

# Attributions to Success and Failure in English Language Learning

— A Comparative Study of Urban and Rural Students in Malaysia —

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## Abstract

This paper presents a descriptive study on Malaysian urban and rural students' attributions for success and failure in learning English as a second language. The study involved 1,156 randomly selected undergraduates from six public universities in Malaysia. Data was collected using the Attribution to Success and Failure Questionnaires (ASQ & AFQ) based on previous research conducted by Gobel and Mori (2007). The findings from the study revealed that although a majority (61.4%) of the respondents obtained an appropriate level of English, as evidenced by national proficiency exams, there were distinct differences in attitudes towards success and failure in language learning tasks based on locality, with the urban students attributing success more frequently to their own abilities and the rural students citing their lack of ability as a cause of failure. The findings suggest that the urban students seemed to be much more study-wise and autonomous in their learning.

**Keywords :** attribution theory, motivation, urban/rural setting, ESL, language education

## 1. Introduction

Attribution, simply put, is the process of assigning a cause to an event. People search for reasons and explanations for success or failure in order to make sense of observed events and, as a result, reasonably predict the course of similar future behaviors and events. Weiner (1986, 2000) hypothesized that attributions come from a person's self-perceptions, which influence their expectancy, values, emotions, and beliefs about their competence, and in turn their motivation.

The present study uses the theoretical framework of attribution theory to explore student attitudes towards language learning – specifically, student attributions for success and failure at specific language tasks. In recent years, a number of classroom-based studies have been done using this framework (e.g. Vispoel & Austin, 1995; Gobel & Mori, 2007; Hsieh & Schallert, 2008), but there have been few studies investigating differences in attributions based on culture or socio-cultural factors. For educators and curriculum designers, any possible differences based on cultural or socio-cultural factors may play an important role in the efficacy of a lesson plan or a curriculum. It is for this reason that the present research was undertaken in Malaysia, a multicultural,

multilingual country with a complex relationship towards English as a Second Language (ESL).

This paper will first review attribution theory and empirical research associated with it, consider research in the field of language education using attribution theory as a theoretical base, and briefly look at the complex issues involved with ESL in the Malaysian university context. The goal of the present study is to examine the relationship between performance attributions and socio-cultural settings, defined by rural (areas with a relatively low population density and fewer public services) and urban areas (areas with a relatively higher population density). In the case of Malaysia and ESL, clear lines can be drawn between urban and rural educational settings (see Rajadurai, 2010 for an overview of this issue). In contrast to previous research, which has been primarily qualitative in nature, the present study takes a quantitative approach, in the belief that this would enable the researcher to gain a clearer perspective on student attributions towards English education.

### **1.1 Attribution theory**

Research has shown that attributions of causality vary depending on the person, the task, the culture and the social group (Graham, 1991). Variations in attributions have been reported for gender (Nelson & Cooper, 1997; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002), self-esteem (Betancourt & Weiner, 1982; Fitch, 1970; Skaalvik, 1994); performance (Carr & Borkowski, 1989; Kristner, Osborne, & LeVerrier, 1988) and for social position (Kluegel and Smith, 1986). This field of study is important to language teaching and learning as well, as it is closely linked to models of motivation that explore factors that lead to effective language learning. These models propose that successful language learning will occur if learners are able to actively attach meaning to their learning situations. Students' beliefs about their ability to control the outcome of a given task are assumed to play an important role in their actions, motivation, and achievement (Bandura, 1979; Schunk, 1991; Weiner, 1986).

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is that of Weiner's (1986, 2000) attribution theory. Attribution theory assumes that people try to determine why they do what they do, that is, interpret causes to an event or behavior. Weiner's attribution theory is mainly concerned with degrees of achievement, and perceptions of how that achievement was or was not attained. According to Weiner, the most important factors affecting attributions are ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. Attributions are classified along three causal dimensions:

1. locus of control (internal vs. external)
2. stability (does the cause change over time or not?)
3. controllability (causes one can control such as skills vs. causes one cannot control such as

luck, others' actions, etc.)

The locus of causality is concerned with whether a cause is perceived as being internal or external to the individual. For instance, ability and effort could be classified as internal, whereas task difficulty and luck would be classified as external. The stability dimension refers to whether a cause is fixed and stable, or variable and unstable over time. In this case, ability would be seen as stable, with effort being unstable, or variable over time. Finally, controllability indicates how much control a person has over a cause. The effect of luck or weather would both be uncontrollable by an athlete, for example. In addition, an outcome might also be attributed to a number of other factors including other people (such as teachers, coaches, or other students), mood, fatigue or illness, personality, and physical appearance. Table 1 shows how the attributions of ability, effort, luck and task can be integrated in terms of the dimensions of locus, stability and control.

**Table 1: Dimensional Classification Scheme for Causal Attributions**

Attributions	Dimension		
	Locus	Stability	Controllability
Ability	Internal	Stable	Uncontrollable
Effort	Internal	Unstable	Controllable
Strategy	Internal	Unstable	Controllable
Interest	Internal	Unstable	Controllable
Task difficulty	External	Stable	Uncontrollable
Luck	External	Unstable	Uncontrollable
Family influence	External	Stable	Uncontrollable
Teacher influence	External	Stable	Uncontrollable

From Vispoel and Austin (1995), based on Weiner (1979)

### 1.2 Attribution Theory in a Cultural Context

A self-enhancement bias is the propensity for people to describe themselves and their achievements in a more positive light. Thus, when someone does well on a task, s/he will attribute this success to personal (internal) reasons more frequently than external reasons. Related to this is the self-protective tendency, which refers to the propensity for blaming outside agents (external attributions) for failures (Kruger, 1999). Many mainstream psychological studies have suggested that self-enhancement is the norm, and that it is a controllable bias, rather than a cognitive affect (Kruger, 1998; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003).

In recent years many researchers have suggested that this phenomenon is pan-cultural in

nature, i.e. it is not affected by cultural/social influence (e.g. Sekides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003). In a meta-analysis of self-enhancement and attribution research, Sekides et. al (2003) claim that self-enhancement motivation is universal, and thus attributions enhancing image of self can be seen in both individualistic and collective cultures, although the attributions themselves may differ depending on the culture. On the other hand, a number of studies have suggested that self-enhancement is indeed affected by culture, cultural/social dynamics, and the cultural image of 'self' (Heine & Renshaw, 2002; Kitayama & Uchida, 2003; Kitayama, Snibbe, Markus, & Suzuki, 2004; Markus, Uchida, Omoroegie, Townsend, & Kitayama, 2006; Heine, Takemoto, Moskalenko, Lasaleta, & Henrich, 2008). These studies suggest that in collectivist cultures a self-critical tendency, rather than a self-enhancement tendency, is the norm.

Meta-analysis of studies conducted in Japan (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Heine & Hamamura, 2007) confirmed such a self-critical rather than self-enhancing tendency and suggested that cultural differences may play a part in this. It may, therefore, be argued that Western cultures such as North America promote autonomy, while many non-Western cultures such as Japan emphasize interdependence and connectedness among individuals and the group. This means that in Western cultures the independent self is motivated to maintain autonomy and uniqueness, thus the individual engages in self-enhancing biases to support the idea that s/he is self-sufficient and worthy. In contrast, in interdependent cultures, an individual considers her/himself as part of an encompassing social unit, and as a result, is encouraged to adjust behavior to maintain meaningful social relationships (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997).

### **1.3 Attribution Theory in Foreign/Second Language Contexts**

Foreign/second language study is an unusual academic endeavor in that it forces students to come to grips with new cultural practices in the task of communication (Williams & Burden, 1997), which in turn may threaten their self-image. For language learners who struggle, there are frequent and varied ways in which to fail. For this reason, attribution theory is a relevant research area in the L2 field. In spite of this, most studies in the area of L2 motivation have relied on attitude and anxiety constructs (e.g., Dornyei, 2001; Horwitz, 1988).

Early foreign language learning attribution studies found a variety of factors, such as teacher influence, personal ability, attitude, and learning context to be attributes related to either positive or negative outcomes, suggesting that these attributions may act to maintain a positive self-image (Tse, 2000; Ushioda, 2001; Williams & Burden, 1999; Williams, Burden, & Al-Baharna, 2001; Williams, Burden, Poulet, & Maun, 2004). Hsieh and Schallert (2008) attempted to combine two motivational constructs, self-efficacy and attribution to explore the motivation of 500 undergraduate

foreign language learners in the US. The students were asked to consider their test scores in light of these two constructs, and give actual reasons for the outcome. Analysis suggested that self-efficacy was the strongest predictor of achievement, supplemented by ability attributions.

With the exception of the last study, all of the foreign language studies mentioned above used data gathered using qualitative techniques. This resulted in a large number of attributional categories, obfuscating results and prohibiting multiple comparisons and generalization. A quantitative method of investigation would enable collection of data from a larger number of participants which means sophisticated statistical procedures can be employed.

With these reference points, the following three studies were undertaken. The first was a study carried out to explore perceived reasons for successes and failures in speaking and reading classes among first-year Japanese university students (Gobel & Mori, 2007). The results revealed that students who reported performing poorly attributed poor performance to a lack of ability and lack of effort. On the other hand, students who reported performing well attributed their performance to teachers and the classroom atmosphere. This finding is in line with that of Heine and Hamamura, (2007) and Markus and Kitayama, (1991) and it further supports their claim that cultural differences do influence attributions to success and failure.

In a follow-up study (Gobel, Mori, Thepsiri & Pojanapunya, 2010), comparing Thai and Japanese university student attributions towards doing well and doing poorly, similar attributional patterns were found with both groups. Finally, a similar study was undertaken with Japanese, Thai, and Malaysian students (Gobel, Mori, Thang, Kan, & Lee, in press). In both studies, the theoretical structure of causal attributions between the groups was quite similar, suggesting a possible attributional cultural bias that extends beyond the Japanese environment, and possibly to a number of Asian cultures in the region. These studies suggest that if this bias does indeed exist, then it should be taken into consideration when considering language teaching methodology and the learning environment.

#### **1.4 The Urban/Rural Divide and English as a Second Language**

To understand the role of English in Malaysia, and the educational goals set by the Malaysian government, it is important to take a brief look at the policies and practices of the British colonial government, which ruled Malaya for almost two centuries. In creating a multilingual and multiracial colony, the colonial government imposed English as a language of power and prestige. Those who were privileged enough to receive an English education (particularly the Chinese and Indians) came to use English increasingly in their daily lives. By the end of the colonial era, English had become a lingua franca among more educated citizens (Lowenberg, 1992).

The rise of nationalism, and independence in 1957, saw a gradual change in attitude towards English, in favor of Malay. The Malay language gradually supplanted English as the primary language of the nation, taking over as the official language in government offices, schools, and courts of law. However, in the private sectors of the country, such as business, and in diplomacy, English is still the dominant language. Thus the competence in English has been and still is a crucial divider in Malaysian society, more common in urban areas, private education, and among those with a higher socio-economic status.

Recently the Malaysian government has implemented new policies to reinstate English as a medium of instruction. This has been met with positive support from those who see Malaysia as becoming a 'global nation', and with opposition from those who see English as a threat to their own culture and language (and a reminder of colonial rule). It is the ethnic Malays who have the strongest opposition to English, with many citing a strong reluctance to engage with English (Ratnawati, 2005; Mardziah & Wong, 2006).

The learning of English in rural schools in Malaysia has always been a major problem for educators as they struggle to pull proficiency levels up against a backdrop where the language is almost non-existent other than the few periods of English per week where it is taught more as an academic subject than as a language (Thiyagarajah, 2003). It is a language which is not spoken or heard at home, in schools, or the social environment. Therefore, teaching and learning the language comes with an almost 'innate' set of obstacles. The falling standard of English remains till this day, an extremely heated topic, with politicians and the public hotly debating whether to strengthen the teaching of English or instead to teach Science and Mathematics in English.

According to Talif and Edwin (1990), rural schools play a major role in the high failure rate of the Lower Secondary Examination English subject. The supposed difference in achievement levels is a strong indicator of the difference in proficiency levels between urban and rural youths and further highlights the disparity in the urban-rural divide. Given this landscape, would these students attribute their success mainly to effort and luck, and their failure to ability and task difficulty, or will they be more likely to attribute their success to an internal locus and their failure to external locus?

Malaysia is a fascinating nation to study because English, though neither the national language nor the medium of instruction in schools or universities, is given prominence by the government and private sector. The present study attempts to examine the relationship in the Malaysian ESL context between performance attributions and urban and rural university settings. Contrary to most previous studies, which used scenarios or hypothetical events to ask about individuals' reasons for the task outcomes (e.g., Schunk & Gunn, 1986; Shores & Shannon, 2007), this study measures students' responses to authentic tasks undertaken in the context of learning English in

an ESL context. More specifically, for the designed questionnaire, students are required to select just one activity and one outcome for its success/failure thus controlling choices. In this way it will be possible to find out with greater precision which activity and what factors have influenced their success or failure.

With this in mind, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How do the attributions to success of urban Malaysian university students compare with those of their rural counterparts?
2. How do the attributions to failure of urban Malaysian university students compare with those of their rural counterparts?

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1 Participants**

This study involved respondents from the six main public universities in Malaysia – i.e. University Malaya (UM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), and Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). The respondents were first (70%) and second year (30%) university students who were non-English majors and were learning English as a Second language. A total of 1,156 students were involved in the study. 584 students responded to the Attitude towards Successful Activity (ASQ) questionnaires whilst the remaining 572 students answered the Attitude towards Failure (AFQ) questionnaires.

The respondents were mainly Malays, Chinese, Indians and the indigenous communities from East Malaysia such as Ibans and Kadazans. The Malays accounted for 56% of the total sample population while 33% of the respondents were Chinese. For this study, the ethnic make-up of the both the urban and rural groups was roughly the same, eliminating ethnicity as a variable in the study.

The respondents' English language proficiency was measured using the SPM. The SPM Examination is a centralized public examination taken by Secondary Five students at the end of secondary school. It is clear that the urban students in both the ASQ and AFQ groups scored higher, in general. For this reason, test score was used as a covariate in the statistical analysis (see Table 2).

**Table 2: SPM Scores as Percentages**

ASQ group	total	urban	rural
A1 - A2 (Distinction)	0.33	0.42	0.19
B3 - B4 (Strong Credits)	0.31	0.36	0.23
C5 - C6 (Weak Credits)	0.23	0.14	0.36
P7 - P8 ( Pass)	0.13	0.07	0.21
F9 (Fail)	0.00	0.00	0.01
	1.00	1.00	1.00
<b>AFQ group</b>			
A1 - A2 (Distinction)	0.33	0.46	0.18
B3 - B4 (Strong Credits)	0.25	0.24	0.26
C5 - C6 (Weak Credits)	0.23	0.21	0.24
P7 - P8 ( Pass)	0.18	0.08	0.29
F9 (Fail)	0.02	0.01	0.02
	1.00	1.00	1.00

Note: a1-a2 is the highest level, with f9 being a failing score

## 2.2 Measure

The study employed two main sets of self-administered questionnaires- i.e. Attribution Success Questionnaire (ASQ) and Attribution Failure Questionnaire (AFQ) (see Appendix). The questionnaires were translated into Malay by experienced translators. Both questionnaires consisted of two main sections. The first section investigated the demographic profile of the respondents. The aspects explored included variables such as gender, ethnicity, year of study and their language achievement in Malaysian public examinations such as the SPM and MUET (Malaysian University English Test, a standardized test used for university admissions). Respondents were also required to self-rate their proficiency in English and identify the location of their school when they had their primary, lower secondary, upper secondary and pre-university education. The second section consisted of questions relating to reasons why students did well or did not do well in the English language classroom activities. The respondents were required to provide their responses based on a six-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

## 2.3 Procedure

Students from the six universities were asked to fill in either the ASQ or the AFQ. A roughly equal number of ASQ and AFQ were distributed in each university in such a manner as to produce a fairly even distribution of sample population in terms of proficiency levels and students' major disciplines. The questionnaire was completed within 15 to 20 minutes. The quantitative data

was analysed by using SPSS (version 18.0). Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis for a pilot test conducted in one of the public universities in Malaysia stood at .785 for the Attribution Success Questionnaire (ASQ) and .826 for the Attribution for Failure Questionnaire (AFQ).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Differences in Attributional Tendencies Based on Urban/Rural Divide

In order to determine the extent to which attribution ratings varied with respect to urban/rural divide, a factor analysis was first performed to reduce the measured variables to a smaller set of factors. If the dimensions suggested by attribution theory actually exist, those attributions that are categorized as internal/unstable/controllable should load together as a result of factor analysis.

The dimensionality of the 12 items from the success attribution measure was analyzed using principal components analysis. Four criteria were used to determine the number of factors to rotate: a minimum eigenvalues of 1.0, the scree test, a minimum loading of .45, and the interpretability of the factor solution. Based on these criteria, three factors were rotated using a Varimax rotation procedure. The rotated solution, as shown in Table 3, yielded three interpretable factors, an internal/controllable success attribution, a class and interest-related success attribution, and a task difficulty-related external/uncontrollable success attribution. The Internal/controllable success attribution accounted for 35.92%, class and interest-related success attribution accounted for 11.41%, and task difficulty-related external/uncontrollable success attribution accounted for 9.02% of the item variance (see Table 4).

**Table 3. Principal components results for success (n=584)**

	Dimension			Component			$h^2$
	Locus	Stability	Controllability	1	2	3	
Ability	internal	stable	uncontrollable	<b>0.690</b>	0.006	0.281	0.554
Effort	internal	unstable	controllable	<b>0.674</b>	0.169	-0.004	0.483
Strategy	internal	unstable	controllable	<b>0.801</b>	0.101	0.017	0.652
Prep	internal	unstable	controllable	<b>0.679</b>	0.321	0.068	0.569
Enjoyment	internal	stable	controllable	<b>0.556</b>	0.456	0.116	0.530
Interest	internal	unstable	controllable	0.466	<b>0.531</b>	0.129	0.516
Level	external	stable	uncontrollable	0.194	<b>0.712</b>	0.208	0.588
Teacher	external	stable	uncontrollable	0.006	<b>0.773</b>	0.155	0.626
Class	external	stable	uncontrollable	0.138	<b>0.725</b>	0.206	0.586
Grade	internal	stable	controllable	0.168	<b>0.601</b>	-0.008	0.397
Task	external	stable	uncontrollable	0.145	0.163	<b>0.768</b>	0.637
Luck	external	unstable	uncontrollable	0.005	0.125	<b>0.776</b>	0.622

**Table 4. Principal components analysis summary for success: Eigenvalues and percent of variance explained**

Component	Initial Eigenvalues		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	4.31	35.92	35.92
2	1.37	11.41	47.33
3	1.08	9.02	56.35

Using the same criteria, the dimensionality of the 12 items from the failure attribution measure was analyzed. The rotated solution, as shown in Table 5, yielded three interpretable factors, class and interest-related failure attribution, internal/controllable failure attribution, and task -related failure attribution. Class and interest-related failure attribution accounted for 37.85%, internal/controllable failure attribution accounted for 13.42%, and task-related failure attribution accounted for 9.06% of the item variance (see Tables 6). Note that principal components analyses for failure and success show similar results. Specifically, interest in the activity, teacher influence, class atmosphere, interest in getting a good grade, and class level loaded together on factor one, and effort, study strategy and preparation for class loaded together on factor two for both failure and success.

**Table 5. Principal components results for failure (n=572)**

	Dimension			Component			<i>h</i> <sup>2</sup>
	Locus	Stability	Controllability	1	2	3	
Interest	internal	unstable	controllable	<b>0.523</b>	0.403	0.142	0.456
Luck	external	unstable	uncontrollable	<b>0.557</b>	0.107	0.309	0.417
Teacher	external	stable	uncontrollable	<b>0.809</b>	-0.001	0.166	0.683
Class	external	stable	uncontrollable	<b>0.731</b>	0.005	0.252	0.601
Grade	internal	stable	controllable	<b>0.790</b>	0.147	-0.279	0.724
Enjoyment	internal	stable	controllable	<b>0.758</b>	0.325	-0.006	0.684
Level	external	stable	uncontrollable	<b>0.808</b>	0.181	0.005	0.688
Effort	internal	unstable	controllable	0.233	<b>0.756</b>	-0.175	0.657
Strategy	internal	unstable	controllable	0.188	<b>0.614</b>	0.262	0.481
Preparation	internal	unstable	controllable	0.172	<b>0.748</b>	0.001	0.589
Ability	internal	stable	uncontrollable	-0.110	<b>0.591</b>	0.323	0.466
Task	external	stable	uncontrollable	0.181	0.148	<b>0.859</b>	0.793

**Table 6. Principal components analysis summary for failure:  
Eigenvalues and percent of variance explained**

Component	Total	Initial Eigenvalues	
		% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	4.54	37.85	37.85
2	1.61	13.42	51.27
3	1.09	9.06	60.33

A one-way multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA), using SPM scores as the covariate, was performed to determine the effect of the independent variable of urban/rural divide on the three success attributional factors measured by factor scores. Table 8 contains these results. Note that only Factor 1 was significant. Looking at the means for the factor scores, we can see that the urban group had a more positive view of this factor than the urban group, suggesting that they attribute internal/controllable attributes to their success more than the rural group. In other words, when they succeeded, they were more likely to attribute this to the dimensions in Factor 1 (Ability, Effort, Study Strategy, and Preparation). I think that this is a significant finding, as it suggests a propensity for urban students to believe more in their own abilities when they succeed.

**Table 7: MANCOVA of factor scores for success**

		SS	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Factor 1	B/ Groups	15.33	1	15.33	15.72	0.00
	W/ Groups	567.67	582	0.98		
	Total	583.00	583			
Factor 2	B/Groups	0.59	1	0.59	0.59	0.44
	W/Groups	582.41	582	1.00		
	Total	583.00	583			
Factor 3	B/ Groups	3.95	1	3.95	3.97	0.05
	W/Groups	579.05	582	1.00		
	Total	583.00	583			

**Table 8: Means factor scores for success**

	N	Mean	Std Deviation	Std error
Factor 1	584			0.041
urban	361	0.127	0.973	0.051
rural	223	-.206	1.01	0.067
Factor 2	584			0.041
urban	361	-0.025	0.976	0.051
rural	223	0.04	1.037	0.069
Factor 3	584			0.041
urban	361	0.065	1.001	0.052
rural	223	-0.104	0.991	0.066

A MANCOVA was also performed to determine the effect of location on the three failure attributional factors measured by factor scores. Table 9 contains these results. As we can see, the differences were significant for all three factors, indicating a significant difference in the way the two groups attribute their failures at language tasks.

Looking at the mean factor scores, we can see that for Factor 1 (Class interest) the Urban group more frequently attributed failure to this factor than the Rural group. For Factor 2 (internal/controllable), the rural group tended to attribute their lack of ability and effort to their failures than the urban group did. Finally, for Factor 3 (Task), the rural group tended to attribute failure to the kind of task they were given, more frequently than the urban group did. Se we see a number of really clear differences in both success attributions and failure attributions.

To summarize, it seems that the urban group is more willing to attribute success to their own ability, effort, and study skills than the rural group. When failure is evident, the urban group attributes this more to lack of interest, class atmosphere, level of the class, and a number of other factors. On the other hand, the rural group attributes failure more to their lack of ability, effort, or study skills, and the task they are given. Based on this data, we can hypothesize that the urban group are much more study-wise students, with a greater belief in their ability to take control of their successes in the language classroom.

**Table 9: MANCOVA of factor scores for failure**

		SS	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Factor 1	B/Groups	7.74	1	7.74	7.83	0.01
	W/Groups	563.26	570	0.99		
	Total	571.00	571			
Factor 2	B/Groups	6.74	1	6.74	6.81	0.01
	W/Groups	564.26	570	0.99		
	Total	571.00	571			
Factor 3	B/Groups	12.27	1	12.27	12.52	0.00
	W/Groups	558.73	570	0.98		
	Total	571.00	571			

**Table 10: Mean factor scores for failure**

	N	Mean	Std Deviation	Std error
Factor 1	572			0.041
urban	310	0.107	1.064	0.06
rural	262	-0.126	0.903	0.055
Factor 2	572			0.082
urban	310	-0.099	0.969	0.008
rural	262	0.118	1.024	0.242
Factor 3	572			0.082
urban	310	-0.135	0.947	0.028
rural	262	0.159	1.038	0.033

## 4. Discussion

The main aim of this study was to investigate if locality had an impact on the attributions to success and failure in learning English among both urban and rural students in Malaysia. Prior to this, however, the covariate of proficiency must be dealt with. The findings in this study reveal that on the whole, both groups of students (ASQ & AFQ) performed rather well in their English language paper during their Secondary Five SPM Examination. Results indicate that a majority (33%) of the all respondents in this study scored distinctions (Grades A1- A2) whilst less than half (23%) obtained weak credits (Grades C5-C6) in their Secondary Five SPM English Language Paper (Table 2). The failure rate for the SPM English Paper for this sample population of university undergraduates stood at .02%. However, results However, indicated that the rural

students obtained fewer distinctions compared to their counterparts in the urban schools. This finding supports previous studies (Thiyagarajah, 2003, Talif & Edwin 1990) and annual Malaysian education ministry reports which often reveal that urban students, without doubt, do better than their counterparts in the rural schools both in terms of quality and numbers.

The main research questions of this study investigated how the attributions to success and failure of urban Malaysian university students compared with that of their rural counterparts. The results in this study indicated significant difference between the two groups. Since the overall English proficiency of the two groups was different (according to SPM data), proficiency was used in the statistical analysis as a covariate. The differences due to proficiency were not statistically significant in either MANCOVA performed, (ASQ  $F(1, 582) = 2.17$ : AFQ  $F(1, 582) = 1.45$ ). However, there were differences in attributions for success and failure which could be attributed to group (urban or rural).

#### **4.1 Attributions for success**

It was noted that the urban group attributed their successes more to factors such as ability and effort – all internal/controllable attributions. It is interesting that this is the only difference in success attributions between the two groups. This suggests that the urban group looks at success in language learning as something coming more from their own effort than from the environment (the teacher, or their peers), or luck. In fact, the rural group tended to attribute success to environmental and external/uncontrollable factors more than the urban group.

The attitude of the rural group is in line with findings from previous studies in Asia (Gobel, et. al, 2007, 2010; Gobel et. al, in press), which highlight the fact that students usually attribute success more to external factors such as luck, in appropriate teacher instruction and classroom environment, rather than to internal causes such as ability, interest, preparedness and effort compared to. It also supports the views of ethnographic researchers regarding student attitudes towards English language learning in rural areas of Malaysia (Romero & Garza, 1986; Thang, 2004; Yoong, 2004; Ratnawati, 2005; Samsiah, Kamaruzaman, Nurazila, Musdiana, Taniza, 2009; Rajadurai, 2010). In these ethnographic studies, rural and ethnic students often viewed the study of English as something that was forced upon them, and which they had no ability or use for. From this point of view, it is possible to see that their success at English might be viewed as the result of motivated teachers, being placed in the appropriate level, or even class atmosphere, rather than personal ability or effort.

#### **4.2 Attributions for failure**

The statistical analysis of failure attributions was more complicated, with the urban group attributing failure to the class and interest-related factor than the rural group. This is actually in line with Western mainstream psychological studies, and the self-enhancing bias mentioned above. In turn, the rural group attributed their failures more to their lack of ability and effort than the urban group did. This seems more in line with other studies in Asia (Gobel, 2007; Mori, et. al, 2010) which exhibited as self-effacing bias in the face of failure. Finally, the urban group attributed failure more to the kind of task they were given than the rural group, indicating once again, a self-enhancing bias.

#### **4.3 Conclusion**

These dual biases in one culture are interesting because they have not been seen until now. Since the demographic make-up of the two groups was similar in most respects (with the exclusion of proficiency and locale) measured in this study, it can be assumed that there are other forces at work. The two that come to mind are socio-economic standing, and the subcultures of rural and local societies. As mentioned previously, there has been a great deal of ethnographic research done on these two factors and their effect on education, but little has been done quantitatively in this regard. This would be an excellent area for future studies, looking more clearly at these two factors and their effect on student attribution.

The above findings have some pertinent pedagogical implications. Broadly speaking, since the findings indicate significant differences in the attribution factors between urban and rural students, Malaysian ESL teachers need to keep in mind the social contexts in which the urban and rural students operate. Urban students have without doubt more exposure to English as a practical medium of communication compared to rural students. So, teachers must ensure that rural students are provided with more opportunities see the utility of the target language.

Furthermore the study indicates some significant differences between urban and rural students with regards to internal motivational and self-efficacy factors such as ability and confidence. This suggests that teachers teaching rural students must instill a sense of self efficacy among rural language learners and motivate them to do well in English. Furthermore, teachers need to be aware and have a deeper understanding of attribution factors and the sensitivities that affect urban and rural students' behavior and motivation to learn English as a second language. Such awareness and knowledge will help teachers design suitable materials that cater to their students' needs. Teachers need to understand that the urban and rural student come from very different settings with various degrees of exposure to English and therefore do not react or learn in the same manner, and neither

can they as teachers, teach in the same manner. This study has to a certain extent helped to shed some light on some of the pertinent differences between urban and rural students and it is hoped that teachers take heed of the differences and exploit them in a positive manner to enhance the teaching and learning of English in Malaysian schools.

On a deeper level, the Ministry of Education must be genuinely concerned and make available the resources to equip teachers, particularly in rural schools, with the tools and software that captivate students' attention as well as motivate them in their learning. In a rural setting, the ESL classroom is actually an EFL classroom as opposed to that of an urban setting. It is difficult for tasks to be realistic, given the scenario that in rural areas, English is truly so foreign, so 'alien', and so far removed in relevance from their lives. As the need for English does not arise, the connectivity with the language does not exist. This, coupled with attributions that may hinder self-efficacy, could hinder progress in English for students in rural settings.

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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 circle the letter 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.

## 英語学習体験における成功と失敗の原因帰属プロセス

—— マレーシアの都市部出身者と地方出身者の意識比較 ——

ピーター ゴーベル

### 要 旨

本論文は、英語学習体験における成功と失敗の原因を求める際、マレーシアの都市部出身の大学生と地方出身の大学生の間で、その原因帰属プロセスに違いがあるかどうかを検証したものである。英語学習者の原因帰属プロセスを検証するにあたり、マレーシアの6つの公立大学に通う大学生の中から、無作為に1156人を選び、質問表（Gobel & Mori, 2007）を用いて調査を実施した。分析の結果、どちらのグループもその大多数（61.4%）が全国英語検定試験で好成績をおさめているにもかかわらず、都市部出身者は、英語学習において成功をもたらした要因は自分の能力にあるとするのに対して、地方出身者は、反対に失敗の原因を自分の能力不足によると考える傾向があることがわかった。また、都市部出身者の方が、より適切な学習方法を習得し、自律した学習者であることも示唆された。

キーワード：帰属理論、モチベーション、出身地域別比較、英語学習、英語教育