

An Empirical Study of Self-attributions on College English Learning in China

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Abstract

In recent decades, attribution study, as one branch of motivation research, has found its way into the field of second and foreign language teaching and learning. In order to understand Chinese learners' self-attributions in college English learning and then to provide reference for effective attribution retraining, the present study investigates empirically the self-attributions of Chinese non-English majors in college English learning. Based on the findings, the pedagogical implications are discussed consequently.

Keywords: self-attribution, achievement attribution theory, attribution retraining, college English learning

1. Introduction

With the increasing emphasis on the learner-centeredness in foreign language teaching and learning, more and more research has been focused on motivation, and that is especially true in the People's Republic of China. The self-attribution of learners for their success and failure is an important part in motivation study. During the past three decades, with the development of research in social psychology of language, researchers began to focus on the study of combination of attribution research and second or foreign language learning (Dornyei 1994; William et al, 2000; Gray, 2005). The studies have confirmed that attribution may exert great positive or negative influence on students' language learning motivation (Tremblay et al., 1995; Williams et al., 1999).

In China, the study of attribution mainly focuses on the attribution theory itself in psychology or its general applications in educational settings (Liu & Liang, 1999; Guo,2001; Zhang, 2002; Liu, 2009). In recent years, although some Chinese researchers have realized the significance of attribution research in the field of foreign language teaching and learning and consequently they have done some research work on it(Qin, 2002; Zhang, 2004; Hu et al., 2009; Zhu, 2010), the number of such research is relatively limited and the application of such research in foreign language classroom is waiting for prompt improvement. Furthermore, compared with the language learners in foreign countries, Chinese learners have completely different cultural background and learning situations. Therefore, all the attribution research findings in western countries should not be copied to China. The work done at home should be characterized by Chinese features and situations. The study of Chinese students' attributions in foreign language learning can be a significant topic for researchers and teachers who intend to promote and improve foreign language teaching and learning in China.

2. Background Literature

2.1 Attribution and Self-attribution

Attribution theory is directly concerned with the perceptions of causality, or the perceived reasons for the

occurrence of a particular event. Martinko (1995: 8) holds that attribution theory is not actually a single theory and there are a number of different attributional perspectives. The majority of attributional perspectives can be classified into other-attribution and self-attribution. Other-attribution refers to the causal explanations given by observers and self-attribution refers to an individual's attempts to understand and interpret the possible causes for his or her own actions, feelings and attitudes. The study of attribution started in 1950s and has become prosperous in the following years with great efforts of many researchers, such as F. Heider, E.A. Jones, K.E. Daris, H.E. Kelley, B. Weiner and etc. Among them, Weiner's achievement attribution theory is an outstanding example of the self-attribution theory and also the most influential and systematic theory in illustrating learning motivation.

2.2 Weiner's Achievement Attribution Theory

To better explain attribution theory, Weiner differentiates between causal explanation and causal dimension. Casual explanations are the specific explanations people make concerning the causes of prior outcome. Weiner et al. (1971) identified that one usually attributed his or her success and failure to the following six categories: (1) ability, (2) effort, (3) task difficulty, (4) luck, (5) the state of health and mood, (6) other elements (e.g. others' assistance, teacher's teaching, etc.). Underlying causal explanations are causal dimensions that represent individual's cognitive structure. Weiner et al. (1971) and Weiner (1979) proposed that all the causal explanations varied along three primary dimensions: Locus of control, stability and controllability. The locus of control dimension which refers to the origin of the cause or causes to which people attribute success or failure. This dimension has two poles: the internal cause versus the external cause. It is apparent that ability, effort, health and mood are forms of internal attributions because they are factors arising from inside us, while luck and task difficulty are forms of external attributions. The stability dimension is concerned with the question whether causes change over time or not. It has two poles: stable cause versus unstable cause. Ability and task difficulty are often considered as stable ones, whereas effort, luck, health and mood belong to unstable attributions. The third dimension, controllability, makes it possible to distinguish between elements that people feel within their control or out of their control. It also has two poles: the controllable cause versus the uncontrollable cause. Any attribution of success and failure can be classified within three dimensions. For example, ability is internal, stable and uncontrollable cause, while effort is internal, unstable and controllable cause.

Weiner also puts emphases on the effect of self-attributions and asserts that self-attribution will cause the shifts in the expectancy, emotional reaction and the consequent behavior, which inevitably influence individuals further performance. In the educational realm, teachers and educators should help learners arrive at the most adaptive, educationally beneficial causal attributions. Attribution retraining, as one of the most important applications of attribution theory, is a cognitive training approach explicitly designed to enhance motivation and achievement performance by changing how students think about their academic successes and failures so that their beliefs work for -- rather than against -- their academic success. Before effective attribution retraining, students' self-attributions to their success and failures in learning must be studied first. In China, although much research has been done in academic achievement contexts, there is a meager body of research conducted to study the self-attributions in learners' foreign language learning. In view of the above considerations, the present study, based on the theoretical framework of B. Weiner, seeks to explore Chinese non-English majors' self-attributions in their College English learning. It is anticipated that the Chinese non-English majors' self-attribution styles in English learning can be revealed and the effective countermeasures be found to motivate them well in their English learning.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Questions

The experiment is designed to answer the following questions:

- 1). What are the main Chinese non-English majors' self-attributions for success and failure in their College English learning?
- 2). Are self-attributions for success and failure related to achievement in English learning? If yes, what are the correlations?

3.2 Participants

120 sophomores (58 males and 62 females) involved come from four departments of China West Normal University (CWNU), Sichuan province, China. There are 30 participants for each department and 60 participants come from liberal arts departments (Chinese department, history department) and other 60 participants come from science departments (chemistry department, mathematical department). The age of the students ranges from 18 to 20. All the subjects have formally received over 7-year English training in middle school and college. These participants from the four departments are considered representative of the population of the Chinese college non-English majors as a whole in this university. There are two reasons for the present author to choose sophomores as subjects: 1) The students in Grade Two have been accustomed to the college English learning and are now in a key period of knowledge accumulation; 2) The psychological development of the sophomores is relatively stable. These 120 non-English major sophomores responded to the questionnaire in September 2014. At last, only one participant had not finished the questionnaire and all the data from other 119 participants were valid and can be analyzed.

3.3 Instruments

3.3.1 Measurement of Self-attributions

According to Benson (1989), there are three approaches most often used in the measurement of self-attributions for success and failure: 1) open-ended approach, 2) direct-rating approach, 3) derived-score approach. The present study will adopt the derived-score approach which requires the participants to rate his reasons for success or failure on 5-point scales for different causal explanations related to self-attribution dimension. This Self-attributions Questionnaire is answered on a five point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" for assessing students' inclination of self-attributions in their English learning. The five points on the scale are related to the score of 1 to 5 ("strongly disagree"=1, "disagree"=2, "not clear"=3, "agree"=4, "strongly agree"=5).

3.3.2 Questionnaire Design

Based on Weiner's three-dimension approach and Guo Hengjie's attribution questionnaire model (Guo, 2001:106), the present author designed the self-attribution questionnaire. The whole questionnaire consists of two parts: (1) Personal Information and (2) Self-attribution Questionnaire. According to B. Weiner's three-dimension approach, Under the three dimensions, all causes can be classifiable within one of the eight cells of a locus \times stability \times controllability dimension matrix. The eight cells are internal stable controllable causes (ISC), internal stable uncontrollable causes (ISU_c), internal unstable controllable causes (IU_sC), internal unstable uncontrollable causes (IU_sU_c), external stable controllable causes (ESC), external stable uncontrollable causes (ESU_c), external unstable controllable causes (EU_sC) and external unstable uncontrollable causes (EU_sU_c). Although Weiner has proposed the main six categories of causal explanations, the present author still assumes that there are differences in explanations between the learners in western countries and the learners in China. Therefore, based on the eight cells, in the Self-attributions Questionnaire, the number of explanations is extended to 16 with every two causal explanations for each cell. The 16 causal explanations include interest, confidence, ability, prior knowledge, effort, learning methods, mood, teacher's evaluation, social relations with classmates, task difficulty, learning environment, teachers' assistance, classmates' assistance, luck, teachers'

teaching and health. All the 16 causal explanations are related to self-attributions of success and self-attributions of failure respectively. So there are altogether 32 statements in the questionnaire and every four statements for each cell. The body of questionnaire items is further divided into two parts: self-attributions of success and self-attributions of failure. For example, "I'm good at English because I work hard on it" or "I have no interest in English study, so I can't study this subject well." The answer of each question can be converted into one of the scores from 1 to 5. The higher the score is, the stronger the inclination the participant has in the corresponding self-attribution dimension. After the 32 statements, there is a supplement which is designed for participants to complete any other causes of success and failure not mentioned in the questionnaire.

3.4 Data Collected

In September 2014, the survey was conducted among the 120 participants. In order to avoid the influences from their English teachers, the present author invited four teachers who were in charge of the four classes of the four departments to help conduct the survey during their routing class meeting time. The principal conditions required were the time spent for the completion within 20 minutes and no communication among students during the completion of the questionnaire. The students were informed that their participation was voluntary and their responses would remain confidential. After the completion, the questionnaires were turned in at once.

3.5 Data Analysis Methods

All the data were analyzed via SPSS 19.0. For question 1, descriptive statistics including frequencies, means and standard deviation are used on their responses to each alternative of the questionnaire items. Pearson product-moment correlations are computed to investigate question 2.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Reliability of the Questionnaire

In order to test the reliability of the present questionnaire, reliability analysis is conducted. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the two sub-questionnaires of Self-attributions Questionnaire (16 items for each one) computed on 119 subjects is .73 and .75 respectively and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the whole Self-attributions Questionnaire (32 items) is .83. Based on the point that "Cronbach α is dependent upon the number of items a scale contains" (Bachhouse, et al. 1982, cited from Dornyei, 1990), these coefficients, from 0.73 to 0.83, are highly reliable.

4.2 Self-attributions in College English Learning

In the part of supplement in Self-attributions Questionnaire, approximately 96% participants answer "no any other causes" for both success and failure in English learning. Some participants give other causes, such as the family influence, cultural influence and learning attitude, but the percentage of each such cause doesn't exceed 1%. Therefore, we just mainly study the self-attributions listed on the questionnaire in this research. To answer question 1, mean and standard deviation of each item are calculated. The item's mean exceeding point 3 is considered to indicate that learners generally incline to ascribe their achievement performance to the corresponding self-attribution dimension. On the contrary, the item's mean which is below point 3 shows the learners generally don't have such corresponding self-attribution inclination in English learning. Table 1 and Table 2 respectively show the overall conditions of self-attributions for success and failure in college English learning.

4.2.1 Self-attributions of Success in College English Learning

Table 1 shows the main learners’ self- attributions of success in English learning, which are ranked in a descendent order based on the means. It is obvious that learners prefer effort, interest and learning method most in their self-attributions of success in English leaning, for all these three self-attributions have high scores in means but low in standard deviation. Especially, cause of success the learners prefer best to ascribe is effort, with its mean beyond 4.00. Learners seldom attribute the success in their English learning to task difficulty, social relations with classmates, teacher’s evaluation, classmate’s assistance, luck, health, teacher’s assistance, learning environment and mood. As for the dimensions, it is found clearly in table 1 that nearly all self-attributions of success, except teachers’ teaching, belong to internal causes. Interest, confidence, prior knowledge and ability are not only internal but also stable causes which are assumed positive in self-attributions of success in learning process. However, it is regretful that the mean of ability item is relatively lower which maybe accord with the modest spirit of Chinese people. Generally speaking, the learners’ self-attributions of success in English learning are positive on the whole.

Table 1 Main Self-attributions of Success in English Learning

Rank	Self-attributions	Mean ± Std. Deviation	Dimensions
1	Effort	4.12 ± .825	IU _s C
2	Interest	3.79 ± .919	ISC
3	Learning method	3.55 ± .789	IU _s C
4	Confidence	3.47 ± 1.064	ISC
5	Prior knowledge	3.36 ± 1.079	ISU _c
6	Ability	3.18 ± 1.022	ISU _c
7	Teachers’ teaching	3.04 ± .858	EU _s U _c

4.2.2 Self-attributions of Failure in College English Learning

Table 2 shows the learners’ main self-attributions of failure in a descendent order by the point of items’ means. It is clear that learners are more likely to ascribe failure causes to effort, learning method and interest, confidence and prior knowledge, especially to effort and learning method which rank in the first two places with the same scores exceeding 4.00 in means. Other causes, including task difficulty (with mean score of 2.37) and luck (with mean score of 1.84), are judged to be less important in self-attributions of failure. Fortunately, most learners do not think ability is an important cause in the failure of English learning. It is clear that all the main self-attributions of failure in English learning belong to internal causes and the learners think they should be responsible for their learning performance. According to Table 2, most causes of failure, except prior knowledge, are controllable causes. Specifically, effort and learning method are presumed to be positive self-attributions in failure situation because they are unstable and changeable. However, interest, confidence and prior knowledge are negative in failure situation due to their stable feature.

Table 2 Main Self-attributions of Failure in English Learning

Rank	Self-attributions	Mean+/- Std. Deviation	Dimensions
1	Effort	4.08 ± .879	IU _s C
2	Learning method	4.08 ± .754	IU _s C
3	Interest	3.49 ± 1.134	ISC
4	Confidence	3.26 ± 1.093	ISC
5	Prior knowledge	3.03 ± 1.207	ISU _c

These results suggest effort, learning method, interest, confidence, prior knowledge are the main causes for both success and failure. Among all these attributions, effort is the most important cause of success and failure, as found in other studies (for example, Perry, 1989; Wigfield, 1988; Qin, 2002). Facing the success and failure in

English learning, learners incline to the internal causes mostly.

4.3 Relationship between Self-attributions and English Learning Achievement

William and Burden (2000:106) hold that achievement is not universally defined in the same way by different people and success and failure are not absolute but relative, defined in different ways by different cultures, groups and individuals. In order to change achievement into a quantitative term, the present study collects the participants' scores of English final examination which was carried out in July, 2014 in China West Normal University. In the study of the relationship between self-attributions of success and failure and achievement in English learning, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated.

4.3.1 Correlation between Self-attributions of Success and Achievement in English Learning

Results show that confidence, ability, interest as self-attributions of success in English learning are positively correlated with English achievement. The strongest correlation exists between confidence and English achievement ($r=.355$, $p<0.01$). The second is the correlation between ability and English achievement ($r=.346$, $p<0.01$), followed by the correlation between interest and English achievement ($r=.324$, $p<0.05$). Luck, however, is negatively correlated to English achievement and the correlation between luck and English achievement is $-.323$ ($p<0.05$). The statistics indicate that the higher the English achievement level is, the more inclination the learner has in the self-attributions of success to the internal and stable causes-----confidence, ability and interest. That is to say, the high achievers are more likely to ascribe their success in English learning to these three causes than the low achievers. However, the low achievers are more inclined to ascribe success in English learning to the external, unstable and uncontrollable cause-----luck. It is obvious that the high achievers' self-attributions of success are more positive than that of the low achievers.

4.3.2 Correlation between Self-attributions of Failure and Achievement in English Learning

Results show that interest, ability and prior knowledge which are regarded as self-attributions of failure in English learning are negatively correlated to English achievement($r = -.346$, $p<0.05$; $r = -.325$, $p<0.05$; $r = -.302$, $p<0.05$). When facing failure in English learning, the low achievers are more likely to ascribe their failure to the internal, stable and control cause----- interest and the internal, stable and uncontrollable causes----- ability and prior knowledge, which are perceived as negative self-attributions of failure and will certainly impede learners' future English learning.

5. Implications and Methods of Attribution Retraining from the Present Study

Since self-attribution plays an important role in the reaction of individuals to success and failure, it is logical to attempt to help learners arrive at the most adaptive and beneficial causal attribution so that their subsequent learning behaviors will be more positive. This therapeutic approach, named "attribution retraining", seeks to alter attributions that are deemed unsuitable and that may lead to cognitive, emotional or behavioral deficits, and then seeks to develop more appropriate attributions that might suggest positive and future-oriented thoughts. The findings from the present research show that it is necessary to conduct attribution retraining in college English teaching and learning.

5.1 Implications from the Present Study

5.1.1 Practicing Positive Attribution Model

According to Tang & Liu (2005:148), the positive and negative attribution models are presented respectively in Figure 1 and Figure 2 as follows.

Figure 1 Desirable Attribution Model

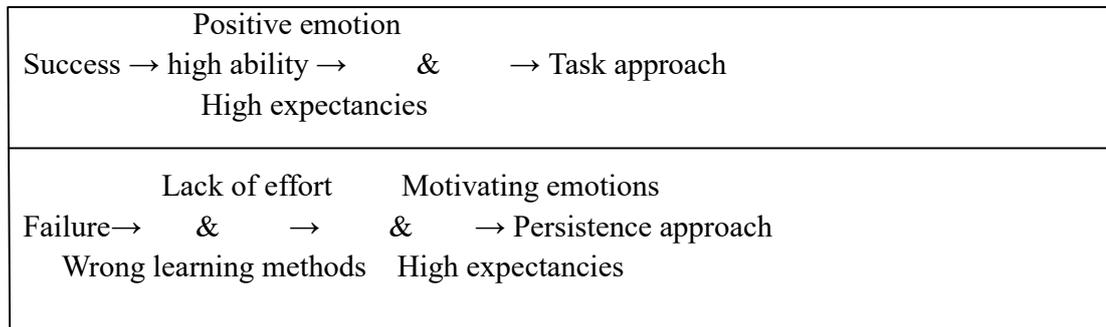
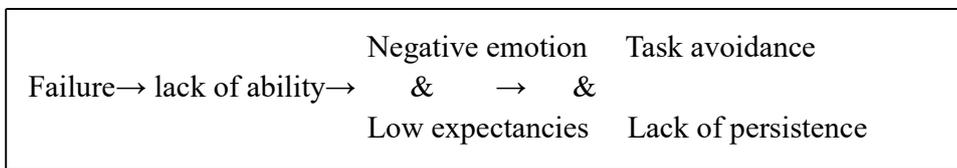


Figure 2 Undesirable Attribution Model



Generally speaking, self-attribution of success and failure to effort may impel learning greatly and self-attribution of success to ability may enhance one’s self-confidence. In addition, self-attribution of success and failure in English learning to learning method can spur learners on to improve their learning methods or explore better learning methods. Failure ascribed to stable and uncontrollable factors such as low ability makes learners produce negative emotions and low future expectancies and thus hinders their future achievement behavior, whereas failure ascribed to unstable and controllable factors, such as effort and learning method, is generally regarded by learners as less detrimental. In order to promote effort attributions, in failure situation teachers should generally emphasize that the low effort or improper learning method is a strong reason for underachievement, which transmits the idea to the students that they can do better in the future. In situations when failure occurs in spite of obvious hard work on the student’s part, the best strategy for teacher is to point out that the learning methods or skills the learner adopted are inappropriate or inefficient and then encourage the student to improve his learning methods and skills in future learning. With regard to students’ success, it should not be attributed entirely to effort (even if the person did work hard) but also to a stable cause such as ability. In the present study, participants mostly prefer to ascribe both success and failure to effort and learning method. They seldom attribute failure to low ability, which is positive for their further learning. However, learners don’t prefer to ascribe success to their own ability. So teachers should pay more attention to leading students to realize that their successes in learning are greatly correlated with their ability.

5.1. 2 Analyzing the Causes Dimensions Dialectically

In the present study, we can clearly see that most of the main self-attributions of success (except one explanation) and all of the main self-attributions of failure are under internal dimension, which should merit English teacher’s attention. From the locus of control, the causes of success and failure in learning can be divided into internal causes and external causes. Dialectical materialism points out that both internal and external causes function together to any result while the internal causes are basically the important ones. So it is not correct to ascribe one’s success or failure in learning only to internal causes or to external ones. As English teachers, we should help them analyze both internal and external causes and keep balance between them. On

the one hand, learners should know first the internal causes are the main causes in their success and failure and they themselves are the masters of their learning. Therefore, they should be responsible for their learning behavior. On the other hand, learners should know that the external causes can not be ignored because these causes exist objectively and influence learning greatly.

We also find in the study that more than half of the self-attributions of failure are stable. If the cause of failure is stable and can not be changed through efforts, learners may be certainly discouraged and give up striving in their further learning. Teachers should pay attention to those self-attributions of failure (such as interest, confidence and prior knowledge) and guide learners to ascribe failure to unstable explanations, such as effort and learning method, rather than the stable explanations.

5.1.3 Correcting Low Achievers' Negative Self-attributions

According to the present study, the high achievers' self-attributions of both success and failure are generally more positive than that of low achievers. The low achievers, compared with high achievers, are more likely to ascribe success in English learning to the external, unstable and uncontrollable cause (such as luck) while ascribing their failure to the internal, stable and control/uncontrollable causes (such as interest, ability and prior knowledge). Therefore, teachers should pay attention to the low achievers' self-attributions and conduct more attribution retraining to low achievers in teaching process.

5.1.4 Guiding Learners to Focus on Learning Goal rather than on Learning Evaluation

The students who regard learning goal as something important often value the mastery of knowledge and individual's development. They are not scared by the threat of failure and would like to deal with obstacles they encounter in learning. However, the students who consider learning evaluation alone as something important often value positive evaluations from others, which makes them afraid of failure and avoid challenges. Because they lack self-confidence in learning, they are inclined to ascribe achievement failure to ability. Therefore, English teachers should teach students to focus on learning goal which is beneficial for them to remove the negative self-attributions in learning.

5.1.5 Giving Learners Appropriate Feedback in Time

Learner's self-attributions were affected directly by teacher's feedback of his or her achievement performance. English teaching and learning is a process in which teachers and students interact with each other. According to the feedback, whether it being positive or negative, students may perceive their success or failure and realize teachers' attitudes toward them, which becomes an important basis in their self-attributions. Therefore, teachers should give appropriate feedback in time as reinforcement. For example, when students make progress after hard work, teachers should praise them and let them know it is their effort that leads to their progress, which is surely beneficial to cultivate and consolidate learners' positive self-attribution to effort. On the contrary, inappropriate feedbacks such as showing empathy to learner's failure, teacher's negative attributions and praise for the correct answer of a very easy question will affect learners' self-attributions negatively. In addition, teachers should pay attention to establish equal, friendly and harmonious atmosphere in teaching that is necessary for students to keep and enhance learning motivation.

5.2 Methods of Attribution Retraining in College English Teaching and Learning

5.2.1 Group Discussion

The whole class can be divided into several groups (about 3-5 persons for each group) and attribution retraining

is conducted in those groups in which the learners analyze and discuss the causes of success or failure in English learning together. This method can be adopted after a test (a quiz) or in the situation of case analysis. First, learners are asked to finish the self-evaluation questionnaire or case analysis. Then, for each group, learners discuss the answers to the questionnaires together. Teacher should give learners an overall guidance leading them to ascribe positively. During the course, individual learner can not only receive good suggestions from peers and teachers but also provide help to others. After that, learners have a second chance to fill in the same questionnaires in which they could change their ideas according to suggestions from others and then turn the questionnaires in at once. After reading the questionnaires, teachers should return them to learners themselves and at the same time give appropriate feedbacks in time to encourage positive attributions or to point out the negative ones for learners' consideration. Learners are also required to keep the questionnaires well maybe in their portfolios established in advance as records of the presentation and summary of their learning performances in a specific time. This method is suitable for college students because they completely have the capability of analysis, discussion and self-evaluation. In addition, this method is beneficial for learners because it may promote their self-access language learning.

5.2.2 Individual Conversation

Based on observations and questionnaires, teachers may choose some individual learners to have a talk with them respectively after class. During the conversation, teachers can know more about learner's English learning and the difficulties or ideas he or she has and consequently help them analyze learning results correctly. The private communication can not only correct learners' self-attributions of English learning but also shorten the psychological distance between teacher and learner. So it is beneficial for further attribution retraining and English teaching and learning.

5.2.3 Classroom Reinforcement

This method is a common one in attribution retraining. In English classroom, students are required to finish some tasks. No matter whether students achieve success or not, teachers' evaluations should attempt to promote them to ascribe their performances positively. For example, if a learner completes the task (e.g. classroom presentation, passage dictation, question answer, etc.) well, teacher may praise his or her good performance by saying "You are good at this kind of exercise. You must have prepared this exercise carefully and fully. Go on working hard!" or "Your performance is very good. Would you like to introduce the method you use in this task to your classmates?" If learners don't finish the task satisfactorily, teacher may guide them like, "You should have done well if you spent more time in studying English" or "The method you used in finishing this task is maybe not ideal. I hope you can find a better way next time." By this way, all the learners will certainly regard efforts and learning method as the causes of the success or failure in English learning. Compared with group discussion and individual conversation, this kind of reinforcement can be carried out easily and repetitively whenever needed in class.

6. Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Study

Over the past several decades, the study of attribution in education field has been developed into a hot topic. The present study has made an empirical investigation into the self-attributions of Chinese non-English majors in their English learning. Based on these findings, the corresponding pedagogical implications are discussed. However, the study of self-attributions of college English learning is not easy and naturally there are some limitations in this study. It is only a preliminary study on a small-scale. Firstly, the subjects in this study are only from a single university and further research with larger samples from more universities and colleges is

needed to test the generalization of the results proposed in this study. Secondly, the instrument applied in the present study is limited to just one questionnaire. It is questionable whether all the related self-attributions can be covered. So other instruments, such as interview, etc. are still necessary to get more reliable information for the analysis in further study. Thirdly, the questions studied in the present research are limited due to the space. They're only focused on self-attributions in college English learning and the relationship between self-attributions and achievement. In the future study, the research questions can be extended more widely, such as the relationship study between self-attribution and emotions, future expectancies, genders, etc. and the factors influencing self-attributions and the study on attribution retraining, etc..

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