



# Implications from self-efficacy and attribution theories for an understanding of undergraduates' motivation in a foreign language course

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## Abstract

Although studies on self-efficacy and attribution have independently contributed to the motivation literature, these two constructs have rarely been considered together in the domain of foreign language learning. Here, 500 undergraduates in Spanish, German, and French courses were asked to report whether test scores represented a successful or unsuccessful outcome and to provide attribution and self-efficacy ratings upon receiving their grades. Representing an innovation over previous studies, attributions were measured in two ways, using dimensions of attributions and asking about actual reasons for a real outcome. In regressions predicting achievement, self-efficacy was the strongest predictor, supplemented by ability attributions. Students who attributed failure to lack of effort had higher self-efficacy than students not making effort attributions.

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## 1. Introduction

Recent motivation models depict learners as actively attaching meanings to their learning situations, with students' beliefs about their capabilities to deploy control over a given task assumed to play an important role in their actions, motivation, and achievement

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(Bandura, 1977; Schunk, 1991; Weiner, 1985). Bandura's (1977, 1997) self-efficacy theory and Weiner's (1976, 2000) attribution theory represent two perspectives that have contributed substantially to an understanding of students' beliefs and explanations of their achievement. *Self-efficacy* refers to the beliefs that individuals have about their capabilities to complete a particular task successfully (Bandura, 1995). *Attributions* refer to the explanations individuals give for their success or failure in a particular performance, explanations that were described by Weiner (1986) along three dimensions, *locus*, *stability*, and *control*. Both constructs have generated extensive lines of research connecting each to performance, persistence, and emotions. For example, self-efficacy has consistently been shown to be positively associated with general academic achievement (e.g., Jackson, 2002; Lane & Lane, 2001; Pajares, 1996b; Pajares & Kranzler, 1995; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Schunk, 1981, 1984; Wood & Locke, 1987) and with performance in several specific domains, including math (Pajares & Miller, 1994, 1995), writing (Pajares, 2003; Pajares, Britner, & Valiante, 2000; Pajares & Johnson, 1996), and sports (Bond, Biddle, & Ntoumanis, 2001; Chase, 2001). As for the work on attributions, Weiner (1977, 2000) maintained that attributions come from students' self-perceptions and can influence their expectancy, values, emotions, and beliefs about their competence, and in turn influence their motivation. Differences in attributions were reported for individuals differing by gender (Nelson & Cooper, 1997; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002), culture (Graham, 1991, 1994; Holloway, 1988), self-esteem (Betancourt & Weiner, 1982; Fitch, 1970; Skaalvik, 1994), and by success or failure in performance (Carr & Borkowski, 1989; Kristner, Osborne, & LeVerrier, 1988). The latter has been especially well researched with constructs such as adaptive and maladaptive attributions (Dweck & Elliott, 1983; Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993; Seegers, Van Putten, & Vermeer, 2004) being offered to explain when it might be good to attribute one's performance to ability and when effort attributions might be more adaptive. However, the two constructs of self-efficacy and attributions have rarely been combined to explain students' beliefs about their performance nor have they frequently been applied to the domain of foreign language learning.

The purpose of our study was to examine the three-way relationship in a foreign language setting between attributions, self-efficacy, and performance. This study is especially innovative because students' attributions for test outcomes were measured as soon as test grades were returned to students. Whereas previous attribution studies used scenarios and hypothetical events to ask about individuals' reasons for the outcomes, our measures asked about students' attributions for an event that was pertinent and salient to them. Also, many attribution studies reported in the past focused either on attributional dimensions solely (e.g., Bond et al., 2001; Stajkovic & Sommer, 2000) or asked students to make attributions for hypothetical success and failure for the same task (e.g., Chase, 2001; Schunk & Gunn, 1986; Shores & Shannon, 2007). Instead, we used both an attributional dimension measure and a questionnaire asking students to rate actual reasons for their grade so as to gain multiple perspectives on students' attributional beliefs. Another innovation was that the students themselves determined whether the outcomes of their tests represented a successful or unsuccessful performance.

### *1.1. Why study motivation constructs in the foreign language classroom*

Before returning to a discussion of the motivational constructs we were studying, we want to establish why the setting of the foreign language classroom was a fruitful context

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