

Attribution Patterns of TEM-8 Performance Among English Majors : A Study Based on Weiner's Attribution Theory

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Abstract: This study investigates how English majors attribute their performance on the Test for English Majors Band 8 (TEM-8) based on Weiner's attribution theory. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fourteen fourth-year English majors, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The results show that students mainly attributed their performance to ability, effort, task difficulty, luck, physical and mental state, and external environment. Ability was commonly perceived as internal, stable, and uncontrollable, whereas effort was viewed as internal, unstable, and controllable. External factors such as task difficulty and luck were regarded as largely uncontrollable, while physical and mental states were considered partially manageable. These attributional patterns were closely related to students' motivation and learning behaviors. The findings support the applicability of Weiner's framework in high-stakes language testing and suggest pedagogical value in fostering more adaptive attributional styles.

Keywords: TEM-8; attribution theory; English majors; motivation; qualitative research

DOI:10.12417/3029-2344.25.10.015

1. Introduction

The Test for English Majors Band 8 (TEM-8) is a key proficiency assessment for undergraduate English majors in China, evaluating language competence in listening, reading, translation, writing, and proofreading (Hou, 2017). The test significantly influences students' career prospects and academic self-perception (Liu, 2020). Despite fluctuations in pass rates, typically ranging between 40% and 60%, only 10-15% of test-takers score above 80 (Wu, 2019). This variance raises critical questions: What factors do students perceive as influencing their TEM-8 performance? How do these perceptions shape their learning behaviors?

To answer these, this study applies Weiner's attribution theory (1985, 1986), which suggests that individuals' attributions of success and failure are based on three dimensions: locus (internal vs. external), stability (stable vs. unstable), and controllability (controllable vs. uncontrollable). These attributions affect emotional responses (e.g., pride, frustration) and subsequent behaviors (e.g., persistence, disengagement) (Weiner, 2010). For instance, attributing success to internal, stable, and controllable factors like effort fosters self-efficacy, while attributing failure to external, uncontrollable factors like task difficulty may lead to learned helplessness (Graham, 1988).

While research on TEM-8 has focused on test design (Liu, 2020), curriculum effects (Hou, 2017), and skill-specific strategies (Yu, 2018), there has been less attention to the psychological factors shaping test-takers' performance perceptions (Heberle, 2018). Attribution patterns significantly influence motivation and learning strategies (Graham, 1991), and understanding these patterns in the Chinese educational context—where effort-oriented norms and collectivist values prevail (Heberle, 2018)—can provide valuable insights.

This study aims to explore TEM-8 attribution patterns among English majors using Weiner's framework. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) identify key causal factors students associate with TEM-8 performance, (2) map these attributions onto Weiner's dimensions, (3) examine their link to academic motivation, and (4) offer practical recommendations for fostering adaptive attributional styles. The following research questions (RQs) guide the study:

RQ1: What are the key causal factors that students attribute to their TEM-8 performance?

RQ2: How do these attributional patterns relate to students' academic motivation and learning behaviors?

By addressing these questions, the study will contribute to applying attribution theory in language testing and offer evidence-based insights for pedagogical practices aimed at English majors.

2.Literature Review

2.1 Attribution Theory and Its Application in Education

Attribution theory, particularly Weiner's (1985a, 1986) model, plays a central role in motivational psychology, positing that individuals' causal attributions shape their emotional responses and behavioral intentions. Attributing success to internal, stable factors (e.g., ability) enhances self-esteem, while attributing failure to unstable, controllable factors (e.g., lack of effort) can inspire hope and motivation for improvement (Weiner, 2010). Kelley and Michela's (1980) ANOVA model further elaborates on this, emphasizing the importance of consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness in shaping attributional judgments. These principles are highly relevant in academic settings like TEM-8, where students compare their performance to peers or previous results to infer causality.

Although attribution theory is well established in academic achievement research (Graham, 1991; Greene, 1985), its application in language testing remains underexplored. Studies on high-stakes language tests like TOEFL and IELTS have shown that learners often attribute their performance to factors such as language proficiency or test difficulty (Xu, 2020). For example, students who attributed poor IELTS scores to insufficient practice (effort) were more likely to engage in corrective actions, while those who blamed "bad luck" showed less motivation. TEM-8, with its comprehensive nature and high stakes, offers an ideal context for exploring attributional processes.

2.2 Contextual Factors and Methodologies in Attribution Research

Attribution patterns are often shaped by cultural and contextual factors. Graham (1988, 1997) found that socioeconomic status (SES) and racial identity influence attributional styles. Low-SES African American students, for example, maintained high expectations even after repeated failures, exhibiting "unrealistic optimism" (Graham, 1988). This suggests that cultural contexts, including educational pressures and cultural norms, may influence how students attribute success or failure. In China, where Confucian values emphasize perseverance, students may be more likely to attribute their performance to effort, which can affect their responses to both success and failure (Yu, 2018; Heberle, 2018).

Methodologically, thematic analysis is commonly used to study attributional beliefs in education. This qualitative approach allows researchers to identify patterns in data, such as students' open-ended responses about their academic performance. Studies like those by Graham (1991) and Greene (1985) utilized thematic analysis to uncover attributional patterns related to academic success and failure. This method is particularly suited for exploring TEM-8 attributions, as it facilitates the coding of diverse responses into categories consistent with Weiner's framework, providing a deeper understanding of students' motivational dynamics.

3.Theoretical Foundation

This study is grounded in Weiner's (1985a, 1986) attribution theory, which posits that individuals interpret achievement outcomes through causal attributions categorized along three dimensions: locus, stability, and controllability. Locus refers to whether the cause is internal (e.g., ability, effort) or external (e.g., task difficulty, luck). Internal attributions impact self-esteem, with success attributed to internal factors enhancing pride, while failure linked to internal causes may induce shame (Weiner, 2010). Stability concerns whether the cause is enduring (e.g., ability, task difficulty) or transient (e.g., effort, luck). Stable causes lead to expectations of consistent outcomes, whereas unstable causes foster hope for improvement (Weiner et al., 1971). Controllability involves whether the cause is within personal control (e.g., effort, strategy) or beyond it (e.g., luck, physical state). Controllable causes elicit guilt or satisfaction, motivating behavioral adjustment, while uncontrollable causes reduce personal responsibility (Graham, 1997).

Weiner's theory also identifies six primary causal factors relevant to academic contexts, each mapped onto the three dimensions. These include: Ability (internal, stable, uncontrollable), Effort (internal, unstable, controllable), Task difficulty (external, stable, uncontrollable), Luck (external, unstable, uncontrollable), Physical/mental state (internal, unstable, partially controllable), and External environment (external, unstable, uncontrollable). These

factors offer a structured framework for analyzing and coding students' attributions of their TEM-8 performance, as detailed in the Findings section.

4. Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach with thematic analysis to explore how English majors attribute their TEM-8 outcomes. Thematic analysis was selected for its ability to identify patterns in qualitative data and align them with theoretical constructs (Guest et al., 2012; Mohammed et al., 2018). Fourteen fourth-year English majors who had recently completed TEM-8, were sampled to include a range of outcomes. Semi-structured interviews focused on open-ended questions about the factors influencing participants' success or failure. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using a hybrid coding approach: deductive coding based on Weiner's six factors and inductive coding for emergent themes. Two researchers independently coded the data. Table 1 summarizes the attribution themes, categories, and representative performance descriptions derived from participant responses.

Table 1. Attribution Themes, Categories, and Specific Performances

Theme	Categories	Sub-categories
Ability	Skill strengths & weaknesses	Weak listening
		Strong reading
		Average translation
Effort	Preparation input	Sufficient practice
		Insufficient input
Task Difficulty	Exam difficulty	Time pressure
		Question design issues
Luck	Chance factors	Familiar questions
		Guessing accuracy
Physical & Mental State	Exam-day state	Negative states
		Positive states
External Environment	External conditions	Resource support

5. Findings

5.1 Ability and Effort: Internal, Stable, and Controllable Factors

Participants largely perceived language ability as internal, stable, and uncontrollable. Listening weaknesses were frequently described as enduring limitations that persisted despite practice, as illustrated by comments such as, "Listening has always been my weak point; even after months of practice, I still struggle with fast speech" (P7). In contrast, reading proficiency was commonly viewed as an inherent strength, with participants expressing confidence in their natural ability to comprehend texts quickly (P3).

Effort, by contrast, was framed as internal, unstable, and controllable. Successful students attributed their performance to sustained and deliberate preparation, often highlighting consistent daily practice (P2). Those who failed tended to explain their outcomes in terms of insufficient effort due to competing priorities, such as postgraduate entrance exam preparation (P9), and expressed regret that greater investment might have led to better results.

5.2 Task Difficulty and Luck: External, Stable, and Uncontrollable Factors

Many participants attributed performance outcomes to task difficulty, viewing exam design as an external,

stable, and uncontrollable constraint. Tight time limits and ambiguous question formats—particularly in proofreading—were frequently cited as barriers to success, with students noting that sections were difficult to complete within the allotted time (P5) and that correct answers were often unclear even to instructors (P8).

Luck was also mentioned as an external and uncontrollable influence. Some participants linked success to chance familiarity with test content, such as encountering a known translation topic (P3), while others described outcomes shaped by random guessing, whether successful or unsuccessful (P12). These accounts highlight the perceived unpredictability of luck in shaping exam results.

5.3 Physical & Mental State and Environment: Internal, Unstable, and Partially Controllable Factors

Physical and mental states were regarded as internal and unstable, yet partially controllable. Anxiety and fatigue were commonly reported as negatively affecting concentration and performance during the exam (P10; P13). At the same time, participants acknowledged that better preparation and time management might have mitigated these effects, indicating a degree of perceived personal control.

The external environment was viewed as unstable and largely beyond individual control, though potentially manageable at an institutional level. Access to resources, such as past exam papers in university libraries, was seen as supportive of success (P6), whereas poor test conditions—such as faulty audio equipment or external noise—were cited as disruptive factors (P13; P10). Together, these reflections suggest that environmental conditions can significantly shape test performance, even when they lie outside students' direct control.

6. Discussion

6.1 Attribution Patterns in Relation to Theory and Culture

The findings provide strong empirical support for Weiner's (1985a, 1986) three-dimensional attribution framework, as all six causal factors reported by participants align clearly with the dimensions of locus, stability, and controllability. Ability was consistently interpreted as internal, stable, and uncontrollable, whereas effort was framed as internal, unstable, and controllable, demonstrating the framework's effectiveness in explaining how English majors make sense of their TEM-8 performance. At the same time, participants' descriptions of physical/mental state and external environment as partially controllable (e.g., "I could have slept better"; "the venue could be improved") introduce nuance to Weiner's model, suggesting that students perceive more agency over situational factors in academic contexts than the theory originally proposes.

Cultural influences further shape these attribution patterns. The overwhelming emphasis on effort—mentioned by 13 of 14 participants—reflects Confucian educational values that prioritize diligence and perseverance (Heberle, 2018). Rather than questioning their ability, failing students tended to express regret over insufficient effort, a pattern consistent with Yu's (2018) findings that Chinese English majors regard effort as a moral obligation. This contrasts with Western research, where ability attributions are more salient (Duda & Allison, 1989), underscoring the importance of situating attribution theory within specific cultural contexts.

6.2 Implications for TEM-8 Test Design and Educational Practice

Participants' frequent attribution of failure to task difficulty, particularly time pressure and ambiguous proofreading items, echoes concerns raised in research on TEM-8 washback effects (Hou, 2017). The fact that a majority of participants identified time constraints as a major barrier suggests that revising section timing could reduce external, uncontrollable attributions and enhance perceptions of fairness. Similarly, addressing ambiguity in proofreading items would respond to Liu's (2020) call for improving the exam's validity and reliability. Such improvements are pedagogically significant, as Graham (1991) links external and uncontrollable attributions to reduced motivation.

From an instructional perspective, the findings point to concrete strategies for fostering adaptive attributional styles. Given the cultural salience of effort, teachers should emphasize effort-based feedback rather than innate

ability, as such feedback has been shown to enhance persistence and resilience (Graham & Barker, 1990). Institutions can also reduce maladaptive external environment attributions by improving test venues and ensuring access to learning resources, consistent with Xu's (2020) findings on resource availability. Moreover, stable ability attributions—especially regarding listening—can be reframed through attribution retraining, encouraging students to view language skills as learnable and improvable, an approach shown to enhance academic performance by increasing perceived control (Forsterling, 1985).

7. Conclusion

This study identifies six attribution patterns through which English majors interpret their TEM-8 performance, all aligning with Weiner's three-dimensional framework of locus, stability, and controllability. Ability and effort emerged as the most salient internal factors: language ability was commonly perceived as stable and uncontrollable, reflected in beliefs about inherent strengths or persistent weaknesses, whereas effort was viewed as mutable and controllable, shaped by preparation intensity, time allocation, and competing academic demands. Successful students tended to emphasize sustained and strategic effort, while unsuccessful students more often attributed their outcomes to insufficient preparation.

External and situational factors further influenced attributional reasoning. Task difficulty and luck were framed as uncontrollable external forces, while physical and mental states were understood as transient yet partially manageable. The external environment, including testing conditions and access to resources, was largely perceived as institutionally controlled. Influenced by effort-oriented cultural values, students foregrounded diligence as a primary explanatory factor. Overall, the findings confirm the relevance of attribution theory in high-stakes language testing and suggest implications for assessment design and effort-focused pedagogical feedback.

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