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Understanding Success and Failure at Tests Via Students' Causal Attributions

A case study of Algerian students at the English Department

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the substance of this dissertation is entirely the result of my investigation and that due reference or acknowledgement is made, whenever necessary, to the work of other researchers.

To my mother

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Abstract

Research on causal attributions (Weiner, 1974, 1992; Covington, 1992; Graham, 1991, 1994) has shown that students' perceptions of the causes of their successes and failures will affect their expectations, and thereby their future achievement behaviour.

The present study aims to gain insights into how students in the English Department at the University of Algiers interpret their perceived successes and failures at tests. Of special interest were differences in attributions between "successful" and "less successful" students.

A total of eighty-one students participated in this study at the beginning of their third year. Data were collected by means of an open questionnaire, a rating scale and a group interview. The results revealed that students attribute their perceived successes mostly to effort and interest (internal factors). On the other hand, failure was explained by teacher's severity in marking and test difficulty (external factors). This is a classic example of the "ego-serving bias" (Miller and Ross, 1975), according to which individuals are predicted to respond with more internality to success as compared to failure in order to protect their self-esteem. The results also showed that statistically significant differences were found between "successful" and "less successful" students in their causal attributions for failure. "Less successful" students seem to have an external locus of control when accounting for their failures, which suggests an apparent lack of autonomy. Another noteworthy finding is that "successful" students were found to manifest a high degree of achievement motivation, reflected in their high attribution of success to effort.

The findings of this study suggest that students should learn to take responsibility for their achievement outcomes. Moreover, "less successful" students should be taught to attach more value to effort as a cause of academic success.

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Introduction

The high rate of failing students in the English Department at the University of Algiers is now largely acknowledged. One has to only read the statistics produced by the department every year to see how alarming the problem is. Lecturers tend to explain poor academic progress in terms of various factors among which students' low academic motivation. Our educational system being highly test-oriented, students' motivation to achieve is necessarily related to their test scores. Evidence now exists to show that it is not so much the students' level of achievement per se that brings about motivation as the causes to which students attribute their successes and failures at tests (Covington, 1992; Graham, 1991, 1994; Weiner, 1974, 1992). Several studies (e.g., Covington and Omelich, 1979 cited in Covington, 1992) have shown that teachers typically attribute success to high effort and failure to lack of effort on the students' part. However, it is not always the case that students fail because they do not try hard enough. Although effort is usually necessary to achieve academic success, the latter does not depend only on effort.

Research on causal explanations led to the emergence of a set of theories called "Attribution Theories" (see chapter two). These are concerned with how people's interpretations of their experiences can affect their expectations and thereby their subsequent behaviour. The perceived causes of behaviour are considered by attribution theorists to be more powerful than the actual causes.

According to Weiner (op. cit.), individuals tend to draw upon four causal attributions for their successes and failures in achievement situations, namely, ability, effort, task difficulty and luck. These were classified along three causal dimensions : locus (internal vs. external causes), stability (stable vs. unstable causes), and controllability (controllable vs. uncontrollable causes). The above dimensions have important consequences. They are, as a matter of fact, related to students' cognitive reactions (such as their expectations regarding future outcomes), to their affective reactions (such as self-esteem changes) and to their behavioural reactions (such as achievement-related behaviour).

In short, attribution research helps us to understand how observable behaviour is linked to unobservable causes. To uncover these causes, it seems logical to go for accounts from the students themselves.

From informal discussions I had with many students in the English Department (University of Algiers) over the past six years, it seems that many of those who fail tests tend to hold external forces responsible for their low grades. Statements such as "I have put everything but the teacher gave me a bad mark", "the test was too long, we should have had more time", "the teacher is too severe", "the teacher does not like me", "the exam questions have nothing to do with the lectures", "I cannot figure out what this teacher wants", "there is no use in attending this teacher's classes anymore" are frequent complaints. We now know from research (Rotter, 1954,1971 cited in Lefcourt, 1982) that students with a high sense of personal control are more likely to succeed than those who

feel controlled by external forces. The simple reason is that the former believe that they can influence their own learning. By contrast, the latter do not even see the point in trying to succeed since their learning outcomes do not depend on them. Thinking so, they fail in advance.

Clearly, students' causal attributions for doing well or poorly at tests are worth looking at, for they act as mediators of future achievement behaviour. Approaching students would help us to "explain achievement-related outcomes beyond the effect of student abilities and environmental factors" (Schunk and Meece 1992: ×i).

Following Weiner's attribution model of achievement motivation, this study intends to show that students use a variety of causes to explain their success or failure at tests. Of special interest in this study are differences in causal attributions between "successful" and "less successful" students. It is hoped that the findings will provide ideas as to how teachers can use Attribution Theory to increase students' achievement motivation. The results of this study are also expected to help rethinking the tendency for teachers to overemphasize the role of effort in determining failure.

Causal attributions are one of the cornerstones of contemporary social psychology. The results assessed from the multitude of studies are impressive and particularly influential. Yet attribution research specific to FL learning has been neglected. Few studies only have investigated students' attributions for success and failure in learning a foreign language (McQuillan, 2000; Tse, 2000;

Williams and Burden, 1999- all cited in Williams et al., op. cit.-Williams, Burden and Al-Baharna, 2001) despite increasing interest in the learners' contributions to the language learning process (Breen, 2001). This is perhaps why Williams, Burden, Poulet and Maun (2004) claim that:

> the door is now open for the development of further studies into attributions for success and failure in language learning in order to build up a more coherent picture of this area in relation to learning foreign languages.
>
> (Williams, Burden, Poulet and Maun op. cit.: 28)

The present study therefore aims to extend our understanding of students' interpretations of their achievement outcomes in the area of FL learning. It attempts to answer the following questions:

1 How do 3rd year students in the English Department perceive their scores on tests?

2 To what causes do they attribute their success or failure at tests?

3 How do "successful" and "less successful" students differ in their causal attributions?

While most attribution studies involved participants in hypothetical achievement situations (Frieze and Weiner, 1971; Weiner and Kukla, 1970; Weiner, 1992), this study seeks to gain insights into how students react to an authentic achievement event of high importance to them – a mid-term test. And

in applying Weiner's model, many attribution researchers used a pre-determined set of causes to assess their subjects' attributions. By contrast, the attribution rating scale constructed for the current study was based on 868 free-form attribution statements made by the 81 students who participated in this research.

This research project is divided into four chapters:

The first chapter reviews the literature on causal attributions. It explores central assumptions about how attributions are made and their impact on the way people think, feel and behave.

Chapter two describes the research design and procedure, and provides the rationale for the research tools used to carry out this study.

Chapter three reports and discusses the findings of the study.

Chapter four draws conclusions and offers suggestions on how teachers can use Attribution Theory to motivate their students in a more effective way.

Chapter one
Attribution research in achievement settings

According to Atkinson (1957, 1964, 1987 cited in Covington 1992), people differ markedly in their need to achieve successfully. His theory of Achievement Motivation states that human achievement is the outcome of an emotional conflict between striving for success and avoidance of failure. This is the reason why some individuals are success-oriented and approach learning with enthusiasm, while others are constantly dominated by the fear of failure and therefore approach learning tasks with reluctance.

Atkinson postulated that the driving force behind high achievement was emotional anticipation: pride versus shame. However, this assumption has been challenged by Weiner (1971 cited in Covington 1992), who proposed a reinterpretation of Atkinson's Achievement Motivation. Weiner argued that cognitive processes rather than emotional conflict were at the basis of the quality of achievement. And more specifically, it is how people perceive the causes of their past successes and failures that determines their achievement behaviour.

In accordance with Weiner's view, we explore in this chapter the central principles of Attribution Theory and how they relate to achievement behaviour.

We also review attribution research specific to FL contexts. Finally, limitations to the methods used in attribution research are discussed.

1.1 Causal search

Human beings look at the world through a subjective lens (Dornyei, 2001). This vision is the outcome of their beliefs about themselves and perceptions of the surrounding environment. Consequently, this subjective nature of the human's perspective results in an "inner" or "phenomenological world" of the individual's own making. And this is the reason why people react to the same situation in different ways (Carver and Gaines, 1987 cited in Covington, 1992; Graham, 1994). Puchta (1999) supports this view, for he points out that :

> Humans interact with the world around them on the basis of their own inner map, which they make of the world. It is because of these individual maps that people react so differently in situations that are the same.
>
> (Puchta 1999:247)

Therefore, in the framework of this study, making inferences as to why students passed or failed their tests would be of little or no use. It is the students' perceived causes of success and failure that will influence future achievement behaviour.

Heider (1958), a social psychologist , was the first to postulate that it was how people perceived events rather than the events in themselves that influenced

behaviour. In other words, individuals will behave in ways which are dictated by their own interpretations of reality. This view is comforted by Covington (1992:50) who argues that : “meaning is a construction of reality, not reality itself, and a variety of constructions are possible”. According to Heider (op. cit.), this process, that is creating meaning in our lives, is guided by the principles of Attribution Theory: people ascribe causes to their actions. And as Covington (op. cit.) pointed out : “there can be little doubt that the way individuals perceive the causes of their actions plays an important role in their lives, whether these perceptions be accurate or distorted” (p.51)

Thus, it is the distinguishing feature of human beings to perceive the causes of events and make causal inferences. For Heider (op. cit.), the ordinary man or woman is a “naïve psychologist” who tries to explain his own and others’ behaviours. According to this researcher, people have an innate need to understand and control their environments. Kelley (1967:193 quoted in Weiner 1992) assumes that humans are motivated to “ attain a cognitive mastery of the causal structure of [the] environment”. In other words, “one wants to know why an event has occurred – to what source, motive, or state it may be ascribed” (Weiner 1992:229). Therefore, people always seek to explain their experiences. And to do so, they attribute events to causes. This process of matching an event with its cause is known as “causal search”, and the explanations that one offers are labelled “causal attributions” (Graham, op. cit.). This researcher argues that

"attributional judgments are phenomenological : they depict the causal world as perceived by the actor" (Graham, op. cit., p.32). In this sense, "perceptions about the causes of behaviour may be independent of the actual causes of behaviour" (Harvey, Ickes and Kidd 1976:54).

But how is a causal search triggered? Attribution theorists (e.g., Kelley, 1972, 1973 cited in Forsterling 2001) assume that individuals carry with them causal schemata, that is, "naïve causal theories" that link causes and effects. Events that are consistent with our causal beliefs (world view), and therefore expected, do not initiate an attributional (causal) search. Conversely, events that are unexpected or schema-inconsistent elicit causal search, for the individual wants to understand what is happening. Weiner (1985b) notes that :

> Attributional search thus can be considered one instance of the more general class of exploratory behaviours that are elicited in the face of uncertainty.
>
> (Weiner 1985b:81 quoted in Forsterling 2001)

According to Meyer et al. (1994 cited in Forsterling, op. cit.), unexpected events lead to surprise and thus to attributional search only in as much as they are discrepant with our schemata. As Forsterling (op. cit.) summarizes :

> Attributions can also be conceived of as cognitive schemata that are only consciously examined when unexpected (schema-discrepant) events happen. Why questions are typically asked when events are unexpected and negative.
>
> (Forsterling op. cit.:17)

In addition to unexpectedness, research by Wong and Weiner (1983 cited in Forsterling, op. cit.) has shown that failure instigates more causal search than success. Following Weiner (1985b):

> Effective coping importantly depends on locating the causes of failure. In this case, attributional search more clearly serves an adaptive and therefore hedonic function.
>
> (Weiner 1985b:81 quoted in Forsterling 2001)

Therefore, people are more likely to get involved in a causal search –to want to know why- following unexpected or negative events. And understanding the causes of events will enable the individual to predict and control their world. As such, "causal search is therefore functional because it may impose order on a sometimes uncertain environment" (Graham 1991:6).

1.2 Attribution Theories

The individual's perceptions of causality have been of great interest to attribution theorists. Attribution Theory is concerned with how ordinary people -the ordinary man or woman in the street – explain surrounding events and the psychological outcomes of these explanations. It has also been referred to as "common-sense psychology". Forsterling (op. cit.: 4) remarks that "attribution theorists are not concerned with the actual causes of behaviour but they focus on the perceived causes of behaviour". Dornyei (op. cit.) explains:

> Because researchers have found that these subjective explanations play an important role when people start planning their future actions, a whole psychological theory has been constructed around attributions, called – not surprisingly – "attribution theory"
>
> (Dornyei op.cit.: 118)

In achievement contexts, "attribution theorists are concerned about what happens when we try to explain our successes or failures to ourselves – when we attribute our performance to causes" (Good and Brophy 1997: 143). According to Weiner, causal explanations for achievement outcomes are important in that "the allocation of responsibility manifestly guides subsequent behaviour" (Weiner 1974: 185). Thus, an individual's evaluation of his prior performance does not depend on the level of achievement per se, but also on how he interprets his achievement (Dornyei, op. cit.). Covington (1992:62) supports this view, for he points out that "Attribution theory teaches us that it is not so much the event of failure, or even its frequency, that disrupts performance as it is the meaning of failure". Therefore, failure may act as a challenge as well as a block depending on how it is interpreted. This is guided by the principles of Attribution Theory : as the individual interprets his failure (or success), he also develops beliefs about himself, which turn into expectations as to future outcomes. These, in turn, are very likely to influence subsequent achievemnt behaviour. This is better illustrated in Martinko's (1995) example:

> An employee who attributes the failure to make a sale to lack of ability will have a lowered expectation of future success and is unlikely to expend effort on sales in the future. On the other hand, if an employee attributes the failure to make a sale to inappropriate presentation, that

> person may change his or her presentation with the expectation that a better presentation will result in success in the future.
>
> (Martinko 1995:8)

Consequently, beliefs are very likely to guide behaviour, and as Heider (1958:5 quoted in Hewstone 1990) put it : "If a person believes that the lines of his palm foretell the future, this belief must be taken into account in explaining certain of his expectations and actions". According to Puchta (1999), "If we believe in something, we act as if it were true regardless of reality" (p.256-7). This researcher expands his view arguing that "beliefs act as very strong filters of reality […] our students' negative and positive beliefs can be of enormous influence on the success of their learning" (1999: 256-7).

Issues regarding people's perceptions and beliefs and how these might guide their future behaviour are at the heart of Attribution Theory. Works by Heider (1958 cited in Weiner 1992), Jones and Davis (1965 cited in Hewstone 1990), Kelley (1967 cited in Weiner and Graham 1999), and Weiner (1974) constitute the four main contributions to Attribution Theory.

1.2.1 Heider's "naïve psychology"

Attribution theory was first introduced by Heider (1958 cited in Weiner 1992). For him, people have an innate need to make sense of the world around them. This will, in turn, determine how they think and behave in the future. His

theory of "naïve psychology" states that the lay person is a "naïve scientist" who tries to explain his own and others' behaviours. Heider assumes that the ordinary person, "the naïve psychologist", makes causal inferences for events on the basis of two types of factors : factors residing within the person (dispositional attributions), and those residing within the environment (situational attributions). Heider (op. cit. quoted in Weiner 1992) stated this distinction as follows :

> In common-sense psychology (as in scientific psychology) the result of an action is felt to depend on two sets of conditions, namely factors within the person and factors within the environment.
>
> (Heider op. cit.: 82 quoted in Weiner 1992)

For Heider (op. cit.), the determination of attribution is based on the following principle : "that condition will be held responsible for an effect that is present when the effect is present and that is absent when the effect is absent" (p.152). And we must observe how the effect varies with different conditions, these being :

1)- The presence or absence of the effect with the presence or absence of the object,

2)- The presence or absence of the effect with different states or classes of objects, and

3)- The presence or absence of the effect with different persons.

Thus, since people act on the basis of their beliefs, we must take the layman's understanding of events very seriously. Heider's original theory was further developed by subsequent research by Kelley (1967), Jones and Davis (1965), and Weiner (1974) among others.

1.2.2 Jones and Davis's "correspondent inference theory"

Jones and Davis (1965 cited in Hewstone 1990) were interested in how a perceiver might infer another person's intentions and personality traits (personal dispositions) from his or her behaviour.

According to them, the first thing an individual does in causal search is to infer whether the cause is deliberate or not. If the behaviour is perceived as deliberate, the individual will look for personal attributes within the person which may be responsible for his behaviour. Linking behaviour with a personal characteristic to which it corresponds is what Jones and Davis termed : "a correspondent inference".

These researchers wanted to construct "a theory which systematically accounts for a perceiver's inferences about what an actor was trying to achieve by a particular behaviour" (Jones and Davis 1965: 222 quoted in Hewstone 1990). For them, the underlying traits are directly reflected in behaviour.

1.2.3 Kelley's "covariation model"

Kelley' (1967 cited in Weiner and Graham 1999) attribution theory is about how people form causal inferences when they have access to multiple instances of similar events. For Kelley, covariation is the foundation of the attribution process. When trying to explain an event, Kelley contends that the individual determines the responsible factor by examining the covariation of the effect and the causal factors over entities, persons and time. In other words, before an event and a factor can be accepted as causally linked, they must covary with one another, otherwise, they cannot be causally matched.

Kelley suggested that the three important factors in evaluating covariation are :

Consistency : whether that person responds in the same way to the same stimulus across time ;

Distinctiveness : whether the person responds in the same way to a different stimulus or his (her) action distinguishes between different stimuli; and

Consensus : whether there is a consensus across individuals in response to the same stimulus, or people vary in response.

Different constellations of positions on the dimensions above lead to different attributions about the causes of behaviour. For instance, an internal (dispositional) attribution is more likely to be made when consistency is high,

distictiveness is low and consensus is low. On the other hand, high consistency, high distinctivenss and low consensus lead to an external (situational)attribution. And it should be noted that other constellations lead to other attributions.

1.2.4 Weiner's "achievement attribution theory"

Weiner's Attribution Theory (1971 cited in Frieze, Francis and Hanusa, 1983, 1974, 1992) focuses on achievement-related situations. His attribution model of achievement motivation postulates that the causes to which we ascribe our successes and failures affect our expectations and thereby our future performance. It outlines the causal linkages between attributions, cognition, affect, expectations, motivation and achievement. Causal attributions are viewed to relate in systematic ways to feelings of pride and shame, expectancies for the future, and future achievement behaviour. Thus, according to this model, a student who attributes failure on a test to low ability, will –driven by shame- give up trying harder in the future. Conversely, poor performance seen as due to bad luck will not generate feelings of shame and may lead to better expectations as to future success. As Weiner (1974) states it :

> causal ascriptions influence both goal expectations and the affective consequences of success and failure. Therefore, it follows that causal ascriptions should influence performance.
>
> (Weiner 1974:37)

Causal attributions are likely to differ across achievement groups who, according to Weiner (1974):

> have disparate perceptions of causality for success and failure. Persons high in achievement needs ascribe success to high ability and high effort, and failure to lack of effort. On the other hand, persons low in achievement needs display no clear attributional preferences for success and ascribe failure to low ability.
>
> (Weiner 1974:39)

Thus, individuals low in achievement needs tend to believe their failure is due to lack of ability. This can have detrimental effect on future performance in that:

> Ability is perceived as stable; in most domains it does not subjectively fluctuate from moment to moment. Thus, there is an expectation of continued failure. This results in the cessation of goal striving.
>
> (Weiner 1974: 39-40)

High and low achievers also differ in the causal value they attach to effort as a success factor. Weiner (op. cit.) states that:

> Concerning intensity of performance, persons high in achievement needs ascribe success to high effort and failure to a lack of effort. Thus, they perceive effort-outcome covariation; that is effort expenditure is believed to be an important determinant of performance. Therefore, they work hard at achievement tasks, since effort is perceived as necessary for success. Conversely, the amount of perceived effort expenditure among persons low in achievement needs is little influenced by success and failure. It appears that these individuals do not perceive effort-outcome covariation and the efficacy of effort. Thus, they display relatively little intensity at achievement-related tasks.
> (Weiner op. cit.: 39)

1.3 Elements of attribution and causal dimensions

Attributions are perceived causes of outcomes. According to Weiner (op. cit.), people tend to tend to attribute their perceived successes and failure to four main elements : **ability, effort, luck and task difficulty**. These are classified along three causal dimensions : **locus of causality, stability, and controllability**, each of which "is uniquely related to a particular set of psychological consequences" (Graham 1991: 8).

Locus of causality : whether the cause in internal or external to the person. Ability and effort are perceived as internal as they reside within the individual whereas luck and task difficulty are perceived as external (environmental). The locus dimension is linked to esteem-related affects such as pride versus shame. Attributing success to internal factors (ability, effort) leads to feelings of pride. On the other hand, failure ascriptions to these same causes generate negative feelings about oneself.

Stability : whether a cause is stable or subject to change over time. Effort and luck are perceived as unstable, for they fluctuate across time and situations. On the other hand, ability and task difficulty are seen as stable, that is, unchanging. This dimension is related to affects that implicate future expectations. Failure attributed to stable causes leads to hopelessness, apathy, or resignation since the situation is not deemed to change in the future.

Controllability : whether a cause is controllable or not by the person. Ability, task difficulty and luck tend to be perceived as uncontrollable. By contrast, effort is judged as controllable in that people are responsible for how much effort they are willing to invest in a task. The controllability dimension is linked to social emotions such as guilt, shame, pity, and anger. Attributing failure to cause within one's control (e.g., effort) gives rise to feelings of guilt. On the other hand, feelings of shame are likely to follow failure ascriptions to uncontrollable factors such as low ability.

Therefore, it is the combination of elements of attribution with causal dimensions that will influence future behaviour. According to Weiner (1992), causal dimensions dictate cognitive, affective and behavioural reactions. If the cause of an outcome is seen as stable, for instance, this implies the likely reoccurrence of that same outcome. On the other hand, if an outcome is ascribed to a cause which is unstable (e.g., luck), this makes its reoccurrence less likely. Williams and Burden (1997) better illustrate this through their example:

> If I believe that I lack the ability to learn a foreign language and I see this as a stable internal factor beyond my control, then I will be unlikely to make much of an effort to improve. However, if I believe that language ability is a form of unstable skill that can be improved by hard work, I shall be more likely to make an effort.
>
> (Williams and Burden 1997:106)

Therefore, causal attributions have underlying properties. And it seems clear

that the dimensional location of a cause is far more important than the causes per se. As Brophy (2004) remarks :

> Causal attributions generated during or after a performance are likely to affect subsequent motivation in that situation and others like it. The effects will depend on the nature of the causes to which the performance is attributed. Causal attributions have been distinguished according to whether they are used to explain perceived success or perceived failure. Furthermore, both success attributions and failure attributions have been classified according to whether the attributed causes are internal or external to the person, controllable or uncontrollable by the person, and stable or unstable across situations.
>
> (Brophy 2004 : 62)

In sum, achievement outcomes generate emotional reactions along with expectations as to future outcomes. Both will mainly depend on the nature of the outcome (success versus failure) as well as on the causes to which it is ascribed (Graham, op. cit.). In this sense, causal attributions have functional consequences: they guide subsequent behaviour (Weiner and Graham 1999). This is simply because “all of the emotions related to causal dimensions have motivational significance” (graham op. cit.: 18).

1.4 Locus of Control

We cannot discuss causal dimensions without emphasizing that of controllability, also called “Locus of Control” (Rotter 1954 cited in Lefcourt 1982). Locus of control refers to how a person perceives the causes of life events. If people believe that they are responsible for what happens to them, they are said to have an internal locus of control. Others, on the other hand, may

feel that life events are totally beyond their control and very often blame fate, luck, people or other external forces for the outcomes of their behaviours. In this case they are said to have an external locus of control. However, these two categories are not always exclusive, for people may shift from an internal orientation to an external one, and vice-versa depending on the situation.

The controllability dimension is particularly relevant to achievement settings. It determines which forces students hold responsible for their successes and failures. This will affect the way they approach learning. Williams and Burden (1997) explain that:

> Those [students] with a high internal locus of control show strong tendencies to seek information and use it appropriately in problem-solving tasks, to be active and assertive and to exhibit a high degree of exploratory behaviour and excitement about learning…Those demonstrating high externality, on the other hand, tend to be relatively passive, compliant, non-exploratory and inattentive.
>
> (Williams and Burden 1997:102)

Consequently, students with a high sense of personal control are more likely to succeed than those who feel controlled by external forces. This is simply because:

> If I believe studying will influence my grade, then I'm more apt to study. But if I believe my grade is the result of uncontrollable factors such as a teacher's compassion, an easy test, or just plain luck, then there is really no point in studying at all.
>
> (Covington 1992:65-66)

1.5 Antecedents to attributions

Many attribution researchers (Weiner 1974; Graham 1991, 1994; Kelley and Michela 1980 cited in Graham 1991) tried to document the causal cues which individuals use to arrive at causal ascriptions for outcomes such as success and failure.

Graham (1991) distinguishes between two types of cues students may use to infer causal attributions : **direct** (straightforward) causal cues and **indirect (**more subtle) ones.

Direct attributional cues

Attribution researchers (Kelley and Michela 1980 cited in Graham 1991; Weiner 1974) have identified a number antecedents cues that an individual uses to form causal attributions, for instance, prior performance history and social norm information. The latter are direct and convey explicit information.

According to Weiner (1974:8), "Ability inferences are determined primarily by past history information…high grades often are accepted as evidence that a person is smart". Social norms are also used to infer ability level in that "if one succeeds at a task that all others fail, then he or she is likely to be perceived as very able"(Weiner 1974:8).

Effort ascriptions are influenced by the same cues suggested for ability. In addition, success following repeated failure (and vice-versa) can be ascribed to change in effort expenditure (Frieze and Weiner 1971 cited in Weiner 1974).

According to Weiner and Kukla (1970 cited in Weiner 1974), informational cues used to infer task difficulty are social norms, objective task characteristics and the rate of people failing or succeeding at the task.

Luck ascriptions depend largely on the degree of perceived control over an outcome. The outcome is ascribed to luck if lack of control and variability in the outcome sequence are identified. On the other hand regular outcome sequence would lead to ability ascriptions. (Weiner 1974).

Indirect attributional cues

Students can also utilize indirect and more subtle cues to make causal ascriptions. Oftentimes, in this case, the source of information is the teacher. According to Graham (1991), some teacher behaviours can indirectly convey low-ability cues. These include communicating pity following failure, offering praise following success at easy tasks, and giving unsolicited offers of help. Lack of effort attributions can be conveyed through the following teacher behaviours : communicating anger following failure, assigning blame following failure (especially at easy tasks), and withholding help.

Therefore, in achievements contexts, individuals combine informational cues that are available to them in order to reach causal judgments.

1.6 Related motivational theories

Attribution Theory is related to other motivational conceptions. The latter are briefly reviewed in this section.

1.6.1 Self-worth Theory

An important assumption of Attribution Theory (Covington 1992) is that people will interpret events in such a way as to maintain a positive self-image. Covington's Self-worth Theory (op. cit.) states that individuals will attribute their perceived successes or failures to factors that will enable them to feel as good as possible about themselves. This theory assumes that "the search for self-acceptance is the highest human priority" (op. cit., p.74).

Reality is that people are viewed to be as worthy as their achievements. This places the individual under constant pressure to achieve highly, which increases with competition. And when failure occurs, self-esteem is threatened.Therefore, in academic settings, students resort to failure-avoiding strategies.

Research by Covington and Omelich (1984b cited in Covington op. cit.) at the college level has shown that a high ability level was the most important contributor to feelings of personal well-being. On the other hand, being a hard

worker led to very little satisfaction. Brown and Weiner (1984 cited in Covington op. cit.) found that students preferred to explain failure as due to low effort rather than to low ability. By contrast, students preferred to attribute their success to high ability rather than hard work. This is the reason why underachievers or failure-threatened students avoid work in order not to test their ability (Covington op. cit.). By doing so, they sabotage their own chances for success. Riggs (1992) takes this issue a step further. She not only addresses the problem of underachievement from an attributional perspective, but she also discusses how self-handicapping strategies (sabotage of one's potential and performance) can be alleviated. She reports on a paper by Jones and Berglas who said that :

> By finding or creating impediments that make good performance less likely, the strategist nicely protects his or her sense of self-competence. If the person does poorly, the source of the failure is externalized in the impediment …If the person does well, then he or she has done well in spite of less than optimum conditions
>
> (Jones and Berglas 1978:201 cited in Riggs 1992)

According to these researchers, self-handicapping strategies include lack of sleep before an important performance, avoidance of lessons and practice, and even drugs and alcohol. However, effort withdrawal was found to be the primary tactic used by underachievers (Jones and Berglas 1978 cited in Riggs 1992). Riggs concludes by asserting that we must address the underlying problem – the

individual's self-concept- rather than the symptom – self-handicapping strategies. She says that:

> A child or adolescent (or adult) needs to know that he or she is accepted and respected for what he or she is, rather than for what he or she could be. This type of environment should lead to the development of a positive self-image, rather than to the establishment of a precarious one that may foster self-defeating behaviour.
>
> (Riggs 1992:264)

1.6.2 Self-efficacy Theory

Self-efficacy beliefs are "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura 1997: 3 quoted in Alderman 2004). Ehrman (1996: 137 quoted in Arnold 1999) defines it as "the degree to which the student thinks he or she has the capacity to cope with the learning challenge".

According to Bandura (1986 cited in Alderman, op. cit.), beliefs of self-efficacy constitute a strong predictor of a student's learning regardless of the skills he or she might possess. The basic premise of this theory is that there is a difference between having the skills to perform a given task and actually using those skills appropriately in various situations.

Thus, self-efficacy beliefs represent an individual's judgment as to his or her effectiveness in reaching the desired goal. These are likely to influence behaviour, effort and persistence in that whether students want to expend effort

on an academic task depends in part on whether or not they believe they are "good enough" at doing the given task. And self-efficacy beliefs are likely to influence the way students make attributions for their achievement outcomes. Students who hold high self-efficacy beliefs about themselves attribute their success to high ability. By contrast, those who hold low self-efficacy beliefs attribute their success to luck or task ease while they blame failure on low ability.

1.6.3 Learned Helplessness

Seligman and Maier (1967 cited in Pierce and Cheney 2004) developed a theory called "Learned Helplessness". This concept refers to a state in which people have learned that they have no control over what happens to them in particular situations. This is usually due to a lack of contingency between past efforts to change one's situation and the outcomes associated with these efforts. In other words, the individual is convinced through past failures that there is no use in attempting to change the negative situation. In such a state, individuals feel that their goals are out of reach no matter how hard they try. Furthermore, they do not even see the use in trying hard. Dweck (1975) argues on the matter:

> the manner in which a person perceives the relationship between his behaviour and the occurrence of certain events, indeed appear to be [an] important determinant(s) of the way in which people react to events.
>
> (Dweck 1975: 684)

Learned helplessness has motivational, cognitive and emotional consequences. It can even lead to the acceptance of the negative situation to the point that the 'helpless' individual remains passive and gives up trying to change it. This is because he does not expect his effort to improve things. Moreover, people in this state are unable to learn that new responses are available and can impact outcomes. The end-effect of a state of "learned helplessness" is low self-esteem, and in extreme cases, depression (Seligman 1975 cited in Peterson, Maier and Seligman 1993).

1.6.4 Self-serving Bias and Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Frieze and Weiner (1971) found that success is more likely to be attributed to internal factors such as ability and effort, than is failure. This finding lends support to the Ego-serving Bias Theory (Miller and Ross 1975), according to which people tend to attribute their successes to internal factors, while blaming failure on external factors. Thus, the ego-serving bias describes a pattern of biased causal inference, which is motivated by the need to protect self-esteem. And although people might be aware of their biased causal inference, they nevertheless offer it to others in order to create a positive impression.

However, the attribution bias is true for most people but those who suffer from low self-esteem or depression. Another line of research (Festinger 1957) has shown that people seek out information that is congruent with their view of themselves. For instance, individuals with high self-esteem seek information

that is consistent with their view of themselves. According to Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, op. cit.), if inconsistency exists between our attitudes and our behaviour, we experience an unpleasant state of arousal called "cognitive dissonance". The latter motivates us to change something, our attitudes or our behaviour, to reduce or eliminate the unpleasant arousal. Reducing the tension helps us achieve consonance, a state of psychological balance. Consequently, individuals who have low self-esteem achieve consonance by blaming their failures on low ability and attributing success to external factors such as luck.

1.7 Attribution retraining

One of the most important pedagogical implications of Attribution Theory is "attribution retraining" (Covington op. cit.). Williams and Burden (1997) argue that :

> [Attribution retraining] consists of changing people's attributions so that instead of viewing failure as due to stable and uncontrollable factors, they begin to see it as controllable and unstable. In other words, they begin to see that they can have control over their learning outcomes.
>
> (Williams and Burden 1997:106)

Therefore, attribution retraining can help alter the meaning of failure among students (Covington op. cit.). Through this approach, students can turn debilitating attributions such as "I can't do that- I'm too stupid" into constructive ones like "I didn't use the appropriate strategies". According to

Covington (1998:75 quoted in Dornyei 2001), “rather than minimising failure, educators should arrange schooling so that falling short of one’s goals will be interpreted in ways that promote the will to learn”.

In chapter four we will see how teachers can use attribution retraining to help their students interpret achievement outcomes in more constructive ways.

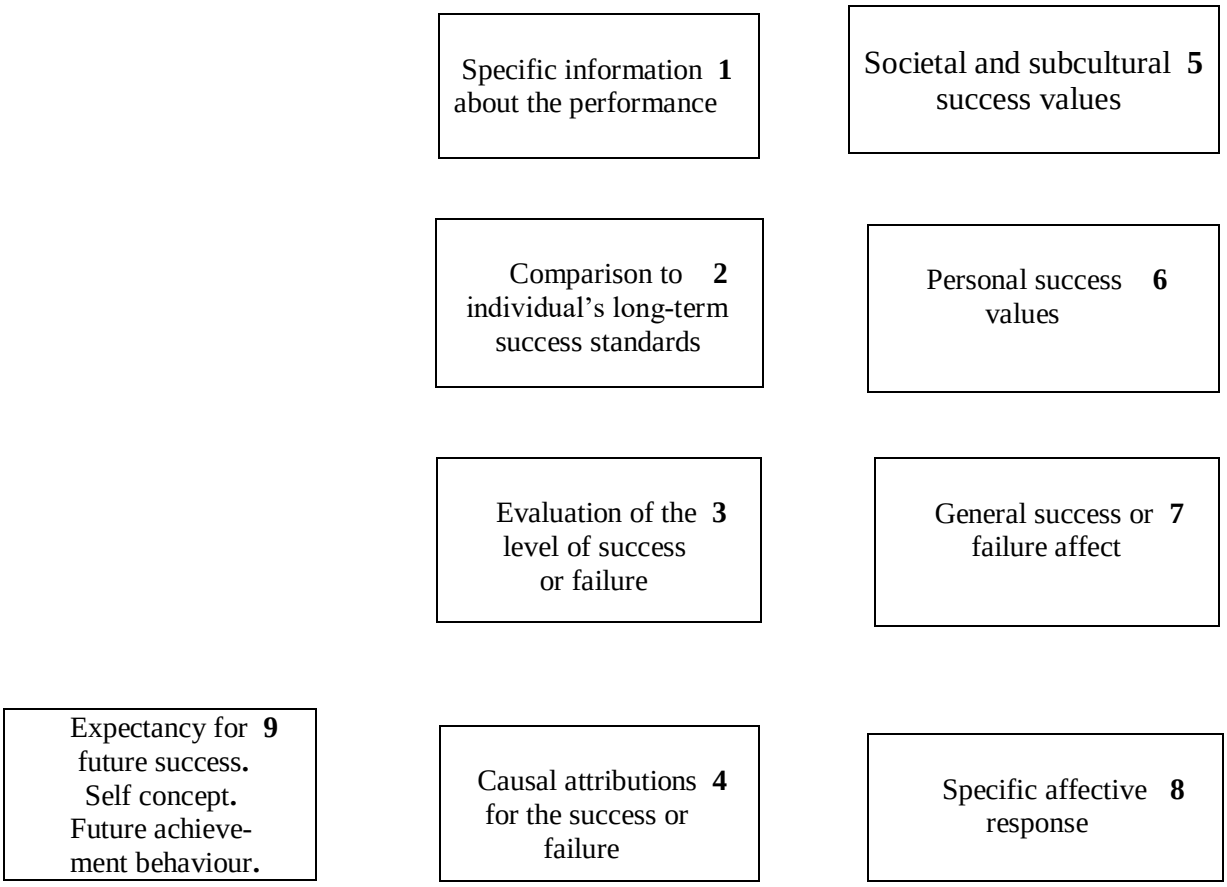
1.8 Putting it all together

In this section we present two attributional models that summarize the attribution process: Frieze, Francis and Hanusa’s (1983) and Graham’s (1991).

Frieze, Francis and Hanusa (1983) proposed an attribution model which describes the attribution process and incorporates success and failure judgements. This model is outlined below:

According to this model, the information in **Box 1** is used to determine the level of success or failure. It includes the objective score (performance level), how much effort was put into the performance, prior performance expectations, and how challenging the task was. These pieces of information are then assessed against the long-term personal success standards of the individual (**Box 2).** The individual may, for instance, compare the objective performance level to his or her previous performances or to absolute standards. This information processing stage results in a subjective evaluation of the performance –success or failure- (**Box 3).** This subjective evaluation generates affective reactions (outcome-dependent emotions) such as happiness or sadness depending on the outcome

(Box 7); it also influences the causal attributions made **(Box 4)**. These two steps then lead to a specific attribution-dependent affective response **(Box 8)**. The latter together with the general affective response **(Box 7)** are moderated by the values of the society **(Box 5)** and the individual's personal values **(Box 6)**. Finally, causal attributions will have an impact on one's expectancies for future success, self-concept and future achievement behaviour. The major underlying feature of this model is that the subjective evaluation of achievement outcomes (success or failure appraisals) precedes the formation of causal attributions.



Short term reactions to achievement event
(Frieze, Francis and Hanusa, 1983: 14)

In her "Review of Attribution Theory in Achievement Contexts", Graham (1991) sums up the motivational sequence that captures the process of causal thinking from antecedents to consequences as follows (A partial representation of this sequence is depicted on p.33):

1. The sequence begins with an achievement outcome (success or failure),
2. This generates immediate affective reactions such as happiness or sadness (outcome-dependent emotions),
3. A causal search is undertaken to determine why the outcome occurred,
4. Antecedent cues are utilized to reach causal attributions (prior performance history, social norm information, teacher feedback),
5. Once the outcome is attributed to a cause, the latter is placed in dimensional space (Locus ×Stability ×Controllability),
6. Each dimension has particular psychological and behavioural consequences.

Graham (1991:25) concludes that "at the very heart of this temporal sequence comprising an attributional model of motivation is the specification of complex interrelationships between thinking, feeling, and acting".

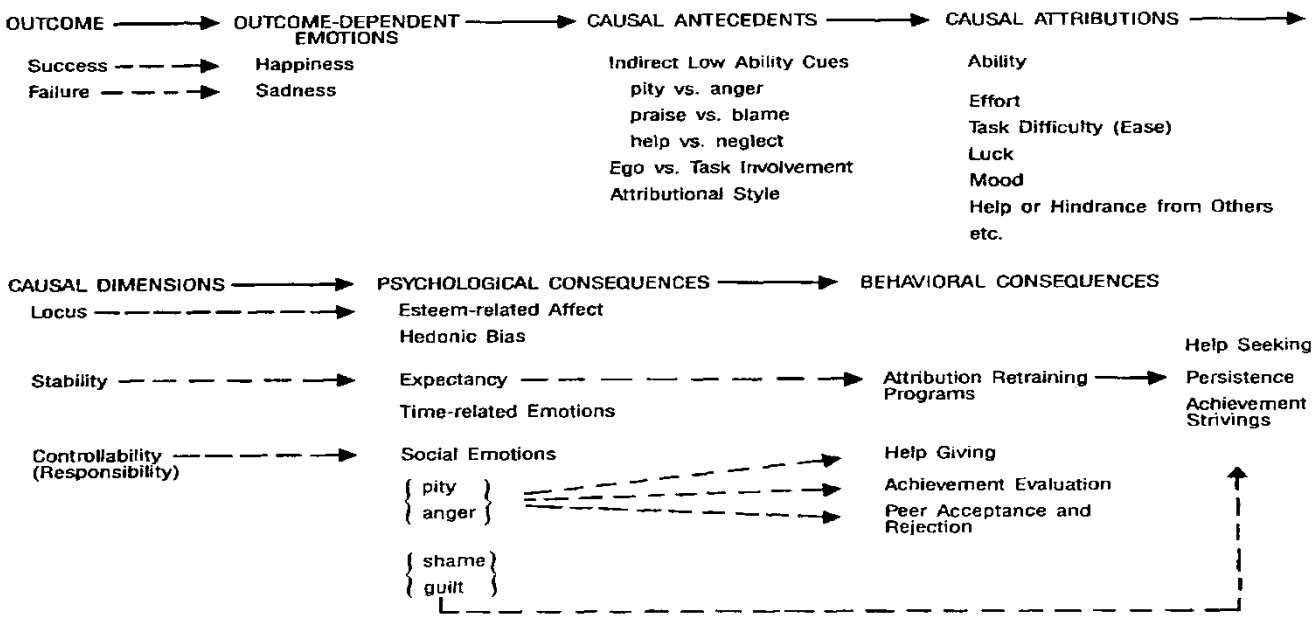


Fig. 1. Partial representation of an attributional model of motivation.

Graham (1994: 24)

1.9 Attribution research in FL contexts

Attribution research specific to FL learning has been neglected. As already stated (p.3), only a limited number of studies have investigated causal attributions for success and failure in learning a foreign language. These will be briefly reviewed in this section.

Williams and Burden (1999) conducted a small-scale qualitative study of learners' attributions for success and failure in learning French. The study also investigated how the learners conceptualize "success". Students aged between 10 and 15 years who were learning French in the South-West of England were interviewed. The results showed that these learners' success appraisals depended

on external factors such as teacher approval and marks. However, many of the attributions mentioned were superficial.

McQuillan's (2000) quantitative study involved 81 students studying a foreign language in the U.S. Attributions for success included the following: motivation, a comfortable pace, a good teacher, ability, time, effort, level and atmosphere.

Concerning failure, it was mostly attributed to lack of time, lack of effort, poor study strategies and poor atmosphere.

Tse (2000) conducted a qualitative study of university students learning a foreign language whilst studying in the US. She found that success was attributed to the teacher, environment, community and motivation. On the other hand, failure was explained by lack of effort, lack of motivation, the teacher and the course.

Williams, Burden and Al-Baharna (2001) carried a small-scale qualitative study into the attributions of 25 secondary school students in Bahrain for their success and failure in learning English. Students were interviewed and the data content analyzed using a Grounded Theory approach. The researchers determined the frequency of occurrence of each causal category. The results revealed that the most cited reasons for success were practice, support from family and teachers, exposure to the language and a positive attitude. On the

other hand, failure was explained by inadequate teaching methods, lack of support from family and teachers, poor comprehension, and a negative attitude.

Williams, Burden, Poulet and Maun (2004) investigated secondary school students' attributions for their success and failure in learning foreign languages. The sample consisted of 285 students –aged between 11 and 16- studying French, German and Spanish in five secondary schools in the UK. These researchers used an open questionnaire, in which students had to indicate their perceived level of success as FL learners and their attributions for success and failure in learning the specific foreign language. Students' responses were analyzed by means of a Grounded Theory approach. The data consisted of over one thousand attributional statements, from which emerged 21 categories for success (effort, strategy, ability, teacher, interest, task, ease, peers, mood, behaviour, personal organization, need/importance, environment, circumstances, independence, teaching materials, time, other people, lack of distractions, rewards and luck) and 16 categories for failure (lack of effort, lack of ability, lack of interest, behaviour, teacher, lack of strategy, task, mood, peer, difficulty, distraction, personal organization, environment, circumstances, teaching materials and time).

The attribution studies reported above show variations in their findings. These reflect cultural and situational differences across research contexts. They may as well be due to differences in the methodologies used.

1.10 Methodology used in attribution research

The relevance of attribution research for educational practice was often criticized, for most studies (e.g. Frieze and Weiner, 1971; Weiner and Kukla 1970; Weiner, 1992, etc) examined students' reactions to hypothetical scenarios, or laboratory tasks. For instance, in Weiner and Kukla's (1970) study, participants were either involved in role-playing situations or given a scenario for which they were asked to explain why they believed a particular academic result occurred and the extent to which the outcome was a result of the person's effort or ability.

Frieze and Weiner (1971) investigated the cue utilization of people when given information about their achievement. And in that study, too, subjects were asked to ascribe an attribution to the success or failure of a hypothetical situation.

Another problem with attribution research lies in the widespread use of rating scales. Thus, researchers overlooked the ways in which individuals spontaneously react to events. Kelley and Michela (1980:490 quoted in Hewstone 1990) argued that "the central irony of attribution research is that while its central concepts concern the causal distinctions made by common people, these have been little investigated".

However, Elig and Frieze (1979 cited in Hewstone 1990) argued that though subjects might find open-ended attribution questionnaires easier and more natural to respond to than close-ended measures, the former are "psychometrically inferior". These researchers conducted a thorough examination of the different methods used to measure causal attributions. They compared the use of open-ended measures (subjects state in their own words the reasons for success or failure), percentage of causality measures (subjects are given a list of potential attributions and asked to indicate how much each cause contributed to their success or failure), and measures of importance of different causes (subjects are given a list of potential attributions and told to rate the importance of each one on a separate scale). Elig and Frieze concluded that the use of importance rating scale was the best method. However, they acknowledged the value of open-ended measures at the pilot stage of research.

Although attribution research contributed to the development of a better understanding of causal processes, most studies failed to capture how their subjects would truly feel and react in a real-life situation. Therefore, more attribution research involving authentic achievement situations and using a more qualitative approach is needed.

The current study was meant to extend our understanding of achievement-related outcomes from the student's perspective. As such, a key assumption in this research is that accounts from the students themselves would reflect more

truthfully how they react to achievement outcomes. To meet this objective, we carried out a case study using a bottom-up approach and adopting a Grounded theory approach. The following chapter describes how the research tools were constructed as well as the procedure followed to carry out this study.

Chapter two
Research Design and Procedure

The present study seeks to understand success and failure at tests from the student's perspective. Toward this aim, the objectives of the study are:

1. To investigate students' perceptions of their scores on tests.
2. To determine students' causal attributions for success and failure at tests.
3. To identify differences in attributions between "successful" and "less successful" students.

In order to meet the objectives of the study, an exploratory approach with a Grounded Theory orientation seems more appropriate. Since we are dealing with students' perceptions, accounts from the students themselves would reflect more truthfully how they interpret their achievement outcomes.

Data were collected by means of an open questionnaire, a rating scale and a group interview. This chapter presents a description of the subjects, research tools and data analysis procedure. It also provides a rationale for the approach used to carry out this study.

2.1 Data collection

2.1.1 Subjects of the study

Eighty-one students from three intact (naturally occurring) 3rd year groups in the English Department at the University of Algiers participated in this study.

Because of the large data base needed for a Grounded Theory Approach (see section 2.2), the researcher could not work on the whole 3rd year population (six groups).

This sample includes 65 females and 16 males, aged between 19 and 24 for the majority. End-of-year academic scores for all students were used as a measure of academic performance in this study, and were reported by the subjects themselves. The general score is the average of scores obtained in Test 1 and Test 2 (two mid-term tests taken in January and May, respectively). A ten out of twenty is a pass mark. Students are given the opportunity to catch up with their failing grades (below ten) in make-up tests (June and September make-up test sessions). Thereafter, if they fail to obtain a general score of ten, then they must repeat the year for the modules where they failed (Refer to Appendix D for students' general scores).

The subjects of this study enrolled for a four year's programme leading to a Licence in English (Prior to which they had learnt English in middle and secondary school). Instruction is mostly content-based, that is, English is used as a medium for studying many modules (literature, civilization, linguistics, didactics and psycho-pedagogy) depending on the level (1st, 2nd, 3rd or 4th year). In addition, language skills (writing, reading, oral expression, listening), grammar and phonetics are taught to enhance the students' command of the English language. Teachers are provided with syllabus guidelines. However, there is no imposition regarding the teaching methodology to be used (Refer to

Appendix F for the second year curriculum). Assessment is done through examinations at the end of each semester. They are curriculum-based and consist in essay-writing most of the time from the second year on. Students are evaluated on both content and form.

From informal discussions I had with many students in the English Department (as a former student in this same setting), it seems that content-based modules (civilization, literature and linguistics in which evaluation is on both content and form) are the most challenging for students. Therefore, these were the ones targeted in this study. Content-based modules are taught from the 2nd year on (with linguistics already introduced in the 1st year), this is the reason why the study sample consists of 3rd year students at the beginning of the academic year. As shown by attribution research (See chapter two), students' initial beliefs are very likely to shape their whole academic path. And for the sake of consistency, questionnaires from students repeating the third year were not included in the data sample.

The data collection phase started at the beginning of the academic year 2007/2008. This allowed for a distinction between "successful" and "less successful" students (for one of the purposes of the current study) as all of them had received their general scores. The achievement event studied in this research is Test 2 (May 2007), the latter being the most recent test that all students took ("successful" and "less successful" students).

2.1.2 Research tools

To answer the research questions, data were collected by means of an open questionnaire, a rating scale and a group interview.

2.1.2.1 The open attribution questionnaire

An open attribution questionnaire (Appendix A) was constructed to determine students' perceptions of their scores and elicit their causal attributions for success and failure.

The first section of the questionnaire draws up the student's profile. Subjects are asked to indicate their age, gender, general score and whether they passed in May, June or September.

The second section of the questionnaire deals with students' perceptions of their scores and how they account for these. It consists of a table with three columns to fill in. Students are asked to write alongside each module the score obtained on Test 2 (May 2007), whether it is a success or a failure (according to them), and to give two main reasons for their score.

It must be reiterated that this study investigates students' causal attributions for their PERCEIVED successes and failures. As already seen in chapter one, success and failure do not exist as such. Being subjective perceptions, they are likely to vary among students, but also within the same student across situations. Thus, this open attribution questionnaire was constructed in line with the

attribution model proposed by Frieze, Francis and Hanusa (op. cit.), which describes the attribution process and incorporates success and failure judgements (See section 1.8). This questionnaire takes into account the students' subjective appraisal of their scores on tests. It also follows the natural sequence of the causal thinking process (also outlined in Graham op. cit). That is, given an achievement outcome (**column 1 of the questionnaire)**, the student makes a subjective appraisal of his/her performance –success or failure- (**column 2 of the questionnaire)** depending on many factors (prior performance history, social norm information, teacher feedback, etc). Then, a causal search is undertaken to account for (make sense of) the occurrence of the outcome (**column 3 of the questionnaire)**.

The choice of an open-ended statement "You obtained this mark because : (Give 2 main reasons)" was meant to allow causal attributions to emerge from the students themselves, based on their own reactions to their test scores. Close-ended items would not only influence students' responses, but also restrict their choice to a limited range of attributions, thus failing to provide a genuine picture of the situation. In this sense, accounts from the students would reflect more truthfully how they perceive/explain their achievement outcomes, and understanding their viewpoints is an end in itself.

The open attribution questionnaire was administered to students (n = 81) in class-time (late November 2007) by their teacher (the researcher was present). Its completion took thirty minutes for the majority of students. The teacher

reminded the students that she would not read their responses and that these were for a researcher in the English Department.

The open questionnaire yielded a wealth of 868 attribution statements (not all the students gave two reasons for each score, and many of the statements were just comments on the scores obtained, thus bringing the number of actual attribution statements to 868). The data were subjected to a content analysis, and eight salient attributional categories were induced (See chapter three). In order to determine the most dominant causal attributions for success and failure (the students' general causal tendencies), and identify differential attributional patterns between "successful" and "less successful" students, these attributional categories were used in the design of an attribution rating scale.

2.1.2.2 The attribution rating scale

On the basis of the findings from the open questionnaire, an attribution rating scale (Appendix B) was designed. It was meant to measure students' causal attributions for success and failure and determine the most dominant ones. A further objective was to identify differences in attributions between "successful" and "less successful" students.

This attribution rating scale consists of two sub-scales : one for success and one for failure. Both include eight items, each of which reflects an attributional category. Students are asked to rate, on a scale of 0 to 5 (with 0 = untrue and

5 = absolutely true), the degree to which each attribution item applies to them. The development of attribution items on the basis of students' free-form entries resulted in an attribution rating scale that is more in tune with the student's perspective. Success and failure were operationalized as "obtaining good marks" and "obtaining bad marks", respectively. Students rated attribution items on the basis of how true they believed each to account for their perceived successes and failures at Test 2. The attributional categories and corresponding items are presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

Attributional category	*Attribution items for success*
1. Effort	I worked hard for the test
2. Ability	I am good at the module
3. Test difficulty	The test was easy
4. Interest	I loved the module
5. Teacher's competence	I had a good teacher
6. Writing	My writing is pretty good and so I could easily express my ideas
7. Teacher's severity in marking	The teacher was generous in his/her marking
8. Luck	I was lucky

Table 1. Attribution items for success

Attributional category	Attribution items for failure
1. Effort	I didn't work hard enough for the test
2. Ability	I am not good at the module
3. Test difficulty	The test was difficult
4. Interest	I didn't love the module
5. Teacher's competence	I didn't have a good teacher
6. Writing	My writing is not good enough and so I had difficulty in expressing my ideas
7. Teacher's severity in marking	The teacher was severe in his/her marking
8. Luck	I was unlucky

Table 2. Attribution items for failure

The attribution rating scale was administered to students (n = 58) from the same study sample in class-time (Late January 2008) by the same teacher (the researcher was present). The other twenty-three subjects were absent during the collection of the second set of data. Its completion took fifteen minutes for the majority of students. Then, a group interview was held with four students immediately after the completion of the rating scale.

2.1.2.3 The group interview

A semi-structured interview (Appendix C) was held with four students from the study sample immediately after the completion of the rating scale. It was meant to follow up the points dealt with in the questionnaires and probe the

students' responses. Unfortunately, the researcher could not interview more students because two out of the three groups who participated in this study had other classes scheduled right after they had completed the rating scale. The interview lasted one hour and a half (interviewee 1 –see below- had to leave earlier). The researcher opted for note-taking to record the students' responses. That way the students would not feel the need to edit their answers. The interviewees (selected by their teacher) were :

Interviewee 1 : a 36-year old female who passed in June with a general score of 10.52/20.

Interviewee 2: a 22-year old male who passed in May with a general score of 10.30/20.

Interviewee 3: a 19-year old female who passed in May with a general score of 12.31/20.

Interviewee 4: a 23-year old male who passed in June with a general score of 10/20.

Entries from the open attribution questionnaire, the attribution rating scale and the group interview were analyzed following the research objectives. This is dealt with in the following section.

2.2 Data analysis

In analyzing the data, percentages were computed for students' perceptions of their scores. Then, these were graphically displayed to allow for a holistic view of the distribution of success and failure across modules (See section 3.1).

To determine students' attributional patterns, a bottom-up procedure was used, adopting first a Grounded Theory approach, and then a descriptive statistical approach. The steps of the analysis are described as follows:

Entries from the open attribution questionnaire were subjected to a content analysis. The first step was to conduct a key word analysis, generating categories from the attribution statements made by students. Then, a further analysis of these preliminary categories revealed that some of them had to be further divided, while others could be grouped together. The end-product was the emergence of eight salient attributional categories for both success and failure (See section 3.2.1).

The use of a Grounded Theory approach (whereby a theory must emerge from the data) was meant to exhaust the possible range of causal attributions generated by students. These were used in the design of an attribution rating scale, which allowed not only to determine the most dominant causal attributions, but also to identify differences in attributions between "successful" and "less successful" students (See section 3.2.2 and section 3.3).

To determine students' general causal tendencies, mean scores and standard deviations were computed for each attribution item of the rating scale. The mean score for each attribution item was obtained by summing all the scores and dividing by the number of students. Thus, we obtain the average score of the study sample for each causal attribution. And in order to know how the scores

are dispersed around the mean, we computed the standard deviation for each attribution item.

Finally, to examine whether significant differences in attributions exist between "successful" and "less successful" students, a t-test was used. The latter is a statistical procedure which compares the mean scores of two groups in order to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference.

Adopting a bottom-up design, that is, moving from a Grounded Theory approach to a statistical descriptive one was meant to enhance both the validity of the research procedure and the reliability of results. The latter are presented and discussed in the following chapter.

Notes

1. Grounded Theory is a systematic qualitative research methodology in the social sciences emphasizing generation of theory from data in the process of conducting research. It was developed by two sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselem Strauss and presented in their book The Discovery of grounded Theory (1967). It was intended as a methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data. The theory evolves during the research process itself and is a product of continuous interplay between analysis and data collection. The analytical process involves coding strategies. From the data collected, the key points are marked with a series of codes, which are extracted from the text. The codes are grouped into similar concepts in order to make them more workable. From these concepts, categories are formed, which are the basis for the creation of a theory. Grounded theory pays great attention to participants' own accounts of social and psychological events of their associated local phenomenal and social worlds.

Chapter three
Findings and Discussion

The present study aims at understanding success and failure at tests from the student's perspective. Data were collected by means of an open questionnaire, a rating scale and a group interview. This chapter deals with data analysis and interpretation. The findings of the study are presented and discussed under three major headings : students' perceptions of their scores, students' causal attributions for success and failure, and differences in attributions between "successful" and "less successful" students.

3.1 Students' perceptions of their scores

The first research question sought to determine students' perceptions of their scores on Test 2 (May 2007). In the open questionnaire students (n = 81) were asked to write alongside each score obtained (in American literature, American civilization, English literature, British civilization, and linguistics) whether they perceive it as success or failure.

Percentages were computed for students' perceptions of their scores and a frequency table (**Table 9**) was drawn for the five content-based modules. It summarizes the numbers and percentages of students who perceived their scores as success or failure in each module. Success and failure distribution across

modules is then graphically displayed in **Figure 1** (Refer to Appendix D for success and failure appraisals per student and module).

Module	American Literature		American Civilization		English Literature		British Civilization		Linguistics	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Success	33	40.74%	35	43.24%	62	76.54%	34	41.97%	33	40.74%
Failure	48	59.26%	46	56.76%	19	23.46%	47	58.02%	48	59.26%
Total	81	100%	81	100%	81	100%	81	100%	81	100%

Table 3. Frequency distribution of perceived success and failure across modules

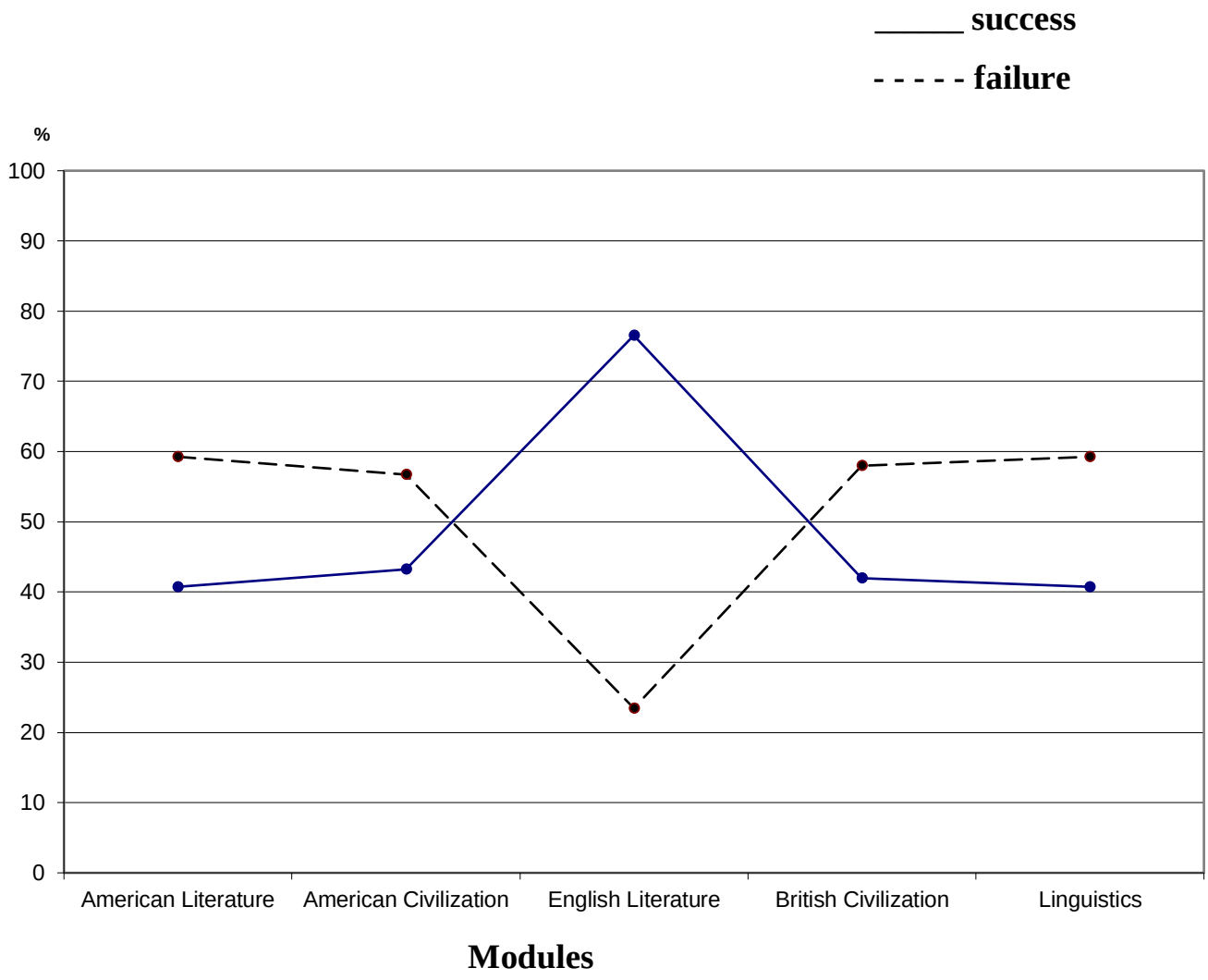


Figure 1. Graphical representation of students' perceptions of their scores

The graphs in Figure 1 show that the distribution of success and failure is stable across the modules of American literature, American civilization, British civilization, and linguistics, with the rate of failure higher than that of success (~ 60 % for perceived failure versus ~ 40 % for perceived success in four out of five modules). By contrast, the rate of success is higher than that of failure in English literature (76.54 % for perceived success versus 23.46 % for perceived failure).

The high rate of perceived failure in four out of five content-based modules indicates that on the whole the students may be dissatisfied with their achievement outcomes. And this can lead to demotivation. As Willis (1994:14) argued "Success and satisfaction are key factors in sustaining motivation". Nevertheless, attribution research has shown that :

> Students' appraisal of their past performance does not only depend on the absolute level of success they have achieved but also on how they interpret their achievement.
>
> (Dornyei 2001:117)

In this sense, the causes to which students attribute their past successes and failures are far more important than the level of achievement per se. That is, the demotivating effect of perceived failure depends on how it is accounted for. Thus, the second objective of this study was to investigate students' causal attributions for their perceived successes and failures at Test 2 (May 2007). Results are presented and discussed in the following section.

3.2 Students' causal attributions for success and failure

The second research question aimed to identify students' perceived causes of success and failure at Test 2 (May 2007). Data from the open attribution questionnaire were subjected to a content analysis, which revealed eight salient attributional categories. These were used in the design of an attribution rating scale (administered to the same subjects), which allowed for the measurement of causal attributions. The results of the content analysis, students' ratings of attribution items along with the interview data are presented and discussed in this section.

3.2.1 Content analysis of attribution statements

Eighty-one third year students in the English Department were asked to state two main reasons for their perceived success or failure at Test 2. the data (868 attribution statements) were then subjected to a content analysis, which yielded eight salient attributional categories, namely, effort, ability, test difficulty, interest, teacher's competence, writing, teacher's severity in marking, and luck. Effort, ability, test difficulty, and luck were borrowed from Weiner's (1974) model (See section 1.3). The other four categories were labelled by the researcher. Students' causal attributions for success and failure along with a few samples of the statements which generated them are as follows (Refer to Appendix E for the open questionnaire entries) :

Attributions for success :

1 High effort :

Fifty-one students reported high effort as a main reason for doing on Test 2. This included statements such as : “I revised well and did research on the net”, “I attended all the lectures”, “Jane Eyre was prepared before I started my lesson (in the summer)”, “I worked hard”, etc. The statements above refer to different ascriptions such as “regular attendance to lectures”, “revising for the test”, “working hard”, “learning by heart”, “doing research on the net”, and so on. They all refer, nevertheless, to the high effort that was put in the task of preparing for tests.

2 High ability :

Reference to ability ascriptions was made by twenty-three students. For example, “I’ve understood lectures”, “I can understand this module”, “I have a good memory”, “I have some knowledge in literature”.

3 Test easiness :

Sixteen students ascribed their successes to the ease and/or simplicity of exam questions. For instance, “simple questions”, “questions that everybody can answer”, “the 2nd test was easy, in the 1st test I had 8/20”.

4 High interest :

Forty-two students mentioned liking the module as a main reason for doing well on the test. For instance, “interesting module”, “I liked the module”, “I’m fond of this module”, etc.

5 Teacher’s high competence :

Teacher’s high competence was cited by fifty-six students as a main reason for succeeding at Test 2. “Loving the teacher” and “having a good teacher” were reflected in statements such as : “I had an excellent teacher”, “the method of explaining is extraordinary”, “I love my teacher (Ms x)”, etc.

6 Good writing level :

Three students reported having a good writing level as a main reason for doing well on test 2 : “I expressed the answer freely”, “I wrote a good essay”, etc.

7 Teacher’s generosity in marking :

Six students attributed their successes to the lack of severity in marking on the teacher’s part. For instance, “the teacher was not severe”, “the teacher was not strict”, etc.

8 Good Luck :

Seven students explained their successes by good luck. This attributional category was reflected in statements such as : “we’ve got an idea about the topic before the exam”, “it was luck”.

Attributions for failure

1 Low effort :

Thirty-eight students mentioned low effort as a main reason for doing poorly Test 2. Statements included : “I didn’t work hard”, “I didn’t attend regularly”, “I was lazy in this module”, “I didn’t make enough efforts”, etc.

2 Low ability :

Thirty-eight students made references to low ability to account for their failures. Frequent comments were : “I didn’t understand all lessons”, “the words are difficult”, “I understood nothing”, “I think my command was not good”, etc.

2 Test difficulty :

Test difficulty was cited by sixteen students as a main reason for failing tests. Students’ complaints about this category included : “the first question was unbelievable, you have to remember all the characters of the novel (who said to whom and when?)”, “the question is complicated”, “the questions were

difficult", "it was very hard", etc. All the statements above refer to the "complexity" or "difficulty" of exam questions.

4 Low interest :

Fifteen students explained their failures by a lack of interest in the module. This was apparent in comments such as : "I didn't like what we were studying", "I've never liked this module", "boring module", etc.

5 Teacher's low competence :

The low competence of the teacher was mentioned by thirty-seven students to explain why they did poorly on Test 2. Complaints included : "the teacher had a boring method", "the teacher was very, very bad. So I hated the module", "I hated the teacher because he was lazy and I didn't like his method", "bad method of explanation", etc.

6 Low writing level :

The present study was carried out in an EFL setting. It is not surprising therefore that seventeen students complained of their poor writing level as a reason for their bad marks. This category was illustrated in statements such as : "I prepared hard but I based on information and neglected my writing form", "I have a problem in writing", much faults", "my problem is writing and I don't

know how to explain my idea", "the answers were correct but the grammar was bad", etc.

7 Teacher's severity in marking :

Twenty-five students attributed their failures to the teacher's severity in marking. For example, "the teacher was strict in correcting the papers", "the teacher was so severe", "the teacher was very severe –the only reason-", etc.

8 Bad luck :

Two students attributed their failures to bad luck: "in this module I took all my time to be better but I hadn't chance. This is my work in linguistics", "I explain to my friends how they should write their essays about Jane education because I repeated the 2nd year with the same teacher, but I didn't know why she didn't give me the mark although they all have 12, 13, 14, 11, only me", etc.

The primary goal of the open questionnaire was to gain insights into the range of attributions generated by students, which was revealed by the content analysis of the questionnaire entries. And as one of the objectives of the current study is to determine students' causal inference patterns, these attributions were used in the construction of a rating scale. The latter allowed for the computation of mean scores and standard deviations for causal attributions in order to

determine the most dominant ones. Results are presented and discussed in the following section.

3.2.2 Students' ratings of causal attributions

The attribution categories induced from students' free-form responses were used in the design of a second attribution questionnaire. It was filled in by fifty-eight students from the same study sample (the other twenty-three students were absent during the collection of the second set of data).

The items of this rating scale reflect our attributional categories. Success and failure are dealt with separately. Students are asked to rate , on a scale of 0 to 5, the degree to which each attribution item applies to them (with 0 = untrue and 5 = absolutely true). Mean attribution score and standard deviation were computed for each causal attribution.

The mean score for each attribution item was obtained by summing all the scores and dividing by the number of students (N = 58). Thus, we obtained the average score of the study sample for each attribution item. And in order to know how the scores are dispersed around the mean, we computed the standard deviation for each attribution item.

Mean scores and standard deviations for students' causal attributions for success are presented in **Table 3**.

Causal attribution	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. High effort	3.77	1.27
2. High ability	2.82	1.53
3. Test easiness	1.86	1.58
4. High interest	3.62	1.67
5. Teacher's high competence	3.37	1.67
6. Good writing level	2.60	1.45
7. Teacher's generosity in marking	0.72	1.22
8. Good luck	0.82	1.44

Table 4. Students' causal attributions for success

From Table 4 it can be seen that students' mean attribution scores on effort, ability, interest, teacher's competence and writing are all higher than the average mean score of the questionnaire.

Mean scores and standard deviations for students' causal attributions for failure are presented in **Table 5**.

Causal attribution	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. Low effort	1.98	1.87
2. Low ability	2.15	1.81
3. Test difficulty	2.53	1.85
4. Low interest	1.87	1.78
5. Teacher's low competence	2.36	2.02
6. Low writing level	2.12	1.76
7. Teacher's severity in marking	2.72	2.03
8. Bad luck	1.31	1.77

Table 5. Students' causal attributions for failure

From Table 5 it can be seen that students' mean scores for failure on test difficulty and teacher's severity in marking are higher than the average mean score of the questionnaire.

It must be reiterated that students' attributions for success and failure are significant as far as their causal structure is concerned. As demonstrated in section 1.3, each causal dimension is uniquely related to a particular set of psychological consequences. Therefore, the most dominant causes were examined with respect to the locus, stability and controllability dimensions as shown in Table 6.

Causal attributions	**Locus**	**Stability**	**Controllability**
For success			
High effort	Internal	Unstable	Controllable
High ability	Internal	S/U	C/U
High interest	Internal	S/U	Uncontrollable
Teacher's high competence	External	Stable	Uncontrollable
Good writing level	Internal	Stable	C/U
For failure			
Test difficulty	External	Stable	Uncontrollable
Teacher's severity in marking	External	Stable	Uncontrollable

Table 6. Analysis of causal structure

Table 6 is self-explanatory. The comparative analysis of students' causal attributions in the table above clearly shows that students attributed success

mostly to internal causes, whereas failure was externalized (blamed on external causes). This is a classic example of what Miller and Ross (1975) have called "the ego-serving bias" (See section 1.6.4), according to which individuals are predicted to respond with more internality to success as compared to failure. In other words, individuals take more credit for success while taking little responsibility for failure. This can be accounted for by the fact that people are motivated to protect their self-esteem. Therefore, they make causal inferences that make them feel good about themselves.

Students' causal attributions for success and failure are further displayed in a graphical form as shown in **Figure 2** (See below). It highlights the fact that our students attribute their perceived successes and failures to different factors. The graphs show that the most dominant attributions are effort and interest for success (the highest curves),teacher's severity in marking and test difficulty for failure (the highest curves). Once again, this evidence is entirely in keeping with the ego-serving bias theory (Miller and Ross, op. cit.), which holds that people are motivated to view themselves positively. This results in biased causal inference patterns: success is consistently attributed to internal factors (effort and interest in the case of the present study), while failure is blamed on situational ones (teacher's severity in marking and test difficulty in the case of the present study).

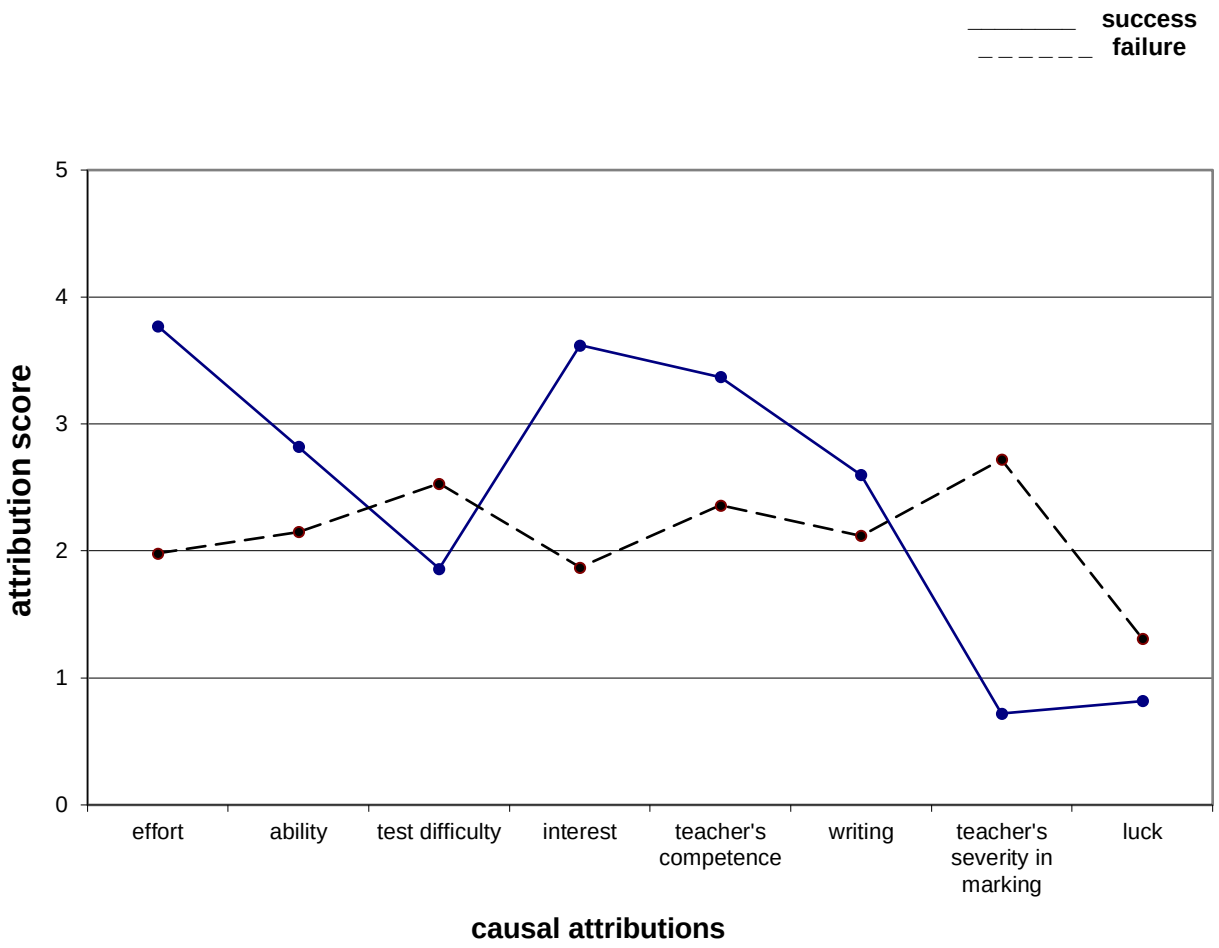


Figure 2. Students' causal attributions : success versus failure

The dimensional location of effort (Table 6) shows that this factor is internal, unstable and controllable. Students are simply responsible for how much effort they are willing to put into studying for tests. It is also unstable in that it can be increased, lowered or withdrawn. Students' attribution of success to effort increases the expectancy of success for future tests, since this factor is within their volitional control.

Table 6 shows that though interest is internal (resides within the students), it is uncontrollable. Interest is known to have a high motivational effect in that

interest and effort go hand in hand. As one student reported (open attribution questionnaire) “I love American literature, I devoted my time”, which is an instance of the role of intrinsic motivation in the amount of effort expenditure. However, such a causal reasoning may place the students in a risky situation if the equation is negatively reversed, which gives: “I don’t like module x, so I didn’t work”, as a student reported “I hate linguistics” to account for his failing grade. In other words, equating effort with interest is not an autonomous approach to learning. In such a situation, the student is basing a controllable factor (effort) upon an uncontrollable one (interest). After all, one cannot wilfully decide to be interested or not in a subject-matter.

As regards teacher’s severity in marking, this factor is external and uncontrollable as shown in Table 6. It simply resides within the environment (the teacher). Therefore, it is not within the students’ control: the teacher may be generous, severe or just fair. But in either case, students have no say in the way a teacher is marking them. And attributing failure to the teacher’s bias is likely to have a discouraging effect on the students. The latter are likely to believe that however hard they try, the teacher will grant less than actually deserved.

Table 6 shows that test difficulty in an external and uncontrollable factor. Students cannot decide upon the complexity of the tests they take. Perceiving failure as due to the difficulty of the test can work in the short term by protecting the student’s ego. However, in the long run, students are likely to feel “helpless” (a state in which the individual perceives no relation between his behaviour and

the presentation/withdrawal of aversive events) and consequently drops out effort (See section 1.6.3). This is because test topics –he or she believes- is beyond his or her current mastery level.

This section focused on examining the students' causal inference patterns. A noteworthy finding is that students tend to internalize their successes but externalize their failures, which might have an ego-enhancing/preserving function. A further aim of this study was to investigate whether "successful" and "less successful" students exhibit disparate attributional patterns. Results are presented and discussed in the following section.

3.3 Differences in attributions between "successful" and "less successful" students

The third research question addresses differences in attributions between "successful" and "less successful" students. Two sub-groups from the study sample, each including seven students (top and bottom of the grading list –see Appendix D) were classified into "successful" and "less successful" students on the basis of their general scores. Mean attribution scores and standard deviations were computed for each attribution item for the two achievement groups. Then, a t-test was performed in order to examine differences in attributions between high and low achievers. The t-test is a statistical procedure by which the means of two groups can be compared in order to determine whether there is a

statistically significant difference. The results of the statistical analysis are given in **Table 7 and Table 8**.

Causal attribution	**High achievers**		**Low achievers**		***t-value***	***P***
	Mean	***S.D.***	**Mean**	***S.D.***		
1. **High effort**	4	1.29	2.28	2.05	1.890	*n.s.*
2. High ability	3.28	1.25	2.42	1.90	1.011	*n.s.*
3. Test easiness	3	1.91	2.71	2.36	0.254	*n.s.*
4. High interest	4	1	3	2.30	1.063	*n.s.*
5. Teacher's high competence	3.71	1.11	3.14	2.03	0.655	*n.s.*
6. Good writing level	3.71	1.11	2.14	1.57	2.180	P<.05
7. Teacher's generosity in marking	0.71	1.11	1.57	1.90	1.036	*n.s.*
8. Good luck	0.28	0.48	2.42	1.71	3.194	P<.05

Table 7. Differences in attributions for success: successful versus less successful students
Note : *df =12* , critical *t*-value = 2.179 , *p* = .05

The results of the t-test analysis in Table 7 indicate that significant differences in attributions for success were found between "successful" and "less successful" students on two measures only : writing and luck. These are discussed as follows :

Good writing level. "Successful" students scored highly on writing (Mean = 3.71 on item 6 : My writing is pretty good and so I could easily express my ideas) compared to "less successful" students (Mean = 2.14). It seems that "successful" students are aware that their good writing level constitutes a real asset in such a context. This is very likely to add to their self-confidence (self-efficacy beliefs) as they feel able of conveying their ideas in an appropriate way.

Good luck. The two groups were remarkably different in how they scored on luck ascriptions for success. “Less successful” students scored highly on luck (Mean = 2.42 on item 8: I was lucky) compared to “less successful” students (Mean = 0.28). This implies that “less successful” students did not expect to succeed and this is why they ascribed their success to luck. In other words, if they happen to succeed –an unexpected outcome- it must be –according to them- due to luck. This suggests that “less successful” students may have a weak academic self-concept, due to their repeated past failure. As a result, they demonstrate an external locus of control even when they experience success. One possible explanation – following Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957) – is that “less successful” students seek out information that is congruent with their view of themselves (see section 1.6.4). As they may have a weak academic self-concept, they do not take credit for their successes. Doing so, they reinforce their negative view of themselves.

Table 8 (See below) shows the results of the t-test analysis for failure. It indicates that significant differences in attributions for failure were found between “successful” and “less successful” students on six measures : effort, ability, test difficulty, teacher’s competence, teacher’s severity in marking, and luck. These are discussed as follows :

Causal attribution	High achievers		Low achievers		*t-value*	*P*
	Mean	***S.D.***	**Mean**	***S.D.***		
1. **Low effort**	1	1.15	2.71	1.49	2.408	p<.05
2. Low ability	0.57	0.97	2.71	1.60	3.057	P<.05
3. Test difficulty	2	1.91	4.14	1.46	2.377	P<.05
4. Low interest	1.28	1.25	2.28	1.97	1.136	*n.s.*
5. Teacher's low competence	0.85	1.21	3.71	1.70	3.666	p<.05
6. Low writing level	1.14	1.95	2	1.29	0.977	*n.s.*
7. Teacher's severity in marking	1	1.41	3.14	1.57	2.708	p<.05
8. Bad luck	0.42	0.78	3.14	2.03	3.317	p<.05

Table 8. Differences in attributions for failure : successful versus less successful students
Note : *df = 12* , critical *t*-value = *2.179* , *p* = .05

Low effort. The low effort mean score for "less successful" students is 2.71 while only 1 for "successful" students. This difference suggests that indeed low achievers do put little effort into preparing for tests. This is in line with the findings reported by Covington and Omelich (1988) that the main cause of the poor performance of low achievers is inadequate preparation. The latter can be explained by a low level of achievement motivation (See section 1.2.4). An alternative explanation is that "less successful" students may resort to self-handicapping strategies (See section 1.6.1) –lack of effort in the present case – in order not to test their ability. That way, they will preserve their self-esteem.

Low ability. A striking difference was found regarding this category. "Less successful" students scored highly on low ability (Mean = 2.71 on item 2 : I am not good at the module) compared to "successful" students (Mean = 0.57).

Attributing failure to low ability is likely to lower one's feelings of self-efficacy (beliefs about how competent one is to perform a task) as to future tests. According to Self-efficacy Theory (See section 1.6.2), whether students want to expend effort on an academic task depends in part on whether or not they believe they are "good enough" at doing the given task. Moreover, ability is usually perceived as relatively stable. Therefore, "less successful" students might expect to fail again and will be very likely to withdraw effort for future tests (See section 1.2.4). And in extreme cases, "less successful" students are likely to become "helpless" (See section 1.6.3) as they perceive no relationship between their behaviour and achievement outcomes. In other terms, ability being relatively stable and uncontrollable, "less successful" students do not expect effort to improve things.

Test difficulty. "Less successful" students scored highly on test difficulty (Mean = 4.14 on item 3 : the test was difficult) compared to "successful" students (Mean = 2). This suggests that "less successful" students did not prepare well for tests and this is the reason why they perceive test topics as difficult, that is, beyond their mastery level. As shown in research by Covington and Omelich (1988 cited in Covington, 1992), "less successful" students spend less time studying than others. This results in poor test performance due to inadequate preparation.

Teacher's low competence. The two groups differed highly in their ascriptions for failure to the teacher's low competence (Mean = 3.71 for "less successful" students versus 0.85 only for "successful" students). These results show that "less successful" students tend to blame the teacher (poor instruction) for their low grades. Conversely, with a mean score as low as 0.85, "successful students" seem to take responsibility for their low marks. As a "successful" student (interviewee) commented: "Even if the teacher is not good, we can control our knowledge…research in the internet". This same student added : "If a student revises and prepares himself, he will get a good mark, without paying attention to the teacher".

Teacher's severity in marking. "Less successful" students scored highly on teacher's severity in marking (Mean = 3.14 on item 7 : the teacher was severe in his/her marking) whereas only 1 for "successful" students. This suggests that low achievers are less likely to question themselves as regards their low grades and instead, they place the blame on teacher's bias.

Bad luck. Here, too, the difference is striking. Mean Scores on bad luck were 0.42 and 3.14 for "successful" and "less successful" students, respectively. It seems that "less successful" students frequently hold hazardous (external and uncontrollable) causes responsible for their failures. This implies that "less successful" students have an external locus of control. And this is going to influence the way they approach studying for tests (See section 1.4): as they

believe that learning outcomes are outside their control, they will see no point in trying hard. Thinking so, they are doomed to failure in advance.

Differences in attributions between "successful" and "less successful" students for success and failure are further displayed in graphical forms as shown in **Figures 3** and **4**.

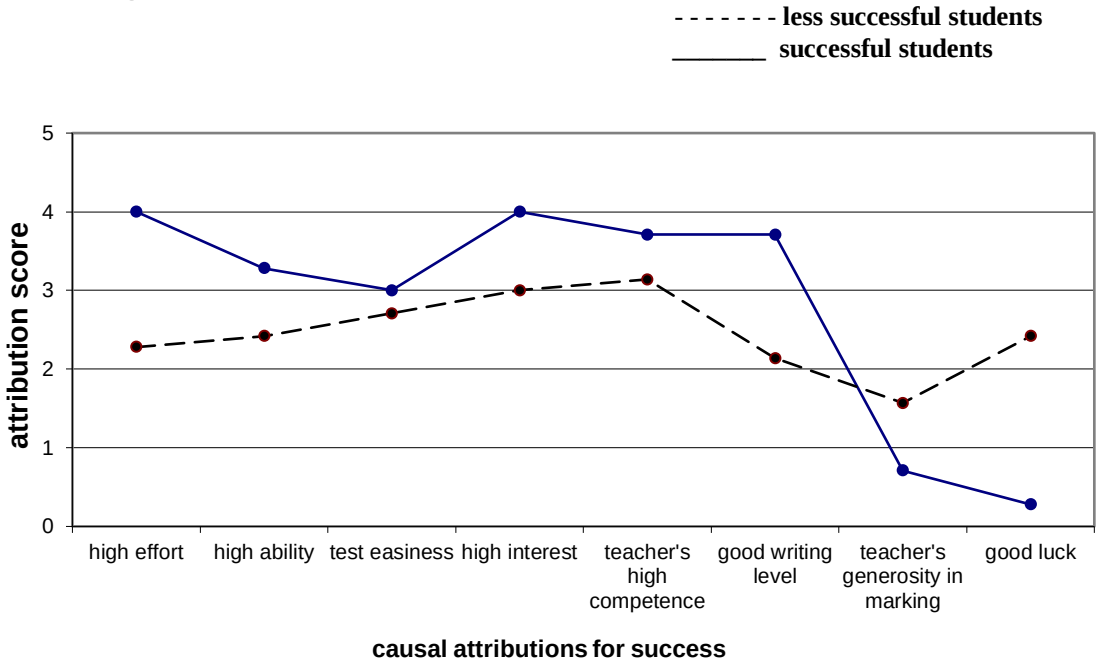


Figure 3. Causal attributions for success : successful vs. less successful students

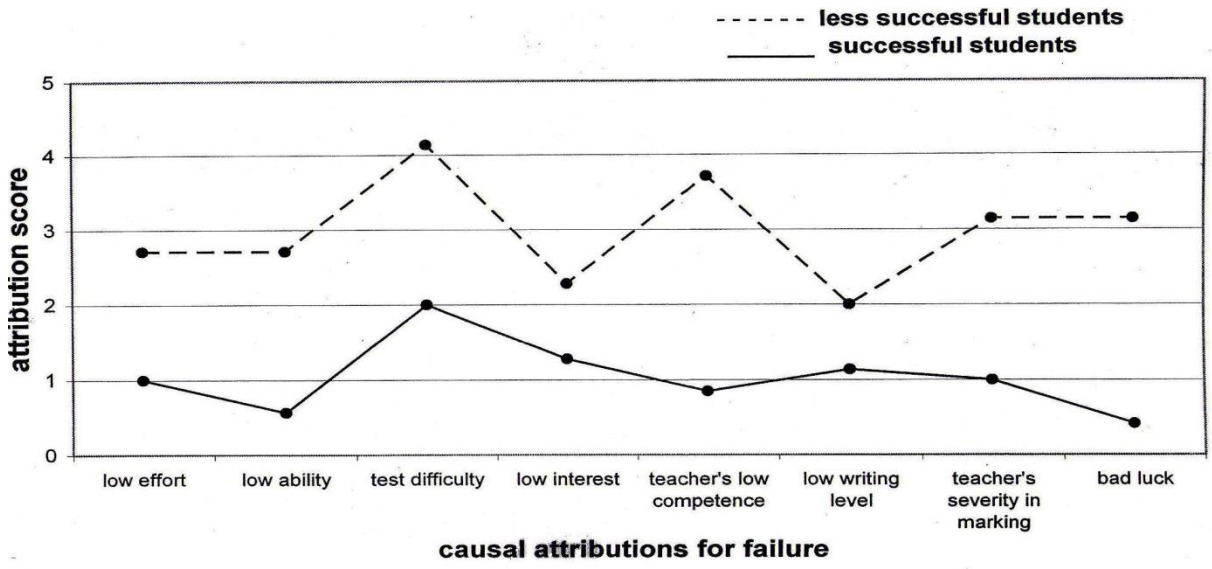


Figure 4. Causal attributions for failure : successful vs. less successful students

The comparative analysis of figures 3 and 4 reveals that there are larger differences between “successful” and “less successful” students in ascriptions for failure than in ascriptions for success. “Less successful” students manifest an external locus of control when accounting for failure. They are –according to Locus of Control Theory (See section 1.4) - “externalisers”. This suggests that the strength of “successful” students lies in the way they explain failure: they do so in a constructive way. By contrast, “less successful” students interpret their failures in a debilitating manner which inhibits future efforts.

Figure 3 also shows that “successful” students place a high value on the causal value of effort (Mean = 4). As a successful student (open attribution questionnaire) reported : “even I had a good mark, it was thanks to my own effort, not because the teacher explained well the courses. She had no right to be a teacher”. Another “successful student” (interviewee) said : “even if the teacher is not good, we can control our knowledge … research in the internet”. When this interviewee was asked “what motivates you to work for tests?”, she answered “I want to succeed. (Researcher : “why?”). I’m used to good marks. Having just a ten as a general score would be a shame. (Researcher : “why?”). Having a degree with 12 will help me have a good job”. How might we interpret these accounts? Probing the interviewee’s motives revealed the very characteristic of “successful” students: they manifest a high degree of achievement motivation (a need for achievement striving). And this may explain

the high amount of effort they are willing to expand in order to succeed (See section 1.2.4).

Attributing one's success to high effort can be a real asset as this factor is internal and controllable, making the reoccurrence of the positive outcome (success) very likely. The accounts made by the "successful" student above illustrate this point quite clearly: "In Term 1, I revised and I had a good mark. So in the 2nd term, I expect an equal or a better mark, but not less, but I revise". From this comment we can see that "successful" students have a realistic perception as to what it takes to succeed. They do not take future successes for granted and consequently do not withdraw effort. Our findings are consistent with Weiner's (See section 1.2.4).

This chapter detailed the analysis and interpretation of the data. The bottom-up nature of the research design helped to exhaust possible attributional categories and then conduct statistical analyses for purposes of the study. The main findings are as follows:

1. A large number of students perceive their scores on tests as failures across 4/5 content-based modules. This suggests a general dissatisfaction with achievement outcomes, likely to affect students' future motivation to study.
2. The content analysis of over eight hundred attribution entries made by eighty-one students revealed eight salient attributional categories for both

success and failure: effort, ability, test difficulty, interest, teacher's competence, writing, teacher's severity in marking and luck.

3. Students rated the most dominant causal attributions as being effort and interest for success, teacher's severity in marking and test difficulty for failure. Therefore, students tend to internalize their successes, while blaming failure on external causes. This is known as the ego-serving bias, which is motivated by a need to protect one's self-esteem.

4. "Successful students seem to manifest a high degree of achievement motivation, reflected in their high attribution of success to effort and low attribution of failure to lack of it.

5. "Less successful" students tend to attribute failure to low ability, which suggests a weak academic self-concept. This is likely to lower their self-esteem as well as self-efficacy beliefs. These students interpret their achievement – using Dornyei's (2001) terms- in a "debilitating manner".

6. "Less successful" students made frequent ascriptions for failure to external and uncontrollable causes. This means that they have an external locus of control, which suggests an apparent lack of autonomy. By contrast, "successful" students made few ascriptions of failure to external factors. This implies that "successful" students are autonomous enough to take responsibility for their achievement outcomes.

The findings of the current study have implications for pedagogical practice. These are dealt with in the next chapter.

Chapter four

Pedagogical Implications

The educational significance of Attribution Theory is well conveyed in Good and Brophy's (1997) statement :

> Do not look back, keep moving forward. Yet we must examine our past and present performances so that we can monitor our progress and determine whether we are moving forward or merely travelling in circles.
>
> (Good and Brophy 1997 : 445)

This chapter aims to draw conclusions from the findings of this study. The following are some recommendations for teachers as to how they can use Attribution Theory to increase their students' motivation to achieve at tests.

Recommendations for teachers

1. Encourage effort attributions.

One of the findings of this study is that high achievers manifest an apparent need for achievement striving. This was reflected in their high attribution of success to effort. The dimensional location of effort shows that this cause is internal, unstable and controllable. Therefore, failure attributed to low effort can be reversed since one is in control of how hard he or she tries. Furthermore, according to Weiner (1974) :

> The growth of achievement motivation is contingent upon the learning of cognitive structures which represent the causal value of effort.
>
> (Weiner 1974 : 191)

For Dornyei (2001:120), "The essence of promoting motivational attributions can be summarised in a short sentence : encourage students' effort attributions". This researcher expands his view arguing that :

> If we can make students believe that higher levels of effort in general offer a possibility for success, they will persist in spite of the inevitable failures that accompany learning.
>
> (Dornyei op. cit.:120)

Dornyei (op. cit.) offers some suggestions as to how teachers can encourage effort attributions:

- *Provide effort feedback*: In failure situations, we should emphasize the low effort exerted as being a strong reason for underachievement because this communicates to students that they can do better in the future.
- *Model effort-linkages*: Describe personal experiences in which you managed to accomplish a difficult task by trying hard to succeed. Elicit similar stories from the learners themselves.
- *Encourage learners to offer effort explanations*: learners will be more likely to believe in the motivational value of effort if the belief is expressed by the learners themselves in their own words.

- *Make effort and perseverance a class norm* : Teachers can emphasize the general importance of effortful behaviour by providing feedback such as 'I like the way you try', or 'That was a nice piece of effort'. Students must be taught that persistence pays off.

Likewise, effort attributions for success increase the expectancy of this same outcome in the future. Again, this is because one is in control of how much effort he or she is willing to exert.

2. Discourage ability attributions.

The results of this study showed that low achievers scored highly on the low ability item in accounting for their failures. The "ability" factor can be seen as a double-edged sword. That is, attributing successful outcomes to ability is very likely to increase one's self-esteem as well as efficacy-beliefs. However, when it comes to failure, low ability is perceived as a characteristic of the failing individual, thus generating feelings of shame or self-pity. According to Weiner:

> In achievement-oriented contexts, ascription of failure to a lack of ability is aversive and connotes that failure will be encountered again in the future.
>
> (Weiner op. cit.:30)

Moreover, as most people view ability as enduring over time and beyond personal control, the failing person may fall into a state of "learned helplessness" as he or she sees no relation between his or her behaviour and future outcomes. As Weiner (op. cit.) states it :

> By concentrating so much of our attention on mental capacities and by considering only the rewards of 'each according to his abilities', psychologists have neglected the role of intent and volition as determinants of achievement evaluation and achievement performance.
>
> (Weiner op. cit.:202)

Therefore, according to Dornyei (op. cit.), teachers should refuse low ability explanations for failure, and instead point out that the student has failed because he or she did not persist long enough and/or used ineffective strategies.

3. Foster student autonomy

This study has shown that students tend to internalize their successes, while blaming failure on external factors : the ego-serving bias. Doing so, they protect their self-esteem. This strategy can be efficient in the short term (ego-preserving). However, it is counter-productive in the long run, likely to inhibit the development of the student's autonomy. And here, the teacher can play an essential part in raising the students' awareness of their role as active agents of their achievement.

Students must be encouraged to take responsibility for their learning outcomes. Teachers should raise the students' awareness as to the relationship between one's approach to learning and his or her achievement. Carver and Scheir (1996) contends that :

> Students who believe they can control outcomes are more likely to engage in those situations, expend effort, and persist in the face of difficulty. By contrast, those who believe that their behaviours have little impact on outcomes would not be

> expected to demonstrate the same level of motivation because they believe that factors outside of their control will be primarily responsible for success or failure.
>
> (Carver and Scheir 1986:4)

In other words, students should be taught to take control upon their learning outcomes. According to McCombs (1994) :

> motivation is fundamentally a function of the degree to which individuals are aware of themselves as agents in the construction of their thoughts, beliefs, goals, expectations, attributions, or any other thought systems
>
> (McCombs 1994:49)

A study by Arlin and Whitley (1978 cited in Williams and Burden 1997) has shown that there is a clear relationship between learners' perceptions of personal control over learning outcomes and the number of opportunities that those learners had been given to take responsibility for their own learning. In the light of this finding, Williams and Burden (1997) suggest that language teachers could help and encourage learners to :

- identify their own attitudes towards language learning, and their strengths and weaknesses both cognitively and socially;
- develop their own individual plans for learning the language;
- take responsibility for carrying out their own plans;
- evaluate realistically their progress and the reasons for their successes and failures;
- participate in the selection of learning activities;

- take responsibility for helping each other in carrying out learning plans.

(Williams and Burden op. cit.:103)

4. Encourage task-involving rather than ego-involving activities.

As stated earlier, this research has shown that low achievers tend to blame their failures to low ability. Many variables can contribute to low ability attributions, among which competition with peers.

Research by Jagacinki and Nicholls (1984, 1987 cited in Graham 1991) has shown that task-involving and ego-involving situations can be antecedents to high and low ability attributions, respectively. In task-involving situations one's goal is to master the task for the sake of understanding and developing new skills. Conversely, in ego-involving situations one's goal is to demonstrate high ability compared to others. Therefore, students should be encouraged to focus on the intrinsic value of the task rather than competition with fellow students.

5. Be aware of the impact of your feedback on students' attributions.

In accounting for their successes/failures, students make use of the cues available to them, namely, past history performance, social norms, randomness/ consistency of the outcome, task characteristics, etc (Weiner, 1974; Weiner et al., 1971 cited in Frieze and Weiner, 1971; Weiner and Kukla, 1970 cited in Weiner, 1974). However, students also use indirect cues to make causal attributions, such as teacher behaviour, particularly teacher feedback.

According to Butler (1987 cited in Graham, 1991), teacher feedback about students' performance in the form of written comments (task-focus) lead to increased interest in the task and higher attributions to effort. By contrast, mere normative grades (ego-focus) result in attributions to low ability (in the case of failure) as well as less interest and lower performance. Consequently, it is essential for teachers to ensure that their feedback carries the right message and has a motivating rather than harmful impact.

6. "Work smarter, not harder" must be your motto.

If a student fails despite having tried hard enough, as one student (interviewee) described: "If a student has a bad mark, he will be discouraged, especially if he put all his effort. He will say 'even if I work hard, I will have a bad mark' ". In such a situation, the teacher should emphasize the importance of using appropriate strategies and developing the needed skills. And more importantly, students must be taught to learn how to learn. This includes : strategy training, study skills, and so on. In other words, teachers should encourage "strategic" effort.

7. Make sure that students know what is expected from them in tests.

Many students in our English Department explain their failures at tests by "I have put everything but the teacher gave me a bad mark", "the exam questions have nothing to do with the lectures", "I cannot figure out what this teacher wants" (informal discussions), "I really liked this module and I did my

best to get it. But it didn't work, I don't know why", "I didn't know what the teacher wants" (open attribution questionnaire). Such complaints denote students' lack of awareness as to what is expected from them in tests. In other words, there often is a discrepancy between students' quality of achievement and teachers' expectations.

In order to reduce this gap, teachers should as early as the beginning of the academic year explain what the objectives of their courses are and what is expected from students to achieve in the short term (tests) as well as in the long run (end of the course). In other words, students must clearly understand what is required of them to achieve at tests and beyond. This cannot be said any better than Brophy (1998:69 quoted in Dornyei, op. cit) did : "Encourage students to see you as allied with them in preparing for tests, not as allied with the test in pressuring or threatening them".

8. Encourage low achievers to regain self-confidence in their academic competence.

The results of this study revealed that low achievers tend to attribute failure to low ability. This may be due to their repeated past failures. Unfortunately, students with a past history of repeated failures are likely to develop a low academic self-concept and therefore low expectations of future success. These will act as self-fulfilling prophecies: the student has no belief in his or her self-

efficacy, and therefore does not see the use in investing much of an effort. With such a reasoning, he or she indeed fails in advance.

Canfield and Wells (1994 cited in Arnold and Brown 1999) use the metaphor of the 'poker chip theory of learning', in which poker chips represent the learner's self-concept. Their conclusion is that:

> The student who has had a good deal of success in the past will be likely to risk success again; if he should fail, his self-concept can 'afford it'. A student with a history predominated by failures will be reluctant to risk failure again. His depleted self-concept cannot afford it … One obvious recommendation in this situation is to make each learning step small enough so that the student is asked to only risk one chip at a time instead of five. But even more obvious, in our eyes, is the need to build up the student's supply of poker chips so that he can begin to have a surplus of chips to risk.
>
> (Canfield and Wells 1994: 6 quoted in Arnold and Brown 1999)

In other words, low achievers should be taught to set realistic goals (small steps) within their current level of mastery. That way, as they are more likely to succeed, they will develop confidence in their academic capacities.

9. Encourage an "incremental" view of ability.

Our data have shown that low achievers tend to attribute their failures to low ability. This is likely to result in a weak academic self-concept. One thing a teacher can do to help these students is alter their view of ability. According to Dweck and Elliot (1983), teachers should help students shift from an "entity" view of ability (ability as fixed and limited) to an "incremental" one (ability as malleable and that can be developed through practice). In this way, students

would feel more in control of their learning outcomes, since they can influence their progress.

Dweck and Elliot (1983) suggest some ways whereby teachers can encourage an incremental view of ability:

- Acting more as resource persons than as judges;
- Focusing students more on learning processes than on outcomes
- Stressing effort over ability and personal standards over normative standards when giving feedback; and
- Attempting to stimulate achievement efforts through primarily intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivational strategies.

10. Minimize the importance of grades.

"There is no use in attending this teacher's classes anymore" was the comment made by student A after receiving a low grade on a test (informal discussions). As already stated, "success and satisfaction are key factors in sustaining motivation" (Willis, op. cit). And the comment above denotes the student's demotivation following failure. It also exhibits the preoccupation of student A with the outcome rather than the process of learning. Covington (1999 : 127 cited in Dornyei, op. cit.) noted that : "Certainly, many students are grade driven, not to say, 'grade grubbing', and this preoccupation begins surprisingly early in life". However, our educational system is test-oriented and therefore grades are part of it. As Covington and Teel (1996:43 quoted in Dornyei, op.

cit.) concluded : “Teachers cannot be expected to defy such entrenched traditions. Grades and grading are here to stay”.

However, teachers can reduce the demotivating effect of grades by minimizing their importance. That is, students’ attention must be focused on the process rather than the outcome of learning. Dornyei (op. cit. : 132-134) offers some suggestions toward this endeavour:

- The rating system should be absolutely transparent, that is, it should be obvious right from the start what the success criteria are. You could provide students with models to illustrate what constitutes exemplary performance. Alternatively, or in addition to this, you could have students practise using the list of assessment criteria to evaluate themselves on an assignment.
- When marking assignments, complement grades with comments that deliver praise and suggestions for improvement. These notes provide an ideal opportunity to make personal comments and to offer help.
- Grades should reflect, as much as possible, the student’s relative improvement rather than only their standard of achievement as compared to some external criterion. In practical terms this would mean, for example, awarding ‘improvement grades’ when a student redoes an assignment or makes up for a deficit or redresses an error after receiving corrective feedback.

- Involve students in an ongoing process of evaluation during the course rather than relying on the results of one or two tests only. The assessment should also cover participation in the lesson or in projects. Alternative measurement tools, such as portfolio assessment, might be particularly appropriate for the purpose of continuous assessment. Portfolios are organised sets of student work collected in a folder to illustrate the student's progress over time.
- Teacher's ratings should be complemented by the students' self-assessment; to this effect, provide learners with self-evaluation tools and show that you trust that students can be honest in evaluating their own work.
- If appropriate, consider developing a system of peer grading (i.e. when students evaluate each other).

The power of attributions has been acknowledged by social psychologists. And it is hoped that this chapter helped in providing teachers with some insightful ideas as to how they can use Attribution Theory to motivate their students in a more effective way. As Alderman (1999) states it:

> The attributional explanation for motivation is one that teachers, parents, coaches, and counsellors find especially useful. As one student who had learnt about attribution in another class cautioned his classmates, "you will never look at yourselves the same way again after learning about attribution.
>
> (Alderman 1999:i× quoted in Dornyei 2001)

Conclusion

This work describes the study of 81 students undertaken in an effort to understand students' explanations of their achievement outcomes. It highlights the importance of these subjective interpretations as mediators of future achievement behaviour.

The data revealed that students attributed success and failure at tests to eight salient causes, namely, effort, ability, test difficulty, interest, teacher's competence, writing, teacher's severity in marking and luck. A second finding is that students tend to internalize their successes while blaming failure on external causes. Third, "less successful" students manifest a weak academic self-concept as well as a lack of autonomy. Finally, "successful" students show high autonomy alongside strong achievement motivation.

When we look across the findings summarized above, we can notice that while attribution research reported only four causal attributions as commonly used by people in achievement settings, using a Grounded Theory approach in the current study allowed for the emergence of eight causal attributions for both success and failure. This shows that when students are asked to spontaneously react to their achievement outcomes, a wide range of attributions can emerge. Therefore, these results could only have been revealed following an approach whereby concepts and categories come from the data.

Furthermore, this study looks at achievement problems from a socio-psychological perspective; thus offering an alternative explanation to success and failure – one that lies in the students themselves.

In conclusion, we can say that the concept of student achievement motivation is very complex, and no one motivational theory can capture this complexity on its own. Attribution Theory is just one way to account for why such differences in achievement motivation exist. And following an attributional approach, increasing students' achievement motivation boils down to one basic principle : Teachers cannot make a student do something; the student's perception of reality shapes his or her motivation to achieve successfully at tests. As a result, if teachers can control the attributions their students make, they will be more likely to influence their achievement behaviour. Thus, the challenge posed to teachers is –using Dornyei's terms- "to help them [students] to deal with their past in a way that it will promote rather than hinder future efforts" (Dornyei, op. cit. : 117).

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Dear student,

Appendix A : The Open Attribution Questionnaire

This questionnaire is meant to investigate your opinions about your scores on the tests you took in May 2007. Your information will be of great value to a Magister research project. Please answer as honestly as possible. Your responses will remain anonymous.

Thank you for your cooperation

Age : ……. Gender : ..……...(male or female)

Are you repeating the year? Yes ☐ No ☐

Please indicate your **general** score: ……../20

In May ☐ June ☐ September ☐

Module	**Score on Test 2 (May 2007)**	**For you , this mark is :**		**You obtained this mark because : (give 2 main reasons)**
		a success (good)	**a failure (bad)**	
American Literature	…../20			1-…… 2-……
American Civilization	…../20			1-…… 2-……
English Literature	…../20			1-…… 2-……
British Civilization	…../20			1-…….. 2-……..
Linguistics	…../20			1-…….. 2-……..
Phonetics	…../20			1-…….. 2-……..

Dear student,

Appendix B : The Attribution Rating Scale

I am a Magister student doing research in the English Department.This questionnaire is meant to investigate your opinions about the scores obtained on the tests you took in May 2007.Your information will be of great value to my research project.Please answer as honestly as possible .**Your cooperation is greatly appreciated.**

Age : ..... Gender : .....(male or female)

Are you repeating the year? Yes ☐ No ☐

Please indicate your **general** score: ...../20

In May ☐ June ☐ September ☐

Module		**American Literature**	**American Civilization**	**English Literature**	**British Civilization**	**Linguistics**
Score on Test 2 (May 2007)		...../20	...../20	...../20	...../20	...../20
For you , this mark represents : (Use a " × ")	**success**					
	failure					

How true are the following reasons for your successes/failures at Test 2 ?
Please circle for each statement the number that best applies to you :
(from 0 = untrue to 5 = absolutely true).

I obtained <u>good</u> marks because :

1- I worked hard for the test 0 1 2 3 4 5
2- I am good at the module 0 1 2 3 4 5
3- The test was easy 0 1 2 3 4 5
4- I loved the module 0 1 2 3 4 5
5- I had a good teacher 0 1 2 3 4 5
6- My writing is pretty good and so I could easily express my ideas 0 1 2 3 4 5
7- The teacher was generous in his/her marking 0 1 2 3 4 5
8- I was lucky 0 1 2 3 4 5

I obtained <u>bad</u> marks because :

1- I didn't work hard enough for the test 0 1 2 3 4 5
2- I am not good at the module 0 1 2 3 4 5
3- The test was difficult 0 1 2 3 4 5
4- I didn't love the module 0 1 2 3 4 5
5- I didn't have a good teacher 0 1 2 3 4 5
6- My writing is not good enough and so I had difficulty in expressing my ideas 0 1 2 3 4 5
7- The teacher was severe in his/her marking 0 1 2 3 4 5
8- I was unlucky 0 1 2 3 4 5

Appendix C : The Group Interview Guide

1 Among the scores you obtained on Test 2, which one is a real success ?

2 How do you decide that this mark is a success ?

3 Why do you think you did well in this module ?

4 Among the scores you obtained on Test 2, which one is a real failure ?

5 How do you decide that this mark is a failure ?

6 Why do you think you did poorly in this module ?

Questions that emerged during the interview :

1 What motivates you to work hard for tests ?

2 How do you feel when you obtain a bad mark ? And when you obtain a good mark ?

3 When you get your results, do you start asking yourself "Why did I obtain this mark ?" ?

4 Do you compare your marks with the other students' marks ?

5 What is according to you the key to success at tests ?

Appendix D : Students' perceptions of their scores : success versus failure

S = Success F = Failure

Students	General Score (…./ 20)	Passed in	Modules				
			American Literature	American Civilization	English Literature	British Civilization	Linguistics
1	14.16	May	S	S	S	F	S
2	13.79	May	S	S	S	S	S
3	13.14	May	S	S	S	F	F
4	12.80	May	S	S	F	S	F
5	12.51	May	S	S	S	S	S
6	12.47	May	S	S	S	S	S
7	12.39	May	F	S	S	S	F
8	12.31	May	S	F	S	S	S
9	12	May	F	F	S	S	F
10	12	May	S	S	F	F	S
11	12	May	S	F	S	F	S
12	12	May	S	S	F	F	F
13	11.50	May	F	S	S	S	S
14	11.48	May	F	F	S	F	F
15	11.37	May	S	F	S	F	F
16	11.36	May	F	F	S	S	S
17	11.34	May	F	F	S	S	S
18	11.32	May	F	S	S	F	S

19	11.30	May	S	F	S	S	S
20	11.11	May	S	F	S	F	F
21	11	May	F	S	S	S	S
22	11	May	F	F	F	F	S
23	11	May	F	F	F	F	F
24	10.99	May	F	F	S	F	S
25	10.89	May	F	S	S	F	F
26	10.85	May	S	F	S	F	S
27	10.79	May	S	S	F	S	F
28	10.74	May	S	S	S	F	S
29	10.72	May	S	F	S	F	S
30	10.61	May	S	S	S	S	F
31	10.60	May	F	F	S	S	S
32	10.59	May	F	S	S	F	S
33	10.50	May	F	S	S	F	F
34	10.45	May	S	F	S	S	S
35	10.41	May	F	F	S	F	F
36	10.40	May	S	F	S	F	S
37	10.39	May	S	S	S	F	F
38	10.32	May	S	F	F	F	S
39	10.27	May	F	S	S	F	F

40	10.16	May	F	F	F	F	F
41	10.08	May	F	F	S	F	S
42	10.06	May	S	F	S	S	S
43	more than 10	May	S	S	S	S	S
44	not reported	May	F	F	S	F	S
45	11	June	S	S	S	S	F
46	10.96	June	S	F	F	F	F
47	10.93	June	F	F	S	F	F
48	10.75	June	F	S	S	S	F
49	10.74	June	F	F	S	S	F
50	10.67	June	S	S	S	F	F
51	10.66	June	S	S	S	S	F
52	10.55	June	F	F	S	F	S
53	10.52	June	F	F	S	S	F
54	10.52	June	S	S	S	F	F
55	10.50	June	S	F	F	S	S
56	10.46	June	F	F	S	F	F
57	10.45	June	F	F	F	F	F
58	10.40	June	S	F	S	F	S
59	10.16	June	S	F	S	F	F
60	10.14	June	F	S	S	F	F

61	10.14	June	F	F	S	F	F
62	10.12	June	F	F	S	F	F
63	10	June	F	S	F	S	F
64	10	June	F	S	S	F	F
65	10	June	F	F	F	S	S
66	not reported	June	F	S	S	S	F
67	not reported	June	F	S	S	S	F
68	10.57	Sept.	F	F	S	S	F
69	10.45	Sept.	F	S	S	S	S
70	10.45	Sept.	S	F	F	F	F
71	10.43	Sept.	F	S	F	S	F
72	10.32	Sept.	F	F	S	S	S
73	10.31	Sept.	F	F	S	S	F
74	10.27	Sept.	F	F	F	F	F
75	10.14	Sept.	F	F	F	F	F
76	10.14	Sept.	F	S	S	F	S
77	10.10	Sept.	F	F	F	F	F
78	10.04	Sept.	F	S	S	F	F
79	10	Sept.	F	F	S	F	F
80	10	Sept.	F	F	S	S	F
81	10	Sept.	F	F	F	F	F

Appendix E : Samples of the open questionnaire entries

1 Effort :

“I did my best”, “I studied too much and I got good marks”, “because I attended regularly”, “I revised well and did research on the net”, “I made effort to understand all lessons”, “I attended all the lectures”, “I did my best and I deserve it”, “honestly, I revised well and learnt by heart”, “Jane Eyre was prepared before I started my lesson (in the summer)”, “I worked hard”, “I didn’t work hard”, “I didn’t attend regularly”, “I was lazy in this module”, “I didn’t make enough efforts”, “I didn’t revise well in the second term”, “I didn’t read all stories”, “weak preparation to the exam”, “I read the novel only once”, “I was not serious enough”, “bad preparation”, “I was often absent”, “I missed most classes”, etc.

2 Ability :

“I’ve understood lectures”, “I can understand this module”, “I understood the novel given to us”, “good assimilation”, “I have a good memory”, “I am intelligent”, “I have learnt how to write a good paragraph”, “I have some knowledge in literature”, “I have understood the second semester’s lessons”, “I didn’t understand all lessons”, “I didn’t understand linguistics”, “the words are difficult”, “I understood nothing”, “I like this module but I found some difficulties with it”, “I haven’t understood the lectures”, “I think my command

was not good", "the teacher asked for details and for me, I have a poor memory", "the teacher's method was based on analysis and this is my problem", "I worked hard but it was not a good mark. The teacher was explaining everything. So it was my problem", "I can't do better even in my dreams", etc.

3 Test difficulty :

"simple questions", "the questions were easy. The much you write you get a better mark", "questions that everybody can answer", "the 2nd test was easy, in the 1st test I had 8/20", "the questions were simple, not analysis", "the exam contained very simple easy questions", "the first question was unbelievable, you have to remember all the characters of the novel (who said to whom and when?)", "the question is complicated", "the questions were difficult", "it was very hard", "difficult topics", "the 2nd exam was difficult especially with the yes and no questions", "even if I understood the lessons, the question was difficult and indirect", "I understood courses, but at the day of the exam I find a difficult topic", etc.

4 Interest :

"interesting module", "I liked the module", "I found it so interesting", "I'm fond of this module", "I like so much history", "It was very amusing as well as interesting", "I'm keen on this modules", "I like history in general", "I enjoyed

reading the novel", "I love English literature", I love American literature, I devoted my time", "I really enjoyed hard times, I can say that I learnt it by heart", "I didn't like what we were studying", "I don't like the module", "I hate linguistics", "I've never liked this module", "boring module", "I dislike American literature", etc.

5 Teacher's competence :

"I had an excellent teacher", "the teacher gave us vital points", "we had a wonderful teacher", "the method of explaining is extraordinary", "the teacher was good (explanation, method of working…)", "I love my teacher (Ms x)", "I love my teacher because she taught us linguistics as a story. This made us understand the Bloomfieldian thinking and others", "the teacher made her courses very interesting", "I love my teacher so much", "the teacher knew how to make his lectures attractive", "I liked the way my teacher gave her lectures. So it facilitates to me to understand and learn easily", "the lessons were well explained", "the teacher is very, very good", "Ms X, she is for me a model of teacher as she did her best to explain the lessons", "the teacher had a boring method", "the teacher didn't show us how to write an essay in good way. She told us senseless things", "the teacher was very, very bad. So I hated the module", "I hated the teacher because he was lazy and I didn't like his method", "bad method of explanation", "the teacher was not serious at all", "I wasn't

interested in English literature because of the teacher", "because of the bad method of the teacher, because she considers herself the top", etc.

6 Writing :

"I expressed the answer freely", "I wrote a good essay", "I prepared hard but I based on information and neglected my writing form", "I have a problem in writing", "because of the grammar mistakes", "I suffered from a bad way to express my answers", "I'm sure I could do better if I had good writing", "because of spelling mistakes", "I write too long essay with much faults", "mistakes in grammar and we know that literature is based mostly on writing", "my problem is writing and I don't know how to explain my idea", "I didn't know how to give my information", "problems of writing", "the answers were correct but the grammar was bad", "my writing imposed itself on my mark, in this case I couldn't say anything", etc.

7 Teacher's severity in marking :

"the teacher was not severe", "the teacher was not strict", "the teacher was fair by giving the real marks", "was strict in correcting the papers", "the teacher was so severe", "the teacher was unfair", "the teacher was very severe –the only reason-", "the teacher is hard concerning the marks", "the teacher has already been known by her severity, so I didn't hope for more", etc.

8 Luck :

"we've got an idea about the topic before the exam", "it was luck", "I didn't attend this lecture and I had a good mark. Maybe it was luck", "the teacher almost gave us the question before the exam", "the teacher repeated the questions done in class", "I did it with my friends before the exam, there was a question from the previous years", "in this module I took all my time to be better but I hadn't chance. This is my work in linguistics", "I explain to my friends how they should write their essays about Jane education because I repeated the 2nd year with the same teacher, but I didn't know why she didn't give me the mark although they all have 12, 13, 14, 11, only me", "linguistics is my favourite module and I never forgive the teacher who make (réoriené) I swear I don't deserve", etc.

Appendix F : The Second Year Curriculum

Module	Hours per week
American literature	**2 hours**
American civilization	**2 hours**
English literature	**2 hours**
British civilization	**2 hours**
Linguistics	**2 hours**
Phonetics	**2 hours**
Writing	**4 hours**
Grammar	**2 hours**
Listening	**1 hour**
Oral expression	**1 hour**
Arabic Literature	**2 hours**

عنوان البحث : *فهم النجاح و الفشل في الامتحانات من خلال انتسابات الطلبة*

ملخص البحث

تبين من خلال البحوث في ميدان الانتساب (وينر 1974 ،1992 ؛ كوفينتون، 1992 ؛ جراهم 1991 ،1994) أن انتساب الطلبة لأسباب نجاحهم أو فشلهم يؤثر على توقعاتهم و من ثم على سلوكهم المستقبلي في ميدان الدراسة .

يهدف هذا البحث إلى اكتشاف تفسيرات طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة الجزائر لنجاحهم أو فشلهم في الامتحانات . كانت الاختلافات في الانتساب بين "الطلبة المتفوقين" و أولئك "الأقل تفوقا" ذات أهمية خاصة.

شارك واحد و ثمانون طالبا في هذا البحث في بداية سنتهم الدراسية الثالثة. جمعت معلومات البحث بواسطة استمارة استبيان مفتوحة، سلم انتساب، و مقابلة. بينت النتائج أن الطلبة يفسرون نجاحهم بالجهد والاهتمام (عوامل داخلية)، أما الفشل فقد فسر بصرامة الأستاذ في التنقيط و صعوبة الامتحان (عوامل خارجية). هذه حالة كلاسيكية ل "خطأ خدمة الذات" (ميلر و روس، 1975) : للفرد انتساب داخلي للنجاح مقارنة مع الفشل بهدف حماية الذات (الأنا). تبين كذلك من خلال نتائج الإحصاء أن فروق مهمة وجدت بين "الطلبة المتفوقين" و أولئك "الأقل تفوقا" من حيث انتسابهم للفشل. الطلبة "الأقل تفوقا" لديهم موقع تحكم خارجي من حيث تفسير الفشل مما يوحي إلى نقص في الاستقلالية. يتمتع الطلبة "المتفوقون" بنسبة عالية من الإرادة و التي ترجع إلى انتسابهم العالي للنجاح إلى الجهد.

توحي نتائج هذا البحث إلى أنه يجب على الطلبة التحكم في نتائج دراستهم. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، يجب على الطلبة "الأقل تفوقا" تعلم أهمية الجهد كوسيلة للنجاح.