

Attribution Theory and Culture: Using Focus Groups to Uncover Parameters of Influence

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The fact that learners' perceptions of success and failure in foreign language learning can be influenced by their own culture is an idea put forward by studies on Attribution Theory. However, these studies have generally relied on assumptions about the cultures investigated, resulting in inconsistent findings mainly due to stereotyping. In order to avoid making subjective inferences on cultural parameters of specific groups of people, simply on the basis that they share the same geographical space, a number of focus groups were used to sound out a sample of research subjects selected according to nationality, level of English proficiency, age, and place of education. Data from the focus groups were analysed using constant comparative analysis in the light of social constructivism. The specific cultural parameters that emerged will serve to create a questionnaire as part of a large project for the investigation of both culture and attributions.

1. Introduction

In foreign language learning, Attribution Theory is a motivation theory which deals with the reasons a learner attributes to his/her success or failure in learning the target language, and with the influence that learners' perceptions of success or failure may exert in present and future learning of the same or other foreign languages. Recent studies involving young learners (cf. Williams & Burden 1999; Williams et al. 2002; Williams et al. 2004) have revealed that their reasons for being more or less successful may differ according to age, gender, perceived level of success, and even the language studied. Little research has been carried on adult learners. Other studies on Attribution Theory have considered the impact of culture on language learners' perceptions of success or failure (cf. Niles 1984; Kashima & Triandis 1986; Murphy-Berman & Sharma 1986; Hau & Salili 1990; Ho et al. 1999; Reyna 2000; Juvonen 2000; van Laar 2000; Williams et al. 2001). However, none of these has moved beyond researchers' assumptions of the research subjects' culture. There is therefore a double gap in the data on adult language-learners' perceptions of their progress.

1.1. Attribution Theory and adult language learning

In 2006, I carried out an exploratory study to establish whether adult learners' perceptions of success and failure differed according to age, gender, perceived level of success, and language studied. The participants in the study were 185 English learners (87 male and 98 female, aged 20-90) studying Portuguese, French, Spanish, Italian and German in an adult language centre in the south of England, and also their tutors (to assess whether the reasons they gave for their learners' successes and failures differed from the ones mentioned by learners). They were all asked to complete a questionnaire where they had to specify their perceived level of success at learning the foreign language, the reasons to which they attributed their success or failure in learning the language, and personal details. Some personal details (e.g. age and gender) were used as research variables, while those used as control variables were nationality (only English students were included, to ensure that culture would not be an influencing factor) and foreign language learning experience (to ensure

respondents had a reasonable degree of language learning experience and use). The data was analysed using grounded theory with open and axial coding, line-by-line analysis and constant comparative analysis. The results showed that, as with young learners, the reasons adult learners gave for their success or failure at learning a foreign language differed according to their age, gender, the language they were studying and whether they believed to be more or less successful at learning that foreign language.

Subsequently I carried out a similar study in a different context. As very few studies have targeted African countries, I decided to conduct my study in Angola. The participants were 60 Angolan learners (30 male and 30 female, aged 18-36) who were studying English as a foreign language as part of their curriculum in a high school in Luanda, as well as their tutor. Here learners' experience was not controlled for because they all had a minimum of three years experience learning English in secondary school. Unlike the previous study, the Angolan learners were asked to complete a questionnaire that considered only age, gender and perceived level of success. The answers provided by the respondents were coded and analysed in the same way as above. Differences in terms of age, gender and perceived level of success were once again found, but Angolan learners attributed their success or failure to reasons which differed from those mentioned by English learners. More specifically:

- The attributions provided by English students outnumbered those given by Angolan students.
- In the two studies, attributions varied across different age groups and by gender, but the most frequent reasons given for success or failure were not the same. Angolan learners often mentioned teaching, effort, language-learning competence, ease (often as an attribution for failure), attitude and emotional response. English students frequently mentioned practice, teaching methods and techniques, teaching materials and peers.
- The Angolan learners did not consider their successes or failures to be caused by factors like appropriate content, exposure to authentic language, performance, ability, previous experience, and pace, while the English learners did.
- In Angola tutors' attributions matched learners' attributions, while in England they differed.

The results of these two studies are consistent with Williams et al.'s (2001) conclusion that – apart from age, gender, perceived level of success and language studied – the learners' context might influence their attributions for success or failure in foreign language learning. Williams et al. (2001) investigated the reasons Bahraini learners construed for their successes and failures in learning English, how these differed from the ones provided by their Bahraini EFL teachers and from those given by Western European learners, in an attempt to prove the influence of culture. The study found that learners' reasons for success or failure were in fact different, which suggests that a learner's cultural background and/or educational tradition is likely to have an impact on variation in his/her attributions. However, this study failed to investigate in-depth the cultural issues behind learners' attributions for success and failure, and it made assumptions only about their culture.

As part of a bigger project researching how culture influences learners' attributions, this paper examines the cultural characteristics of a group of learners through the use focus groups. Its results will subsequently contribute to a questionnaire targeting the role of culture in learners' attributions; the first step, though, is to establish what is meant by culture.

1.2. Defining culture

Culture has always been a controversial term in that no consensus has yet been reached as to how it can be defined. One can talk about culture as the expression of feelings in the arts, for example, or as a community's way of acting in certain contexts (Brooks 1968; Scollon & Scollon 2001). A good definition is that given by Hong (2009: 4), who claims that culture is composed of “networks of knowledge, consisting of learned routines of thinking, feeling and

interacting with other people, as well as a corpus of substantive assertions and ideas about aspects of the world". For the purposes of this paper, culture is understood therefore as the set of habits, values and beliefs shared by a group of people and construed by them over time in interaction with each other and their environment, leading to similar patterns of behaviour.

2. Methodology

The present study was carried out in two different sites in Luanda (Angola): a public university and a private one. The impact of culture on attributions of success or failure in language learning is analysed here from the perspective of 'small cultures', and not from the standpoint of a nation. Although the study was carried out in the same city and with research subjects who share the same nationality, it recognises that learners attending the public university share beliefs, norms and values that differ from those of the learners attending the private university, mainly due to differences in their socio-economic status which in turn can determine more or less exposure to other cultures. The research subjects were students at these universities enrolled in a course that includes English as a foreign language as one of the modules. They were male and female Angolan adult learners, aged 18-45, with an elementary level of English (although they had been learning the language for over five years).

To determine what cultural traits might influence these subjects' attributions for success or failure in foreign language learning, a number of focus-group studies were carried out. According to Krueger and Casey (2009: 2), a focus group study is "a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment". In this study, the use of focus groups seemed an appropriate way to identify people's feelings, perceptions, and thoughts about a specific subject. Focus groups allow the researcher "to learn how a target audience sees, understands and values a particular topic" (*ibid.*: 8). They "provide insight into complicated topics when opinions or attitudes are conditional or when the area of concern relates to multifaceted behaviour or motivation" (*ibid.*: 20).

The participants were divided according to the university they attended and their age to form four groups: public university, age group 18-30; public university, age group 31-45; private university, age group 18-30; private university, age group 31-45. The participants in each group were then split into three focus groups, thus providing a total of twelve focus groups. According to Krueger and Casey (*ibid.*: 2), "group discussion is conducted several times with similar types of participants so the researcher can identify trends and patterns in perceptions".

The size of each focus group varied between four and twelve participants, which is considered as optimal (Krueger & Casey 2009) for in most cases smaller focus groups provide better, more relevant data. The length of the focus groups varied from around forty minutes to an hour and forty-five minutes, with most lasting just over an hour.

Participants were not recruited beforehand. As the researcher is a lecturer in both universities, permission was asked to their Portuguese lecturers to conduct the focus groups as part of the Portuguese subject curriculum (which includes debates and argumentative discourse) and on the date and time agreed the researcher took the place of the Portuguese lecturer. The discussions were audio-recorded and held in Portuguese, given the students' low level of English.

The groups followed a carefully predetermined questioning route, sequenced to provide information from more general to more specific. All the questions were open-ended and kept as general as possible in order to allow respondents to come up with their own ideas, avoiding elements that could elicit a response that they would not normally give (Krueger & Casey 2009). Both thinking questions and feeling questions were asked to discover important

factors influencing decisions. A list of the questions used in the focus groups is given in Appendix A. Key questions were paraphrased if necessary and follow-up questions were also asked, depending on respondents' answers. The focus groups were carried out until the point of theoretical saturation was reached, i.e. when no new insights were gained.

3. Data analysis

A qualitative analysis was carried out of the data gathered in the focus groups. Its main purposes was to let the culture parameters of the research subjects emerge from the information provided and to search for patterns and relationships within the data, as well as to locate possible variations across research-subject groups. The analytic framework employed was the constant comparative method with grounded theory, to allow categories, properties and dimensions to emerge from the data to form a theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Strauss & Corbin 1998; Charmaz 2006). Accordingly, the comparison of data was a systematic process involving coding, memo writing, establishing properties and dimensions within and across categories and the relationships between them.

Open coding of data to identify concepts, their properties and dimensions was followed by axial coding to organise concepts into categories and relate these categories to their subcategories (Strauss & Corbin 1998). First, the information in the researcher's notes from all the focus groups was partially transcribed and classified, then a preliminary categorisation of responses was carried out through line-by-line analysis. Its purpose was to scan the data in search for as many cultural parameters as possible (including interactions and their interrelationships), so focus groups were treated as a whole, regardless of control distinctions such as age or institution. The data were divided into different categories and sub-categories; most category labels were taken from the literature to facilitate comparison, others derived from the data (*in vivo* coding) or the researcher's intuition (Strauss & Corbin 1998). After careful examination, some of the categories were re-classified as subcategories and relabelled if necessary.

4. Findings

The responses provided by the focus groups were compared and divided into five categories: authority (sources, effects and domains); conservatism (what needs to be preserved and what the threats are); distribution of duties and responsibilities; personality (positive and negative aspects); and group belonging/affiliation (microsystem, mesosystem and macrosystem). A detailed list of these categories is given in Appendix B. Subsequently, the data from the four relevant groups (private university, age 18-30; private university, age 31-45; public university, age 18-30; public university, age 31-45) were compared for similarities and differences in: the amount and depth of information provided; the respondents' interpretation of the concept of culture; the role of hierarchy and authority in Angolan society; group affiliation and belonging; acceptance; conservatism, duties and responsibilities.

4.1. Amount and depth of information

Respondents from the public university provided far more information and in much greater depth than those from the private university, suggesting that the latter do not often discuss their traditions/customs because they do not follow or teach them. Moreover, public university respondents went straight to the point and did not need to spend so much time on opening and introductory questions, as opposed to the private university respondents, who needed more cues. Interestingly, in terms of amount and depth of information, the two age

groups in the public university were similar, whereas the younger group in the private university tended to provide far more simplistic data, and less than the older group.

4.2. The concept of culture

Culture was seen in a similar way by respondents from both universities, i.e. as a set of habits, customs and traditions, with the difference that private university respondents tended to view culture in terms of nation, whereas public university respondents emphasised its regional aspect. This suggests that the latter are more aware of cultural differences within their country. Moreover, private university students believe they do not all belong to the same culture, and see this as a consequence of being exposed to various types of influence from different sources (rather than their coming from different regions, as claimed by the public university respondents).

4.3. Hierarchy and authority

Students from both universities describe Angolan society as very hierarchical and place great emphasis on the authority of the hierarchy. However, younger private university respondents believe that the traditional hierarchy has been replaced by economic power, and that age and gender are no longer factors that determine who runs a family or is in a position of power.

Concerning respect for authority, public university respondents (of both age groups) believe that people owe respect to those who are hierarchically above them, like parents and uncles, the elderly, tribal authorities and teachers, who should not be challenged. Private university respondents, especially the younger group, disagree: they believe people should respect whoever respects them, and not necessarily those who are above them. The older age group claim that respect is owed to parents and the elderly (although the degree of respect for them has decreased, as parents spend less time with their children today), while the younger group stress that if parents do not respect their children, or teachers their students, then they do not deserve respect from children/students either. It is important to add that the younger and older private university respondents agree that a teacher who does not respect his/her students does not deserve respect either; the teacher can be challenged if s/he is more authoritarian than authoritative.

Another difference in terms of attitude to the teacher's authority is that public university respondents believe challenging the teacher's authority should be avoided, as they are afraid of some kind of punishment, whereas private university respondents are not afraid of challenging the teacher. Finally, private university respondents believe that a university degree confers more status than experience does, whereas experience is more valued by public university respondents.

4.4. Affiliation and belonging

Data in this category show that both groups of respondents live in a collectivist society and share its ideals, despite some differences in terms of what group they feel most affiliated to or seek approval from. They share a great sense of unity, mostly involving the family, but differ in their view of belonging to a tribe: the public university respondents emphasise three aspects of the tribal system (unity among members of the same ethnic group; culture enforcement, that is, members of the same ethnic group are forced to abide by cultural traditions and habits; and the fact that certain ethnic groups are closed to other cultures); whereas those from the private university make reference to tribes (perhaps because, although they are supposed to have inherited their parents' ethnicity, they do not practise what is considered characteristic of their own or another ethnic group's culture). While the former see themselves as related to a specific tribe, the latter express affiliation to the nation.

Differences were also found in the respondents' perception of autonomy. The public university group views autonomy as a privilege of those entitled to make decisions, participate in debates and give their opinion: parents (especially fathers), uncles, the elderly and teachers. Conversely, the private university group (especially younger students) believe there is a greater degree of freedom of speech now (as opposed to the past) in terms of expressing their opinion and making their own decisions. Private university students are no longer family dependent, and certainly do not rely on their teachers. They are not afraid of expressing their opinions or of doing what they believe to be right, whether or not that matches what authority figures want to impose.

4.5. Acceptance

Respondents from both universities expressed a strong need to be accepted, but differences arose when it came to describe who they needed approval from. Public university respondents sought approval from the microsystem (i.e. their family, teachers and peers). Older private university respondents did so to a lesser extent and they excluded teachers, while younger private university respondents did not seek approval from the microsystem but from their friends and neighbours (mesosystem) and the foreign world (countries/people other than Angola/Angolans) (macrosystem). Older private university respondents also showed a need to be accepted by the foreign world and friends, but also by Angolan society at large (regardless of ethnicity or economic status). Unlike private university students, the public university group expressed the need for acceptance by their ethnic group as well as society at large. Respondents agreed that Angolans seek acceptance a lot and change their behaviour like chameleons, according to what they think others expect them to act like or consider appropriate.

4.6. Conservatism, duties and responsibilities

Public university respondents expressed the need for, and stressed the importance of, rescuing and/or preserving moral values, traditions and habits. Private university respondents simply acknowledged their loss, and identified possible causes. As for the sources of influence, all believed that moral values, traditions and customs were being lost due to the media (e.g. foreign TV channels and the internet), other cultures, important others, globalisation, and the Portuguese (the former settlers).

Differences in terms of duties and responsibilities were also observed. For private university respondents, the hierarchy is no longer the main source of authority, and duties and responsibilities do not differ in terms of degree of authority. Moreover, younger private university respondents believed that duties and responsibilities do not differ according to age or gender, and that there should be equal rights. Public university respondents and older private university respondents disagreed, saying that there are still gender differences in responsibilities. This discrepancy was reflected in the behaviour of women: in the public university focus-groups they would only speak when encouraged by men (otherwise they would just nod when they agreed and show an expression of disbelief when they did not); whereas in the private university focus-groups, women, especially young girls, would speak more than men.

Respondents distinguished between responsibilities to the family and school. Public university respondents believed that upbringing is a family duty, whereas education is the responsibility of schools, and that school can sometimes spoil what families teach their children. But for private university respondents, parents' lack of time for their children means that schools are responsible for both education and upbringing, and parents are right in blaming schools for their children's bad behaviour.

5. Conclusions

The main purpose of this study was to identify what cultural characteristics could influence the reasons given by research subjects for their successes and failures in learning English. Two groups of research subjects with different cultural backgrounds were chosen, one attending a public university (more attached to tribal traditions and values), the other attending a private university (more influenced by other cultures, hence more 'globalised'). The analysis revealed that, although both groups shared most of the categories affecting their responses, various factors within each category differed between the two groups. Such differences mostly concerned the duties and responsibilities of individuals, the degree of autonomy and authority, affiliation to specific groups and the attitude towards each group. Moreover, within the private university group there was variation between younger and older members.

The use of focus groups, a methodology frequently used in market research, has proved effective in determining the cultural parameters that need to be taken into account when drafting a questionnaire for a larger qualitative study. In order to assess the relationship between learners' attributions and culture in Angola, a researcher should consider several factors: their attitude towards the foreign language and its speakers; support and acceptance from their family, teachers and peers; their attitude towards authority and autonomy (regarding the family, teacher and peers); and the respective duties and responsibilities of teachers and learners.

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Appendix A

List of questions used with the focus groups

Opening Question: What is culture to you?

Introductory Questions: Do you believe you all belong to the same culture? Which?

Transition Question: What do you think characterises your culture and customs?

Key Questions:

If you had to describe your culture:

- What aspects would you outline as positive?
- What aspects would you consider as not so positive?
- What would you say in terms of gender?
- What would you consider the attitudes towards foreign people, foreign languages, school, and teachers to be?
- How would you characterise family relationships?
- In which areas is your culture different from other cultures?

Ending Questions:

- Of all aspects of culture discussed, which do you think better describe your culture?
- If you had to summarise your culture in three words what would they be?

Appendix B

Categorisation of responses from focus groups

Authority		
Sources	Effects	Domains
Hierarchy Economic power Experience	Power Respect Problem-solving	Socio-political Tribal Academic Family

Conservatism	
Need for preservation	Threats
Habits Traditions Moral/Ethnic values	Media Globalisation Portuguese Other cultures Important others

Duties/Responsibilities
Hierarchy-related Age-related Gender-related Domain-related

Personality	
Positive	Negative
Hard-working, positive, calm, modest, hospitable, respectful, cheerful, humble, welcoming, sociable, proud of their identity, spontaneous, versatile, extrovert, traditional, sympathetic, peaceful, obedient	Ambitious, show-off, proud, assimilators, bad imitators, accusative, afraid of change, appearance driven, vain, tribal chauvinist, defiant, false, easily influenced, envious, complacent, extravagant, self-inferior, corrupt

Group belonging/affiliation		
Microsystem	Mesosystem	Macrosystem
Family (unity and autonomy) Teachers Peers (unity)	Neighbours Friends	Ethnic group (autonomy, unity, culture enforcement, attitude to other cultures) Society at large (unity) Foreign world

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