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PERCEPTION OF SUCCESS AND FAILURE IN EFL LEARNING: INVESTIGATING STUDENTS' ATTRIBUTIONAL BELIEFS

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ABSTRACT

Research into attributional beliefs in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning has helped determine what factors contribute to learners' academic success and failure, providing useful information for both teachers and students. Consequently, the former were prompted to find adequate instructional settings and make effective interventions in the classroom, whereas the latter – to take control of their own learning. By assigning causes of learning outcomes to external, changeable variables, within the individual's control, such as students' actions, scholars encouraged students to face their failures head-on, claiming they are essential to progress and fundamental to long-term success. Such an assumption was supposed to help develop a feeling of potency and agency in students, and build up self-esteem, ramping up their academic achievement. This article reports on an interview study carried out in the Polish educational context in the 2019/20 school year with a pool of 37 high school students, diversified by their language levels, age, gender, duration of learning and school grade, and aimed at investigating students' perceived level of success and failure in learning English and its causal attributions. The research sought to examine how participants conceptualized the notion of success and self-assessed their linguistic aptitude and personal progress, and how those factors impacted self-perception as un/successful and in/competent. The analysis of students' narratives, both positive and negative experiences with learning English allowed the author to identify a range of attributions.

Keywords: Attribution theory; academic achievement; causal attributions; perceived success/failure.

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1. Introduction

Given the importance placed on learning English as a foreign language (EFL), considered currently a means of global communication, it comes as no surprise that strong pressure is exerted on students to succeed in this domain. To ease the pain associated with learning the language, researchers have studied thoroughly what factors may contribute to the improvement of learners' academic achievement, and how to build in individuals a feeling of self-efficacy. Scholars have uncovered that success in learning is related to students' willingness to initiate a task, their effort devoted to performing it, and persistence amidst the challenge (Wigfield 1994). If students are to succeed, they must believe that the effort required is controllable and when expended, leads to high achievements, whereas success cannot be anticipated if students do not try hard to do a particular assignment (Weiner 1985).

This article explores the reasons for success and failure in the EFL context and discusses how students' academic self-concepts and attributions can contribute to their educational development. The empirical part investigates causal attributions of learners in the Polish high school setting with a view to explaining their learning outcomes. Since there is a scarcity of EFL attribution research in school settings due to the fact that most of such research has taken place at the university level (also in the Polish context), the current study aiming to bridge this remarkable gap seems to be timely.

2. Literature review

2.1. The conceptual framework of the study

Analyzing the reasons why students succeed in learning a foreign language is grounded in three theories: social learning theory, constructivism, and attribution theory of achievement motivation (AT). The former assumes that individuals with an internal locus of control believe themselves to be responsible for what happens to them. Conversely, people with an external locus of control feel unable to influence the outcomes in their lives (Rotter 1954). Constructivism presumes that learning, perceived as active construction of meaning, occurs within a social context through interactions with others (Donato & McCormick 1994). Since knowledge is internal and personal to the individual, the way different people understand and create their own meanings is unique to individuals (Williams & Burden 1999). In such a perspective, students' developing perceptions of themselves are placed at the forefront of the learning process, having a significant impact on the ways new knowledge is constructed and learning tasks approached (Seifert 1997).

AT, in turn, the prominent cognitive motivation theory, fundamentally constructivist in its underpinnings, premises that human beings always seek explanations as to what different reasons, i.e., causal attributions, have contributed to their scholastic achievement (Weiner 1985, 1986, 2010). On this basis individuals form a network of beliefs about their capabilities of being (un)successful in performing a given activity or task in the future (competence beliefs), which will allow them to predict and control their subsequent actions, their outcomes, the individuals' affective state, and their future attitude toward learning (control beliefs). Accordingly, these individually emerging, perceived attributions affect future learning processes insofar as they regulate students' scholastic achievement and educational development in the future (Hsieh & Schallert 2008; Kálmán & Gutierrez 2015; McLoughlin 2007; Schunk & Zimmerman 2006).

It is noteworthy that outcome attributions, seen as more or less consistent over time, do not necessarily reflect learners' true reasons for success and failure, but concern their perceived causes of individually experienced success and failure. These ascriptions are constructed in order to help an individual explain or interpret why s/he has (not) performed well in a specific situation, and to determine the amount of effort they need to invest in the future to become successful. In the long term, these personal beliefs and task-specific performance experiences need to be seen as a relevant personal resource which will guide students' future actions, helping individuals cope with academic requirements in a given educational setting (Faber 2019; You, Hong & Ho 2011).

Weiner (1985) identified four main causal attributions (causes of learners' perceived success and failure): native and genetic ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. The causal ascriptions are grouped into three categories (dimensions): locus, stability, and controllability. Locus reflects one's belief as to whether an individual perceives the cause of success or failure as either internal (e.g. ability and effort) or external to themselves (e.g. luck and task difficulty) and determines students' academic self-esteem, whereas stability refers to how likely the cause is to change over time, i.e., whether the future is predetermined and future effort seems pointless or the future can be changed by effort. When students attribute success and failure to unstable causes (e.g. effort or luck) their expectations can change. Controllability, in turn, depicts the extent to which the cause is volitional in nature, i.e., whether it can be altered or not – individuals can respectively control the situation or not (learners perceived as either commanders of their own fate or pawns of others). Effort is the only causal attribution that can be completely controlled. Ability, in turn, is an internal, stable factor, outside a person's control, whereas task difficulty is an external, changeable parameter, within an individual's control. Attributions perceived as external, variable and controllable are prone to have a more consistent effect on the individual than causes recognized as internal, stable and uncontrollable

(Weiner 1986). It should be emphasized, however, that individuals only put in effort if they believe that the effort will influence the outcome. If failure in an exam is attributed to a lack of ability, perceived as personally uncontrollable and stable, then a student is likely to experience hopelessness and will anticipate a similar result in the future. In contrast, if the cause of failure is the paucity of effort, then an individual recognizes it as controllable, temporary and unstable, feels hopeful and future failure is not anticipated (Weiner 2000).

2.2. Previous research

AT has significantly deepened our understanding of foreign language ,showing that students' attributions for past success or failure in L2 learning influence substantially their attitudes to continue or discontinue learning (Jarvis 2005; Schunk 1991, Smith 2012; Williams & Burden 1997; Ushioda 2001). Empirical research in different contexts following from Weiner's theory has found controllable and temporally unstable attributions for academic failures to contribute to students' increased motivation, persistence and achievement (Findley & Cooper 1983). For instance, perception of control over effort and strategy use were reported to be the potential causes of grades for different age groups, helping students achieve higher grades and contributing to a lower course withdrawal rate (Gifford, Briceno-Perriott & Mianzo 2006; Hsieh & Kang 2010; Ross & Broh 2000; Ruthig et al. 2004; Sisney et al. 2000; Van Overwalle 1989; Van Overwalle & De Metsenaere 1990).

Likewise, scholars analyzed the relationship between attributions and other parameters such as a proficiency level (Mori et al. 2011), cultural background (Gonzalez 2011), gender (Wu 2011) and achievement (Pishghadam & Zabihi 2011). These studies revealed that high proficiency students attributed success to their own effort and ability more than mid and low proficiency students (Mori et al. 2011), and effort was correlated with achievement (Pishghadam & Zabihi 2011), whereas cultural background and educational traditions were recognized as directly involved in success and failure (Gonzalez 2011).

However, research on gender effects yielded mixed results. Whereas in some studies gender differences were reported not to be related to the success or failure attributions of language students (Luo et al. 2014; Wu 2011), other research evidenced that female learners tended to attribute positive outcomes of language learning more strongly to internal causes than their male counterparts (Mori 2012; Peacock 2010). In addition, Mori (2012) traced back male students' language success to effort more strongly than female students'. This inconsistency of findings may result from the diversity of student samples, educational and cultural contexts, as well as from the attribution measures applied.

Studies also substantiated common patterns in students' attributions – in most cases, unsuccessful students tended to attribute their failures to a lack of academic

ability but success to external variables, whereas successful students explained their success by their ability and their failure by a lack of effort or environmental constraints (Faber 2012). Likewise, poor performers who perpetually attributed their failures to internal and stable variables were likely to develop incremental feelings of uncontrollability, hopelessness and helplessness (Abramson, Garber & Seligman 1980) and displayed reduced engagement in critical or demanding tasks (Stipek & Mason 1987). Empirical research in students' causal attributions should warrant insights into the motivational processing of foreign language learning and "reveal important references to implement adequate instructional settings" (Faber 2019: 635). In the same vein, it should lead to attribution retraining, aiming to change those negative feelings which demotivate learners and arouse in them positive emotions, and a conviction of having personal control over the learning process (Graham 2008; Ruthig et al. 2004). Such attribution retraining should enable individuals to think and act in a more positive manner, achieving better results.

3. Research study

3.1. The rationale and aim

The impetus for the study came from the author's interest in how language educators can develop teaching approaches and procedures that foster student motivation and language acquisition, and create classroom environments conducive to language learning, i.e. students' ultimate achievement. Some prior research on how students conceptualize the notion of doing well while learning a foreign language provides preliminary empirical evidence that attributions play a relevant role in student motivation and thus support the application of Weiner's attribution theory to the EFL domain. However, the issues regarding students' personal progress in learning the L2, their views on their own abilities to acquire a foreign language, and the implications this has for students' self-perception as un/successful and in/competent are still under-researched and warrant further studies.

The current research, exploratory in nature, sought to investigate and was guided by the following questions:

1. How do students conceptualize the notion of success in learning EFL?
2. In students' view, how successful are they in learning English?
3. What are students' causal attributions for their perceived success/failure in learning English?
4. How do students' attributions affect their beliefs about their ability to learn English, attitudes toward learning and classroom behavior?

3.2. Method

Given the complex nature of both the phenomenon being studied and the research questions, an interview study was conducted. The qualitative methodology, giving direct access to students' experiences and actively constructed narratives, allowed for adequately gauging the researched problem, i.e., unrestricted by and challenging conclusions drawn from surveys and questionnaires (Tse 2000; Holstein & Gubrium 2011). Accordingly, the employed methodology enabled students to express their views in greater depth than a quantitative study would have done, thus providing a more comprehensive description of how students perceive their EFL learning/classes. Likewise, interviews, perceived as avenues to recognize stories often unacknowledged or silenced in quantitative studies, allowed the researcher to gain access to emerging themes in the data that may have been otherwise missed (Merriam 1998), and observe the interplay between the students' views, perceived results of EFL learning experiences, and classroom atmosphere. Since the study aimed at investigating students' perceived attributions of success/failure, no external rating of success/failure was performed. The research was carried out within an interpretative framework – data were collected and interpreted (Denzin & Lincoln 1994).

As regards the researcher's positionality, which impacted upon his "contemplative eye", long and extensive experience in teaching EFL helped the author establish a rapport with the respondents, allowing for insights and access to the investigated area. This enabled the researcher to, as Pratt (1992: 242) put it, "establish the grounds for taking a position and the right to speak – for oneself and certainly about others."

3.3. Participants

The study sample was recruited from two high schools located in a large city with half a million inhabitants in Central-Western Poland. Teachers of English, personal contacts of the author, were asked to find volunteers among their students to participate in the study. The students were informed they would not receive any compensation for their participation. In the case of minors, their parents were asked to grant written consent for their children's participation. Target recruitment and purposeful sampling, using the principle of the maximum variation recommended for qualitative research, were employed because of their ability to generate in-depth knowledge from a small but information-rich group of informants (Morse 1991; Silverman 2013). To build such a diversified sample, the teachers were asked to recruit students of different ages, English proficiency levels, gender and achievement. High achievers were defined as students who had been given the top grade in the previous semester (6 – excellent [A+]; 5 – very

good [A]; 4 – good [B]); whereas low achievers were students who had received the lower grades (3 – satisfactory [C]; 2 – passing or mediocre [D]; 1 – unsatisfactory [F]).

In total, the interview sample consisted of 37 students, with a near equal gender split: 15 females (40.54%) and 22 males (59.46%). The average age of the participants was 16.54, ranging from 15 to 18, with a SD of 1.22 and a CV of 7.35% (a relatively low standard deviation and dispersion indicate that the age groups were similar in numbers). The participants were first-year students in the new system of education introduced in the year the study was conducted (27.03%), first-year students in the old system (24.03%), second-year students (16.22%) and third-year students (32.43%). Their English proficiency ranged from pre-intermediate to advanced (A2 to C1 according to *the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* by the Council of Europe). Twenty seven respondents (72.97%) were classified as high achievers and 10 (27.03%) as low achievers. The average grade in the previous semester was 4.08 (SD = 0.98).

All the participants were raised in monolingual Polish families and were unfamiliar with the researcher who carried out the interviews. The majority of the sample (35 students; 94.59%) started learning English either in kindergarten or in the first year of elementary school, at the ages of 5-7. The remaining two students (5.41%) commenced learning English either in junior high school (at the age of 13) or in high school (age 16). Fourteen students (37.83%) attended English additional courses in private language schools or private tutorials in addition to school. At the time of the study, all the participants had mandatory 45-minute English lessons from three to five times a week, depending on the program they were enrolled in.

3.4. Data collection and procedures

The data come from 37 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in Polish in February and March 2020. Each participant was interviewed individually, in a quiet room made available by the school authorities. The choice of interview questions was guided by the chosen theoretical framework, i.e., Weiner's attribution theory (1985). The interviewees were asked to be as specific and detailed as possible. The students were informed that their responses would be used anonymously, only for research purposes, and would not be shown to their teachers or school authorities. The participants were asked a set of prepared questions while being encouraged to add their comments freely and make digressions. Semi-structured interviews were employed intentionally to elicit respondents' perceptions of success/failure in learning English and to avoid over-directiveness and response bias which might otherwise lead the participants to provide what they considered to be "acceptable" responses. The researcher followed the participants' lead whenever they showed such an initiative.

The interview questions were piloted with one additional student from the target population, prior to the interviews, to check for clarity. This resulted in a few changes in wording of the questions in order to resolve any ambiguities. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews lasted from 17 to 33 minutes, totalling 846 minutes (M = 22.86; SD = 5.17; CV = 22.61%). Recordings enabled an in-depth analysis of the manner in which the students' stories were told and the tone of the comments. All the respondents' contributions were anonymized (codes S1 to S37). Transcripts were also coded for units of meaning. Such procedures were employed to follow the rigor demanded in qualitative research, and to achieve more valid findings. Furthermore, data analysis was subject to member checks in order to increase trustworthiness and maintain validity of the interpretations and research findings (Lincoln & Guba 1985). The researcher returned to the study participants with the draft report, which helped him refine the results in light of the participants' feedback.

The interviewing protocol revolved around 17 closed and open questions related to the students' views on various aspects of foreign language learning, their personal history in this domain, their experiences, dynamics and agency, focusing on how the respondents perceived their causal attributions (see Appendix).

3.5. Data analysis

Initial coding was accomplished through line-by-line reading of each interview transcript, which allowed for distinguishing emerging themes, recurrent motifs, trends, patterns, and conceptual categories salient in the students' narratives (Corbin & Strauss 1990). Each transcript was read multiple times. This led to identifying key content and thematic categories that reflected what students recognized as directly involved in success or failure.

Data were analyzed in several steps following the principles of a constant comparative analysis method to check for the fit between code and category, conceptual similarity and distinctiveness among and between codes, to assess the appropriateness of their placement within, and relationships to thematic categories (Rice & Ezzy 1999). This enabled selecting, labeling and meaningful grouping units of data in a way that informed the current research purpose and questions (Baptiste 2001). After preliminary data analysis, the researcher met with a few participants to ask follow-up questions about the issues that needed clarification. The emergent data and categories were considered through Weiner's framework discussed in the theoretical part of the article. They were grouped into the following four themes:

1. Students' conceptualization of success in learning English
2. The participants' perceived level of achievement

3. Attributions of success and failure
4. Attitudes toward English and learning the language.

Finally, vivid and compelling examples from the interviews were selected for inclusion in the manuscript.

4. Findings

The analysis of the interview data is presented according to the four research questions and the themes identified at the data analysis stage.

4.1. Students' conceptualization of success in learning English

The students' discourse has demonstrated only a slight disparity in how they defined success in learning English. The majority of the sample (34 respondents; 91.89%) associated high achievements with a good command of English understood as being capable of communicating effectively through the language, i.e., not only with native speakers, but also with speakers of English as a foreign language, and comprehending them. The ability to read and understand written English was also considered an important criterion of success. Six participants (16.21%) stated that successful learners can use English as a tool to study a chosen discipline, e.g. artificial intelligence, watch films or sports events, or understand programming manuals. Four respondents (10.81%) emphasized that high achievers use the language as well as their L1 – speaking fluently, without pauses or the need to think what to say next. The reported that successful learners apply grammar rules automatically and choose proper words or phrases intuitively.

Two interviewees (5.40%) associated success with balanced competence in all the four skills and the ability to use correct grammar while speaking. One learner equated doing well in English with an understanding of English speaking cultures. Eight respondents (21.62%) contended that teacher feedback, expressed through good grades, was the main indicator of success. However, the majority of the interviewees developed an inner sense of achievement and believed that competence is manifested through the application of appropriate strategies while using or learning the language. As one participant put it: "Success in learning English cannot be measured merely by school grades, since teachers assess our achievements very narrowly, i.e., focusing on separate elements of the language, such as vocabulary" (S32).[2]

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[2] All quotes were translated from Polish into English by the author of the paper.

4.2. The participants' perceived level of achievement

All but one participant (97.29%) considered themselves successful or somewhat successful learners of English. Albeit the respondents mentioned a range of deficiencies in their command of English, such as problems with grammar, spelling, pronunciation of sophisticated words, limited vocabulary or insufficient writing skills, they generally expressed satisfaction with their linguistic progress. Concomitantly, some high achievers believed they could have accomplished even more, had they been more committed and worked harder:

> I find my proficiency in English satisfactory. I am communicative and have no problems conveying what I want to say. Whenever I am abroad, I can do everything by means of English. I feel no language barrier, nor fear to speak English. (S31)

Interestingly, nine of ten learners (90%) classified by their teachers as unsuccessful felt far more positive about their linguistic achievements than their school grades suggested. An internal feeling of competence, based on conversational ability and reading comprehension, was much more meaningful to them. The students attributed their poor grades not to a low language proficiency per se, but to insufficient preparation for school tests (a lack of effort). Thus, the students' failure causes can be seen as controlled, since they were perceived as temporary and changeable:

> I know English at a relatively high level. Whenever I am in England, where I visit my family every summer, and speak English, people often compliment me. However, at school I often forget there will be a test in English the next day and hence, learn on the spot, just before the test, during the break. My vocabulary repertoire goes far beyond the one which our English textbook covers. If I prepared for tests, I guess my grades would be much better. (S14)
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> My weak final grade doesn't reflect properly my linguistic abilities. It results mainly from problems with English grammar. Both the textbook and the teacher focus on grammar. When speaking is graded, my outcomes are much better – I score either 70% of the total or even 10 points out of the 10 available. But I fail on grammar tests, which we have most often. (S15)

4.3. Attributions of success and failure

The students ascribed their success in learning English to a wide range of internal and external causes. These included: ability, effort, personal drive to learn, use of an appropriate strategy (experience), mood, interest, liking the subject, teacher influence, peer influence, family support, class atmosphere, teaching method and materials, task difficulty or ease and exposure to English (time). Table 1 clarifies the obtained information:

Table 1. Students' casual attributions of success by dimensions

Attributions	Dimensions		
	Locus	Stability	Controllability
ability	internal	stable	uncontrollable
interest	internal/external	unstable	controllable
effort	internal	unstable	controllable
strategy use	internal	unstable	controllable
teacher influence	external	stable	uncontrollable
peer influence	external	stable	uncontrollable
class atmosphere	external	stable	uncontrollable
family support	external	stable	uncontrollable
mood	internal	unstable	Controllable
liking of English	internal	unstable	Controllable
task difficulty	external	unstable	controllable
teaching method	external	stable	uncontrollable
teaching materials	external	stable	uncontrollable
time	external	unstable	controllable
motivation	internal/external	unstable	controllable

Many participants claimed they possess a natural aptitude for English and expressed proudly that their highly perceived language ability and personal qualities, such as a good ear, accent, memory or retention, determined their success to a large extent ("I guess have a knack for English" [S28]). The participants without exception declared their willingness to communicate in English both in the school setting and outside it. In the interviewees' views, the most important factor which contributed to their progress in English was prolonged exposure to the language. The students who previously had an extensive program of English, i.e., daily English classes at school, believed this contributed significantly to their proficiency.

> In junior high school we had English every day. Now we have fewer classes and my speaking has deteriorated considerably – my fluency has decreased, I make pauses and have to think much longer what word to use. In the past I didn't need to think whether I was using the appropriate grammar tense or a vocabulary item, since everything came automatically. (S8)

The majority of the sample reported that they did not develop their English proficiency merely due to formal instruction or work undertaken in school and time spent doing the assigned homework. The respondents were convinced they learned as much or more English outside school as in it. The participants realized that in order to acquire considerable proficiency they need to do a lot

on their own in addition to attending English classes at school. One student expressed this explicitly: “School helped me acquire the language to a moderate degree” (S2).

The participants regarded the use of appropriate strategies effective for learning as contributing to their high achievement. This included resorting to a dictionary whenever students encountered an unfamiliar vocabulary item, using Quizlet – a mobile application for learning vocabulary, creating vocabulary lists or flashcards with Polish equivalents, drawing mind-maps of words and a range of grammar concepts, learning vocabulary through associations, and revising on a regular basis. It is noteworthy, however, the students seemed to be oblivious to the fact that they developed the aforementioned strategies at school, thanks to their teachers, and thus, they owe them quite a lot in this respect.

The majority of the study participants referred to their liking for the English language as a factor contributing to their success and stated they used English every single day in their free time. Another reason which the respondents recognized as directly responsible for their success was the help, support and encouragement from significant others, i.e., family members or peers. Among those who reported this attribution were a few students whose parents were highly proficient in English and who spoke the language with them and/or even tutored them regularly, as well as learners with family living abroad, either in the US or the United Kingdom. The latter respondents contacted their family members by means of English since their cousins attended American/English schools and often had problems with the Polish language. Sometimes the participants played the role of an interpreter for their family who did not know English and had to use English even in business contexts. As one student put it:

> In my free time I am immersed in English. I have a friend who used to live in England for a few years and went to school there. We often speak English when we are together, merging it with Polish. Our talks in Polish are often intertwined with English words or even whole sentences are said in English. (S7)

A few respondents often kept in touch with their international peers via Skype or communicated with their girlfriends/boyfriends or classmates in English.

Notably, attribution of a good, caring teacher as facilitating success was discussed thoroughly in the learners’ narratives. The respondents praised teachers’ commitment, passion for teaching, a personalized approach to students, ability to arouse interest in learners and encouraging them to learn. As important were teachers’ linguistic competencies, employed methods, clarity of explanations, feedback, but also teachers’ ability to rivet learners’ attention and keep discipline in the classroom. The participants appreciated teachers’ amicable approach toward students and a lack of situational anxiety (“My teachers never corrected me in a condescending manner” [S37]). The quotes below

demonstrated that the participants were satisfied with their current learning experiences and shed some light on how positively the respondents accounted their teachers for their own achievements in acquiring English:

> My English teacher in junior high school often used to abandon the textbook material and gave us the lyrics of a song with gaps to be filled in while we were listening to it. This motivated me to learn. The lessons were much more interesting than they are now. (S10)
> The teacher plays one of the most important roles in our learning, if not the greatest. He/she has a huge influence on the class and how students feel in it. It depends on the teacher whether we feel relaxed or constrained. (S21)

Three other factors that strongly emerged from the interviews as contributing to students' achievements were positive learning conditions in the classroom, a comfortable pace of lessons, and the enjoyment the interviewees found in attending them. In a similar vein, the respondents placed emphasis in their narratives on classroom participation, i.e., active involvement in class activities, especially opportunities to interact in the L2, recognizing this cause as directly associated with their highly perceived outcomes:

> We often work in pairs or groups, and consequently everyone can express himself/herself. The teacher assigns a range of tasks to us, which contributes to our development in all the domains of the language. (S21)
> Pair and group work helped me gain fluency in speaking English. (…) What I like most in my English class are the exercises which require interaction with other classmates, since they develop my ability to communicate. (S23)
> We don't follow the textbook blindly, doing exercise by exercise, page by page. I guess talking in English is also a form of learning. Whenever we focus on a particular topic in class, our teacher allows us to digress freely. He is not a pain in this respect. Consequently, nobody is afraid to initiate a talk or respond to what another classmate has said, and there is a relaxed, friendly atmosphere, which is very helpful in developing speaking. (S36)

Some learners believed that textbooks with interesting, highly informative content, useful tasks, and exercises with clearly defined objectives, as well as other stimulating teaching materials, such as language games or short films, were among the reasons for their success. Others ascribed the nature of a learning task and the level of its difficulty to their success or failure:

> English textbooks have always been ones of my favorite. I found the topics they covered very interesting and arousing curiosity. Using them was definitely a boost to learn. (…) Talking to a friend/friends in a pair/group helped me overcome anxiety I suffered from whenever I was to speak in English. (S32)
> The way I approached my learning differed significantly depending on what kind of a text I had to encounter or task to perform. Some of those texts/tasks were too

> easy for me and not demanding at all; others caused some difficulties I had to overcome. Dealing with the former gave me no satisfaction, since to complete them, I didn't have to take any effort. I had the feeling I was wasting my time performing such tasks. (S7)

The external attribution of classmates' positive influence was frequently cited in the interviews as a factor mediating success. The following excerpts illustrate this:

> I have many friends who are much better in English than me. Whenever I have a problem, they try to help me – I contact them by Facebook. I write them what I don't understand and they often send me a link to a website where I can find clear explanations. If it is still unclear to me, they try to explain the problem to me face to face when we meet. (S5)
> My classmates definitely contributed to my high achievements in English. When I see that somebody is better at speaking the language than I am, it motivates me to work much harder to keep up with him/her. For me it's a healthy competition which invigorates me to act. (S33)

Failure attributions were mentioned less often - the respondents were reluctant to discuss their negative experiences extensively, thus, the obtained data were relatively scarce. The students' narratives revealed that they linked failures to both internal and external variables, mainly to a lack of effort or commitment, teacher-related factors, task difficulty, a lack of interest and the influence of their peer group:

> My biggest problem is laziness. I realize my achievements in English depend on me, my motivation and effort put into learning the language. I don't learn on my own on a regular basis; nobody does these days anymore. (S4)
> If I don't feel like learning English or I'm tired, I don't prepare for my class. I' m aware I don't get involved in learning English the way I should. I lack self-discipline. (…) Another problem is with the classroom atmosphere – I feel there as if I was during a break because of the constant noise. All the time I'm distracted by my classmates engaged in searching their mobile phones, which makes focusing on what's going on extremely difficult. The teacher has no control of what's going on in her class. If I were her, I would throw half of my classmates out of the classroom. (S12)

The majority of the sample self-rated as successful, and only one of the informants attributed his poor performance in English to a lack of ability (specifically, poor memory), stating that learning English did not come easily to him. Furthermore, this student claimed that despite prioritizing the English language as a school subject, he did not achieve much ("Languages are not my asset" S13). Albeit ability is perceived as stable, internal, yet uncontrollable, Gardner's work on multiple intelligences (1993) and Feuerstein's proposal on cognitive modifiability (Feuerstein et al. 1985) place this attribution in a different perspective, suggesting it is not fully fixed and individuals can develop their capabilities through pedagogical interventions and employ them successfully in various situations.

The students were found to consider personally controllable attributions as primarily contributing to their failures, whereas uncontrollable ones as collateral factors. The participants reported not studying the language sufficiently and not using it either in the classroom or outside it, which resulted in low achievement. Placing a lack of effort or commitment on top of the list of attributions for failure, an internal factor within the students' control, indicates that the respondents felt internal responsibility for their failures. This finding seems to be promising since this attribution can be changed and it does not lower the respondents' self-esteem, the latter of which indirectly could decrease their chance of success in the future. The instability of this attribution brings hope that if the issue of effort is addressed in tutoring, the respondents may become self-efficacious in L2 learning, increasing their accomplishments. If the students expend more sustained effort and persistence in the future, they may perform better.

4.4. Attitudes toward English and learning the language

All the students referred to the need or importance of learning English, as well as their enjoyment of learning the language, as the reasons for their success. They attributed their positive attitudes toward English to the nature of the language – its perceived value as a lingua franca, which made it a gateway to invaluable online resources and enabled them to establish and maintain relationships with individuals of diverse nationality. Even though English is a mandatory subject in a school curriculum, the respondents, with the exception of one individual (97.29%), declared that they would decide to learn it at school even if it were not compulsory. As three respondents put it: "English is useful, but it is a means to an end, in my case – to learn how to write computer programs" (S15), "the future belongs to English" (S35) or "good knowledge of English is a necessity today" (S37). The only student who would not like to continue his school-based English education claimed he kept fostering his competences by reading American graphic novels, adding that he felt school lessons no longer provided any benefits for him.

It deserves mention that the majority of the students (35 students; 94.59%) commenced learning English as children, either in kindergarten or at the beginning of elementary school, which the respondents appreciated and believed put them at a distinct advantage:

> I started learning English very early, in kindergarten. English has been an inherent element of my education, present in my life ever since I remember. Perhaps that is why I pick it up so quickly and easily now. (S11)

The sample owes this early start to their parents, who realized that English would be indispensable for their children to participate in a global community and a

source of their competitive advantage in the workplace. Accordingly, parents created space for their children to learn the language by arranging and paying for additional lessons of English – only four individuals in the sample (10.81%) never had such lessons:

> My father always encouraged me to learn English. He kept saying that he had lost many opportunities in his professional life because of his English deficiency. (…) Dad's narratives generated in me a genuine willingness to learn English. (S37)

The participants' discourse revealed that they gravitated toward English, deeming it relevant to achieve their personal, both short- and long-term goals and to fulfill future expectations. The students stated that they aspired to acquire English at a very high level of proficiency, specifically at the C1 or C2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Albeit the students found their self-declared knowledge of the language to range from the level B1 to C1 respectively, in the case of a few respondents confirmed by official certificates, such as CAE, satisfactory to communicate and use for a range of diverse purposes, they wanted to further develop it. Many of the interviewees believed that high competences in English would be useful for their academic achievements, studies abroad (majoring in computer science and artificial intelligence) and, finally, for getting a good job in the future. The students regarded the English language as a tool for their professional development. A few respondents considered finding a job abroad.

The respondents declared they were exposed to English constantly, watching TV series either in English or with English captions on, reading books, comic books or news in English, listening to English songs or playing computer games. Many of the informants mentioned that in the past no Polish versions of computer games were available, so when the respondents wanted to play them, they had to do it by means of English. This forced them to seek recourse in the internet translator and learn vocabulary. As one student put it: "I grew up in the environment where I was surrounded by English extensively" (S34). Furthermore, a large group of the students listened to English podcasts or songs, focusing on their lyrics, followed English social media, searched English websites on the Internet, visited a range of English portals and read/wrote posts published there. English allowed many of the participants to develop and pursue their varied interests.

The study participants expressed positive attitudes and affective dispositions toward the study of English. On the one hand, this seemed to stem from their positive self-belief regarding their linguistic aptitudes and competences, and highly perceived L2 progress. On the other hand, students' interest in learning the language derived from the perceived high L2 significance ascribed unanimously to English as an international language. In their narratives the respondents expressed the joy of learning and using English, savoring this experience:

> Learning English comes naturally to me, because a lot of stuff I am interested in can be found only by means of English. The English language of computer science and programming is nothing else but English with a different syntax. A programming language in Polish sounds like English; without knowing the meaning of English vocabulary it would be impossible to comprehend anything. I became interested in technology and science (astronomy and computer science) a long time ago. Vocabulary in these areas originates from English – a global language. Trying to extend my knowledge in those domains I naturally developed my English vocabulary. Good English opened new avenues for me to read articles and watch films regarding the topics I had a great interest in, which, in turn, increased my general English proficiency. (S26)
>
> I have been exposed to the English language for so long that I am well attuned to its melody. Now whenever I have to learn a lot for school, there is no problem. Learning English is a pure joy. (S36)

5. Discussion

The present study sought to investigate the level of self- perceived achievement and causal attributions for success and failure of native Polish high school students learning English. The results of this study demonstrated that the respondents were overwhelmingly unanimous in conceptualizing what doing well in English meant. The participants equated success with using the language and applying appropriate strategies for effective communication with both native and non-native speakers. This outcome confirms the results of previous studies (Gabillon 2013; Tse 2000) and may imply that the respondents were cognizant of the unique nature of English as a global language.

Despite being aware of deficiencies in their English proficiency, the participants perceived themselves as capable and successful language learners. As has been observed, the respondents found questions about their attributions of success meaningful and showed interest and genuine commitment to respond and express their views. However, the students were unwilling to talk about failures since they self-rated as high achievers. The collected data indicated that the participants attributed their success in learning English to multiple internal and external factors, the five main ones being ability, effort, personal drive to learn, interest, and time devoted to learning. The students' accounts revealed that the sample tended to consider their achievements in EFL as dependent more upon internal, mainly controllable, temporary, unstable and changeable variables, which can be regulated, such as investment of time or effort, self-discipline, motivation and interest rather than on external causes, such as influential others, i.e., the teacher, peers and family or the class atmosphere, which are uncontrollable and stable.

The findings of this investigation are largely consistent with previous empirical studies that explain typically occurring patterns in learners' causal

attributions of individually experienced high achievement (Erten & Burden 2014; Gonzalez 2016; Hsieh & Kang 2010; Sahinkarakas 2011; Soriano-Ferrer & Alonso-Blanco 2020; Williams & Burden 1999; Williams et al. 2004; Taşkiran & Aydin 2017). The dominant internal attributions of effort, interest and motivation reported in the current study are unstable and changeable and contribute to positive emotions, for example, a feeling of being proud of oneself, and should drive individuals to achieve more (Weiner 1985). This outcome demonstrates that the respondents' successful academic performance corresponds with a feeling of agency over their own learning. The students' narratives revealed that the respondents appear to realize that if they expend more effort and sustain it over time, they will be able to achieve a desired effect. As reported by the participants, high self-efficacy and positive beliefs in their capabilities to learn English bode well for the respondents' future behavior and could translate into their sustained learning, i.e., grasping opportunities to develop the L2 and exerting more effort, strengthening their self-confidence and beliefs that they can become effective and competent language users (Bandura 1997, Dörnyei 2000, Weiner 2000). Accordingly, in the long-term, these students should perform even better, since previous scholarship has shown that attributing high ability to oneself denotes perseverance in learning (Dupuy & Krashen 1998; Gabillon 2013; Tse 2000).

The respondents concurred that learning a foreign language is difficult and requires aptitude, but equally important are hard work and commitment. Thus, the current research, on the one hand, corroborates the study by Hsieh & Schallert (2008), where the pertinence of ability as a significant indicator of learners' achievement in EFL was emphasized. On the other hand, the study is consistent with the research conducted by Balet (1985) and Lei & Qin (2009), who claimed that effort is a relevant mediator of success among EFL learners.

The participants of the current research credited using the language independently for a range of purposes as predictive of their achievements. This finding confirms the results of other studies (Henry 2014; Ryan & Mercer 2011), where the respondents related their success in English learning mainly to out-of-school EFL exposure and experience and did not rely heavily on teacher guidance. Furthermore, the research indicated a lack of correspondence between learners' perception of success and the feedback from the teacher expressed by school grades – most students classified by their teachers as low achievers rated themselves as successful. The study did not substantiate earlier research findings, which suggested that learners associated doing well with external variables, i.e., good grades, rather than with awareness of developing particular skills for using or learning the language (Williams & Burden 1999). Contrary to Williams & Burden's study, the majority of the sample in the current research developed an inner sense of achievement and competence, and judged success by factors other

than school grades, such as communicating effectively, comprehending what was said or written, or receiving positive feedback from their interlocutors. It seems that the respondents viewed English as different from other school subjects, where achievement is measured by the grade received. One plausible explanation for this discrepancy may be that the quoted study was carried out among elementary school learners and, as scholarship has shown, learners of different ages construct the notions of doing well and badly differently (Weiner 2010).

Another factor pronounced in the interviews as contributing to the students' success in EFL learning was a good class atmosphere. The participants expressed a generally positive view of the FL classroom, which motivated them toward further exposure to the target language (TL). This finding substantiates the outcomes of other studies (Dewaele & MacIntyre 2014; Dewaele et al. 2016), whose authors concluded that there is a correlation between EFL enjoyment, a good classroom environment and learners' performance and scores. Likewise, students' perception of teacher and family support had a positive effect on perceived control and translated into academic achievement. The respondents concurred that teachers played a positive role in helping them improve their English proficiency. In the participants' views, the friendly, supportive and caring teacher was perceived as a success facilitator and considered requisite in creating a classroom atmosphere conducive to learning. Conversely, the respondents were aware of the negative impact of a bad teacher on the learning process and its results, but in the students' narratives unengaged, uncommitted, unfriendly and/or incompetent teachers appeared very rarely.

Although teachers and classroom methods appeared in the respondents' narratives as factors justifying good performance, the participants did not prioritize the teacher's role in their learning. This result is incongruent with findings of previous studies (Erten & Burden 2014; Tse 2000; Yan & Li 2008), where having a good teacher was referred to as one of the main attributions of success. These studies, however, were conducted in Asian contexts, where teachers are highly valued both by society and students, which may help elucidate the difference in findings.

A considerably narrower range of attributions was invoked in the interviews to account for failure. The interviewees attributed failure outcomes to internal variables, primarily a lack of effort and interest, and to external, unstable and non-personal factors, such as the teacher and the class atmosphere. Similarly, in an earlier study, Mori et al. (2011) listed a lack of preparation (effort) as the main reason for students' poor achievement, but another failure attribution was ability, which did not appear in the findings of the present research. However, most failure attribution responses in this study are controllable, which indicates that the students should not develop a sense of hopelessness or personal helplessness nor lose the sense of control over the subsequent process of learning. As previous

literature suggests, when students perceive the cause of their failures as unstable and changeable and attribute those failures to themselves, they may be successful in the future if they devote greater effort into learning (Erler & Macaro 2011). As long as students believe that the reasons for their failure are within their control, they may attempt to change the situation and persevere in learning to achieve their objectives (Dörnyei 2009).

6. Conclusions and implications

The findings of the current study and the presented discussion allow for constructing a clear and comprehensive picture of how Polish high school students perceive their EFL learning process and its results. The students tended to attribute their success and failure to a range of factors, both internal and external. The sample accepted personal responsibility for their doing well and/or badly, tracing back academic achievement mainly to interest, personal drive, effort and the learning environment, whereas failures were attributed to a lack of effort and/or interest, task difficulty, the teacher and peers. The main reasons why the respondents considered themselves successful were extensive exposure to the TL outside school and time they devoted to using/learning it.

This research corroborates the interrelationship between attribution and self-efficacy demonstrated in the literature (Bandura 1997; Hsieh & Kang 2010; Preston & Salim 2020). Students who have a sense of internal responsibility for their learning and believe that they can influence their ultimate performance are prone to hold higher expectations and become more strongly motivated to engage in developing their skills. Judging by the attribution responses obtained in this study, where in the respondents' accounts a "can-do" mentality pervaded, we can assume that the students felt responsible for the outcomes of their subsequent learning and will initiate actions to improve their English. This finding forms a basis for a clear educational implication – teachers should help learners develop a sense of self-efficacy and make appropriate attributions for success or failure. It would be appropriate for teachers at all levels of education to afford students ample opportunities to reflect on how they progress in language learning, supporting and modeling their effort attributions accordingly. Helping students view success and failure as outcomes they can control may induce them to become more proactive, persistent, and self-directed in learning, and to seize opportunities to challenge themselves in their language studies.

While the current investigation has provided invaluable insights into students' attributional beliefs, some limitations of the study should be addressed. First, a longitudinal study, i.e., data collected more periodically, in which interviews would be carried out several times, over a longer period of time, during a whole semester or a course rather than reported a posteriori, could allow for

investigating how students change their attributions over time and for validating the conclusions drawn in the current study. Second, the research was conducted on a small sample, whose participants self-elected to partake in it, thus the conclusions, as preliminary and tentative, should be treated with circumspection and cannot be generalized beyond the study group. Furthermore, the data analyzed and discussed in the paper come from two schools. To verify the empirical results presented in this article, to draw more reliable and valid conclusions, the research should be replicated with a larger sample in other educational settings where students demonstrate different TL proficiency levels, ages, L1, and cultural backgrounds. Fourth, more helpful insight could be gained by complementing the current study with data received from other sources; i.e., students' diaries, journals, logs, e-portfolios and teachers. This would help validate the obtained data and thereby increase the credibility of the current research findings. Fifth, interviews were supposed to assess general attributions for both success and failure in learning English rather than specific attributions for students' genuine success/failure on a particular test or task. We know that the more specific the event, the more accurate the attribution; thus, further research should focus on task-specific attribution measures in different areas of the language, i.e., the four skills, grammar and pronunciation. Only triangulation of methods and sources will help further pursue and investigate the matter thoroughly, and eventually allow for enhanced insight into the investigated topic, providing reliable answers to the research questions and advancing our understanding of the phenomenon.

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APPENDIX – Interview questions

1. How many foreign languages have you learned? What are those languages and where did you learn them?
2. When did you start learning English?
3. Why do you keep learning English?
4. Is school the only place where you learn/have learned English?
5. How do you approach learning English? Are you satisfied with the results?

6. What was the final grade you got in your English class at school last semester? Does this grade, in your view, reflect your language proficiency and skills?
7. Are you going to take the Matura (the final exam) in English? At what level: ordinary or advanced?
8. How would you define success in learning English as a foreign language?
9. How do you assess your English proficiency in terms of the four skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing? What are your perceived strengths and weaknesses?
10. What level of English proficiency would you like to achieve? To what extent, do you think, you have an impact on whether you will manage to do this or not?
11. How much time a week do you spend learning/improving English? What do you do to improve your English? Is a good command of English one of your prioritized life goals?
12. How do you assess your language aptitude and skills to learn a foreign language? Is this assessment correlated with your achievements or lack thereof, i.e., success or failures in English learning?
13. What individuals and/or factors have contributed most to your achievements in learning English? In what way?
14. What individuals and/or factors have contributed most to your failures in learning English? In what way?
15. What do/don't you like about your English class at school? What types of exercises, tasks and activities have helped you most to succeed in learning English?
16. What, in your view, is the role of a teacher in learning English at school? Do you have a good rapport with your current English teacher? How would you assess his/her work? What do/don't you like about the way he/she teaches English?
17. What would you change in the way English classes are run in your school so that they contributed more to your success?

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