



Relationship between Success and Failure Attributions and Self-Efficacy of Chinese ELF Junior High School Students with Different English Proficiency Levels

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Abstract

This study aimed at 1) comparing the levels of students' success and failure attributions and self-efficacy in English language learning among the students with different levels of English language proficiency and 2) investigating the relationship between success and failure attributions, and self-efficacy among Chinese junior high school students. The success and failure attributions were categorized into two aspects: The internal attributions associated with ability and effort and the external attributions associated with luck and context. One hundred and ten junior high school students at a school in Shizong, China were voluntarily recruited for the research. The study was a correlational study and supported by a qualitative study based on a semi-structured interview. The results revealed that 1) high and medium English proficiency students showed high internal attributions while Low English proficiency students displayed moderate internal attributions ($\bar{X} = 4.35, 3.69$ and 2.82 $SD = 1.19, 1.18$ and 1.24 , respectively) and self-efficacy of high and medium English proficiency students showed high level of self-efficacy while low English proficiency students displayed low self-efficacy ($\bar{X} = 3.90, 3.56$ and 2.44 $SD = 0.84, 1.01$ and 1.02 , respectively). External attributions were moderate across all English proficiency levels. 2) The correlation between success and failure attributions and self-efficacy varied among students with different levels of English proficiency. The data from the semi-interviews provided some evidence to support the results of the questionnaire.

Keywords: Chinese Junior High School, English Language Learning, Success and Failure Attributions, Self-efficacy, Different English Proficiency Levels

Introduction

English performance plays a crucial role for Chinese youth as one of the major compulsory courses (Xiao, 2021). Many studies have focused on the factors that help students improve their English performance. Self-efficacy and success or failure attributions have become two important factors in the field of language learning related to factors involved with individual differences (Du, 2011). In China, junior high school is the basic stage for students to learn English, when they enter junior high school, English teachers and parents pay more attention to learning methods than to academic performance. How to be more efficient in the learning process, and how to attribute the cause when facing learning failure has become a concerned issue in education and psychology (Maimaiti, 2020).

Research objectives

1. To compare the level of English learning success and failure attributions and self-efficacy of Chinese junior high school students with different English proficiency levels.
2. To examine the relationship between English learning success and failure attributions and self-efficacy of Chinese junior high school students with different English proficiency levels.

Hypothesis

1. Different levels of English learning success and failure attributions and self-efficacy are found in Chinese junior high school students with different English proficiency levels.
2. There are positive relationships between English learning success and failure attributions and self-efficacy of Chinese junior high school students with different English proficiency levels.

Literature review

Academic self-efficacy refers to learners' judgments about their ability to complete the learning process, achieve good academic performance, and avoid possible academic failure (Chen, 2018). English learning self-efficacy is based on Bandura's self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977), which is a form of academic self-efficacy in the specific context of the English subject and English learning (Kitikanan & Sasimonton, 2017). Meanwhile, English learning self-efficacy is defined as learners' subjective judgment of their learning ability to complete English learning tasks.

Success and failure Attributions are the terms used in psychology to refer to the explanation students offer about why they were successful or failed in the past (Dörnyei, 2001). In school environment, Graham (1994) listed attributions associated with success and failure attributions students often claimed: ability, effort, task difficulties, luck, mood, family background and help or hindrance from others. These attribution lists can be divided into two main categories: Internal and external attributions. The internal attributions mostly refer to ability and effort while the external attributions often refer to luck and context (Heider, 1958). Internal attributions have been identified as the most influential perceived causes of success and failure. Raffini (1993, p. 107) asserted that “students should never be allowed to fail at tasks until they have a reasonable chance to succeed. If they do, they have no chance but to attribute their failure to lack of ability and will therefore stop trying”. Weiner (1992, cited in Dörnyei, 2001), proposed that previous failures attributed by the learner to limited ability impede future achievement actions more significantly than failures attributed to inadequate effort. Chase (2001) showed in his research that people tend to avoid situations in which they believe they will not succeed. In addition, whether or not they believe they will succeed affects the amount of effort and persistence they put into it. Hsieh and Schallert (2008) proposed that the concepts of self-efficacy and attribution have produced a large body of research that relates to academic performance, academic perseverance, and emotion respectively. And that the two constructs have rarely been combined to explain students' perceptions of their own performance or applied to the field of foreign language learning.

Research methodology

The Population and sample of the study

A population of 150 junior high school Chinese students from five difference eighth grade classes were studied, the sample size was calculated using Yamane's formula, which was 110. The English proficiency of these students is categorized into three levels: High, medium and low levels based on their Scholastic Proficiency Test (SPT) grades on the China-wide standardized test. In this sample, 47 students achieved high English level, 44 students achieved medium English level, and 19 students achieved low English level. As for the sample size for the semi-structured interviews, the total of 6 volunteers took part in the interviews, of which 2 students were representing each level of the 3 English proficiency group—high, medium and low. By having 2 students from each group, it allowed the more precise investigations to capture the characteristics and viewpoints of students at different English language proficiency levels.

Research instruments

Two research instruments, namely, questionnaires and semi-structured interview protocol were employed. The questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data to measure the levels of success and failure attributions and self-efficacy at different English proficiency levels, and the relationship between them. Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit qualitative data to complement and support the quantitative data.

The questionnaire on success and failure attributions was adapted from Lefcourt's Multidimensional-Multiple Attribution Scale (MMCS) by Song (2022). The questionnaire on self-efficacy was based on the Learning Self-Efficacy Scale developed by Bian (2004) and Chen (2009). Before conducting a formal questionnaire of 110 students, the researcher conducted reliability test with the pilot group, who are 30 students of the same grade from another school (they share similar characteristics with the students of the main study) to ensure the reliability of the success and failure attribution and self-efficacy questionnaire. The reliability coefficient was found at 0.82, the semi-structured interview questions were constructed by the researcher and they mainly covered more in-depth data on success and failure attributions in English learning and self-efficacy. Descriptive data analysis was used to answer research objective 1) For the criteria to interpret the levels of mean scores for success and failure attributions and self-efficacy, the mean score ranges of 3.50-5.00, 2.50-4.49, and 1-2.49 were interpreted as high, moderate, and low level, respectively. Additionally, Pearson correlation analysis was performed to reveal the relationship between success and failure attributions and self-efficacy for research objective 2) The data from a semi-structured interview were analyzed through content analysis to support the study.

Research results

The findings are presented based on the research objectives as follows:

Results for research objective 1: The level of English learning success and failure attributions and self-efficacy of Chinese junior high school students with different English proficiency levels.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of junior high school students' success and failure attributions focusing on the internal attributions in English language learning.

Questionnaire Items for internal attributions; i.e. ability and effort associating with success and failure attributions	Level of Students' English Proficiency		
	High	Medium	Low
1. If I get a low grade, I will doubt my academic ability.	3.94	3.91	3.47
2. High ability is the most crucial factor for me to achieve high scores.	3.40	3.77	2.63
3. If I can't learn English well, I will think I am not capable	3.65	3.64	2.95
4. I think my high English scores are a direct reflection of my academic ability.	3.98	3.59	2.21
5. Getting low grades in English classes made me think I couldn't learn English well.	3.98	3.70	3.26
6. If I get a low grade, I usually feel that most of the factors are that I didn't work hard enough in class.	3.74	3.86	3.00
7. In my case, the good results I have achieved in English are mainly due to my efforts	3.98	3.80	2.00
8. If I didn't achieve my goals, the main reason was that I didn't work hard enough.	4.04	3.82	2.63
9. I'm doing well because I'm studying hard.	4.11	3.68	2.42
10. I believe that if I work hard enough, I can learn English well.	4.28	4.05	2.84
Total	47	44	19
Mean	4.35	3.69	2.82
SD	1.19	1.18	1.24
Level of success and failure attributions focusing on internal attributions	High	High	Moderate

From Table 1, the level of success and failure attributions focusing on internal attributions were found to be different with students' different English proficiency: the high level of success and failure attributions focusing on internal attributions were found with the high and medium English proficiency students but the moderate level was found with the low English proficiency students. The three top mean scores of the success and failure attributions focusing on internal attributions of high English proficiency were: 4.28, 4.11, 4.04 in the items 10, 9, and 8, respectively. This showed that high English

proficiency students generally believed that effort and ability were the main reasons for their success. This may reflect their self-confidence and strong belief in their own influence, making them more likely to attribute success to internal factors.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of junior high school students' success and failure attributions focusing on the external attributions in English language learning.

Questionnaire Items for external attributions; i.e. luck and context associating with success and failure attributions	Level of Students' English Proficiency		
	High	Medium	Low
11. Luck is also the key to success in learning English.	3.66	3.70	3.95
12. Sometimes my low score in English is often the result of bad luck.	3.21	3.20	3.74
13. If I get a good grade in my English class, I will be happy.	3.66	3.82	3.63
14. Getting a low score could be a result of bad luck and not studying the right subject at the right time.	2.91	2.93	3.68
15. I think luck is also important when taking English exams. For example, the test item happened to be an item I had studied before.	2.81	3.05	3.53
16. The low score I got in English could be a result of bad luck, such as: being physically or emotionally unwell at the time of the test.	2.89	2.98	3.84
17. There were times when I scored high on English exams because the teacher's scoring standards were too loose.	1.91	2.16	3.89
18. In my opinion, the low scores I received in English meant that the teachers were too strict in their grading.	2.28	2.25	3.68
19. Peer relationships are also associated with grades in English classes.	2.94	2.59	3.63
20. I got high marks in English exams simply because English was easier than other subjects.	2.91	2.84	3.68
Total	47	44	19
Mean	2.64	2.85	3.38
SD	1.19	1.14	1.09
Level of success and failure attributions focusing on external attributions	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate

As shown in Table 2, the level of success and failure attributions focusing on external attributions were found at the moderate level in all different English proficiency students. The top three highest mean scores are: 3.95, 3.89, 3.84 in questionnaire items 11, 17, and 16, respectively which are from low proficiency level students. This demonstrated the tendency of students with low English proficiency to attribute their successes and failures to external factors such as luck, environment, or the influence of other people. This may imply that their relatively low self-confidence in English proficiency leads to a greater tendency to place attributions on external factors.

Table 3 Descriptive statistics of junior high school students' self-efficacy in English language learning.

Questionnaire Items for self-efficacy	Level of Students' English Proficiency		
	High	Medium	Low
1. I am always confident about learning English.	3.34	3.02	2.53
2. Compared with other students in my class, I am a strong learner.	3.87	3.18	2.68
3. I felt very relaxed about the test in English class.	3.98	3.09	2.53
4. In English class, I can answer the teacher's questions fluently	3.81	3.20	2.32
5. Even if I always fail in English exams, I still believe I can succeed next time.	3.91	3.30	2.79
6. I think I can understand the English textbook very well.	3.91	3.34	2.53
7. I think I can understand what the teacher said very well	3.74	3.27	2.26
8. I was able to respond easily when the English teacher asked me questions that I was not prepared for.	3.89	3.27	2.26
9. I don't often think that other students speak English better than I do	3.74	3.05	2.32
10. I can understand English books, read and understand English magazines and instruction books, and watch English movies.	3.85	3.41	2.53
11. I am confident that I can understand English spoken by others.	3.96	3.09	2.47
12. I am confident that I can easily and comfortably communicate with foreign teachers and foreign friends.	3.94	3.34	2.37

Questionnaire Items for self-efficacy	Level of Students' English Proficiency		
	High	Medium	Low
13. No matter how good or bad my academic performance is, I never doubt my ability to learn.	3.89	3.45	2.42
14. I can complete all English assignments easily.	3.34	3.16	2.47
15. I am capable of coping with most of the difficulties that arise when learning English	3.94	3.34	2.42
16. What motivates me most to work harder in my studies are the failures I have encountered	3.22	3.82	2.84
17. Even if I do poorly in an English test, I can still evaluate myself objectively and calmly and analyze the reasons.	2.98	3.89	3.00
18. If I study hard, I believe I am fully capable of improving my English learning.	3.21	4.00	2.89
Total	47	44	19
Mean	3.90	3.56	2.44
SD	0.84	1.01	1.02
Level of self-efficacy	High	High	Low

The level of self-efficacy for the high, medium and low English proficiency students as illustrated in Table 3 were different: high level self-efficacy was found in the high and medium English proficiency students but low level of self-efficacy was found in the low English proficiency students. The top three self-efficacy items were: 3.98, 3.96, 3.94 in the questionnaire items 3, 11, and 15 respectively are from high English proficiency levels. This show that high English proficiency students show confidence in English exams, speaking English and communicating with foreigners. Their positive self-efficacy may serve as a positive motivation and influence in learning and socializing.

From the evidence displayed above, the hypothesis 1: Different levels of English learning success and failure attributions and self-efficacy are found in Chinese junior high school students with different English proficiency levels was, to some extent, accepted.

Results for research objective 2: The relationship between English learning success and failure attributions and self-efficacy of Chinese junior high school students with different English proficiency levels.

Table 4 Correlation analysis between success and failure attributions and self-efficacy with different English proficiency level.

Level of English proficiency students	Pearson correlation		
	Internal attributions; i.e. ability and effort of success and failure attributions	External attributions; i.e., luck and context of success and failure attributions	Self-efficacy
High English proficiency students			
Internal attributions; i.e. ability and effort of success and failure attributions	1	-.604**	.450**
External attributions; i.e., luck and context of success and failure attributions		1	-.599**
Self-efficacy			1
Medium English proficiency students			
Internal attributions; i.e. ability and effort of success and failure attributions	1	-.486**	.366*
External attributions; i.e., luck and context of success and failure attributions		1	-.351*
Self-efficacy			1
Low English proficiency students			
Internal attributions; i.e. ability and effort of success and failure attributions	1	-0.522*	-0.465*
External attributions; i.e., luck and context of success and failure attributions		1	.476*
Self-efficacy			1

*p < 0.05

**P < 0.01

Based on the data of Pearson correlation presented in Table 4, junior high school students of different English proficiency levels showed some correlations between success and failure attributions and self-efficacy. In the high-level English group, internal attributions were significantly and positively correlated with self-efficacy ($r = 0.450$, $p < 0.01$), which suggests that those students who tend to attribute their success in English learning to ability and effort usually have a higher sense of self-efficacy. However, external attributions were significantly negative correlated with self-efficacy ($r = -0.351$, $p < 0.01$), implying that students who tended to attribute their failures in English language learning to luck and context tended to perform poorly in terms of self-efficacy. In the medium English group, internal attributions were positively and significantly related to self-efficacy ($r = 0.366$, $p < 0.01$), while external attributions were negatively and significantly related to self-efficacy ($r = -0.351$, $p < 0.01$). The medium English students did not seem to rely on their luck and context, but they relied more on effort and ability. In the low English proficiency group, internal attributions were negatively and significantly related to self-efficacy ($r = -0.465$, $p < 0.05$), while external attributions were positively and significantly related to self-efficacy ($r = 0.476$, $p < 0.05$). The low English proficiency students who tended to attribute their success in English language learning to internal attributions tended to show lower self-efficacy, leading to lower self-confidence. On the other hand, these students who tended to attribute their failures in English language learning to external attributions tended to show higher self-efficacy, possibly because they attributed their failures to external factors. Therefore maintained a higher level of confidence in their abilities in English language learning.

For hypothesis 2, there is a positive relationship between English learning success and failure attributions and self-efficacy of Chinese junior high school students with different English proficiency levels. Based on the results of the correlation presented in Table 4, the hypothesis was accepted to some extent.

The content analysis of the interview transcripts seems to support the findings from the correlation findings above revealing that high English proficiency students exhibit high self-efficacy levels and internal attributions for their success in English. High English proficiency students displayed internal attitudes, attributed success to their efforts and effective methods, and recognized the importance of practice and diverse resources. One of the high English proficiency students commented, “My English performance is not bad, but I still have shortcomings. I have room for improvement in my English performance. I need to find effective study methods, utilize resources, and manage my time better. Improving listening and speaking skills is crucial, as is finding motivation and understanding the significance of learning English.”

Medium English proficiency students also demonstrate positive self-efficacy and internal attributions, though to a lesser extent. Medium English proficiency students reported that they were determined to improve, acknowledged challenges, and emphasized the role of effective learning methods. One of the Medium English proficiency students stated: “Although I am still lacking in some areas, such as vocabulary and grammar knowledge, and my listening and speaking skills need more practice, I believe I have the potential to improve further.” On the other hand, low English proficiency students tend to have lower self-efficacy levels and may demonstrate moderate internal attributions for their difficulties in learning English. Low English proficiency students struggled with a lack of confidence, interest, and appropriate learning methods while acknowledging efforts to overcome challenges. “There are several reasons for my frustration and failure in learning English: First, most of my classmates around me are very good at English, while I try to study but cannot understand. Secondly, I have tried my best to study, but with little success. Truth be told, I was not very interested in learning English and felt that I was not suited for the subject. Finally, frequent failures make it difficult for me to regain my spirit and confidence, and it is hard for me to find a suitable way to learn English well,” reported by one of the low English proficiency students.

These findings align with Bandura's theory, which suggests that self-efficacy beliefs and internal attributions play significant roles in influencing academic performance and learning outcomes.

Discussion

From research objective 1, it can be concluded that 1) high and medium English proficiency students attributed success and failure predominantly to internal factors. This finding resonates with the work of Dweck (2013) and Bandura (1994)—underlining the connection between self-efficacy and attribution styles. This also aligns with Schunk and Pajares (2005) who emphasize the role of self-efficacy in shaping attributions. Similarly, the consistent moderate level of external attributions across all proficiency levels aligns with the foundational attribution theory proposed by Weiner (1986), emphasizing the influence of external factors on attributions. This corroborates the idea that attributions tend to encompass a blend of internal and external determinants. 2) higher self-efficacy levels among high and medium-English proficiency students mirror research by Pajares (2006) and Zimmerman (2000), who have explored the link between self-efficacy and academic performance. This discrepancy in self-efficacy levels aligns with the assumption that higher proficiency students possess greater confidence in their abilities and potential for success. The findings underscore the potential importance of nurturing self-efficacy among low English proficiency students. Tailored interventions that bolster self-efficacy, as

suggested by Pajares (2006), could potentially impact their attributions, promoting a positive cycle of enhanced self-belief and improved academic outcomes.

From the arguments above, it is important for instructors to be notified of the causes of their student's success and failure to assist them in maximizing their potential.

For research objective 2, it was found that 1) internal attributions and self-efficacy have a negative relationship with one another for low English proficiency students. This may be explained by the fact that students who credit internal sources for their performance exhibit lesser self-efficacy. This might be seen as an illustration of a lack of confidence or a conviction that one's skills are constrained and pointless. In such cases, Seven (2020) suggested that teachers need to put effort into their English language teaching methodologies so that students can feel internally motivated. 2) A positive correlation between external attributions and self-efficacy may indicate that high self-efficacy students tend to think that their failure is due to external factors. The high-level English proficiency interviewees reported that they had used a variety of diverse resources to practice English daily. Similarly, students with medium English proficiency levels mentioned actively participating in class discussions, listening attentively, and using online resources to enhance their English skills. Both Halawa et al. (2022) and Yang (2014) agree that these students may benefit from watching English movies and practicing reading aloud to help them gain confidence in communicating in English. However, the low English proficiency students exhibited lower levels of self-efficacy. They recognized their struggles and limitations in English and may feel discouraged by their performance.

Implications

Teachers may need to be careful in giving feedback and encourage the students to learn English based on the internal and external attributions found from each English proficiency group. The following points are to be considered:

1. Motivated students are likely to attribute their failures to a deficiency in effort and suitable strategies employed, rather than to inadequate capability.

2. English teachers need to put effort into their teaching methodologies so that students can feel internally motivated. They should employ learning tasks that are within the learners' skill level and establish a classroom culture that values effort and persistence.

- 3 Teachers may use a variety of diverse resources and encourage the high and medium-English proficiency level students to practice activities in and out of class. For the low English proficiency students, the assigned activities should be scaffolded to help them gain more self-confidence and lower

their struggles and limitations in using English so they may feel more confident to improve their English language performance.

Recommendations

Recommendation for further research

There is still relatively few research on Chinese students' success and failure attribution and self-efficacy in English language learning, and more research is needed to fill the research gap in the future. Based on the results of this study, the following are recommendations for future research.

1. This study only investigated the level of success and failure attribution and self-efficacy in English language learning of the Chinese junior school students and their relationship with different English proficiency. Future research can use an experimental method to explore teaching methods that improve students' success and failure and self-efficacy.

2. The study was limited to the English teaching in Shizong city of China. Future studies can be conducted in other cities in China.

3. In future research, other factors that may influence middle school students' success or failure attributions and self-efficacy may be considered for inclusion in the analysis. For example, factors such as family background, motivation, and learning strategies may have a significant impact on middle school students' success or failure attributions and self-efficacy.

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