# On the Training of the Attributional Style of the Vocational College Students

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**Abstract.** Attribution is an important aspect of the affective factors in the English learning. Nowadays, the level of the vocational college students' attribution is unsatisfactorily low. The article firstly explains the theory of attribution and training styles of attribution, and then it introduces some strategies of attributional training mainly as follows: The teachers should be equipped with rich knowledge about attribution in English learning and help the students learn to make positive attribution; Teachers should create situations and design tasks to provide vocational college students opportunities to experience success. The article aims at transferring the negative attibutional styles of vocational college students' and aiding college English teaching.

## Introduction

Foreign language teaching has seen a gradual shift of emphasis from teacher-dominated to student-centered classroom activities over the recent years. Affective factors, a key concept in second language acquisition, should be given more attention in the teacher-student interaction. Attribution refers to the analysis of how people process past experiences of success and failure, and what consequences these will have on future achievement strivings [1]. Attribution of the past success and failures could be expected to affect motivation [2]. The attribution researches have demonstrated that people's explanations of their experiences have a profound impact on the way they think, feel, and behave [3] [4] [5] [6] [7] [8].

Until now there are few researches on the attributional belief training of vocational college students' , although there are some studies on causal ascription in cognitive aspects of motivation, little attention has been devoted to the vocational college students' attributional belief training in foreign language learning. It would be desirable to conduct research in this field to help learners change their negative attributional style more effectively.

## The Theory of Attribution

It was Heider that first proposed attribution theory in 1958. A central aspect of Heider's theory was that it was how people perceived events rather than the events in themselves that influence behavior [9]. Heider's basic premise is that there is an innate need to understand and control their environments. Thus individuals function as "naive psychologists", and developing can give explanations for significant events. In Heider's view, we would tend to attribute behaviors either to dispositions or to situational factors when required to give reasons for the outcomes of events. It is emphasized by Heider that if a person ascribes his or her failure to environmental forces he may have lowered expectation of future success and is unlikely to make an effort in the future [10].

Another influential and significant attribution theory proposed by Bernard Weiner, lays emphasis on the effects of attribution. Weiner's attribution theory was an attempt to find out how individual interpreted the cause of their behavior and to look at the way their beliefs may impact their behavior and motivation. It is part of human nature to find reasons for one's successes or failures. By seeking explanations and understanding for the causes of one's success or failure, one can predict and control the events that affect them and continue working, with the hope of succeeding again or can be guided so as to avoid failing again. But all of it depends on one's beliefs. Weiner identified ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck as the most important factors affecting attributions for

achievement. Attributions are classified along three causal dimensions: locus of control, stability, and controllability. The locus of control dimension has two poles: internal and external locus of control. The stability dimension captures whether causes change over time or not. For instance, ability can be classified as stable, internal causes, and effort classified as unstable and internal. Controllability contrasts consists of one can control, such as skill/efficacy, from causes one cannot control, such as attitude, mood, other's actions and luck.

## Training Mode of Attribution

Attribution training is a process that involves improving a person's beliefs in the causes of his or her own failures and successes to promote future motivation for achievement. It is used for discouraged individuals who are unmotivated to achieve. According to attribution theory, students are unmotivated due to their beliefs of why they succeed or fail at tasks. These beliefs about causality are called attributions [11]. For example, if students believe they failed due to low ability, then they would not be motivated to work harder to succeed.

Forstering summarizes the previous researches into attributional training, and points out that there are at least three models of attributional training [12].

**Learned Helplessness Model.** The learned helplessness model was rasied by Segliman. Learned Helplessness means the psychological state and behavior of being helpless and hopeless when facing difficulties after experiencing failures and frustrations. The people who are in the state of learned helplessness usually ascribe the causes of failure to the internal or external uncontrollable conditions, and they often under-estimate their own ability, thinking that trying hard is in vain. If we apply some training methods to help them change their attribution about failure like: change internal, controllable, common attribution into external, changeable, special attribution, in this way, we can guide them out of the state of learned helplessness, rebuild confidence and then achieve success. The main goal of this model is to change attributing success to luck into internal attributions such as ability and working hard.

**Self-efficacy Model.** The self-efficacy model was put forward by the founder of social learning Bandura in 1977, which is to explain the reasons of motivation in some special contexts. The theory holds that the strength of motivation depends on individual's assessment of self-efficacy when he is confronting a special task. As for attribution, attributing success to ability other than luck or other's success can enforce self-efficacy. On the contrary, attributing success to working hard, thinking little of ability, this cannot enforce self-efficacy. The emphasis of this training model is to promote individual to form a high self-efficacy of "I can do it!" More specifically, the model is to guide an individual to transform attributing success to working hard, luck, others' help, into ability attribution and change attributing failure to ability into not working hard.

**Achievement Attribution Model.** Weiner thinks ability, working hard, task difficulty and luck are the four main causes we percept when we explain our success and failure and classify them from the three dimensions as: locus of controllability, controllability, and stability. Through a large amount of research, Weiner claims that an individual make attributions about their behavioral results using various information, the result of attribution will bring about psychological changes in individual's expectations and emotions, then changing behavioral motivation, then influencing behavior and then new behavior brings new result, then new attribution will appear. Circulating like this, to make an individual's behavior change eventually. The goal of this training model is to ascribe success to ability other than luck, and ascribing failure to not working hard other than low ability.

Individuals' different attribution can lead to different follow-up behaviors and produce different outcomes. Attributions influence one's own behavior, emotions and actions. For example, a student who makes a stable attribution, such as lack of ability for an exam failure, should feel less motivated and more helpless possibly leading to withdrawal from class or even the course. In contrast, unstable attributions, such as lack of effort should produce high expectations of future success, feelings of hope, motivation, and persistence. English learners' attribution of success or failure after an examination greatly influences his learning motivation, learning expectancy and

learning enthusiasm. Positive attribution is beneficial to improve learner's achievement expectancy, enhances his motivation and the persistence of learning behavior. How does a learner make a positive attribution towards English learning? Can negative attributions be altered? Attribution training is a remedial intervention and an important application of attribution theory, which can change negative attribution into positive one.

## Strategies of Attributional Training

It is a common phenomenon that college students lack self-confidence in English learning for both successful and unsuccessful learners. But confidence, as a psychological factor, is hard to be improved in a short period of time and many internal and external factors are involved in it. How to increase vocational students' self-confidence seems quite a tough task that English teachers are faced with.

Firstly, researchers of this study propose that it is crucial for the teacher to strengthen these notions that success results from ability and effort and failure results from lack of efforts accordingly. Teachers can also use pertinent examples from their own lives or the lives of people they know or have read about.

Secondly, teachers should make it clear to students that it is natural and inevitable for them to encounter frustrations, failures and disappointments over the long period of time of English learning; they should face up to these difficulties and overcome their anxiety in English learning.

Thirdly, teachers should create situations and provide vocational college students opportunities to experience success. In fact, college students are not required to master the English language to the same further degree as university students are. They are required to master basic language skills and apply them in certain occupations. Therefore English teachers of higher vocational colleges had better set a lower standard for students to reach, and reinforce their language ability mainly on listening, speaking and translation in simple and step-by-step fashion and assign them tasks a little higher than their level and they can succeed with moderate efforts.

Fourthly, teachers need to design tasks in which the student can focus on without the fear of failure. When a student is unsuccessful at some language learning activity, the steps students follow need to be retraced or analyzed to find other possible ways of solving the problems. By these, students can learn how to cope with difficulties and mistakes and learn how to persist. Researches have revealed that rewards, marks based on merits, and even simple praise, can motivate problematic learners. Therefore, teachers finally should convey their frequent and timely praise to students when they do well and exert students' strong points to encourage them in order to improve their confidence.

Fifthly, teachers should be equipped with rich knowledge about attribution in English learning. The findings propose the effectiveness of attributional training in English reading learning of vocational college students. As attribution theory is a theory from the field of social psychology, it implies that a teacher should equip himself with a grasp of some knowledge regarding educational psychology. On a whole, not all English teachers graduated from normal university, some even have no conceptions about psychology, let alone psychological research methods. As a fact, a teacher must learn some knowledge about pedagogy and educational psychology in order to be qualified before teaching ever, can't guarantee a good command and application in his practical teaching in such a short period of time as one or two months. But in a long run, it will have amazing impact on students' reading performance.

## Conclusion

Nowadays, it is very common that the vocational college students lack self-confidence in English learning for both successful and unsuccessful learners, and their English learning attribution is negative. As attribution can influence people's expectations, affect and subsequent behaviour. The English teachers and students should realize the problem and employ adequte strategies to tackle the problem.

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