

Exposing the Dynamic Nature and Potential Role of Student Attribution Processes on English for Academic Purposes Achievement in Higher Education

Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the reasons that English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students in the Open Access College at the University of Southern Queensland give to explain their success in a course of study. It will examine how students' internal and external attributions change while studying EAP. The data has been gathered through a survey administered four times to EAP students. The students come from English as an additional language (EAL) backgrounds and intend to undertake tertiary study in English at USQ. The data foregrounds the potential role of adaptive and maladaptive attribution processes in the EAP learning experience, showing that the majority of students possess a mixture of internal and external attributions that evolve over a course of EAP study. The implications of this study are the potential to contribute to the development of more holistic approaches in EAP programs.

Introduction

Factors relating to globalization, digitization of education, the expansion of English as a pivotal medium of communication in higher education, and government policy movements continue to influence the priorities of the higher education sector. Within this dynamic landscape a more diverse tertiary student population has emerged, accompanied by a shift in focus from supporting equitable participation in higher education of recent times to one of facilitating *successful* participation, with enhanced emphasis on capability (Leach 2013) and employability.

These trends are necessarily reflected in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs. In addition to traditional cohorts of international students with histories of academic success in their first language (L1), EAP enrolments in Australian universities now include greater numbers English as an additional language (EAL) students who are the first in their family to

attend university and who have a much wider range of reasons for choosing university pathways. There is also more intense scrutiny of literacy outcomes (Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012), with a general acknowledgement that academic literacy and language proficiency levels among students with EAL are inadequate to meet the communication demands of university studies and the workplace (Tertiary Education and Quality Standards Agency, 2013).

For EAP practitioners, addressing the reality of larger numbers of EAP students from non-traditional backgrounds in more dynamic and accountable higher education environments (Richardson & Coates, 2014) now requires a wider and more holistic scope (Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012). There is also growing recognition that this new scope for supporting language learning achievement entails foregrounding a wider range of language learning elements and processes and a greater understanding of how psycholinguistic and environmental elements potentially interact as a system and impact on the language success rates that naturally fluctuate and emerge within EAP contexts over time (Beckner et al. 2009; Larsen-Freeman 2012; Ryan & Dornyei 2013; Ushioda & Dornyei 2014; Henry 2015), despite the best intentions of EAP practitioners (Larsen-Freeman & Ryan 2015).

Motivation and SLA – systems within systems

Within the second language acquisition (SLA) field, motivation is an area that has begun to embrace a more systemic approach for understanding language development (Ryan & Dornyei 2013; Ushioda & Dornyei 2014; Schumann 2015). Dornyei's L2 motivational self system theory and directed motivational current theory both attempt to explain the relationships between cognition, emotion, action, and the learning context in the L2 development process (Dornyei 2009; Ryan & Dornyei 2013; Henry, Davydenko & Dornyei 2015). They have particular relevance for supporting EAL students to develop adaptive behaviours when approaching language learning tasks and the necessary capacity to build

and sustain motivation and lifelong learning within achievement contexts (Ryan & Dornyei 2013). The theories for both these constructs involve a number of system components and processes themselves, and a deeper understanding of these may provide EAP practitioners with new strategic possibilities for understanding fluctuating language learning task engagement and enabling successful outcomes in dynamic and more diverse contexts (Dornyei 2009a; Dornyei 2009b; Ushioda & Dornyei 2014; Henry, Davydenko, & Dornyei 2015).

Attribution processes

Because of the inherent complexity of the hidden factors within the motivation construct, research favouring a 'micro' approach (Dörnyei, 2005; Manolopoulou-Sergi, 2004; McGroarty, 2001; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995; Ushioda, 2011) foregrounding the hidden social and mental mediating processes involved in driving or inhibiting macro behaviour in a system is necessary more than ever before (Henry 2015; Irie & Ryan 2015). Weiner's (1979) attribution theory from mainstream psychology may offer useful insights for revealing the interaction of mental and social processes in L2 learning experiences.

According to Weiner (1979), an individual's perceived causes for previous success or failure can be categorized according to three dimensions: stability, locus, and controllability, which have significant thinking and emotional consequences on future motivation behavior (Weiner, 2000). The stability of a cause concerns the individual's perception of the causal duration and to what degree the cause is expected to change, with potential impacts on a student's expectations of future success and consequent learning behaviour. This dimension may also carry secondary psychological consequences including feelings of hopelessness or hopefulness (Weiner, 1985, 2000). The attributed cause of previous success or failure may be perceived by the individual as being internal or external to them, and can lead to feelings of pride or shame, with significant impacts upon self esteem. The controllability of a perceived cause concerns an individual's perception of who controls the cause of the

previous success or failure event. This concerns whether the student feels they or others are in control of the perceived cause and may invoke feelings of guilt, anger, or shame.

Attribution inequality and English as a second language achievement

In achievement contexts, it has been shown that attributions to stable and internal, and / or uncontrollable causes are maladaptive and have negative impacts on future expectancies of success and self esteem, respectively, with potentially detrimental consequences on striving behaviour and academic performance (Weiner, 2000). Numerous studies in the educational psychology, special education, and L1 domain (Banks & Woolfson, 2008; McClure et al., 2011; Nunez et al., 2005) have confirmed these attribution, thinking, and behaviour patterns. However, in the field of foreign language learning, studies are few and have shown conflicting results. In an investigation into the relationships between attributions of students enrolled in undergraduate Spanish, German, and French as a second language courses and their self efficacy and performance, Hsieh and Schallert (2008) concluded that the way students explained unsuccessful results was an important predictor of future achievement. They found that those students who attributed their failure to more internal and controllable causes had higher self efficacy despite the poor outcome. In contrast, lower self efficacy was associated with students who explained poor results in terms of uncontrollable factors. Studies by Cochran, McCallum and Bell (2012), on the other hand, with college students enrolled in introductory Spanish, German, and French courses found that attributions to success were not a predictor of success.

Similar studies in the English as a foreign language (EFL) higher education domain are also scarce, but have found that students with higher language proficiency results tended to attribute their success to less stable and more controllable and internal attribution dimensions whereas students with lower proficiency tended to explain their results according to factors outside their control (Gobel, Thang, Sidhu, & Oon, 2013; Peacock, 2009). Research by Gobel and Mori (2007) examining relationships between achievement in EFL

reading and oral classes and the attributions of first year Japanese university students suggests that culture may have an impact on the attributions students give for success and failure. The most common attributions for success were found to be classroom atmosphere and the teacher, both stable, uncontrollable, and external dimensions, whereas internal attributions were predominantly endorsed to explain failure. Studies by Pishghadam and Zabihi (2011) found that positive language learning achievement in a tertiary Iranian context was strongly related to ascribing success to effort *and* ability and that future language learning success was most effectively predicted from stable and personal attributional dimensions. Conversely, the researchers found that lower marks were associated with attributions to causes such as luck and mood.

However, the possible relationships between attributions and language learning outcomes in the L2 field, in general, and in Australian EAP contexts, in particular, still need to be explored. This study attempts to expose the role attribution processes may have on EAP achievement in higher education preparatory contexts. The following research questions guided this study:

How do ESL students explain their success in EAP in higher education?

- a. Which attributions do students cite as being relevant to their EAP language learning success?
- b. What noticeable changes were evident in the listings (most cited to least cited) of attributions as students progressed in the EAP courses?

Methodology

EAP program and Participants

The EAP program at University of Southern Queensland (USQ) is offered at two levels and includes two courses in level one, EAP1, and four courses in level two, EAP2. It takes ten

weeks to complete EAP1, and ten weeks to complete EAP2, as shown in Table 1. Both are completed on campus.

Table 1 EAP Program

Level	Course	Course description
EAP1	Academic Speaking and Listening	To develop academic English speaking and listening language, skills, and strategies
	Academic Reading and Writing	To develop academic English reading and writing language, skills, and strategies
EAP2	Studying at University	To prepare for entry into mainstream university programs
	Communication Processes	To enhance reading and writing in academic English.
	Academic English Skills	To improve four language skills in academic English
	Applied Communication	To focus on academic English and academic numeracy

In this study, the participants consisted of 29 EAL students (11 females and 18 males) who started EAP1 and successfully completed EAP1 and then transferred to EAP2 after 10-weeks of EAP1. The age range was from 18 to 38. Nine out of 29 students were over 30, 18 were between 20-30 and two were under 20. There were 2 PhD, 5 post-graduate, and 22 undergraduate students (see Table 2).

Table 2 Nationality of students

Nationality	A number of students	Nationality	A number of students
Afghanistan	6	Vietnam	2
Iraq	7	Korean	2
Saudi Arabia	4	China	4
Iran	2	East Timor	1
Russia	1	Total	29

Instrument

The questionnaire was designed with three sections. The questions in the first section attempted to collect demographic data of participants. The questions in the second section were based on the Language Achievement Attribution Scale (LAAS) developed by Hsieh (2004), a self-report instrument which measures casual attributions for success and failure

by ranking responses to six categories: ability, effort, task difficulty, mood, luck, and teacher influence. These responses are tabulated and interpreted using the 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The questions in the last section are based on the Revised Causal Dimension Scale (CDSII)(McAuley, Duncan & Russell, 1992). It examines responses to 12 items in four attribution dimensions (locus of causality, stability, external control, and personal control) using, again, the 5-point Likert scale. An example of one of the items assessing the locus of causality dimensions was 'related to yourself - related to the situation'. Students rated the extent to which they felt the cause was external or internal on this scale, by circling a number from 1 to 5. Some questions related to the 12 items were modified to meet individual levels of English.

Procedures

Students were asked to complete this questionnaire four times during EAP1 and 2 to examine if and how student attributions to their achievement changed. The first data collection was at the beginning of EAP1. Twenty-six out of 29 completed this first data collection. The second collection was in the middle of EAP1. Only 24 students participated. The third collection was at the beginning of EAP2, and 27 out of 29 participants responded. At the end of EAP2, 24 participants had completed the questionnaire. Completing the questionnaire in each collection took 15-20 minutes.

Results

At the beginning of EAP 1

In the response to LAAS, students cited 'effort' as being most influential on their achievement. A total of 44.8% students agreed (41.4%) or strongly agreed (3.4 %) respectively. The majority of students (78%) *strongly disagreed* (37.9 %) and *disagreed* (37.9%) that 'luck' had an influence on their achievement, and half of the students (55.2%)

seemed unsure whether 'ability' influenced strongly their achievement or not. The responses to 'task difficulty' and 'teacher' were scattered. 37.9% of students strongly attributed 'Task difficulty' to their achievement. However 31% of students cited this attribution as *neutral* and 20.7% of students cited it as having a main effect. To 'teacher', a third of students *disagreed* (17.2%) or *strongly disagreed* (13.8%) that this had an influence on their achievement, while 24.1% of students *agreed* (13.8%) or *strongly agreed* (10.3%) that the teachers' influence had a main effect. For 48.2% of students, the attribution, 'mood', was considered to have the least impact on their achievement.

In the middle of EAP1

'Ability' (34.5%) and 'effort' (37.5%) were noticeably attributed to students' achievements. Yet, 'luck' (69%) and 'mood' (51.5%) hardly impacted their achievement. Students' responses to 'task difficulty' varied from (*strongly*) *disagree* (26.1%), *neutral* (41.4%) to (*strongly*) *agree* (20.6%).

At the beginning of EAP2

Participants in this study completed EAP1 successfully and transferred to EAP2. At the beginning the EAP2, students cited 'effort' (44.2%), 'ability' (41.4%), and 'teacher' (41.4%) as strong influences on their EAP1 achievement, respectively. However, 'luck' (82.7%) still received a low rating for impact on their achievement.

At the end of EAP 2

'Ability' (44.8%) and 'effort' (34.4%) among the six items were still ranked as having a strong influence on their achievement. According to students' responses, two items, 'luck' (62.1%) and 'mood' (34.5%), were low-impact attributions to their language learning achievement.

The changes of each attribution

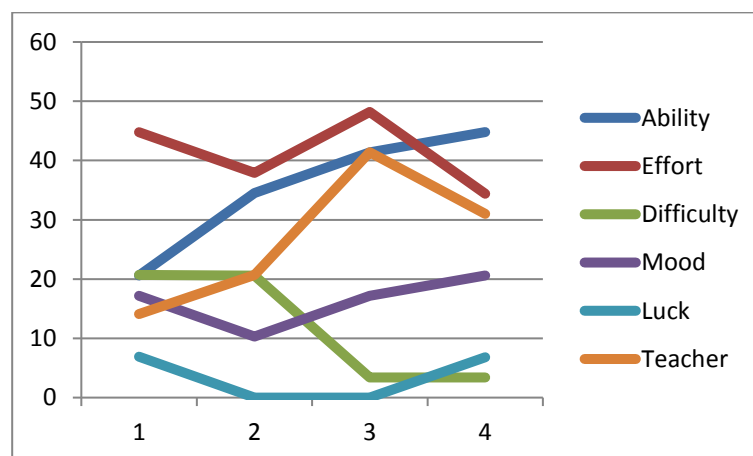
Table 3 shows the results of four data collections from the beginning of EAP1 to the end of EAP2 over 20 weeks. Each figure was obtained by summing the scale 'agree' and 'strongly agree'. The first, second and third results revealed 'effort' was the highest-impact attribution

in their language learning achievement, whereas 'luck' was attributed the least. At the end of EAP2, results indicated that student attributions had changed, with students attributing achievement mostly to 'ability' rather than 'effort'. In addition, 'task difficulty' instead of 'luck' was attributed to their academic success the least. Interestingly, 'teacher' had an increasing impact on their EAP results, and rose from 14.1 % to 41.4 % at the end of EAP1 but dropped 30% by the end of EAP2. The impact of 'task difficulty' had also dropped dramatically from 20.6 % to 3.4 % during the EAP program. When students transitioned from EAP1 to EAP2, attributions to 'mood' and 'luck' slightly increased even though these were still low-impact attributions. Figure 1 illustrates the changes of each attribution over the 20 weeks.

Table 3 The result of LAAS during EAP1 and 2

Attributions \The time	At the beginning of EAP1 (%)	In the middle of EAP1	At the beginning of EAP2	At the end of EAP2
Ability	20.6	34.5	41.4	44.8
Effort	44.8	37.9	48.2	34.4
Difficulty	20.7	20.6	3.4	3.4
Mood	17.2	10.3	17.2	20.6
Luck	6.9	0	0	6.8
Teacher	14.1	20.7	41.4	31

Figure 1 The changes of LAAS attributions



At the beginning of EAP 1

CDSII scores were computed for the four causal dimension subscales by summing the responses to the individual semantic differential scales. The results of the summation of

students' responses indicated that students ranked internal attribution dimensions highly (ex. inside you, not controlled by others or under your control) to their success in three dimensions. In the 'locus of causality' dimension, students (68.8%) attributed their success as being *related to themselves* rather than *related to the situation*. Similarly, students cited internal causes (ex. not controlled by others and under your control) as having the largest main effect on their results compared to 'external control' (6.9%) and 'personal control' (55.1%) dimensions. In terms of the 'stability' dimension, results showed that a successful language learning experience could be 'temporary' (31%) rather than 'permanent' (24%).

In the middle of EAP1

The results for the 'locus of causality', 'external control', and 'personal control' rating scales were similar to the findings from the beginning of EAP1. Language learning success was mainly attributed to internal causes. Respondents were more likely to attribute *something about you* than *something about others* to their level of success. However, 51.6% of students perceived their successful language learning experience as permanent or unchangeable.

At the beginning of EAP2

More than half of the respondents perceived that their successful language learning experience resulted from their internal motivation. Also, 55.1% of students believed that the cause of this successful experience rarely changed.

At the end of EAP 2

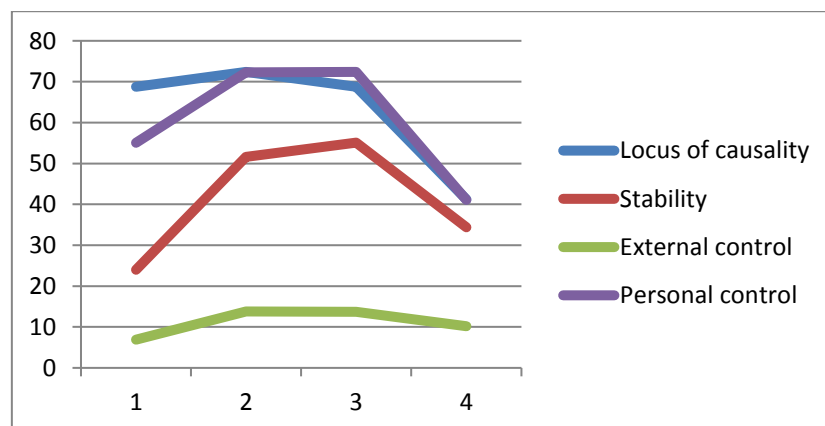
Students' internal causes had an influence on their language learning success, which aligned with the previous three data findings. 34.4% of students still believed that the cause of their success could not be changed even though the figure was a slightly lower than the previous results.

The findings of CDS II showed that the most consistent main cause given for their language learning success was internal factors. Although the figures dropped slightly at the end of EAP2, it was obvious that students' perception had not changed with respondents strongly attributing internal causes to their success over the 20 weeks. In addition, more students at the end of EAP 2 believed that the causes of their learning success could be changed. Table 4 was produced by summing each percentage of the scale '4' and '5' (ex. related –to yourself, under your control, and so on). Figure 2 illustrates the changes on each attribution dimension by graph.

Table 4 The result of CDS II during EAP1 and 2

Attributions \The time	At the beginning of EAP1	In the middle of EAP1	At the beginning of EAP2	At the end of EAP2
Locus of causality	68.8	72.4	68.8	41.2
Stability	24	51.6	55.1	34.4
External	6.9	13.8	13.7	10.2
Personal	55.1	72.3	72.4	41.1

Figure 2 The changes of CDS II dimension



Discussion and Conclusion

The attribution and self-efficacy theories discussed earlier cast light on the results of the surveys completed by the EAP1 and EAP2 students. While this study did not link attribution to student numerical pass/fail results, it did reveal the dynamic nature of student motivation

over time, and the complex non-linear interaction of processes involved in SLA. It also revealed some differences between the attributions given by EAP students, and those found by earlier studies considering ethnically consistent groups, as seen in the studies by Pishghadan and Zabili (2011). Awareness and consideration of these elements is important in enabling more successful results for groups of students like the EAP cohort.

The surveys indicated that a high proportion of students attributed uncontrollable factors with their success or failure throughout the EAP program. As discussed by Gobel and Mori (2007) and Pishghadam and Zabili (2011), such factors are frequently used by less successful students to explain failure. It is possible that such factors may also be used to explain results that, while technically successful, do not meet student expectations. The abdication of responsibility through the allocation of an uncontrollable attribution can protect the student, albeit at the expense of self-efficacy. However, the shift to identifying ability, an internal and uncontrollable attribution factor, as the dominant attribution, occurred over the twenty-week program, growing in importance as the course progressed. At the beginning of EAP 1, 55.2% of the students were unsure whether ability was significant, placing a greater emphasis on effort (44.8%). As a controllable attribution, effort places success or failure within the student's capacity to change the outcome, and places responsibility for success or failure onto the student. However, the steady increase of the significance of ability over the program – 34.5%, 41.4%, and 44.8% by the end of EAP 2 - indicates an increasing belief that elements of success or failure within the program lay outside the students' control. It is possible that this shift may have occurred in response to the challenging nature of the program, and failure to either achieve successful results, or results that met the student's expectations. It is worth noting, however, that effort remained the second most significant attribution, falling from 44.8% to 34.4% by the end of EAP 2. The dominance of ability, though, indicates that students felt that effort, internal and controllable, was limited by ability, internal and uncontrollable.

Another uncontrollable attribution increased over the EAP program – the significance of the teacher, which rose from 14.1% to 31%. As with ability, the significance of the teacher is an uncontrollable attribution, although, in contrast, it is external. It is worth noting that many students felt that the teacher was almost as important as effort, again indicating that uncontrollable factors could cancel out those within the student's control. This is significant, as where students feel that the causes of their success or failure are outside their control, they can experience a decrease in motivation, resulting from emotions of helplessness, guilt, shame and humiliation. This can decrease their self-efficacy, and reduce efforts to achieve their goal. Therefore, this emphasis on two uncontrollable attributions, at the expense of effort, may contribute to an explanation of unexpected EAP results. It does, therefore, need to be taken into consideration within the SLA classroom, in order to achieve more successful results.

However, other results indicated that, unlike the results found by Pishghadan and Zibili (2011), the EAP students did not use certain external and uncontrollable attributions to explain success or failure. Task difficulty, external and uncontrollable, fell in importance over the program, dropping from 20.7% at the start of EAP 1, to 3.4% at the end of EAP 2. Furthermore, the students also placed little emphasis on luck and mood, also uncontrollable attributions. This latter finding is in direct contradiction to Pishghadan and Zabili (2011), who found that lower marks were associated with attributions to luck and mood, protecting the students from damage to their self-efficacy.

This focus on the uncontrollable attributions of ability and the significance of the teacher may have a further impact on student motivation and learning. Attitudes towards learning, and towards specific learning activities, are determined by motivation. As Manolopoulou-Sergei (2004) points out, students will evaluate the learning experience and its possible outcomes before becoming involved with the actual learning experience. Essentially, students assess their actions and performance, and make decisions based on this assessment in relation to

the achievement of their goal (Manolopoulou-Sergei, 2004). Students who attribute success or failure to effort and ability may, if outcome expectations do match existing knowledge, attempt to allocate cause to an external source (Yeigh, 2007), like task difficulty or teacher. A behavioural reaction such as this may work to maintain self-esteem, leading to a possible self-preservation effect (McClure et al., 2011; Reyna, 2000; Weiner, 2000). This may then enable students who are used to success to remain motivated and persist in the face of failure. However, such attributions may also alter the effort a student puts into a task, if they feel that their effort and ability is not reflected in the outcome. This may help to explain the tendency for some students to refer to uncontrollable attributions. Thus, while their self-esteem is protected, their motivation may decline.

The choice of uncontrollable or controllable attributions, or of locus of causality, may also be influenced by a student's possible self. Students who possess a clear ideal self that involves the use of English, or come from a culture, like China, where the ought to self is capable of acting as a sufficient motivator (Huang, Hsu & Chen 2015), may make different attributional choices than those who lack such clear possible selves. In this case, poor results, while possibly being explained by uncontrollable attributions, may not result in a loss of motivation, as the ought-to or ideal self is strong enough to provide an alternative source of motivation for the student. There are, therefore, a number of factors related to attribution that need to be taken into account to improve success in an SLA classroom.

Overall, these results indicate that while about half the students in the EAP program report attributions likely to increase their motivation and self-efficacy, a reasonable percentage of the students make attributions likely to decrease their motivation and self-efficacy. Such attributions may have a negative impact on their response to future failures, decreasing their efforts to achieve their goals. This research has not attempted to discover why students are making these attributions, although extant research indicates that students form such tendencies over their schooling experience (Weiner, 2000). Other studies, however, suggest

that it might be possible to alter the attributions students make, helping them to see success or failure as something they can control, rather than something dependent on uncontrollable factors (Hsieh & Schallert, 2008). Future research may be able to identify the causes of EAP2 student attributions, and investigate the possibility of altering the attributions made by students in order to increase their chances of future success.

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