	0					
	B	1					
14.	A	1					
	B	0					
15.	A		0				
	B		1				
16.	A		0				
	B		1				
17.	A			1			
	B			0			
18.	A			1			
	B			0			
19.	A				1		
	B				0		
20.	A				0		
	B				1		
21.	A					1	
	B					0	
22.	A					1	
	B					0	
23.	A						0
	B						1
24.	A						0
	B						1
25.	A	1					
	B	0					
26.	A	0					
	B	1					
27.	A		1				
	B		0				
28.	A		0				
	B		1				
29.	A			0			
	B			1			
30.	A			0			
	B			1			
31.	A				1		
	B				0		
32.	A				0		
	B				1		
33.	A					1	
	B					0	
34.	A					0	
	B					1	
35.	A						1
	B						0
36.	A						0
	B						1
37.	A	1					
	B	0					
38.	A	0					
	B	1					
39.	A		1				
	B		0				
40.	A		0				
	B		1				
41.	A			1			
	B			0			
42.	A			0			
	B			1			
43.	A				1		
	B				0		
44.	A				0		
	B				1		
45.	A					1	
	B					0	
46.	A					0	
	B					1	
47.	A						1
	B						0
48.	A						1
	B						0

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