

# An Investigation and Analysis of Attribution Preference and Gender Difference of Non-English Majors' English Learning—Based on Investigation of Non-English Majors in Tianjin Polytechnic University

Juan Wu

Foreign Language College of Tianjin Polytechnic University, Tianjin, China  
Email: wujuan2000@gmail.com

**Abstract**—This paper investigates 97 non-English majors' attribution preference of their English learning (including 52 female students and 45 male students) by using Weiner's attribution theory. All of the participants are from the Tianjin Polytechnic University (TJPU). According to the data, this paper discusses and analyses the new trends and features between the gender difference and students' attribution preference of their English learning. The results show that the female and male students' attribution preference are basically correct and reasonable and tend to be the same, but some problems still exist.

**Index Terms**—English learning, attribution preference, gender difference

## I. INTRODUCTION

Attribution theory, as one of the new research topics in the contemporary psychology, is widely applied in the education, management and clinical practice in recent years. It can provide the theoretical basis to explain and infer people's actions and the causality of activities. From the perspective of the foreign language education, the scholars in China have studied it in the following three aspects: (1). the research of students' self-attribution. (2). the research of the attribution training. (3). the attribution research of teachers' teaching. However, it is rare now that the study of attribution preference of male and female students (Zhang, 2007). This paper focuses on studying the attribution preference in non-English majors' English learning and whether gender differences exist between male and female students or not, which can offer the real and accurate information for teachers and the teaching practice, so that students' English learning can be improved effectively.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Attribution Theory

It is very important for learners to explain his/her successes or failures about his/her learning from the cognitive point of view. This is because the learners' motivation of learning the similar things can be decided to some extent by how s/he gave the attribution explanation about his/her former results of learning. Attribution refers to people always attribute their successes or failures, perceived by themselves, to some certain reasons. In seeking to understand better the ways in which people make sense of events in their lives, the social psychologist Fritz Heider began to develop in the 1940s and 50s what he termed a 'naive' psychology of the layperson (Heider, 1944, 1958). A central aspect of Heider's theory was that it was how people perceived events rather than the events in themselves that influenced behavior. When required to give reasons for the outcomes of events or the behaviors, Heider suggested that people would tend to refer to a limited range of internal (personal) and external (environmental) factors. Psychologist Bernard Weiner drew together Heider's view of attribution and the theory of control, and he proposed his own influential version of attribution theory in 1970s (William and Burden, 2000). Weiner revised his attribution theory in 1980s, which is "the most systematic theory to explain learning motivation" (Zhang, 2000, p.163).

After a large number of researches, Weiner suggested that, on the whole, people tend to refer to six main sets of attributions for their perceived successes and failures after they finished their work: "(1). ability, (2). effort, (3). task difficult, (4). luck, (5). physical and mental condition, (6). others which refers to some influence from other elements, such as, the help from teachers. And the six attributions can be divided into three dimensions due to the different features of the attributions. (1). Locus of causality, which refers to that people regard the source of attributions in from personal (internal) or environmental (external) factors. The three attribution elements of ability, effort and the physical and mental condition belong to the internal factors, while others relate to the external factors. (2). Stability, which refers

to the factors are stable or not. The attribution elements of ability and task difficulty belong to the stable factors, and others belong to the unstable factors. (3). Controllability, which refers to whether the factors can be controlled by clients' hopes. The attribution element of effort relates to the dimension of controllable, all of others relate to dimension of uncontrollable. In general situation, people would attribute their successes to the stable, internal and controllable factors, while attribute their failures to the unstable, external and uncontrollable factors. This is always regarded as the correct method of people's attribution preference" (William and Burden, 2000, p.105-106). As to the six attributions and three dimensions, it will be different for the different people to deal with different tasks in different situations (Zhang, 2000), so this paper focuses on investigating and analyzing the attribution preferences of the students who are studying in TJPU.

### B. Gender Difference

Over the past two centuries, some scientists conducted experiments observing human behaviors, and they naively have assumed that results obtained from those tests on male subjects would automatically generalize to the female population as well. But, since the women's movement in the 20c70s, those people who are engaged in the scientific study of humans have come to realize that there are gender differences in humans beyond the obvious biological ones. Perhaps this disparity is due to the genetic destiny, as seemingly espoused by Freud, or may be these differences can be traced to cultural learning processes in while males and females are taught to behave in different ways (Dowling, 1981). Nevertheless, whether the source is "nature" or "nurture", the end result is that the two genders see the world differently (Gilligan, 1982), interpret identical situations differently (Kohlberg, 1973), and attribute causation and results differently (Horner, 1972).

Among the past 40 years, the attribution processes have been examined extensively. At first, researchers (for example, Dweck and Rapucci, 1973) seemed to find an "externality bias" among females, which meant that females generally refused to accept personal responsibility for their own success, and this situation was countered by the apparent "internality bias" among males. Later studies (for example, Sweeny, Moreland and Gruber, 1982) completely contradicted these earlier findings. In 1933, Beth Dixon searched for indication of an externality bias among adolescent females and found little evidence to support its presence. She concluded that in the generation since the original research done in the 1970s, females have tended to show less and less externality or self-derogatory bias in explaining their success and they have begun to exhibit much more of a self-serving bias as do their male counterparts (Maguire, 1996). Because the gender difference is changing as time goes by, the gender difference is another focus of this study.

### C. Research into Attribution in Language Learning

In the past studies of the English learning, most researchers just analyzed the external elements, which would influence the English learning. The research of the learners themselves does not gain enough attention as a central part in the previous studies. Only if the intelligent elements and the non-intelligent elements of learners' learning process can interact well with each other, the good and positive learning results can be gained. One of the important elements which can influence the learners' results in the language learning process is the learners' attribution preference. The different attitudes towards the attribution will lead to different results.

So far, researches into attribution have been focused mainly on sport psychology. Unfortunately, very little has been carried out in the area of the attribution theory and EFL or SLA. Marion Williams and Robert Burden are about the only researchers who have tried to systematically link the two areas. And the two most famous scholars studying in this field in China are Chuming Wang in GuangDong University of Foreign Studies, and Xiaoqing Qin in Huazhong University of Science and Technology (Chen, 2008, p.82). I did not find any other persons or materials, which focus on the research of the gender difference and attribution theory of English learning.

This paper uses Weiner's attribution theory, aims to find the changed relationship between the two genders and the attribution preference of students' English learning, and analyses the results of the whole investigation.

## III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### A. Research Question

This study focuses on the attribution preference of non-English majors' English learning and whether gender differences exist between male and female students. The main questions that this paper tries to answer are the following ones: (1). Whether the students' attribution preference is correct or not? (2). Which are the most important ones I the factors that would have an influence on students' English learning? (3). Whether gender differences exist between male and female students? If it does, what the differences are?

### B. Participants

The participants are 110 non-English majors in TJPU, who were chosen arbitrarily in the library and in the self-study classrooms. Except the participants who do major in English and who did not finish the questionnaires as required, the number of the final qualified participants is 97, including 52 female students and 45 male students. They are in different grades from freshmen to seniors. All the participants are not required to sign their names on the papers in order that they can choose the most suitable and real answer without restraint.

### C. Instruments

In this study, the instrument is questionnaire. The whole questionnaire consists of two components. The first part is about some basic personal information of the participants, such as, the gender, the major, the score of College English Test Band 4 (henceforth, CET-4 score), and how they regard their own English learning. The second part includes 18 questions, which are suitable for three dimensions and six attributions of Weiner's attribution theory.

This questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale to finish the 18 questions in the second part, which means the participants can choose the suitable answer from the specific and possible options for each question from the strongly agree to strongly disagree. Part of the 18 questions were adopted from the book--*psychology for language teacher*, written by Williams and Burden(2000), and part of them are from the questionnaire about attribution tendency to English learning successes and failures, finished by Weihong Chen (2008) (see the Appendix for details). In order to avoid misinterpretation, the questionnaires are designed in Chinese.

The quantitative data analysis was used in this study. The traditional descriptive method was also used to contrast the differences between the male and female. Although the CET-4 has some problems in itself, the subjects are from different grades and different majors, the CET-4 mark is the comparatively standard and equitable comparison for them. In the questionnaires, it is normal for the students to regard their English learning situation with their CET-4 scores.

## IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Discussion and Analysis of Personal Information

TABLE 1:  
THE RESULTS OF PERSONAL INFORMATION (↑=ABOVE, ↓=BELOW)

	The score of CET-4				How to assess English learning		
	500↑	500-425	425↓	average score	good	ordinary	bad
<b>F</b>	28.8%	65.4%	5.87%	474.7	26.9%	67.3 %	5.8%
<b>M</b>	26.7%	44.4%	8.9%	462.1	20%	51.1%	28.9%

(1). Based on the investigation data of the score of CET-4, there are two pieces of information can be got: ①. Both male and female students are quite satisfied with their English learning. ②. Female students' English learning are better than male students on the whole. 23.7% of the students consider their English learning are good or even perfect. 59.8% of the participants consider their English learning just in ordinary level. Generally speaking, both male and female students are positive and optimistic about their English learning. Teachers should continue to foster students' interests and confidence about their English learning, make the students have great zeal for their English learning.

(2). 28.8% of female students' and 26.5% of male students' scores of CET-4 are higher than 500, so the proportion of female students are more than that of male students by 2.1%. About the item of how to assess their English learning by themselves, 26.9% of female students and 20% of male students think their English were good, so the proportion of female students are more than that of male students by 6.9%. And the number of students who think their English learning are good is less than the number of students whose CET-4 score are higher than 500. All of these show: ①. both female and male students don't have enough self-confidence for themselves. ②. to some extent, female students are more confident than male students. Teachers should continue to foster students', especially the male students', confidence in their English learning.

(3). The proportion of the female and male students whose CET-4 score are less than 425, and the proportion of students who think their English learning are bad are the same: 5.8% of female students and 28.9% of male students. This situation means that the score of CET-4 has a great influence on students' self-assessment of their English learning. Teachers should make the students know that the ultimate aim of English learning is not only to pass the CET-4 examination.

### B. Discussion and Analysis of Attribution Preference

According to Weiner's attribution theory, the 18 questions in the questionnaire can be divided into nine categories, and the nine categories can be put into the three dimensions: stability, locus of causality and controllability, as in the following table:

TABLE 2:

THE SPECIFIC CATEGORIZATION OF THE 18 QUESTIONS IN THE QUESTIONNAIRE (1, 2, 3, ..... 18 = THE 18 QUESTIONS IN THE QUESTIONNAIRE)

	stability		locus of causality		controllability	
	stable	unstable	internal	external	controllable	uncontrollable
Interesting (1)		+	+		+	
confidence(2)		+	+		+	
effort (3)		+	+		+	
ability (4,5,6)	+		+			+
Physical and mental condition (7,8,9)		+	+			+
Task difficult (10,11)	+			+		+
Learning environment (12)		+		+		+
luck (13)		+		+		+
Others (14,15,16,17,18)		+		+		+

(1). Interest (1)

Interest is a kind of learners’ subjective preference on all things in the outside world, and is the top problem in the learning process. The findings show that both male and female students are positive about the question of whether English learning is related to the interest, because 80% of male students and 65.4% female students choose the alternative of “satisfied”. This refers to both male and female students and more male students consider the interest can have a great effect on their English learning. Some inspirations of the English learning can be gotten from this result: teachers should enhance students’, especially female students’, interest in English learning at its source, and advance their English learning with the effect of getting twice the result with half the effort.

(2). Confidence (2)

Confidence is very important for the English learning, because it is impossible to master a foreign language overnight. The investigation data show that both male and female students are positive about the relationship between English learning and confidence. 60% of male students and 53.8% of female students choose the alternative of “satisfied”, and 23.1% of female students and 17.8% of male students choose the alternative of “neutral”, which means that both male and female students think their English learning need confidence, but their own confidence are not enough. Compared with the male students, less female students consider that their English learning has been influenced by confidence. This situation requires that teachers should pay more attention to foster students’ confidence of their English learning in the teaching process.

(3). Effort (3)

Both male and female students hold the same opinion on this question that English learning would be affected by effort. 80% of male students and 73.1% of female students admit the effort is very important for their English learning. Teachers should lead students to improve their English under this correct attribution preference.

(4). Ability (4, 5, 6)

Both male and female students on the whole are negative about the statement that ability influences their English learning. Less than 30% of students admit that the learning ability affected their English learning, but most students think their English learning is not influenced by the ability. From the theoretical analysis, ability relates to the stable, internal and uncontrollable factor, which should be positive about students’ English learning. However, why do students negate this important factor in such a high proportion? It is a problem deserved to be re-thought.

(5). Physical and mental condition (7, 8, 9)

The data show that both male and female students have a negative attitude about that the physical and mental condition can affect English learning. As to the physical condition, 91.1% of male students and 82.7% of female students hold negative opinions. As for the mental condition, most students also hold negative about it, the proportion makes up 55.5%. There are some “nature” gender differences between male and female students, so it is normal for the male and female students to make subtle different chooses on this item. In the teaching-learning process, teachers should grip students’ this attribution preference, and inspire them to overcome some difficult and study hard.

(6). Task difficulty (10, 11)

The task difficulty in this paper refers to the degree of the difficulty of teaching materials and examinations. The results show that 77.8% of male students and 75% of female students negate the idea that the difficulty of teaching materials can affect the English learning. At the same time, 75.5% of male students and 76.9% of female students negate the idea that the difficulty of the examinations can affect the English learning. This result shows that: ①. The levels of students’ English proficiency are quite high, so the present task difficult cannot be regarded as a kind of difficulty for them. ②. The students have recognized that English learning has no concern with the task difficult. No matter which inference is the real situation, teachers should pay much attention to it, and make some adjustments in the teaching process.

(7). Learning environment (12)

The data show that the disparities between the judgment that learning environment affects English learning for the male and female students are narrow. Both male and female students regard that their English learning are affected by the learning environment, because 73.1% of female students and 77.8% of male students think that the learning

environment is an important influential factor for their English learning. This finding refers to universities even the teachers should create a good learning environment for the students.

(8). Luck (13)

78.9% of female students and 75.5% of male students have a negative attitude about the statement that the English learning can be influenced by luck. But the proportion of admitting luck can influence English learning is that: female students make up 3.8%, while the male students make up 11.2%. Teachers should lead students to refute the factor of luck in the teaching process, because it belongs to the unstable, external and uncontrollable factors. And teachers should make students be conscious of the reality that no matter in the daily learning or in the examinations; English learning cannot be influenced by the luck.

(9). others (refer to the evaluations and helps from teachers and classmates, etc) (14, 15, 16, 17, 18)

The data show that both male and female students on the whole are negative about this kind of relationship can affect English learning. 97.8% of male students and 69.2% of female students think that their English learning are not affected by teachers' evaluations. 86.6% of male students and 86.5% of female students think that their English learning are not affected by the companionship with classmates. 82.2% of male students and 90.4% of female students think there is no relationship between English learning and the helps from their classmates. 60% of male students and 71.2% of female students think there is no relationship between English learning and the helps from their teachers. Only 22.2% of male students and 25% of female students acknowledge English learning is related to the teachers' teaching quality. Weiner regarded these factors as the unstable, external and uncontrollable factors and learners should not attribute the successes or failures of their English learning to these factors, but in the English learning process, especially for the Chinese English learners, the functions of teachers and classmates are very important. And the beliefs of "respect the teacher and reverse his teaching" and "hold together and help each other" are the traditional virtues in China. Therefore, what is the deep resource about this phenomenon? Is the world view of students changed fundamentally or the teachers' ability and quality cannot meet the students' requirements? In view of the existing situation, how should the teacher go about their work? In the author's opinion, the most important and urgent thing is to improve teachers' ability and quality.

All the data from this investigation show that: both male and female students can take a basic correct and reasonable view of their successes or failures of the English learning, which means that the attribution preferences of them are basically correct and reasonable. In the English learning process, the boundary line between the male and female are not very distinct. Both male and female students hold a positive attitude about that the English learning would be affected by the factors of interests, confidence effort and learning environment, and both of them hold a negative attitude about that English learning would be affected by the factors of ability, physical and mental condition, task difficult, luck and other reasons. Both female and male students have similar or even the same opinion about the same reason. The top four elements in the 18 affecting elements, which have the most influence on students' English learning are: effort > learning environment > interesting > confidence. The distinct gender differences are not embodied clearly, but some subtle differences still exist: ①. Both of them admit the influence of the factor of interest, but proportion of male students takes up 80%, while that of the female students only takes up 65.4%. ②. Both of them negate the influence of the factor of teachers' evaluation, but the proportion of male students takes up 97.8%, while that of the female students only takes up 69.2%. Both of the male and female students' chooses belong to the same direction in these two questions, and the differences are just in varying degrees. Some new trends and features also emerged during this study: ①. Both male and female students are negative about the statement that learning ability can affect their English learning. ②. Both of them are negative about the statement that the evaluations and helps from teachers and students can affect their English learning.

## V. CONCLUSION

This paper focuses on studying the attribution preferences and gender differences in non-English majors' English learning in Tianjin Polytechnic University. The main questions that this paper tries to answer are the following ones: (1). Whether the students' attribution preference is correct or not? (2). Which are the most important ones I the factors that would have an influence on students' English learning? (3). Whether gender differences exist between male and female students? If it does, what the differences are? The findings show that both male and female students' attribution preferences are relatively correct and reasonable. Both of them regard some stable, internal and controllable factors as the reasons for their success of English learning, and both of them regard some unstable, external and uncontrollable factors as the reasons for their failures of English learning. The top four elements in the 18 affecting elements, which have the most influence on students' English learning are: effort > learning environment > interesting > confidence. No distinct gender differences about their attribution preferences exist in this study, and their opinions about these factors are similar.

The attribution preferences of students will be changed with the development of their learning, so it is very important for teachers to help the students establish the correct attribution preferences and practice the reattribution trainings--strengthen the right attribution and rectify the wrong attribution, and teachers also should revise their opinions and judgments of the students' attribution preferences constantly. The learning environment and the teachers' ability and quality should be improved, and the teaching methods should be adjusted, etc, which can regulate students'

English learning, strengthen students' interest and confidence, etc, so the English learning can be improved by leaps and bounds.

APPENDIX QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ENGLISH LEARNING ATTRIBUTION PREFERENCE

1. Gender: A: Male B: Female
2. Your major:
3. Your grade: A freshman B sophomore C junior D senior E postgraduate
4. How do you regard your English learning?  
A: very good B: good C: just so-so D: very poor
5. Your CET-4 score:

Please answer the following questions by choosing one answer from the five possible options.

Question: My English learning is in the present situation, and I attribute it to:

reasons	options	A	B	C	D	E
1. the interesting in English						
2. the confidence of learning English						
3. the extent to make effort on English learning						
4. my capability of learning						
5. the learning strategies or methods						
6. when meeting the difficult, I don't know what I should do next						
7. my physical condition						
8. the mood in the class						
9. whether feel tired in the class						
10. the difficult degree of teaching materials						
11. the difficult degree of exams						
12. the learning environment						
13. the luck						
14. the evaluation from teachers						
15. the relationship with classmates						
16. whether get help from classmates						
17. whether get help from teachers						
18. the teachers' teaching quality						

(A=very suitable B=fairly suitable C=may or may not D= not very suitable E= non-relation)

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**Juan Wu** was born in Sichuan, China in 1983. She will receive her M.A degree in linguistics and applied linguistics from Tianjin Polytechnic University, China in 2011.

She is currently a postgraduate in the foreign language college, Tianjin Polytechnic University, Tianjin, China. Her research interests include psycholinguistics and the cultural teaching in FLE.