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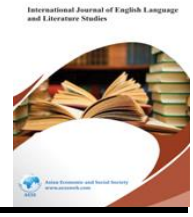

# EFL LEARNERS' ATTRIBUTIONS TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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## ABSTRACT

*The present study focuses on social attributions towards English language learning among Iranian EFL students. In the present descriptive qualitative study, 495 Iranian EFL high school students were selected based on the cluster sampling design. English Learning Attribution questionnaire and a relevant structured open-ended interview were employed to collect data from the sample. The findings indicated that Iranian high school students attributed their success in language learning to effort, interest, and good preparation for exams (internal factors), and attributed their failure to teacher's method, lack of having positive attitude to teachers, lack of teacher's praise and encouragement, lack of having appropriate learning environment, and not having enough teacher's help (external factors).*

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## Contribution/ Originality

This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the Iranian students' attributions towards English language learning in high school by implicating a qualitative approach to explore both internal and external factors in foreign language learning success and failure.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Learning as an enterprise is affected by the perspectives of learners. And learners' perspective is one of the reasons to which learners attribute their failures or successes in learning (Weiner, 1979). Our views of the causes of our success and failure play an important role in our performance. Arnold (1999) states that "what we see as the causes for our past successes or failures will affect our expectations and, through them, our performance".

According to the school of constructivism (Williams and Burden, 1997), people attach different meanings to their learning situations, which subsequently affect their success in the process of learning. In other words, students' attributions and views of their learning process are assumed to play an important role in their actions, motivation and achievement (Weiner, 1986).

First, it is required to have a clear theoretical definition for attribution. When people are required to explain their reasons and motives for the results of events and behaviors, they tend to attribute the results either to internal or external factors (Heider, 1958). This process of attributing the factors or motives for the results of behaviors is called attribution.

Arnold (1999) believes "what we see as the causes for our past successes or failures will affect our expectations and, through them, our performance". This notion has led to the emergence of attribution theory, which has recently captured a lot of attention in educational psychology. The internal factors are associated with the doers themselves and consist of efforts, ability, interest, attitude and character; the external factors are related to environment and consist of the difficulty of the task, rewards and punishment and luck (Qingzong, 2002). Weiner (1974) believes that attributions towards success and failure can radically affect performance. Yan and Li (2008) pose the same idea and maintain that the central tenet of attribution theory is the learner's perception of the causes of success or failure which affects profoundly the future performance.

Weiner (1986) presented four main series of causal attributions. They are ability, effort, luck and perceived difficulty of tasks. Among these, the first two are considered the most dominant causes. Weiner (1992) also suggested three categories of causal attributions: locus of causality (internal vs. external), stability (stable vs. unstable) and controllability (controllable vs. uncontrollable). Weiner (1979) has presented an example to make possible clear dichotomy among them. Stability denotes whether or not we see the cause of something as stable (He's late because he doesn't care about other people) or unstable (He's late because he wasn't feeling well and it took him a while to get ready); and control refers to whether or not we think a person was able to alter the cause (He's late because he forgot to set his alarm again) or unable to alter the cause (He's late because there was a traffic accident that delayed traffic).

The fact that attribution is culture bound makes this domain of investigation broad and interesting. Social categories are pertinent both to the target of the attributions and the agent of the attributions. That is the reason why various attributions may be considered for different cultural groups with reference to their achievements (Duda and Allison, 1989). In an attempt, Chandler and Spies (1993) decided to find out whether different cultures would allocate different meanings to attribution, and they revealed meaningful differences among people in the countries under

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investigation. Among the studies conducted in Iran, Eslami Rasekh *et al.* (2012) focused on learners in private language institutes and found no significant positive or negative relationship between the subclasses of the causal dimension scale and learners' self-perceived communication competence. In two other studies, Hashemi and Zabihi (2011), and Pishghadam and Zabihi (2011) concentrated on the relationship among EFL learners' attributions for success and failure, their performance on placement tests, and their achievement in foreign language classes. The results showed that effort, as an internal factor, significantly correlated with high scores on both the final exam and the placement test. In Pishghadam and Motakef (2012) studied gender differences in attributions by Iranian male and female EFL high school learners. The attribution factors of the study included emotion, self-image, intrinsic motivation, and language policy. The results indicated that intrinsic motivation was the main attribution and that gender did not play any significant role in attribution. In another study, Hosseini Fatemi and Asghari (2012) attempted to investigate whether there was any significant relationship between learners' personality traits and their sets of attributions in learning English. They found that neuroticism correlated negatively with self-image, while extraversion was positively related to emotion, self-image and intrinsic motivation. Males and females, however, were not found to be different from each other in the research.

The context of Iran can be an interesting domain with its centralized educational system which makes it unique. In this educational system, students have English courses in their school career for six years. However, when they graduate, they fail to speak and use English to the accepted standards. Nevertheless, it is not clear who or what should be blamed for this failure. Here the role of the students' attribution towards English language learning can be helpful to understand some social and cultural beliefs. In the present study, the researchers were supposed to explore the students' attributions towards English language learning. Based on the above-stated purpose, the research question is: What are Iranian students' attributions towards English language learning in high school?

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. Participants

The participants of the study were selected from high schools in Tehran. Based on the permission obtained from the Ministry of Education, the researchers selected some high schools from districts 2, 4, 9, 10, 11 and 15. These districts were in the north, south, east and west of Tehran. Then from each district, two schools were selected, and from each school two classes were chosen. Owing to the cluster sampling design, 495 students with the following characteristics participated in the study:

- They were female students.
- They were from all grades of high school.
- They were between 14 to 18 years old.

These students were given the Attribution Questionnaire and from this sample 50 students were selected randomly to be interviewed.

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### 2.2. Instruments

The researchers used the Attribution questionnaire. The questionnaire was adopted from Xia (2012). It consisted of 33 items, 19 of which were aimed at measuring attributions of success, and 14 were aimed to measure attributions of failure.

The questionnaire was used to assess the students' attributions towards English language learning. The questionnaire had two parts: Success and failure. The two parts of the questionnaire included questions which focused both on internal and external factors. The questionnaire was translated into Persian to make students understand the items better in their mother tongue. The translated version was reviewed by two professors, and the required revision was made. In order to standardize the questionnaire, it was piloted with thirty homogeneous students. The Cronbach alpha reliability obtained was estimated at 0.76 (Table 1). And a factor analysis through the Varimax rotation was done to find the underlying construct of the 33 items of the instrument. The SPSS extracted four factors which accounted for 62.33 percent of the total variance.

**Table-1.** Reliability Indexes for the Students' Questionnaire

| | Cronbach's Alpha | N of Items |
|---|---|---|
| Total | .76 | 33 |
| Subscale 1 (Success) | .878 | 19 |
| Subscale 2 (Failure) | .813 | 14 |

The researcher also used a structured interview to gather more data on students' attributions of successes and failures and to verify the reliability of the responses to the questionnaire items. The interview included three questions to elicit the students' attributions of success and failure in language learning in high schools. The content validity of the interview was confirmed by two professors.

### 2.3. Design and Procedure

In this descriptive qualitative study, the researchers experienced some difficulties to acquire the official consent from the Ministry of Education. Thereafter, they collected the required data from the selected high schools. Before administering the questionnaire, the purpose of the study was discussed to draw the participants' attention to the significance of the study in order to convince them to answer the questions as carefully as possible. Moreover, all attempts were made to obtain the proper data from the interviews with respect to the ethical principles. After collecting the required data from both instruments, the researchers endeavored to answer the research question based on proper analyses of the obtained data.

## 3. RESULTS

In order to investigate the students' attributions towards English language learning, a descriptive analysis was made based on the collected data from the student attribution questionnaire. Table 2 and Fig. 1 show that the mean scores, obtained for success and failure, are

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31.88 and 27.88 respectively. This indicated that more students believed in their success in language learning. However, students with the mean score of 32.78 attributed their success to internal factors. Also, regarding failure, more students (mean= 28.26) attributed their failure to the external factors.

**Table-2.** Students' Attributions towards English Language Learning

| | N | Mean |
|---|---|---|
| Success | 495 | 31.88 |
| Success internal | 495 | 32.78 |
| Success external | 495 | 30.87 |
| Failure | 495 | 27.88 |
| Failure internal | 495 | 26.94 |
| Failure external | 495 | 28.26 |

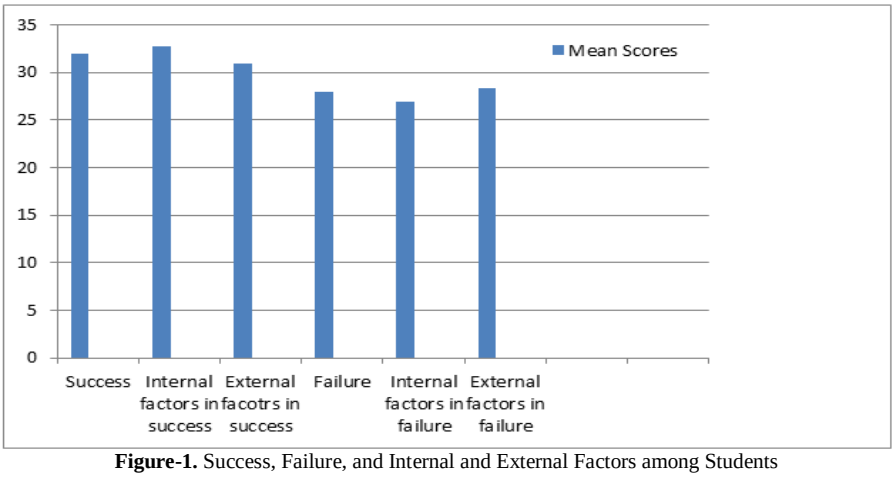


**Figure-1.** Success, Failure, and Internal and External Factors among Students

Fifty students, who were selected randomly from the main sample, were interviewed. It is worth mentioning that the data gathered through interviews were used to verify learners' attributions in relation to internal and external factors collected through the questionnaire.

The researchers asked the students three questions to elicit the factors for success and failure in language learning. Then, they calculated the frequency and percentage of the each of the reasons mentioned by the students. Table 3 and Table 4 display descriptive statistics on the factors mentioned by the students in their interviews concerning success and failure.

**Table-3.** Percentage of Success Factors Based on the Interviews

| Factor | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Students' motivation | 178 | 36% |
| Effort and perseverance | 143 | 29% |
| Teachers' teaching method | 79 | 16% |
| Interest in continuing studies at the university | 40 | 8% |
| Traveling and living abroad | 30 | 6% |
| Social prestige | 25 | 5% |

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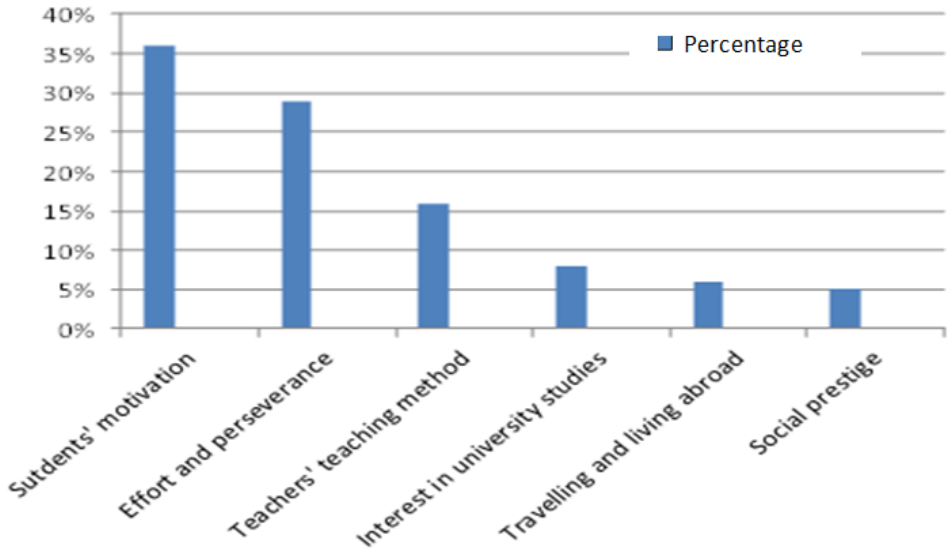


**Figure-2.** Factors behind students' success

Figure 2 clearly represents the superiority of students' motivation and effort as well as perseverance over other factors regarding their success.

**Table-4.** Percentage of Failure Factors Based on the Interviews

| **Factor** | ***N*** | ***%*** |
|---|---|---|
| Appropriate teaching method | 138 | 28% |
| Perseverance | 129 | 26% |
| Motivation | 124 | 25% |
| Learning environment | 79 | 16% |
| Parents' level of awareness in importance of learning a foreign language | 25 | 5% |

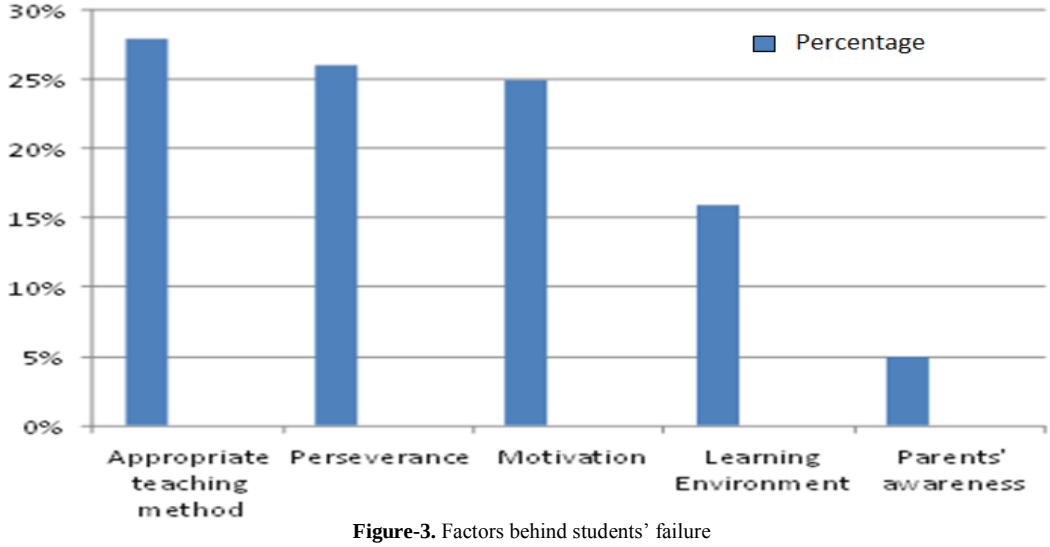


**Figure-3.** Factors behind students' failure

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Figure 3 clearly represents the lack of proper teaching methods, perseverance, and motivation as distinct factors lying behind the failure of students.

Comparison of the results from the questionnaire and interview indicated that students attributed their success and failure to more or less similar reasons. On both the questionnaire and interview, students attributed more their success to internal factors but their failure to external ones. For example, about 36% and 29% of the students attributed their success to motivation and effort, which are internal in nature (Table 3). On the contrary, 28% of them attributed their failure to teachers' teaching method, which is an external factor (Table 4).

## 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of the study indicated that both internal and external factors played a vital role in students' success and failure with internal factors surpassing the external ones with a slight difference. And contrary to the public opinion that language learning has failed in high schools, the findings of the study showed that Iranian high school students believed more in their success than their failure in high school English language learning.

Moreover, the results demonstrated that Iranian high school students attributed their success in language learning to effort, interest, and good preparation for exams. On the other hand, they ascribed their failure to teacher's method, lack of positive attitude to teachers, lack of praise and teachers' encouragement, lack of appropriate learning environment, lack of sufficient teachers' help, and lack of good luck in exams.

Those students who regarded themselves as unsuccessful ascribed their failure to first external factors and then to internal factors. In other words, most of them believed that teachers by not using proper teaching methods were guilty for their failure, although they did not neglect their lack of motivation and perseverance as internal factors.

The findings of the study are in line with the study conducted in Bahrain. Williams *et al.* (2001) found 11 positive and 18 negative attributions among 25 students learning English in Bahrain. In this study, the findings showed that both Bahraini students and teachers attributed success to internal controllable factors such as efforts. Bahraini students attributed their failure to lack of help from teachers and lack of support from family. These findings support the same idea that internal factors are crucial in students' success in Bahrain and Iran.

The findings of this study are also in line with Jones and Davis (1965) belief that people tend to attribute success to internal factors and failure to external factors. Here in the present study, students attributed their failure to teachers' teaching methods although they viewed internal factors to be accountable but to a lesser degree.

The practical implication of the study is helping the authorities of the Ministry of Education who are responsible for planning foreign language programs in high schools in Iran. The findings of the study suggest that authorities should devote a lot of attention to teachers' teaching method, which is considered by many students as the main cause of failure in language learning. In the present study, students pointed their fingers toward teachers as the people responsible in their

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failure. The lack of positive encouragement and praise by the teachers is also referred to by students. These findings suggest that more attention should be given to teachers in general. And it is implied that if some improvement is made in the quality of teaching and methodology, the rate of success in language learning among Iranian high school students will be increased.

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Contributors/Acknowledgement: All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study.

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