INTRODUCTION

Research in analyzing the causes for success or failure originated from mainstream psychology. This field of knowledge is important to language teaching and learning too, as it is closely linked to motivation models that explore factors that lead to effective language learning. These models propose that successful learning will occur if learners are able to actively attach meanings to their learning situations. Students’ beliefs about their ability to control the outcome of a given task are assumed to play an important role in their actions, motivation, and achievement (Bandura, 1997; Weiner, 1986). In view of this,

Students’ Attributions for Success and Failure in the Learning of English as a Second Language: A Comparison of Undergraduates from Six Public Universities in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The present study was undertaken on six Malaysian public universities. It attempts to examine the relationship between performance attributions and different university settings in the English as a Second Language (ESL) context. Investigation into types of causal attributions people make to explain successes and failures in a variety of settings, and how these attributions affect expectations for future success or failure are in line with the primary goals of motivation models and hence of relevance to language teaching and learning. A quantitative approach, through the use of a questionnaire, was used to measure students’ responses to authentic tasks undertaken in the ESL context. The findings clearly show that “getting a good grade” and “teacher influence” are the most endorsed attributes for success across all six universities in Malaysia, so we can say that external factors play a vital role in moulding attributions and this is particularly apparent in the case of one particular university. In conclusion, it can be said that high respect for teachers and self-critical tendency are communal characteristics in the Malaysian context. Findings of previous studies by Gobel and associates reveal similar trends in two other Asian countries.

Keywords: Attributions for success and failure, learning English as a second/language, motivation theory, Weiner’s attribution theory
investigation into types of causal attributions people make to explain successes and failures in a variety of settings, and how these attributions affect expectations for future success or failure will definitely be in line with the primary goals of the abovementioned motivation models and hence of relevance to language teaching and learning. In the context of this study the focus is on the teaching and learning of English as a Second Language (ESL).

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is that of Weiner’s (1986; 2000) attribution theory. Weiner developed a theoretical framework that has become very influential in social psychology today. Attribution theory assumes that people try to determine why people do what they do, that is, interpret causes to an event or behaviour. A three-stage process underlies an attribution:
1. Behaviour must be observed/perceived.
2. Behaviour must be determined to be intentional.
3. Behaviour may be attributed to either internal or external causes.

Weiner’s attribution theory is mainly concerned with degrees of achievement, and perceptions of how that achievement was or was not attained. According to him, the most important factors affecting attributions are ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. Attributions are classified along three causal dimensions, namely:
1. Locus of control (two poles: internal vs. external)
2. Stability (does it cause changes over time or not?)
3. Controllability (causes one can control such as skills vs. causes one cannot control such as luck, others’ actions, etc.)

In general, Weiner (2000) claims a person is more likely to take credit for success than attribute failure to the self (what he terms as hedonic bias). However, he acknowledges that there are several causal antecedents that will influence this. For example, if a person has always failed in the past, the current failure is most likely attributed to the self, rather than the task. Similarly, if others succeed and he fails, he will most likely attribute it to the self, rather than the task.

The present study attempts to examine the relationship in the Malaysian ESL context between performance attributions and different university settings. Contrary to most previous studies, which had used scenarios or hypothetical events to ask about individuals’ reasons for the task outcomes (e.g., Chase, 2001; Shores & Shannon, 2007), this study measured students’ responses to authentic tasks undertaken in the context of learning English in an ESL context. More specifically, for the designed questionnaire, students are required to select just one activity and one outcome for its success/failure thus controlling choices. In this way, it will be possible to find out with greater precision which activity and what factors have influenced their success or failure.

**ATTRIBUTION THEORY IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS**

In the field of education, a number of studies have investigated student attributions regarding test performance, past and future task performance. The majority of these studies which investigate the effects of attribution theory in education focused mainly on the school milieu in general, analyzing attributions, and performance across academic subjects as well as other school activities. For example, Vispoel and Austin (1995) looked at junior high school students’ recollection of successes and failures in the areas of English, math, music, and physical education, noting strong connections between causal beliefs and classroom achievement. In a similar vein, Meyer & Koelbl (1982) suggested a strong relationship between student test performance and attributions which are similar in structure to Weiner’s model. Meanwhile, Sorić & Palekčić (2009) took a different approach, but found strong correlations between learning strategies and the causal dimension of controllability when
explaining academic achievement. Although the results of these studies differ to some degree, they have highlighted not only the importance of attributions of ability, effort, luck, and task, but have also shown how these various attributions can be interpreted in terms of the dimensions of locus, stability and control (see Table 1).

The results of the early studies support Weiner’s (1986) theory which proposes that internal attributions produce greater changes in esteem-related affect than external attributions, stable attributions are more concerned with expectancy for success or failure, and controllable attributions are more closely connected with persistence than uncontrollable attributions. These early studies were mainly qualitative, relying on open-ended questionnaire and interview generated data. It was only recently that detailed quantitative analysis that utilized factor analysis and multidimensional scaling were undertaken and the results of these studies (Hsieh & Schallert, 2008; Vispoel & Austin, 1995) provided support for the above studies.

Studies on the attribution theory in ESL and Foreign Language learning (EFL) contexts began much later. In 1991, Crookes and Schmidt pointed out that motivation research conducted in the foreign language realm has primarily relied on attitude and anxiety constructs. Dornyei (1994) and Graham (2003) were the earlier ones who had tried to rectify this limited perspective on motivation in foreign language learning. Besides, Tremblay & Gardner (1995) tried to bring motivational constructs from the general educational psychology literature to the Second Language field. They investigated the relation of a number of psychological measures of motivation such as goal salience, valence, self-efficacy, and causal attribution, to existing measures of attitude and motivation for learning a language. The results of this study are questionable, since the participants were asked to imagine situations which they had never experienced. Thus, any measures of motivation did not accurately reflect the participants’ learning. In the Malaysian context, studies on motivation also tend to focus on its relationship with attitude (Samsiah et al., 2009; Thang, 2004).

Considering the theoretical significance of attributions in L2/FL motivation, it is surprising that not much research has been conducted in this field. The results of related studies have been mixed. Some of them support Weiner’s theory (e.g. Ushioda, 2001; Hsieh & Schallert, 2008) and some of them do not (Williams et al., 2004; Peacock, 2009). Hence, it is evident that further research needs to be undertaken in this field in the L2/FL environments. It should be pointed out here that all the above studies, except for Hsieh...
& Schallert (2008) and very recently, Peacock (2009), used data gathered through open-ended questionnaires, interviews, or autobiography. This qualitative approach helps to explain why a variety of attributional categories were uncovered, as well as the differences in the findings, made it difficult to compare groups or generalize findings. In addition, many of the studies employed role-playing methods (creating hypothetical situations), rather than measuring actual behaviour, to gather data. This was what prompted Peter Gobel and his associates to undertake further studies in this field in the L2/FL environments using a quantitative approach that would allow larger numbers of participants and more sophisticated statistical procedures. Gobel & Mori (2007) and Mori et al. (2010) found that both Japanese and Thai students attributed success to external factors and failure to internal factors, and this finding is not in line with Weiner’s theory. The studies they conducted were in the Asian settings, which has hardly been explored before by experts in this area, and this further adds significance to their studies. The findings contradict those conducted in L1 settings and many in earlier L2/FL settings too. The findings of their studies clearly point to the reliability of this mode of investigation. It further suggests that the consistency may have something to do with some communalities in these students. The findings suggest that the communalities may be due to a high respect for teachers and self-critical tendency, where underlying influences are cultural in nature. Peacock’s (2009) findings support this. These studies are significant in that they open up a whole new uncharted area of research. This study takes the studies of Gobel & Mori (2007), Mori et al. (2010) and Peacock (2009) a step further by attempting to reaffirm the validity and reliability of their studies by comparing the attributions of Malaysian students across six public universities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS
Specifically, this research study hopes to find answers to the following research questions.

RQ 1: To what dimensions proposed by the attribution theory do the Malaysian ESL students from the six different public universities attribute their success and failure?
RQ 2: Are the attributive dimensions valid in all six universities?
RQ 3: Are there features in the attributive dimensions that make the university (universities) stand out? What are possible reasons for this phenomenon?

METHOD

Background of the Universities Involved
University students from six public universities in Malaysia took part in the study. The six universities are Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), and Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). The first five universities are located in West Malaysia, while UMS is located in East Malaysia (Sabah).

Table 2 provides a summary of the basic facts on these universities.

The establishment of all the 6 universities is based on the need to provide an opportunity for Malaysian students to further their studies at tertiary level in their own country. In addition, they provide the country with skilled and educated human resources. However, every university has its own focus, i.e. the field of specialization. UKM and USM are known for the specializations in Sciences, while UPM is known for its focus in agriculture. UM, on the other hand, is often noted for medicine. UMS focuses on marine science and UiTM is noted for Arts and Humanities (Mass Communication and Public Relation). UiTM was initially established as the Rural and Industrial Development Authority (RIDA) Training Centre for conducting professional courses offered by established international bodies, such as the London Chamber of Commerce, the Australian Society of Accountants and the British Institute
of Management. In fact, when UiTM was officially renamed as Institut Teknologi MARA in 1976, its prime focus was to provide training in the professional and semi-professional levels for Malay students because its sole responsibility was to provide training for Bumiputras (the Malays and the indigenous people of Malaysia). UKM was also established for similar reasons. UKM was founded based on the need for a university for students from Malay medium schools and religious schools to further their studies at tertiary level. In addition, the Malays (teachers, writers, academicians) championed for the Malay language (now Bahasa Melayu) to be recognized as the national language of Malaya (Malaysia). Hence, the history of UKM is very much rooted in the spirit of nationalism among the Malays. This explains why the majority of the students in UKM are from rural parts of Malaysia, from the East Coast states (Terengganu and Kelantan) and from religious schools. These students usually get Bands 1, 2 and 3 in the Malaysian University Test (MUET).

**Background of the Participants**

The students who participated in this study were mainly the first and second year students from the six universities. They came from three faculties, namely, Science, Arts and Economics and Business. All these students had a minimum of eleven years of exposure to English as a second language in primary and secondary education. The students are mainly of three ethnic origins, namely, Malays, Chinese, and Indians. The mother tongue of the Malays is the Malay Language (or a Malay dialect close to it). For the Chinese, it is most probably one of the Chinese dialects (such as Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese, or Hakka) and for the Indians, it is most likely to be an Indian Language (such as Tamil, Malayalam or Telugu). Despite this, there is a unifying factor in that the medium of instruction in all the secondary schools is the Malay Language, which is formally known as Bahasa Malaysia. Students’ placement in the English courses depends on their performance in MUET, but this may vary from university to university. Generally, students who obtain the lower bands for MUET (Bands 1, 2, and 3) will have to register for English Language Proficiency courses before they continue with English for Academic Purposes, whereas students with MUET Bands 4, 5, and 6 are allowed to begin with English for Academic Purposes or Higher Proficiency English Courses. However, students from UMS are required to audit only one English Course before they graduate. Generally, the teachers use textbooks supplemented by materials collated by the department/centre. Each teacher also follows a common structured teaching and assessment schedule developed by the department/centre.

Although the actual contents of the classes and teaching methods of the six universities may differ in certain ways, the participants from the six universities generally have a similar educational experience as far as the language curriculum is concerned. In addition, the levels of proficiency of all the students from all six

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**TABLE 2**

Summary of the basic facts on the six universities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Year of obtaining university status</th>
<th>No. of campuses</th>
<th>No. of students (approximately)</th>
<th>No. of academic staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UM</td>
<td>Research university</td>
<td>1949</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>24269</td>
<td>1918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UKM</td>
<td>Research university</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22525</td>
<td>2105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USM</td>
<td>Apex university</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30000</td>
<td>1600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UPM</td>
<td>Research university</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>26000</td>
<td>2500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UiTM</td>
<td>Public university</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>120000</td>
<td>10000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UMS</td>
<td>Public university</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>132000</td>
<td>814</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
universities range from low to upper immediate, suggesting that the three groups participating in the study are congruent in this regard.

**Measure**

Two versions of a questionnaire were created based on previous research (Vispoel & Austin, 1995). In one version – called Attributions for Success Questionnaire (ASQ) – students were asked about successful learning experience, and in the other version – called Attributions for Failure (AFQ) – students were asked about unsuccessful learning. The questionnaires were translated to the Malay Language by experienced translators. Each version consists of two parts. In the first part of the ASQ, the students were asked to choose an activity from a list of 25 activities which they were particularly successful at. Although those activities were roughly divided into four skills, they were instructed to choose only one activity in order to avoid complications in the subsequent statistical analyses. As for the first part of the AFQ, students were asked to choose an activity at which they performed particularly poorly in the previous semester. The second part of both versions was the same. The students were asked to rate the twelve causes for success (for ASQ) or failure (for AFQ) on a six point Likert scale. The attributions included ability, effort, strategy, interest, luck, teacher influence, task difficulty, class atmosphere, grades, preparation, likes, and levels of the class.

**Procedure**

The students from the six universities were asked to fill in one of the questionnaires. Roughly, an equal number of ASQs and AFQs were distributed in each university in such a manner as to produce a fairly even distribution of sample population in terms of proficiency levels and students’ major disciplines. The entire classes were asked to complete either the ASQ or AFQ. In all the six cases, the questionnaire was completed within 15 to 20 minutes.

**RESULTS**

1062 participants were asked to rate the 12 success attributions on a 6-point Likert scale and 1080 were asked to rate the 12 failure attributions. However, due to uneven sample sizes resulting from a large number of students failing to fill up the forms correctly in the case of UMS, the sample size for the participants from the ASQ were randomly reduced so that it was more proportionate to that of the AFQ groups. Hence, the total sample size for the ASQ groups was reduced to 835. Table 3 gives the universities involved and the sample sizes of the ASQ and AFQ groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Sample size of ASQ</th>
<th>Sample size of AFQ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USM</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UMS</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UM</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UiTM</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UPM</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UKM</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All universities</td>
<td>835</td>
<td>1080</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Success and Failure Attributions**

Student responses were scored based on the 6-point Likert scale. The data revealed that all of the 12 success attributions fell well above the scale midpoint of 3.5, implying that they were all viewed as reasonable reasons for success. In the rank order based on the total sample means, the most to least endorsed success attributions were: interest in getting a good grade (5.17), teacher influence (4.63), enjoyment of studying English (4.55), interest in the activity (4.49), class level (4.48), effort (4.40), class atmosphere (4.27), preparation (4.17), strategy (3.99), luck (3.72), task easiness (3.61), and ability (3.61).
Regardless of the university, interest in getting a good grade was the most endorsed attribute for all universities and teacher influence also scored above 4.3 for all universities, while ability was the least endorsed.

Contrary to the results for success attributions, only two of 12 failure attributions means were above the scale midpoint of 3.5. In the rank order, the most to least endorsed failure attributions were: preparation (3.53), ability (3.52), effort (3.41), strategy (3.38), task difficulty (3.35), interest in the activity (3.00), class atmosphere (2.99), teacher influence (2.95), class level (2.80), luck (2.57), enjoyment of studying English (2.46), and interest in getting a good grade (2.13). The self-critical tendency was in evidence here, with the two most endorsed failure attributions, namely preparation and ability, being internal.

Differences in the Attributional Tendencies Based on University

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

The dimensionality of the 12 items from the success attribution measure was analyzed using principal components analysis. Four criteria were used to determine the number of factors to rotate: a minimum Eigenvalues of 1.0, the screen test, a minimum loading of .45, and the interpretability of the factor solution. Based on these criteria, three factors were rotated using a Varimax rotation procedure. The rotated solution, as shown in Tables 4 and 5, yielded three interpretable factors, an internal/controllable success attribution, a class-related success attribution, and a task difficulty-related success attribution. Since only one low communality (the grade attribution) did not meet the criterion (of a loading of more than 0.5), the solution was accepted and analysis undertaken. The interest success attribution accounted for 34.60%, class-related success attribution accounted for 10.80%, and task/luck-related external/uncontrollable success attribution accounted for 8.78% of the item variance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% of Variance</th>
<th>Cumulative %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>34.60</td>
<td>34.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>10.80</td>
<td>45.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>8.78</td>
<td>54.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using the same criteria, the dimensionality of the 12 items from the failure attribution measure was analyzed. The rotated solution, as shown in Tables 6 and 7 yielded three interpretable factors, class and interest-related failure attribution, internal/controllable failure attribution, and task-related failure attribution. Class and interest-related failure attribution accounted for 35.98%, internal/unstable/controllable failure attribution accounted for 13.42%, and task-related failure attribution accounted for 9.17% of the item variance. Note that principal components analyses for failure and success show similar factors (though not identical) results. Specifically, teacher influence, class atmosphere, and class level loaded together on factor one in failure and factor 2 in success, and study strategy and preparation for class loaded together on factor two for failure and factor two for success. However, in this rotated solution, there was a low communality for luck in the Factor Analysis for failure. In view of the fact that this was a reasonable solution, it was used for further analysis.
TABLE 5
Principal components results for success (n=835)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Locus</th>
<th>Stability</th>
<th>Controllability</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>h^2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability</td>
<td>internal</td>
<td>stable</td>
<td>uncontrollable</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effort</td>
<td>internal</td>
<td>unstable</td>
<td>controllable</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>internal</td>
<td>unstable</td>
<td>controllable</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>internal</td>
<td>stable</td>
<td>controllable</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>internal</td>
<td>unstable</td>
<td>controllable</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyment</td>
<td>internal</td>
<td>stable</td>
<td>controllable</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>stable</td>
<td>uncontrollable</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>stable</td>
<td>uncontrollable</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade</td>
<td>internal</td>
<td>stable</td>
<td>controllable</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>stable</td>
<td>uncontrollable</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luck</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>unstable</td>
<td>uncontrollable</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>stable</td>
<td>uncontrollable</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 6
Principal components analysis summary for failure: Eigenvalues and percentage of variance explained

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% of variance</th>
<th>Cumulative %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>35.98</td>
<td>35.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>13.42</td>
<td>49.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>9.17</td>
<td>58.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to determine the effect of the independent variable of university affiliation on the three success attributional factors measured by factor scores. With the use of Wilks’ criterion, the combined dependent variables were significantly affected by the independent variable of university, F (3, 827) = 3.45 p<.00. Table 8 contains the means and the standard deviations on the dependent variables for the three groups.

The analyses of variance (ANOVA) on each dependent variable were conducted as follow-up tests on the MANOVA. Using the Bonferroni adjustment, each ANOVA was tested at the 0.017 level. Only the ANOVA on the class-related/external success attribution was significant, F (5, 827) = 5.94, p < .00. Meanwhile, the post-hoc analyses to the univariate ANOVA for the second consisted of conducting pairwise comparisons to find which university affiliation most strongly affected the attribution. Each pairwise comparison was tested at the 0.017 level. The results indicate that there were significant differences between UKM and UMS, UM, and UiTM on the class-related success attribution, with the UKM group scoring significantly higher on the class-related success attribution, while the UMS group scored significantly lower (see Table 8). This finding suggests that students in the UKM group tended to attribute external/
uncontrollable-related attributions such as class, teacher, and level to their success more than the other students.

A MANOVA was also performed to determine the effect of university affiliation on the three failure attributional factors measured by factor scores. With the use of Wilks’ criterion, the combined dependent variables were significantly affected by university affiliation, $F (3, 1052) = 59.52, p<.00$. Table 9 contains the means and the standard deviations on the dependent variables for the three groups.

The analyses of variance (ANOVA) on each dependent variable were conducted as follow-up tests on the MANOVA. The ANOVA on all three factors were significant, $F (5, 1054) = 138.59, p < .00$, and $F (5, 1054) = 14.22, p < .00$, and $F (5, 1054) = 22.53, p < .00$ respectively. Post-hoc analyses to the univariate ANOVA for the attributions consisted of conducting pairwise comparisons to find which perceived proficiency level affected the success attributions most strongly. Each pairwise comparison was tested at the 0.017 level. The results indicate that on factor 1 the UKM group scored significantly higher than all the other groups on the class/interest-related failure attributions. The differences were significant for all groups, with the ranking as follows:

UKM > UMS > UiTM > UPM > USM > UM (see Table 9).

For the second, internal/controllable factor, a significant difference was found between UKM and other universities (UMS, UM, and UiTM). Once again, UKM scored highest, with the rest of the university’s mean scores in the following order UKM > UM > UiTM > UMS. There were also significant differences between universities USM and UMS, universities UMS and UPM, and universities UiTM and UPM. This suggests that the UKM group tends to attribute class/interest related causes to failure much more than many of the other groups. Finally, Factor 3 (the task-difficulty related factor) showed similar results in that the difference between

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Locus</th>
<th>Stability</th>
<th>Controllability</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>0.25 0.08 0.83</td>
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all groups was significant. This time, the rank order of the grouping was as follows: UPM>UMS>UiTM>UM>USM>UKM. In addition, there were significant differences between UPM and USM, UM, and UiTM. Thus, it seems that UKM stands out in that they attribute class and internal/controllable causes to their failure more than the task they are given to do.

**Breakdown by University and Activity**

The final analysis undertaken was to find which activity was cited most as a success activity and which was cited most as a failure activity. The findings revealed that among the 6 universities, 46% of the students cited a reading task as a success activity, 14% cited a listening activity, 26% a speaking activity, and 14% a writing activity. Thus, it seems that reading seemed to be viewed as the most successful activity.

For failure, 36% chose a reading activity, 11% a listening activity, 34% a speaking activity, and 19% a writing activity. The findings suggest that reading was again the most popular choice. The most possible reason for this is because of the emphasis given to reading in all these universities.
DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS
The discussion of the findings will attempt to answer the research questions of the study:

RQ 1: To what dimensions proposed by the attribution theory do Malaysian ESL students from the six different public universities attribute their success and failure?

The findings of the study revealed some striking similarities in the manner in which the respondents from the six universities attributed their successes and failures. First, students in all three groups tend to have stronger attribution ratings for successes than for failures. Second, a comparison across mean scores revealed that interest in getting a good grade and teacher influence were the most endorsed attributes for success across all universities. Since English is very important in the private sector in Malaysia and it is the passport to a better job, it is not surprising that obtaining good grades in English was the main driving force behind these students’ desire to perform well in English. Teacher’s influence, another external attribute, was also
highly rated as the reason for success. This is in line with the Asian cultural trend of showing high respect to the teachers and attributing success to being taught well by their teachers. Studies undertaken in Hong Kong by Murphy (1987) and Pierson (1996) and in Malaysia by Thang & Azarina, (2007), Thang (2009a, b) have all found this to be a very strong influencing factor on students’ learning characteristics, especially on their attitude towards autonomy.

Self-critical tendency was also evident in this study. The majority of the students from all six universities attributed their failures to two main internal attributes, namely preparation and ability. These findings supported the findings of Gobel et al. (forthcoming), Gobel & Mori (2007) and Mori (2008), which also uncovered a connection between internal attributes and attributions for failure. This tendency to blame oneself for failures (rather than blame external forces) contradicts Weiner’s concept of a self-enhancement or self-protective bias, in which one blames external forces for failure. This self-protective bias is widely recognized in cognitive psychology.

RQ 2: Are the attributive dimensions valid in all six universities?

Regarding dimensionality, the results of factor analyses presented in this study were very similar to those found in Gobel et al. (forthcoming), Gobel & Mori (2007) and Mori (2008). In terms of success attributions (ASQ), the dichotomy for locus was clearly identified across all studies. Specifically, ability/effort/strategy/interest/preparation/enjoyment (all internal) always loaded together, and teacher/class/grade/level (all external) always loaded together. As with the other studies, all the internal attributes except for “ability” are controllable factors. As for the external attributes, all were uncontrollable except for grade. Like the previous studies, the dichotomy of stability (stable/unstable) was not evident. Just like the previous studies, the results for the AFQ also revealed no clear dichotomy. Specifically, interest/luck/teacher/class/grade/enjoyment/level (a combination of external and internal attributes) all loaded together in Factor One and ability/effort/strategy/preparation (all internal factors) loaded together in Factor Two. These findings suggest the possibility of two culturally-biased attributional frameworks; one for the West and one for Asia, the Western framework would have a self-protective bias for failure situations, and a self-enhancing bias for success situations (blaming others for failures, and praising yourself for success, for example). On the other hand, the Asian framework would adopt a self-critical bias for failure situations, and attribute successes to external factors (such as parents or teachers, for example).

RQ 3: Are there features in the attributive dimensions that make the university (universities) stand out? What are possible reasons for this phenomenon?

The results revealed that UKM was the university that stood out. It scored significantly higher than other universities on the class-related/external success attributions such as teacher, class, grade and level to their success more than the other students. It also scored significantly higher than all the other groups on the class/interest-related failure attributions and internal/controllable failure attributions, but did not score significantly higher in task. This seems to suggest that UKM attributed class and internal/controllable causes to their failure more than the task they were given to do.

The above findings are indeed interesting and the researchers would like to offer a possible explanation for this phenomenon. As mentioned earlier, a large proportion of UKM students are Malays from the rural areas and many of these students came from religious schools background. The Malays (the largest racial group in Malaysia) are known to display high respect for the teachers. Siti Zuraina et al. (1999) gave the example of Malay parents giving a cane to the teachers when they sent their children to school or to religious classes in the past. Such practice symbolizes power, trust and respect granted to the teachers in teaching.
their children. In return, the children were trained to respect and accept the knowledge of the teachers. Thus, this may be a contributing factor to the high evidence of success being attributed to teachers more than the students in the other universities. Meanwhile, a study by Thang & Azarina (2007) lent further support to this explanation. In their study on the students of three universities in Malaysia, namely UKM, UPM and OUM (Open University of Malaysia), they found UKM students to be the most teacher-centred indicating that they had great trust in the teachers’ abilities to help them and hence attributed their success to their teachers. As for failure, understandably, they would blame themselves more than the students in other universities which will explain why they scored significantly higher in the internal/controllable failure attributions. As for scoring higher in class/interest-related failure group, [which comprises mixed attributes of both external (teacher, class, level, luck) and internal (interest, enjoyment and grade) factors], it is possible that the internal attributes were responsible for the significantly higher score rather than the external attributes. However, further investigation needs to be undertaken to confirm the validity of these findings.

Finally, one more feature that stood out was that majority of the students from the 6 universities chose “reading” as the most common activity for their success and failure. The reason may be due to the fact that “Academic Reading” is a compulsory course in all 6 universities. Hence, the type of tasks that they were most exposed to would be those related to reading. Thus, understandably they would relate their successes and failures to reading.

CONCLUSION
Notably, the divergent sizes of the different groups might have affected the reliability of the results but this could not be avoided in a study that depended on the availability and existing size of the sample population and the goodwill of those collecting the data.

In conclusion, it can be seen that the findings of this study support the reliability and validity of the findings of the studies conducted by Peter Gobel and his research team which showed that communalities do exist in Asian countries in the form of high respect for teachers and self-critical tendency. These attributions seem to be influenced by cultural factors. Nonetheless, further investigation could be carried out to confirm the postulations made and to further explore the role of culture in influencing students’ choice of attributions not only in Malaysia but in other Asian countries, too.

IMPLICATIONS TO THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN MALAYSIA
The findings clearly show that “getting a good grade” and “teacher influence” are the most endorsed attributes for success across all universities in Malaysia, so we can say that external factors play a vital role in moulding attributions and this is particularly apparent in the case of UKM. If the attribution, irrespective of whether it is for success or failure, can be identified, it can then be strengthened to produce a change in behaviour that will ultimately have an impact on students’ effort and success in L2/FL learning. It is also clear from the study that students perceive their teachers as having a tremendous impact on their learning abilities especially in the case of UKM. According to Borich (1995, p. 233), teacher behaviour imparts attributional information to their students. This implies that if language teachers are conscious of the attributional messages they send their students, then they can affect attributional changes in their students and in this way bring about successful learning. Dornyei (2001) endorses this by mentioning that teachers can encourage internal attributions and downplay external ones and that by emphasizing the link between effort and outcomes, they will have a positive impact on students’ perceptions that attributions towards success can indeed be controlled. Teachers can exploit this to promote learning by focusing on effort as the factor...
critical to success. They can show their students ways to improve their efforts and to effectively channel their energies, thereby helping their students to perceive that increased effort is likely to have successful outcomes. Classroom interventions such as the self-enhancement approach and the skill development approach are intended to alter students’ self-perceptions by eliminating behaviours that can impede academic success and by developing a student’s skill in a particular academic area. One way is for the teacher to find a specific area in which the learner perceives himself or herself to be particularly successful, and then relate that area to the topic currently under discussion in the classroom. Teachers could also think of ways to inject new ideas, introduce new topics or add new twists to topics they could teach in the classroom in order to offer their students learning opportunities that are more meaningful and motivating.

In a situation where “teacher influence” has been identified as one of the most endorsed attributes for success, evaluating students and grading their tasks with a heavy hand may be counter-productive to the learning process of their students. Course assignments should be planned in such a way that diligence and effort actually lead to successful academic outcomes and the teacher’s evaluation should enable students to see this link. Positive teacher feedback has a significant impact and if teachers consistently help students make strategic effort attributions, that is, believing that working hard in a particular way ultimately leads to success, they can be encouraged to regard failures as the stepping stones in the search for improved learning strategies (Pressley, Borkowski & Schneider, 1987).

In terms of L2/FL learning in the Malaysian context, the findings also have implications on pre and post-service teacher training programmes and instructional design. It is crucial that teachers are aware of the causes for attributions for success and failure and their role in the learning environment so that they can, both directly and indirectly, through motivational strategies promote helpful attributions that will not only have positive but also long-term effects on the students. The findings also indicate that the lack of academic ownership – students attributing their success or failure to external and uncontrollable factors will have far-reaching implications on their L2/FL learning. Students’ perceptions of these attributions are critical because they influence self-esteem, their expectations and motivation to learn. By empowering the students with the awareness that they have control over their actions and that they can change outcomes, academic self-esteem can be enhanced and future success optimized.

REFERENCES


Students’ Attributions for Success and Failure in the Learning of English as a Second Language


