An investigation into Iranian English literature student' academic achievement based on Weiner's attribution theory

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1. INTRODUCTION

The education profession continues to question why some students successfully meet their educational outcomes as measured by educational institutions and the larger society and others do not. Naturally, human beings also are in constant search for the factors that cause them or other people to behave the way they do. Among cognitive psychologists, the discussion of this issue has led to conclusions which indicate that students' beliefs about their probability and causes for success and failure greatly influence their academic achievement (Williams et al., 2004; Williams et al., 2001).

The process of assigning causes to our or other people's behavior is called attribution (Heider, 1958). According to Heider (1958), people broadly attribute the causes of their behavior either to internal or external factors. Weiner (1985) identified four attribution factors that are related to academic success or failure, namely: ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck.

In the traditional approach used to assess causal dimensions, researchers have generally translated the causal attributions made for an achievement-type task by the subject into the causal dimensions described by Weiner (1985). This assumes that the researcher perceives causes in the same way as the respondent. Russell (1987) found this methodology problematic since it did not take into consideration that a meaning of an attribution could vary greatly from person to person and from situation to situation. The present study, intends to resolve the limitation of the previous studies by not restricting the attribution factors being studied to the ones the researchers know or are familiar with through Weiner's attribution theory (2010) and relevant studies. As such, this study investigates the attribution factors experienced and known by university students themselves and the relationship between those factors and university students' academic achievement.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study employed a qualitative approach to investigate the relationship

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between EFL learners' attributional factors and their academic achievement in university. The participants included 20 junior and 20 senior students studying English Literature at Bahonar University of Kerman. The participants' attributing factors to their successes and failures were, subsequently, categorized into different classes thematically. An inductive category formation procedure (Mayring, 2004) was employed to induce the themes from the responses. That is; the raw data was codified to develop concepts and themes from data using constant comparative method and the coding paradigms of the grounded theory approach (Ary et al., 2014).

In order to gather data, a series of interviews were conducted with the students who allowed the researcher to record their voice during the interview process. The interviews were semi-structured in nature to be able to freely delve into issues presented since the students attribute their successes and failures to various internal and external factors that are required to be studied more and more. In other words, academic achievement has a multi-factor nature and the interview questions that don't limit the participants to some pre-determined responses, increase the probability that the participants do not confine the attribution factors to the ones researched before by the previous studies. Hence, this gives them the chance to reflect on their own experiences and state their believes about them (Liu, et al., 2016).

The interview questions were designed and asked in English, but with the purpose of better communication and facilitation of expressing ideas, the interviewees were allowed to use their mother tongue i.e., Persian, if needed. Every face-to-face interview took about 30 minutes and the length of each online interview was about 25 minutes. However, some extended more than that since different ideas and opinions were brought into contact and the total length for all interviews was about 21 hours.

Permissions were sought to gather participants' GPAs (grade point averages) of their last semester to be the indicator of their academic achievement. To be more specific, this research contributes to the body of attributional factors literature by responding to the following research questions:

Research question one: Based on Weiner's attribution theory, which factors do Iranian EFL learners attribute their academic success and failure to?

Research question two: What are the differences between successful and unsuccessful EFL learners in terms of attributional factors of academic achievement?

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Using constant comparative method of data analysis and coding paradigms of grounded theory, participants' attributional factors were classified into two main categories of internal factors and external factors, five subcategories of internal factors, including ability, effort, interest, familiarity with educational major and learning eagerness, and also seven subcategories of external factors, including test difficulty, luck, the time set for studying before exams, quality of teaching, personal and family situation, obligation from family members and the nature of academic courses were obtained. The findings indicated that most of students with high GPAs attributed their academic achievement to internal factors, including most of all, effort and ability and then, interest. On the other hand, most of students with low GPAs attributed their academic failure to external factors, such as test difficulty,

luck, and the time set for studying before each exam. In addition, a high number of recent studies, including Genet (2016), Lei (2009) and Boruchovitch (2004) obtained similar results. Most of participants with low GPAs did not attribute their failures to lack of enough ability and effort. This part of results in the present study does not confirm Kumar et al., (2020) study that introduced lack of enough effort as the most important attributional factor to failure by unsuccessful participants and also does not correspond to Hoomanfard et al., (2020) and Mahmoodi and Karampour (2020) studies since they found that participants attributed their failure to lack of enough ability.

4. CONCLUSION
Regarding the findings of the present study, it could be concluded that students' attribution style influences their learning motivation and inclination since each attributional factor leads to unique results for students.

The present study tried to discover the factors that university students themselves attribute to academic achievement so that it would be much more feasible and profitable for instructors to utilize the results to make positive change in the students believes and thoughts about real causes of events.

Keywords: Attributional factors of academic achievement; External factors; Internal factors; Iranian students; Weiner's Attribution theory