

# Gender Differences in Causal Attributions in Language Learning

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## Gender Differences in Motivation

A number of gender-based motivational studies support the idea of differences in academic motivation between male and female students (e.g., Bacon & Finnemann, 1992; Burstall, Jamieson, Cohen, & Hargreaves, 1974; Dörnyei & Clement, 2001; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Goldberg Muchnik & Wolfe, 1982; Pritchard, 1987; Sung & Padilla, 1998). Despite research findings that show females outperform males (see Linn & Hyde, 1989), female students have lower self-perceptions of ability than male students (Wigfield et al., 1996). Especially in math and sports, males show higher self-perception whereas females show higher self-perception in English (Eccles, 1983; Eccles et al., 1989; Meece et al., 1990; Wigfield et al., 1991). Wigfield et al. (1996) also found that males have higher self-ratings for physical appearance, physical ability and math while females have higher self-ratings for verbal and reading tasks.

In the field of second language learning, researchers have found some evidence implying the existence of gender differences in motivation and attitudes (e.g., Bacon & Finnemann, 1992; Burstall et al., 1974; Clark & Trafford, 1995; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Ludwig, 1983; Goldberg, Muchnik & Wolfe, 1982). Findings of some foreign language studies indicate greater motivation and more favorable attitudes in female students (Burstall et al., 1974; Pritchard, 1987; Williams, Burden & Lanvers, 2002; Jones & Jones, 2001). Other researchers (for instance, Bacon & Finnemann, 1992; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Goldberg Muchnik & Wolfe, 1982; Sung & Padilla, 1998) also found female students have greater motivation and more positive attitudes toward studying a foreign language than male students.

In Japan, Kimura et al. (2001) have reported the results of their investigation on gender and grade differences. They found a significant effect for gender and grade on one factor, preference for teacher-centered lectures, but did not find any differences in the other five factors that they labeled Intrinsic-Instrumental-Integrative Motive, Extrinsic-Instrumental Motive, Influence of Good Teachers, Language Use Anxiety, and

Negative Learning Experiences. Using Expectancy-value Theory, and Gardner's Socio-educational Model, Mori and Gobel (2005, 2006) attempted to explore differences in motivational sub-constructs based on the variable of gender. The findings of these studies indicated a significant difference in Integrativeness based on gender, with females scoring significantly higher on those items.

### **Gender Differences in Causal Attributions**

Causal attributions for achievement have been rigorously investigated over the past four decades. Ever since Weiner (1979) proposed that the motivational dimensions of attribution could be described as a causal structure consisting of three parts: locus, stability, and control, research on causal attributions for achievement typically has focused on ability (internal/stable/uncontrollable), effort (internal/unstable/controllable), task difficulty (external/stable/uncontrollable), and luck (external/unstable/uncontrollable). Many mainstream psychological studies have suggested that people tend to show a self-enhancing bias where they attribute their success to internal reasons such as ability and effort, and self-protective bias where they blame outside agents when they fail (e.g., Kruger, 1998; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2005).

However, studies conducted in Asian countries indicated that Japanese, Thai and Malaysian students attributed poor performance to lack of ability and lack of effort while they attributed successful performance to teachers and the classroom atmosphere (Gobel & Mori, 2007; Mori, Gobel, Thepsiri, Pojanapunya, 2010; Gobel, Mori, Thang, Kan, Lee, 2011; Mori, Thang, Mohd Noor, Latshmi Suppiah, & Oon, 2011). A meta-analysis of studies conducted in Japan (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) confirmed such a self-critical rather than self-enhancing tendency among the Japanese participants and contended that cultural differences may play a part in this.

Gender differences in causal attributions for achievement have been also found. Many studies have suggested that women have a stronger tendency to attribute success to external factors (Meehan & Overton, 1986; Pasquella, Mednick & Murray, 1981; Simon & Feather, 1973; Zuckerman, 1979), or more to effort rather than ability than men (Parsons, Meece, Adler & Kaczala, 1982; LaNoue & Curtis, 1985; Wieggers & Frieze, 1977). When it comes to unsuccessful outcomes, men are less likely to blame internal factors, especially lack of ability than women, thus protecting their self-esteem (Basow & Medcalf, 1988; D'Amico, Baron & Sissons, 1995; LaNoue & Curtis, 1985).

In sum, based on findings of previous research, it can be hypothesized that Asian women may show a greater propensity to attribute successful outcomes to external causes and a stronger self-critical tendency when they fail than their counterparts. In order to confirm this hypothesis, the following research questions were formulated for this study:

1. Are there differences in success causal attributions based on gender and country?
2. Are there differences in failure causal attributions based on gender and country?

## Method

### Participants

Participants in this study were 567 university students from Thailand and Japan. The Thai participants were a total of 289 first-year students (143 female and 146 male) attending a state university in Bangkok. Most were majoring in engineering; none were language majors. All students already had a minimum of six years of exposure to English as a foreign language in primary and secondary education. At this university, the students have to take at least three compulsory integrated-skill task-based English courses in which all four language skills are studied simultaneously depending on the nature of each task. They met twice a week for two periods of 50 minutes. The teachers used in-house materials designed by the department staff based on the principles of task-based learning.

The Japanese participants were a total of 278 first-year university students (122 female and 146 male) attending a private university in Kyoto. Their fields of study included law, business, economics, and sciences. Although they were not language majors, either, they were taking required English courses just like their Thai counterparts. The required English course curriculum consisted of reading classes and oral communication classes. These classes met twice a week. The reading classes were taught by Japanese teachers of English, and the oral English classes were taught by native speakers of English. Each teacher had a choice of textbooks and teaching styles, but had to follow the guidelines for goals and objectives set by the university.

As described above, the actual contents of the classes and teaching methods may have been different. However, the Thai and Japanese participants were comparable in that they were both 1st-year non-English majors studying English as a foreign language in required classes, had similar curriculum and class environments (e.g., class size),

shared similar past learning experience (six years in junior and senior high schools), and had general English proficiency levels varying from beginner to upper intermediate.

### **Measure**

Two versions of a questionnaire were created based on previous research (Vispoel & Austin, 1995) and the research questions: one version asked about successful experience whereas the other asked about unsuccessful experience (see Appendix for the translation of the questionnaire). Both versions of the questionnaire were administered in participants' native languages after they were forward-and-backward translated by experienced translators from English to Thai, and from English to Japanese.

With both versions of the questionnaire, the students were first asked to choose an activity from a list of 25 activities which they were either particularly successful at, or at which they performed particularly poorly in the previous semester. The main reason why this was included was to help the students focus on a particular activity rather than thinking of learning English in general when identifying attributions for success and failure. Since this prompt was not directly related to the research questions, no report on its analysis was included in this paper (See Mori et al., 2010 for details).

The students were then asked to rate the importance of the 12 statements provided as reasons why they might have done well or poorly on a given activity on a six point Likert scale. Those 12 attributions were labeled: (a) ability (I have strong/weak skills in English), (b) effort (I tried/didn't try very hard), (c) strategy (I used the right/wrong study or practice methods), (d) interest (I had interest/no interest in the activity), (e) luck (I had good/bad luck), (f) teacher influence (The teacher's instruction was appropriate/inappropriate), (g) task difficulty (The task was easy/difficult), (h) class atmosphere (I liked/didn't like the atmosphere of the class), (i) interest in grades (I had interest/no interest in getting a good grade), (j) preparation (I was well-prepared/ill-prepared), (k) enjoyment (I like/don't like English), and (l) class level (The level of the class was appropriate/inappropriate).

### **Procedure**

Both the Thai and the Japanese participants answered the attribution questionnaire in their required English classes at the end of their semester. The

participants were divided into two groups. Pertaining to their language learning experience over the last semester, one group was asked about successful activities and reasons for success while the other group was asked about unsuccessful activities and reasons for failure. 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. The way of dividing the students was slightly different between the Thai and Japanese sections. In the Thai section, half the class focused on successful learning activities, while the other half focused on unsuccessful ones. On the other hand, in the Japanese section, entire classes were randomly assigned to complete a questionnaire regarding either success or failure. At both sites the questionnaire was completed within 15-20 minutes.

## Results

### **Research Question One: Are There Differences in Success Causal Attributions Based on Gender and Country?**

**Descriptive Statistics.** Table 1 shows the means of the success attribution scores based on student responses on the 6-point Likert scale. As the table indicates, Thai students scored higher than Japanese students on all items except for easiness of task. Especially, Thai female students attributed more to success than the other three groups did. Nevertheless, the rank order based on the total sample means indicates that external factors, namely teacher influence, class atmosphere and appropriate level, were among the most endorsed success attributions for all four groups. The main difference between Thai and Japanese students is that the Thai students, both male and female, chose their interest in getting good grades as the number one reason, and teacher influence as the second reason for success whereas the Japanese students, both male and female, chose teacher influence as the first reason for success and did not choose their interest in grades as a major reason.

Table 1

*Means of Success Attributions by Country and Gender*

	Thailand		Japan		Ranking
	Male (n=74)	Female (n=70)	Male (n=73)	Female (n=50)	
Ability	3.30	3.46	2.90	2.82	TF>TM>JM>JF
Effort	4.15	4.59	3.47	3.62	TF>TM>JF>JM
Strategy	3.68	4.00	3.33	3.48	TF>TM>JF>JM
Interest	4.12	4.51	3.67	3.58	TF>TM>JM>JF
Luck	3.59	3.59	3.10	2.88	TF/TM>JM>JF
Teacher	4.57	4.81	4.21	4.04	TF>TM>JM>JF
Task	3.23	3.34	3.52	3.38	JM>JF>TF>TM
Class	4.38	4.54	4.07	3.52	TF>TM>JM>JF
Grades	4.93	5.44	3.49	3.44	TF>TM>JM>JF
Preparation	3.70	3.93	3.14	3.30	TF>TM>JF>JM
Likes	4.04	4.10	3.44	3.40	TF>TM>JM>JF
Level	4.32	4.42	3.85	3.86	TF>TM>JF>JM

A one-way MANOVA was performed to examine the effect of country (Thai and Japanese) and gender on the 12 attribution scales. As Table 2 shows, the results for the MANOVA indicated a significant main effect for country on the dependent variables, Wilks's  $\Lambda = .58, F(12, 252) = 14.98, p < .00$ . No significant main effect for gender or interaction between country and gender was found.

Table 2

*The Summary of MANOVA Results with Country and Gender as Independent Variables and Success Attributions as a Dependent Variable*

Effect	Value	Hypothesis			Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
		F	df	Error df		
Intercept	0.029	713.992b	12	252	0	0.971
Gender	0.953	1.027b	12	252	0.425	0.047
Country	0.584	14.981b	12	252	0	0.416
Gender * country	0.964	.792b	12	252	0.658	0.036

Post hoc analyses to the univariate ANOVA were conducted and each pairwise comparison was tested. The results of the analyses suggest that the male students scored significantly higher than the female students on effort ( $p < .05$ ), and the Thai students scored significantly higher than the Japanese students on all items except for easiness of task ( $p < .01$ ).

### Research Question Two: Are There Differences in Failure Causal Attributions Based on Gender and Country?

Table 3 shows the means of the failure attribution scores based on student responses on the 6-point Likert scale. As Tables 1 and 3 show, both the Thai and Japanese students tended to endorse more to success than failure. Unlike success attributions on which Thai students, especially the Thai female students, scored higher than the Japanese counterparts, the Japanese students scored higher than the Thai students on all but three attributions, namely lack of effort and preparation, and inappropriate use of strategy. In terms of gender, the male students scored higher than the female students on seven out of twelve failure attributions.

Although the pattern of failure attribution scores did not seem to be as clear-cut as that of success attribution scores, when looking at the rank order based on the total sample means, one striking similarity among the four groups can be noted. The four most endorsed failure attributions for all four groups include lack of effort and preparation, and inappropriate use of strategy, which are all internal. This is in stark contrast to the most endorsed success attributions, teacher influence and class atmosphere, which are both external.

Table 3

#### *Means of Failure Attributions by Country and Gender*

	Thailand		Japan		Ranking
	Male (n=86)	Female (n=98)	Male (n=93)	Female (n=77)	
Ability	3.71	3.22	4.14	3.09	JM>TM>TF>JF
Effort	3.23	4.05	3.47	3.88	TM>JF>JM>TF
Strategy	3.40	3.90	3.63	3.64	TF>JF>JM>TM
Interest	2.70	2.26	2.75	2.84	JF>JM>TM>TF
Luck	2.37	1.78	1.61	2.88	JF>TM>TF>JM
Teacher	2.52	1.49	3.03	1.99	JM>TM>JF>TF
Task	2.76	2.57	2.92	3.38	JF>JM>TM>TF
Class	2.65	1.73	2.91	1.86	JM>TM>JF>TF
Grades	2.85	2.32	3.00	2.01	JM>TM>TF>JF
Preparation	3.51	4.29	3.46	3.95	TF>JF>TM>JM
Likes	2.85	2.33	3.25	2.19	JM>TM>TF>JF
Level	2.70	1.96	3.06	2.12	JM>TM>JF>TF

A one-way MANOVA was performed to examine the effect of country and gender on the 12 attribution scales. As Table 4 shows, the results for the MANOVA indicated a significant main effect for gender and country on the dependent variables, Wilks's  $\Lambda = .91$ ,  $F(12, 339)=2.71$ ,  $p<.002$ . Wilks's  $\Lambda =.61$ ,  $F(12, 339)=17.81$ ,  $p<.00$ . The multivariate  $\eta^2$  based on Wilks's  $\Lambda$  was quite strong, .61. A significant main effect for interaction between country and gender was also found, Wilks's  $\Lambda =.94$ ,  $F(12, 339)=1.80$ ,  $p<.05$ .

Table 4

*The Summary of MANOVA Results with Country and Gender as Independent Variables and Failure Attributions as a Dependent Variable*

Effect	Value	Hypothesis			Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
		F	df	Error df		
Intercept	0.04	682.190b	12	339	0	0.96
Gender	0.912	2.711b	12	339	0.002	0.088
Country	0.613	17.815b	12	339	0	0.387
Gender * country	0.94	1.796b	12	339	0.047	0.06

Post hoc analyses to the univariate ANOVA were conducted and each pairwise comparison was tested. The results of the analyses suggest that the female students scored significantly higher than the male students on lack of interest and task difficulty ( $p<.001$ ), and the male students scored significantly higher than the female students on teacher influence ( $p<.00$ ). In terms of country, the Thai students scored significantly higher than the Japanese students on lack of interest and task difficulty. Furthermore, the Japanese male students attributed failure more to lack of ability than the other groups whereas the Thai female students attributed failure more to lack of interest than their counterparts.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that both the Thai and the Japanese students tended to attribute more to external factors, especially teacher influence and classroom atmosphere when they succeeded. On the other hand, when they failed, they both had a propensity to attribute more to internal causes, namely lack of effort and preparation, and inappropriate use of strategy. This is congruent with the findings of previous studies (Gobel & Mori, 2007; Mori, Gobel, Thepsiri, Pojanapunya, 2010; Gobel, Mori,

Thang, Kan, Lee, 2011; Mori, Thang, Mohd Noor, Latshmi Suppiah, & Oon, 2011). The finding may confirm that students in some Asian cultures are more self-critical than students in Western cultures where self-enhancing tendency is widely recognized.

When it comes to gender differences, as mentioned in the Introduction section, previous studies suggested that women have a stronger tendency to attribute success to external factors and more to effort rather than ability than men, and tend to attribute failure to lack of ability more than men. Based on these findings together with the findings that showed self-critical tendency among Asian students, it was hypothesized that Asian women may show a greater propensity to attribute successful outcomes to external causes and a stronger self-critical tendency when they fail than their counterparts. However, this hypothesis was rejected as:

1. male students used more effort attributions than female students for successful outcomes.
2. female students attributed failure to lack of interest and task difficulty more than male students did.
3. male students attributed failure to teacher influence more than female students did.
4. Japanese male students indicated lack of ability as a more important cause for failure than their counterparts did.

Especially the first and fourth findings are interesting because they totally contradict the findings of previous studies. One possible explanation is that these findings may be unique in the area of language learning. As mentioned earlier, females show higher self-perception in English (Eccles, 1983; Eccles et al., 1989; Meece et al., 1990; Wigfield et al., 1991), and have higher self-ratings for verbal and reading tasks (Wigfield et al., 1996). Beyer (1998) found that males displayed a more self-enhancing pattern of causal attributions in the masculine subject matter. Nevertheless, Japanese male students' tendency to blame lack of ability for failure can be problematic as it is directly related to the self-esteem affect and expectancy for success or failure. If they have a lower expectancy for success, and consequently become less persistent on future achievement tasks, future failure is seen as unavoidable, and learned helplessness is then reinforced.

Therefore, in order to improve student perseverance, teachers should help change their attributions for failure from internal, uncontrollable factors (such as poor ability)

to internal and controllable ones (such as lack of effort). The finding of this study shows that the male students attributed greater responsibility to effort in explaining their successes. If this tendency actually exists, what teachers can do is to help them realize that the same can be true with unsuccessful outcomes by providing appropriate feedback and well-designed tasks. Especially, tasks designed at an appropriate level of difficulty, with clear goals and objectives related to the curriculum, can encourage students to attribute their failures to factors that do not guarantee failure in the future.

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## Appendix

### Translation of Questionnaire for Successful and Unsuccessful Learning Experience

(This appendix is a combined questionnaire created for brevity's sake. In the actual study, the students in the success group and the failure group received questionnaires specifically related to either success or failure outcomes.)

#### 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 fill in the appropriate space on the computer mark sheet 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.