Attribution Tendency And Its Relationship With Actual And Perceived Proficiency

Setsuko Mori
setsukomori@mac.com
Kinki University
Japan

Thang Siew Ming
thang@ukm.my
School of Language Studies and Linguistics
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Nor Fariza Mohd Nor
norfarizamn@yahoo.com
School of Language Studies and Linguistics
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Vijaya Latshmi Suppiah
vlatsmi@usm.my
Universiti Sains Malaysia

Oon Sok Imm
sioon@usm.my
Universiti Sains Malaysia

Abstract

Attribution theory suggests that people attribute different causes for those areas in their lives where they perceive themselves as having succeeded or failed. These perceived causes may be classified into three causal dimensions: locus of control, stability, and controllability. Using attribution theory, this study examines Malaysian university students' attributions for success and failure in learning English as a second language. The study attempts to investigate their perceived reasons for successes and failures on actual language learning tasks, and explores whether their attribution tendencies vary depending on their actual and perceived proficiency. Based on attribution theory, two versions of a questionnaire (one for success and one for failure) were administered to 2152 students at six different universities in Malaysia. Students were required to pick an activity at which they had scored particularly poorly in the previous semester. In the second part of the questionnaire, the students were asked to rate the twelve causes for success or failure on a six point Likert scale. The findings showed that high proficiency learners and those who perceived themselves as high proficiency learners attributed success to their own effort and ability more than mid and low proficiency learners. On the other hand, when it comes to failure experiences, high proficiency learners and those who regarded themselves as having high proficiency showed a stronger tendency to ascribe their unsuccessful

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outcomes to class and interest-related factors such as class atmosphere and interest in the task whereas those with lower proficiency tended to blame their failure on the lack of their own effort and ability.

Keywords: Malaysian university students, success and failure attributions, actual proficiency, perceived proficiency, English as a second language.

Introduction

Attribution theory

Attribution theory originated from the field of social psychology that describes the way certain people explain the causes of events, their own behavior as well as other people's behavior. Heider (1958) is generally acknowledged to have laid the foundation for attribution theory. He believes that the way in which people perceive or think about events has a much more important effect upon their behavior than what actually happened and relates this to the causes for success and failure. He posits that people usually refer to a set group of external factors (situation, environmental) and internal factors (dispositional, within themselves) when they are asked about why certain events or behavior happened.

Weiner (1974, 1986) later expanded on Heider's position, identifying ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck as the most important achievement attributions. In addition, an outcome might also be attributed to a number of other factors including other people (such as teachers or other students), mood, fatigue or illness, personality, and physical appearance (Weiner, 1986). He classified these attributions into three causal dimensions: locus of control, stability, and controllability. In the dimension of locus, an outcome can be described as either internal or external; in the dimension of stability, the outcome is either stable or unstable (whether the causes change over time or not); and in the dimension of control, an outcome is either controllable or uncontrollable. Weiner (1986) further postulated that people attribute their successes and failures, as well as those of other individuals, according to the different combinations of the six dimensions mentioned above. Each of these causal dimensions influences individuals' expectancies for success, and has important affective consequences.

Attribution and second language acquisition

Some researchers (e.g., Kalaja, 2004; Heikinnen, 1999; Hsieh & Schallert, 2008; Isomöttönen, 2003; Tse, 2000; Ushioda, 2001; Williams & Burden, 1999; Williams, Burden, & Al-Baharna, 2001; Williams, Burden, Poulet, & Maun, 2004) have attempted to explore the topic of attribution theory and second language acquisition. However, most of the existing studies have uncovered a very wide range of attributions using qualitative methods, and offer mixed results. Therefore, more quantitative studies need to be conducted to offer new insights and a more conclusive and established findings on attribution theory and second language acquisition.

Williams, Burden and Al-Baharna (2001) for example, uncovered 11 positive and 18 negative attributions among 25 students learning English in Bahrain. They found that the main attributions for success included practice, support from family, and a positive attitude, while the most common negative attributions include teaching methods, lack of support

from family and teachers, poor comprehension, and a negative attitude. In another study on foreign language learning among 285 adolescent students in the UK, Williams, Burden, Poulet and Maun (2004) identified 21 attribution categories, with the major reasons for doing well cited as effort, strategy, ability, teacher, interest, task, and peers. They also found that the majority of attributions for both success and failure were considered internal. On the other hand, as a result of interviews with L2 learners of French, Williams and Burden (1999) found that the British primary school children attributed success to external factors, and many of the attributions mentioned were strongly connected to teacher influence.

As for teacher influence, a study by Tse (2000) on 51 undergraduates in the United States also showed that these students attributed their success in foreign language learning to the teacher's help, a positive classroom atmosphere, family or community assistance from target language speakers. Similarly, Yan and Li (2008) reported that the high achievers confirmed that apart from the learning environment, the teacher plays a positive role in improving their English. The low achievers, on the other hand, attributed most of their failure to the poor learning environment and the teacher. Although both groups attributed different roles to the learning environment and the teacher, it was agreed unanimously that the learning environment and the teacher could have a profound influence, either positive or negative, on the students' attribution of success and failures in language acquisition.

The impact of the learning environment and teacher was consistently identified by quantitative studies (Gobel & Mori, 2007; Mori, 2008, 2009, 2010; Mori, Gobel, Thepsiri, & Pojanapunya, 2010). According to Mori et al. (2010), both Japanese and Thai university students focused more on external factors (such as teachers and classroom atmosphere) for success and internal factors (such as lack of ability and effort) for failure. In other words, those students credited others when they succeeded while they blamed themselves when they failed. Mori et al. (2010) suggested that such a self-critical tendency may be explained in terms of cultural bias.

Attributions, proficiency and self-efficacy

This research paper is primarily interested in investigating the relationships between attribution tendency, proficiency levels and perceived proficiency levels in English. There are a few related studies that have attempted to uncover possible relationships between attributions and proficiency. In a study on four Chinese postgraduate students in China, Yan and Li (2008) found that unlike the high proficiency group, the low proficiency group attributed their failure to lack of ability. The result is consistent with that of Tse (2000). Mori (2008, 2009) also suggested that although self-critical tendency was identified with students at all proficiency levels, the low proficiency group had a greater propensity to blame lack of ability, lack of interest, difficulty of the task, and dislikes for the absence of improvement. Another difference between high and low achievers suggested by Yan and Li (2008) is that the former group attributed successful outcomes to teachers and learning environment whereas the latter group attributed unsuccessful outcomes to teachers and learning environment. The result is in congruence with Mori (2010).

In addition to actual proficiency level, this study explores possible relationships between attribution tendency, and perceived proficiency levels. Looking into perceived proficiency levels would bring in the dimension of self-perception and self-efficacy. Bandura's (1977)

theory of self-efficacy and Weiner's attribution theory (1974) are closely related in representing the perspectives which contribute to an understanding of students' beliefs and explanations of their achievement. Self-efficacy refers to the beliefs that individuals have about their capabilities to complete a task successfully (Bandura, 1986), and is affected by attributions that students make for their successes and failures (Bong, 2004). Studies exploring the relationship between self-efficacy and academic performance reported a positive association between high self-efficacy with successful academic performance (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990, in Hsieh & Schallert, 2008; Lane & Lane, 2001; Akama, 2006; Skaalavik & Skaalavik, 2004). Smith (2001, in Cheng & Chiou, 2010) argued that self-motivated students believe in their abilities (self-efficacy), controllable outcomes (attribution) and have attainable goals. On the other hand, people with little self-motivation have less confidence in their abilities and hold the view that personal goals are unrealistic. This will lead to low academic achievement or failure.

As for studies on attribution, Weiner (2000) emphasized that attributions come from students' self-perception, which in turn influence their expectancy, values, emotions and beliefs about their competence, and hence, influence their motivation. Bandura (1986) also proposed a reciprocal relationship between self-efficacy and attribution. However, Hsieh and Schallert (2008) point out that the constructs of self-efficacy and attributions have rarely been combined to understand students' beliefs about their performance nor have they been applied to the field of foreign language learning. Tremblay and Gardner's (1995) study was recognized as the first attempt to investigate the relationship of a number of psychological factors, including self-efficacy and causal attributions to existing measures of attitude and motivation for learning a language. They asserted that learners' self-efficacy was directly related to motivational behaviors, but indirectly predictive of achievement. Hu and Xu (2002, in Feng, 2005) investigated the relationship among 8th graders' learning attribution, learning strategies, learning self-efficacy and their achievements in language learning and in Mathematics. The results revealed that there were no gender differences in relation to self-efficacy and learning strategies. However, there was significant correlation between gender differences, self-efficacy and learning strategies.

Hsieh and Schallert (2008) examined the three-way relationship between attributions, self-efficacy and performance in the context of foreign language learning (Spanish, German and French). They found that students across the three foreign language courses had different self-efficacy levels. Spanish learners had the highest self-efficacy while German learners had the highest scores on their first test. In addition, students who believed that they are unsuccessful learners, but rated failure as due to lack of effort have higher self-efficacy than those who did not acknowledge effort as attribution. Thus, the results indicated that the belief that failure is due to factors which are within a student's control can help students build beliefs about competence in learning a foreign language. A significant finding is that self-efficacy can be sustained at a high level even for unsuccessful students when failure is attributed to internal, controllable and unstable factors. Hsieh and Schallert (2008) suggested that effort attribution may protect unsuccessful students' self-efficacy. Therefore, certain types of attributions may be more desirable than others (Hsieh & Schallert, 2008), as attributions can influence students' self-efficacy and have been shown to have important consequences for future success (Graham, 1991; Schunk, 1982).

Studies on motivation in Malaysia tend to focus on integrative orientation (intrinsic motivation) and instrumental orientation (extrinsic motivation) and the relationship of motivation with attitudes. Thang (2004), for example, in her study on four types of Malaysian learners: Malay distance and on-campus learners, and Chinese distance and on-campus learners found that extrinsic motivation was associated with ineffective approaches to learning in the four groups of learners. Applying the Cognitive Evaluation Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), this would mean that extrinsic motivation was seen as a controlling factor but would not lead to increased perception of self-determination or competence and this contradicted Kember's proposal that awareness of positive quality of courses would lead to intrinsic and career motivation.

Ainol Madziah Zubairi and Isarji Sarudin's study (2009) also found extrinsic motivation to be the dominating factor in their investigation of the learning of foreign languages in two public universities namely Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM). They found that majority of the students from both universities agreed that they were motivated to learn a foreign language for extrinsic reasons such as for their future career, to be more knowledgeable and to fulfill graduation requirements. However, UiTM students were slightly more motivated to learn a foreign language for intrinsic reasons than UKM students, for reasons such as interest, enjoyment, to learn the literature of another culture and for travelling purposes.

Samsiah Bidin et al. (2009) study confirmed most of the findings of the above studies. They tried to describe the relationship between students' motivation, attitude and their English Language performance. The subjects were from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM). The mean scores analysis of the motivation and performance revealed that the students were more extrinsically than intrinsically motivated to learn English, but the relationship between intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation and performance was weak, which suggested that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation did not have a direct influence on students' English language performance. However, students' attitudes towards learning English did affect their language performance.

As far as we know, there has not been any study in Malaysia that explores the relationship between attribution tendency, proficiency levels and perceived proficiency level in English; hence, the findings of this study will be illuminating and will address the paucity of research in this field. Specifically, the research questions of this study are:

1. Are first year Malaysian university students' attributions for success and failure different based on their proficiency levels? If yes, in what ways are they different?
2. Are first year Malaysian university students' attributions for success and failure different based on their perceived proficiency levels? If yes, in what ways are they different?

Method

Participants

2152 first year Malaysian students from six universities participated in this study. Although none of them majored in foreign languages, all of them had a minimum of eleven years of

exposure to English as a second language in primary and secondary education, and were required to take English proficiency courses focusing on reading, writing and grammar.

Measure

In order to investigate students' attribution tendencies, two versions of a questionnaire (see Appendix) were created based on previous research (Vispoel & Austin, 1995). In one version – called Attribution to Success Questionnaire (ASQ) – approximately half the participants (1088 students) were asked about successful learning experience, and in the other version – called Attribution to Failure (AFQ) – the other half (1064 students) were asked about unsuccessful learning. The questionnaires were translated from English to Bahasa Malaysia at their schools by experienced translators. Each version comprised two parts. In the first part of the ASQ, the students were asked to choose an activity from a list of 25 activities in which they were particularly successful at. Although those activities were roughly divided into four skills, they were instructed to choose only one activity in order to avoid complications in the subsequent statistical analyses. As for the first part of the AFQ, students were asked to choose an activity at which they performed particularly poorly in the previous semester. The second part of both versions was the same. The students were asked to rate the twelve causes for success (for ASQ) or failure (for AFQ) on a six point Likert scale. The attributions included ability, effort, strategy, interest in the activity, luck, teacher influence, task difficulty, class atmosphere, grades, preparation, enjoyment of studying English, and levels of the class.

Together with the attribution questionnaire, the students in both success and failure groups were asked to provide Sijil Peperiksaan Malaysia (SPM) and Malaysian University English Test (MUET) grades, and their perceived proficiency. SPM is the examination that all Malaysian students have to take after they complete the final year of their secondary school (fifth form), and is used by these students to seek entrance into pre-university programs. For the questionnaires in this study, the students were instructed to choose from the following five categories of SPM grades: (A) A1-A2, (B) C3-C4, (C) C5-C6, (D) P7-P8, and (E) F9. However, since almost no students chose category E and few chose category D, category E was excluded from the analysis, and A was defined as the high proficiency group, B as the mid proficiency group and C and D as the low proficiency group. Their SPM results were used instead of their MUET results for two reasons. First, a large number of the students did not enter their MUET results. Hence, if the MUET results were used then the sample population would have to be drastically reduced. Second, the analysis of data using MUET results did not yield any distinct pattern and there seemed to be inconsistency in the findings. However, it was possible to obtain a clear-cut pattern using the SPM results. As for perceived proficiency levels, students rated their own proficiency levels according to three levels i.e. Low, Mid and High.

Procedure

Students from the six universities were asked to fill in either the ASQ or the AFQ. The division into two groups was to avoid any unnecessary confusion that might occur if they were asked about both successful and unsuccessful experiences at the same time. Roughly equal numbers of ASQ and AFQ were distributed in each university in such a manner as to produce a fairly even distribution of sample population in terms of proficiency levels and students' major disciplines. Entire classes were asked to complete either the ASQ or AFQ.

The questionnaires were completed within 15 to 20 minutes.

Results

Dimensionality of success and failure attributions

Prior to determining the extent to which attribution ratings varied as a function of proficiency, perceived proficiency, factor analysis was performed to reduce the number of overlapping measured variables to a smaller set of factors.

First, the dimensionality of the 12 items from the success attribution measure was analyzed using principal components analysis. Four criteria were used to determine the number of factors to rotate: a minimum eigenvalue of 1.0, the scree test, a minimum loading of .45, and the interpretability of the factor solution. Based on these criteria, three factors were rotated using a Varimax rotation procedure. The rotated solution, as shown in Table 1, yielded three interpretable factors, class and interest-related success attribution, internal/controllable success attribution, and task difficulty-related external/uncontrollable success attribution. The class and interest-related success attribution accounted for 34.50%, internal/controllable success attribution accounted for 11.29%, and task difficulty-related external/uncontrollable success attribution accounted for 9.40% of the item variance.

Table 1: Principal components results for success (n=670)

Attribution	**Dimension**			**Component**			
	Locus	Stability	Controllability	1	2	3	h^2
Interest	internal	stable	controllable	**0.57**	0.47	0.03	0.54
Teacher	external	stable	uncontrollable	**0.73**	0.06	0.13	0.56
Class	external	stable	uncontrollable	**0.75**	0.08	0.21	0.62
Grade	internal	stable	controllable	**0.50**	0.23	-0.06	0.30
Enjoyment	internal	stable	controllable	**0.52**	0.49	0.01	0.50
Level	external	stable	uncontrollable	**0.74**	0.15	0.18	0.60
Ability	internal	stable	uncontrollable	0.08	**0.68**	0.27	0.54
Effort	internal	unstable	controllable	0.19	**0.70**	-0.03	0.52
Strategy	internal	unstable	controllable	0.06	**0.78**	0.06	0.61
Preparation	internal	unstable	controllable	0.40	**0.64**	0.00	0.56
Luck	external	unstable	uncontrollable	0.03	0.08	**0.82**	0.68
Task	external	stable	uncontrollable	0.23	0.07	**0.73**	0.60

Using the same criteria, the dimensionality of the 12 items from the failure attribution measure was analyzed. The rotated solution, as shown in Table 2, yielded three interpretable factors, class and interest-related failure attribution, internal/controllable failure attribution, and ability-related failure attribution. Note that principal components analyses for failure and success show similar results. Specifically, interest in the activity,

teacher influence, class atmosphere, interest in getting a good grade, enjoyment of studying English and class level loaded together on factor one, and effort, study strategy and preparation for class loaded together on factor two for both failure and success.

Table 2: Principal components results for failure (n=666)

Attribution	**Dimension**			**Component**			
	Locus	Stability	Controllability	1	2	3	h^2
Interest	internal	stable	controllable	**0.56**	0.31	0.17	0.44
Luck	external	unstable	uncontrollable	**0.52**	0.09	0.28	0.36
Teacher	external	stable	uncontrollable	**0.81**	0.03	0.06	0.66
Class	external	stable	uncontrollable	**0.73**	0.00	0.15	0.56
Grade	internal	stable	controllable	**0.78**	0.22	-0.29	0.75
Enjoyment	internal	stable	controllable	**0.77**	0.28	-0.02	0.68
Level	external	stable	uncontrollable	**0.80**	0.16	0.06	0.66
Effort	internal	unstable	controllable	0.23	**0.81**	-0.07	0.71
Strategy	internal	unstable	controllable	0.15	**0.61**	0.35	0.51
Preparation	internal	unstable	controllable	0.13	**0.77**	0.10	0.62
Ability	internal	stable	uncontrollable	-0.08	0.36	**0.62**	0.51
Task	external	stable	uncontrollable	0.20	-0.03	**0.83**	0.73

Research question one

Relationship between success attributions and proficiency: A one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to determine the effect of three proficiency levels on the three success attribution factors measured by factor scores. Significant differences were found among the proficiency levels on the dependent measures, Wilks's Λ =.92, F(6, 1330) = 9.41, p<.00. Table 3 contains the means and the standard deviations on the dependent variables for the three groups.

Analyses of variance (ANOVA) on each dependent variable were conducted as follow-up tests on the MANOVA. Using the Bonferroni method, each ANOVA was tested at the 0.017 level. The ANOVA on internal/controllable success attribution was significant, F (2, 667) = 25.43, p = .00. Post hoc analyses to the univariate ANOVA for the attributions consisted of conducting pairwise comparisons to find which proficiency level affected the success attributions most strongly. Each pairwise comparison was tested at the 0.017 level. The results indicate that the high proficiency group scored significantly higher than the mid and low proficiency groups, and the mid proficiency group scored significantly higher than the low proficiency group on internal/controllable success attribution.

Table 3: Analysis of variance of success attributions with proficiency as the independent variable

Attribution	Proficiency	N	M	SD
Class/interest-related	Low	212	0.06	1.02
	Mid	212	0.00	1.02
	High	246	-0.05	0.96
Internal/controllable	Low	212	-0.33	1.00
	Mid	212	-0.03	0.93
	High	246	0.31	0.96
Task difficulty-related	Low	212	0.00	1.08
	Mid	212	-1.11	0.95
	High	246	0.1	0.96

Relationship between failure attributions and proficiency: A one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to determine the effect of three proficiency levels on the three failure attribution factors measured by factor scores. Significant differences were found among the proficiency levels on the dependent measures, Wilks's Λ =.92, $F(6, 1322) = 10.37$, $p<.00$. Table 4 contains the means and the standard deviations on the dependent variables for the three groups.

Analyses of variance (ANOVA) on each dependent variable were conducted as follow-up tests on the MANOVA. Using the Bonferroni method, each ANOVA was tested at the 0.017 level. The ANOVAs on class/interest-related failure attribution and ability-related failure attribution were significant, $F (2, 663) = 9.40$, $p = .00$, and $F (2, 663) = 18.70$, $p = .00$, respectively. Post hoc analyses to the univariate ANOVA for the attributions consisted of conducting pair wise comparisons to find which proficiency level affected the failure attributions most strongly. Each pair wise comparison was tested at the 0.017 level. The results show that the high proficiency group scored significantly higher than the mid and low proficiency groups on class/interest-related failure attribution whereas the low proficiency group and the mid proficiency group scored significantly higher than the high proficiency group on ability-related failure attribution.

Table 4: Analysis of variance of failure attributions with proficiency as the independent variable

Attribution	Proficiency	N	M	SD
Class/interest-related	Low	215	-0.14	0.93
	Mid	235	-0.09	0.96
	High	216	0.23	1.07
Internal/controllable attribution	Low	215	0.10	0.92
	Mid	235	0.00	0.97
	High	216	-0.11	1.10
Ability-related	Low	215	0.26	1.01
	Mid	235	0.04	0.92
	High	216	-0.31	0.99

Research question two

Relationship between success attributions and perceived proficiency: A one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to determine the effect of three perceived proficiency levels on the three success attribution factors measured by factor scores. Significant differences were found among the perceived proficiency levels on the dependent measures, Wilks's Λ =.81, $F(6, 1330) = 25.44$, $p<.00$. Table 5 contains the means and the standard deviations on the dependent variables for the three groups.

Analyses of variance (ANOVA) on each dependent variable were conducted as follow-up tests on the MANOVA. Using the Bonferroni method, each ANOVA was tested at the 0.017 level. The ANOVA on internal/controllable success attribution was significant, $F (2, 669) = 71.20$, $p = .00$. Post hoc analyses to the univariate ANOVA for the attributions consisted of conducting pair wise comparisons to find which perceived proficiency level affected the success attributions most strongly. Each pair wise comparison was tested at the 0.017 level. The results indicate that the high level group scored significantly higher than the mid and low high level groups, and the mid level group scored significantly higher than the low level group on internal/controllable success attribution.

Table 5: Analysis of variance of success attributions with perceived proficiency as the independent variable

Attribution	Perceived proficiency	N	M	SD
Class/interest-related	Low	198	-0.10	1.06
	Mid	274	0.11	0.96
	High	198	-0.05	0.98
Internal/controllable	Low	198	-0.49	0.99
	Mid	274	-0.07	0.87
	High	198	0.59	0.89
Task difficulty-related	Low	198	-0.10	1.00
	Mid	274	-0.05	0.96
	High	198	0.17	1.04

Relationship between failure attributions and perceived proficiency: A MANOVA was also performed to determine the effect of three perceived proficiency levels on the three failure attribution factors measured by factor scores. Significant differences were found among the proficiency levels on the dependent measures, Wilks's Λ =.88, F(6, 1322) = 14.42, p<.00. Table 6 contains the means and the standard deviations on the dependent variables for the three groups.

Analyses of variance (ANOVA) on each dependent variable were conducted as follow-up tests on the MANOVA. Using the Bonferroni method, each ANOVA was tested at the 0.017 level. The ANOVAs on class/interest-related failure attribution, internal/controllable failure attribution, and ability-related failure attribution were significant, F (2, 663) = 8.87, p = .00, F (2, 663) = 16.85, p = .00, and F (2, 663) = 16.39, p = .00, respectively. Post hoc analyses to the univariate ANOVA for the attributions consisted of conducting pair wise comparisons to find which proficiency level affected the success attributions most strongly. Each pair wise comparison was tested at the 0.017 level. The results imply that those who perceived themselves as mid proficiency scored significantly higher than those who regarded themselves as low proficiency on class/interest-related attribution, and those who perceived themselves as low proficiency scored significantly higher than those who considered themselves as mid and high proficiency on internal/controllable attribution and ability-related attribution.

Table 6: Analysis of variance of failure attributions with perceived proficiency as the independent variable

Attribution	Perceived proficiency	N	M	SD
Class/interest-related	Low	219	-0.18	0.92
	Mid	278	0.18	1.05
	High	169	-0.07	0.97
Internal/controllable attribution	Low	219	0.22	0.92
	Mid	278	0.04	0.94
	High	169	-0.35	1.1
Ability-related	Low	219	0.27	1.04
	Mid	278	-0.02	0.87
	High	169	-0.31	1.05

Discussion

The findings based on factor analysis for success and failure attributions show similar results for factor one and factor two. Specifically, interest in the activity, teacher influence, class atmosphere, interest in getting a good grade, enjoyment of studying English and class level loaded together on factor one, and effort, study strategy and preparation for class loaded together on factor two. The attributions of factor one is intriguing and is not in line with findings of studies undertaken in other countries. In our opinion the loading of both external and internal attributions (i.e., class and interest-related attributions) on factor one is due to the fact that generally Malaysian students view teachers, classroom environment and grades as contributive factors to their interest in doing well in schools. This finding is in line with other studies (Thang & Azarina Alias, 2007; Thang, 2009) that also found Malaysian students to be more classroom-oriented and teacher-centric. Another interesting finding is that of factor three. For success attribution, easiness of task was linked to luck and for failure attribution, difficulty of task was linked to lack of ability. This suggests a common Malaysian phenomenon of not wanting to come across as "showing off" when a person does well in something and of being humble and not wanting to blame anyone if he/she does not perform well in a task.

On comparing differences across proficiency levels, the findings from MANOVA imply that the higher their proficiency, the more they attributed success to internal/controllable factors (ability, effort, strategy, and preparation). This finding is consistent with other studies (Thang & Azarina, 2007; Thang, 2009; Tse, 2000; Yan & Li, 2008). Findings by Thang and Azarina (2007) and Thang (2009) revealed that high proficiency students were less teacher-centric than low proficiency students suggesting that they are more independent learners and hence have higher efficacy and more confidence in their own abilities to do well.

Another possible explanation for this finding is that the "self-enhancement bias," a tendency that individuals attribute internal factors such as effort and ability when they

succeed, may be more evident in higher proficiency students. Although some studies (e.g., Heine & Lehman, 1995; Kitayama & Markus, 1995; Kitayama, Markus, & Matsumoto, 1995) report that this phenomenon is often absent with Asian students, the high proficiency Malaysian students in this study appeared to be more similar to students in the West in that they will confidently attribute their success to internal factors. Thang and Azarina (2007), and Thang (2009) also found high proficiency students to be more similar to students in the West in terms of being more confident and autonomous in their learning styles. However, this finding was only limited to high proficiency students and appears to hold true in this present study as well.

Relationships between success attributions and perceived proficiency were also analyzed in this study. The results also show that those who regarded themselves as high proficiency learners had stronger tendency to attribute internal/controllable factors (ability, effort, strategy, and preparation) to success than those who perceived themselves as mid and low proficiency learners. This makes sense as students who evaluate their proficiency highly are more likely to be confident and thus more comfortably attribute their ability and effort to success.

With regard to failure, the results of MANOVA suggest that the lower their proficiency the more they are likely to blame lack of ability, and difficulty of the task. This finding is in congruence with that of Mori (2008, 2009). She proposed that less proficient students tend to blame lack of ability for failure more frequently than their more proficient counterparts.

On the contrary, the results imply that more proficient students have a stronger tendency to choose class/interest-related reasons for failure. The reason behind this may be they are less self critical than the low proficiency students and, instead of blaming themselves for failure, they find fault with the external environment and their teachers.

The results of further statistical analyses also suggest that those who perceived themselves as low proficiency learners blamed lack of ability for failure as well whereas those who considered themselves as being higher proficiency learners blamed class/interest-related factors for unsuccessful outcomes. However, there is one significant difference between actual proficiency and perceived proficiency: unlike those who are actually low proficiency, those who perceived themselves as having lower proficiency showed a stronger tendency to blame internal factors such as lack of effort for failure. MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) argue that highly anxious learners find that confronting their perceived limitations can be painful and demotivating. This may lead them to focus their attention on their perceived inadequacies, the potential for failure and the consequences of that imagined failure. However, Hsieh and Schallert (2008) pointed out this is not necessarily a negative phenomenon as unsuccessful learners who rated failure due to lack of effort have higher efficacy than those who did not do so. Further investigation needs to be undertaken in this area to affirm the truth of the situation.

The finding showed that high proficiency learners and those who perceived themselves as high proficiency learners attributed success to their own effort and ability more than mid and low proficiency learners. On the other hand, when it comes to failure experiences, high proficiency learners and those who regarded themselves as having high proficiency showed a stronger tendency to ascribe their unsuccessful outcomes to class and interest-related factors whereas those with lower proficiency tended to blame their failure

on the lack of their own effort and ability. The findings have implications that may help teachers improve classroom dynamics in Malaysian universities. Since students of higher proficiency and those who perceived themselves to be of higher proficiency are more confident in their own abilities, teachers should allow them greater autonomy and give them more tasks that they can attempt at home. As for less proficiency students and those who perceived themselves to be of lower proficiency, they should be given more attention and guidance.

The likelihood of initiating and undertaking goal-oriented action is greatly determined by the students' perceptions of their own competence and abilities to accomplish a task. As Gardner (1985) pointed out a positive attitude helps learners maintain their language skills after classroom instruction is over. Hence, since the students of lower proficiency and those who perceived themselves to be of such have low perceptions of their own abilities, there is a dire need to change their mindsets and help them develop a positive attitude towards English language learning. Uncovering and reversing students' negative perceptions towards the target language is a psychological empowerment that can change their self-efficacies, and propel them to greater success in their learning. Furthermore, as they are more likely to blame lack of ability and difficulty of the task for their failure, breaking down their mental blocks would help them achieve small but significant improvement in their performance.

Teachers can increase students' linguistic self-confidence with praise and encouragement, providing feedback that is neither controlling nor belittling, but rather encouraging and informational. By promoting learner autonomy, teachers can ultimately help the learners take responsibility for their own learning and perceive that their learning successes or failures can be attributed to their own efforts rather than factors beyond their control**.**

It must be noted that the findings in this study are based on self-reported data which comes with built-in limitations. Students may have reported what they perceived to be desirable, and this may not reflect the actual situation. Another limitation of the study is that the subjects involved in this study represent only first year university students in three disciplines, namely Science, Business and Management and Social Sciences. Thus, the findings may not be generalized to a larger population. However, these findings offer deeper insights into the problems faced by Malaysian English Language learners and this in itself is a worthy contribution to the field of Second Language teaching and learning.

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Appendix

An English translation of the questionnaire for successful and unsuccessful learning experience

I. Personal Data
Fill in the information which is appropriate to you.
1. University:……
Faculty:……Department:……
ID: ……..
2. English Course studied in the 1st semester:……..……
3. Sex: Male Female

II. Perceptions of English Language Learning
1. Think about your past experience in the 1st semester English class. Try to remember a time in which you did particularly **WELL/POORLY** on an activity in the class. The activity you are thinking of might be listed below. If so, circle the activity. If the activity is not listed below, circle the "other" and describe the activity in the space provided. Be sure to choose only **ONE** activity.

1. Reading texts using appropriate strategies
2. Answering comprehension questions
3. Learning vocabulary
4. Understanding grammar
5. Translating texts and passages from English
6. Reading and summarizing texts
7. Reading quizzes and exams
8. Other reading activities_____
9. Understanding a listening passage using appropriate strategies
10. Listening and repetition/dictation
11. Listening and note taking
12. Listening quizzes and exams
13. Other listening activities_____
14. Giving a presentation and/or speech
15. Role play
16. Giving opinions/sharing ideas in class/groups
17. Answering teacher's questions
18. Speaking quizzes and exams
19. Other speaking activities_____
20. Writing a summary
21. Writing paragraphs
22. Writing diaries and/or portfolios
23. Writing a report
24. Writing quizzes and exams
25. Other writing activities_____

2. There may have been many reasons why you did WELL/ POORLY on the activity you just circled. The following statements are possible reasons why you might have done WELL/POORLY. Read each statement and circle the letter to indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement.

A Strongly disagree	D Somewhat agree
B Disagree	E Agree
C Somewhat disagree	F Strongly agree

1. I have strong/weak skills in English.
2. I tried/didn't try very hard.
3. I used the right/wrong study or practice methods.
4. I had interest/no interest in the activity.
5. I had good/bad luck.
6. The teacher's instruction was appropriate/inappropriate.
7. The task was easy/difficult.
8. I liked/didn't like the atmosphere of the class.
9. I had interest/no interest in getting a good grade.
10. I was well-prepared/ill-prepared.
11. I like/don't like English.
12. The level of the class was appropriate/inappropriate.

About the authors

Setsuko Mori (Ph.D) is an associate professor in the Faculty of Law at Kinki University, in Osaka, Japan. Her research interests include learners' attitudes and motivation to study and read in English. She is on the editorial board of Reading in a Foreign Language and JALT Journal.

Thang Siew Ming (Ph.D) is an Associate Professor at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Her areas of interest are learner autonomy, distance education, CALL, learning styles and strategies. Her recent publications are in the AJET, CALL Journal and IJEDICT. Her homepage: www.ukm.my/smthang

Nor Fariza Mohd Nor (Ph.D) is a senior lecturer at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UKM. Her areas of interests are discourse analysis and ICT. Her current researches are on discourse and e-learning and investigation of academic literacy among international students.

Vijaya Latshmi Suppiah has a degree in Linguistics from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). She currently teaches English Proficiency courses at the School of Languages, Literacies and Translation, USM and her areas of interest include translation and the role of ICT in teaching and learning.

Oon Sok Imm is a senior teacher at the School of Languages, Literacies and Translation, Universiti Sains Malaysia. She has a B.Sc (Hons.) in Human Communication from Aston University, UK., and is currently pursuing a long-distance masters in Forensic Linguistics. Her interests lie in discourse analysis and forensic linguistics.