

## Attribution Theory and L2 Writing Processes: Results and Implications

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**Abstract:** *This article discusses that attribution theory can be helpful in interpreting how L2 student writers view the writing process. Attribution theory has its roots in the field of social psychology which describes the way people interpret the reasons of happenings, their own behavior, as well as other people's behavior. This article also describes the basics of this theory, the results of research that was conducted on the attributional styles of Inter, F. Sc (Pre-Med, Pre-Engg) students are presented. In the end, general suggestions of attribution theory for the ESL composition teaching are presented for writing instructors in Pakistan.*

**Key words:** Attribution theory; Second Language Writing; ESL

Suppose you are a student and discussing with some class fellows the results of class tests. One student in your class, good friend of yours, name him Ahsan, got excellent marks in the test. You and your class fellows are thinking about how he got such excellent marks in test. One class fellow firmly insists that the test was easy, another emphatically states that your friend was simply very lucky, yet another says Ahsan just studied hard, you then impatiently announce that they are all wrong and that Ahsan did well because he is extraordinarily talented.

### Theory of Attribution

One frequently encounters such a form of analysis about outcomes in life is an example of attribution theory at work. Attribution theory has its roots in the field of social psychology that is concerned with how people interpret the reasons of events, individuals or their own behavior. It hypothesizes that we try to reflect on our actions at a fundamental level just like amateur reflective practitioners in our daily life, constantly trying to logically and systematically piece together evidence so that judgments about events or behavior can be made. The purpose of this paper is present a short general introduction to attribution theory and to argue that the theory also clings to the possibility of helping to interpret, in part, why students are successful or unsuccessful in producing a well written, coherent piece of writing, as well as pointing to ways in which teachers can directly facilitate the process of writing.

Fritz Heider a well known social psychologist, is in general, considered to be the father of attribution theory. He believed that the manner people perceive or think about events has a much more important cause upon their behavior than the events in themselves (what really happened).

Specifically, Heider focused on what people believed about the causes of success and failure. He further described that when people are questioned about why events or a certain type of behavior has occurred, they usually refer to a set group of external (situational, environment) and internal (dispositional, from inside the individuals) factors. (Heider 1958).

The psychologist, Bernard Weiner, (1986), substantiating Heider's views, has suggested that people, in general, use four kinds of attributions for interpreting why success and failures crop up in life. These four can be evidently seen in the test example about Ahsan: task difficulty ("The test was easy."), luck ("Ahsan was just lucky. "), effort (Ahsan tried really hard. "), ability ("Ahsan did well because he is exceptionally talented.").

The types of effort and ability are obviously internal attributes in that both are personal and come from within the individuals, while luck and task difficulty are external, that is, environmental. Weiner also speculated two other variables, stability and controllability. Stability refers to whether the perceived cause of the behavior is stable, in other words, whether it will be stable in the future or whether it will change or disappear over time. For example, will Ahsan study hard for the next exam? Controllability means whether the perceived cause can be controlled by the individual or is it something that ultimately can't be controlled. Good luck is clearly something that is not controllable.

Putting all of this together, Appendix 1 shows all the components, according to Weiner, involved in the process of making an attribution (using Ahsan as our example). In essence, Weiner declares that making an attribution about the cause of an event involves three decisions: First, an individual has to decide whether the attribution that is being made is internal or external. Then, they need to determine whether or not it is controllable. Finally, they have to judge whether the cause is a stable or unstable happening. After these decisions are made, a final attribution of success or failure can be determined.

While all of this calculating may initially appear to be excessively complicated and abstract, the experimental validity of the theory has been extensively verified (see any standard social psychology textbook, which will have a section on attributions). If examined carefully, the main ideas do make intuitive and practical sense. In fact, this scheme for interpreting our daily attributions made for success and failures is not new and actually has a long legacy. For example, Shakespeare, in 1602, in act no two of his comedy *Twelfth Night* elegantly caught the heart of attribution theory, when Malvolio reads a forged love letter which advocates him to "be not afraid of greatness. "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them. "

### **Student Writers and Cross-cultural Differences**

Individuals differ in both the way in which they perceive attributions and in the ways they combine attributional categories when applying them to situations. These differences in turn result in different outcomes. For example, if a student believes that writing in English is just too difficult to write, and this belief is a stable, internal factor, then he or she will have little motivation to write. If a student thinks that if they work hard and are persistent, they can write in English, and that this effort is a stable, internal factor, and then they will probably be highly motivated to work hard if they want to write in English. Attributional studies have also revealed that there are significant differences in how casual attributions are made between cultures. The researchers, for example; Smith & Bond, 1993, Nisbett 2003, and Brow, 2004, have beautifully highlighted these factors.

### **Attribution Theory and Writing L2 (English)**

One of the major problems involved with doing research on writing processes has been the methodological problem of not being able to find out what goes on in a writers mind when writing. Attribution theory holds the possibility of tentatively interpreting what happens. For the decisions individuals make about process of writing is a product of how they perceive their writing. If we are in a position in which we can understand how student writers perceive themselves as writers, how they attribute their failures and successes, what reasons they give for their attributions, and whether they feel they are in control of their composing experiences, then we might be able to help them successfully manage their writing skills. Unfortunately, little has been written upon the topic of attribution theory and L2 Writing processes. This study would prove an initiative for future research in this area.

As we have seen in the case of Ahsan, students give a range of reasons for successful writing outcomes. For the past two years, I , have been investigating the attributional styles of Pakistani student writers at intermediate level.

Makin use of a series of self-report questionnaires, open-ended questions, and a vignette, I have been interested in the attributions students make regarding writing in English.

In one of three questionnaires I employed, I asked 104 Inter Part-II(FSc) Pakistani student writers and 71 Inter Part-I(FSc) Pakistani student writers to consider a simple pair of scenarios describing two students, one of whom received high scores on two tests of English, the other who did not. The students were asked to select the most possible cause for success and failure in the first case, and failure in the second. (The possible causes were based on responses to an open-ended questionnaire that was given earlier in the term).

The Inter Part-II(F.Sc) Pakistani student writers results concerning the most possible causes for success were as follows:

Statement	Result
Effort	64%
High Motivation	26%
Good Luck	5%
Ability to write well	3%
Teachers' Role	1%

64% of the respondents choose effort as the cause, 26% thought success was due to high motivation, 5% believed good luck was key, 3% thought that the student had a talent for languages, and 1% credited the teacher.

The Inter Part-II(FSc) Pakistani student writers results concerning the most possible causes for failure were as follows:

Statement	Result
Effort	65%
Lack of Motivation	26%
Bad Luck	5%
Lack of ability to write well	3%
Teachers' Role	1%

65% for effort, 26% thought it was the result of lack of motivation, 5% blamed bad luck, 3% a lack of talent for languages, and 1% blamed the teacher.

The Inter Part-I(FSc) Pakistani student writers' responses were different.

The Inter Part-I(F.Sc) Pakistani student writers results concerning the most possible causes for success were as follows:

Statement	Result
Effort	44%
High Motivation	26%
Good Luck	7%
Ability to write well	3%
Teachers' Role	1%

For success: 44% choose effort as being key, 24% thought it was due to high motivation, 21% thought the student had a talent for languages, 7% credited the teacher, 3% picked good luck as the cause, and 1% believed that general conditions contributed to success.

The Inter Part-I(FSc) Pakistani student writers results concerning the most possible causes for failure were as follows:

Statement	Result
Effort	45%
Lack of Motivation	25%
Bad Luck	21%
Lack of ability to write well	6%
Teachers' Role	1%

For failure: 45% believed it was due to a lack of effort, 25% attributed it to a lack of talent for languages, 21% cited poor motivation, 6% thought it was just bad luck, and 1% cited the teacher and conditions.

Research has shown that in developing countries like Pakistan effort is very important because “by trying hard or appearing to do so no one challenges the existing order or shows a lack of loyalty” (Smith & Bond 1993, 189). This is contrary to developed societies, where much stress is placed on ability. According to Stevenson & Lee (1990) there are influential elements in

the Asian educational system, Asian believe that school success is a product more of effort than ability while Americans think on the contrary. The results of the present study support these results that Pakistani students weight effort, although the student writers of Inter Par-I, put less emphasis on effort, and more stress on ability, than the Student writers of Inter Part-I. But this is not to say that Pakistani students simply believe that effort guarantees success. According to Brown (2004, pp.21) "Perseverance is not enough to ensure success; it simply increases the possibility of success by reducing the probability of failure as the result of giving up pre maturely. Quitting, after all, makes task completion and success impossible".

### **Implications for ESL Writing Teachers**

Attribution theory describes that what a person perceives to be the causes for their past failures or successes will have a major impact upon their expectations, and hence, achievements. Studies by psychologists have indicated that it is possible to change individuals' perceptions about performance outcomes. The most important educational insight that attributional studies show is that the way people see causes has consequences for responsibility, and that people can, by changing the explanations they make about their failures and successes, create new attitudes concerning achievements results. Furthermore, when external causes are changed into internal ones, in the case of positive occurrences, and internal causes are changed into external ones, in the case of negative events, an individuals self-esteem and performance is greatly helped(Seligmann 1991).

What things can an ESL writing instructors/teacher do to help improve their novice or unskilled student writers, attribution styles? It needs to be immediately addressed that I am not arguing that teachers should, in addition to all the pressing duties they now have, also become psychotherapists or professional counselors. Rather, it is being claimed that there are a few general techniques that teachers can use or experiment with that could have important consequences for how their pupils see L2 writing processes and results. As I have mentioned earlier, cross-cultural differences exist in how attributions are made. Furthermore, developmental stage and the social context of a student in which they make their attributions are also important(Williams & Burden 1999).Consequently, the first thing a teacher needs to do is get an idea of the general attributional profile of their students. This can be done by employing a simple questionnaire for testing attribution of the students by ranking reasons for their writing processes successes and failures (see Appendix 2 for an example of this type of questionnaire). With the results from this survey, it is then possible for teachers to see if their classes are generally effort, ability, luck, or task difficulty oriented and whether these factors are considered stable or unstable, and controllable. With this information in hand, appropriate activities and feedback can then be constructed.

For example, if the questionnaire reveals that the classes general attributional style stresses ability, tasks and techniques which build up a sense of mastery and agency in students should be

employed. The teacher needs to establish a clear, natural, and firm connection between effort and results, and show that failure is both controllable and unstable. Research has revealed that rewards, marks based on merits, and even simple praise, can motivate problematic learners. If the general attributional style emphasizes effort, immediate rewards for good efforts should be instituted. Excellent efforts should be praised and displayed. In the views of Williams and Burden(1997) the “extent to which learners are in control of a language will have a pronounced effect upon their motivation to be continually involved in learning that language” . The same can be applied to writing and writers.

Educational psychologists frequently recommend several things that teachers can do to change their students’ negative attributions. First, they believe that a planned set of modeling, practice and feedback experiences are very useful (Brophy 1998). Teachers need to design tasks in which the student can focus on without the fear of failure. Examples of this could be classroom activities where the students are not graded but only monitored. Tasks need to be carefully broken down into not too taxing undertakings, specific to the level of the student so that they feel like they have control over the language learning process. Secondly, when a student is unsuccessful at some writing activity, the processes used by the student need to be retraced or analyzed to find other possible ways of solving the problem. This can occur in or out of class. Examples of skilled writing should be emphasized but these models should not be individuals who were easily successful, but rather models of those writers who labored and made some mistakes before they succeeded. Teachers can also use pertinent examples from their own lives or the lives of people they know or have read about. By using these types of models, students can learn how to cope with difficulties and mistakes and learn how to persist. Lastly, all writing failures need to be attributed to the students from a lack of effort and not to a lack of ability. Throughout all of these approaches, proper feedback in terms of praise (not indiscriminant which can be counterproductive), not pity, and constructive feedback (which is informative, not controlling, and related to performing the task at hand) is fundamental.

Clearly there is a great deal of further research that needs to be done on the implications attribution theory holds for successful writing and process outcomes. Specifically, large sample investigations need to be conducted on how culture and social context impact upon attributional styles concerning successful writing outcomes, and on the way teaching methods can positively influence how students understand language performance outcomes. Teachers interested in attribution theory should investigate the topic in their classrooms. While the application of attribution theory is not new for the field of teaching and learning L2 writing. The theory has the added advantage of fitting into the cognitive-constructivist view of writing as a process approach which takes into account writers intentions, interests, and choices.

How individuals in general make sense of, and interpret, their writing experiences, has been one of the most puzzling and persistent problems in the field of teaching of writing. By

focusing on how writers perceive their successes and failures, I may, in part, reach an understanding of how this complex process occurs.

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**Web Source,**

<http://www.celea.org.cn/teic/63/63-13.pdf>.

**Appendix (A)**

This questionnaire aims to investigate the L2 writers’ attributional attitudes towards the causative relation in their ability to write well. I would be thankful if you could answer the following questions. The information provided will be of great help in my research. Your identity will never be disclosed. The data will be used only for the purpose of this study.

**1- Personal and Background information:**

Name: ----- Age: -----

Group.Fsc.Pre-Engg/Med/ etc-----

Years of writing in English : ----- First Language: -----

**2-Background Information about English Writing:**

1. For how many years you have been writing English?  
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2. How frequently you write in English?  
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3. What type of writing you like for example; essay writing, story writing etc.  
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4. In which language do you prefer to think while writing, English or Urdu?  
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5. When you write, do you translate your ideas from Urdu to English?  
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**Questionnaire to Assess attributional Styles**

When you are not successful in writing in English it is because:		Al wa ys	Freq uent ly	Som etim es	Ra rel y	Ne ver
1	You are not talented to write in English.					
2	You did not work hard to enhance your skills in writing					

3	You believe that writing is a gifted process and you are not lucky enough to write skillfully					
4	The topic of writing that was assigned to you was very difficult					
5	The teachers did not properly teach you about how to write					
6	You were not interested in writing especially in English					
2	<b>When you are successful in writing in English it is because:</b>	<b>Al wa ys</b>	<b>Freq uent ly</b>	<b>Som etim es</b>	<b>Ra rel y</b>	<b>Ne ver</b>
1	You are talented enough to write in English.					
2	You work hard to enhance your skills in writing					
3	You believe that writing is a gifted process and you are lucky enough to write skillfully					
4	The topic of writing that was assigned to you was very easy					
5	The teachers guided you properly about how to write					
6	You were very interested in writing especially in English					
3	<b>Which of the following things are under your control when you try to write :</b>	<b>Al wa ys</b>	<b>Freq uent ly</b>	<b>Som etim es</b>	<b>Ra rel y</b>	<b>Ne ver</b>
1	The difficulty of the topic					
2	Your ability to write on the given topic					
3	How you work hard to learn skills to write good					
4	Your interest in the task of writing					
5	The time you have been given to write on a topic					