

Helping Remedial Students Help Themselves: Causal Attribution and Language Proficiency

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How does the average English teacher help students who lag far behind their peers in terms of English proficiency at tertiary level? This exploratory study attempts to answer this question by studying a class of Foundation level students who are repeating an English class for the second time. A four pronged approach was used to help these remedial students whose attitudes range from apathetic to hostile. The approach consisted of the use of computer software, directed grammar exercises, reading and vocabulary notebooks and test and exam reviews. The study examined whether the approach would affect their causal attributions for lack of success. Students attended computer laboratory sessions where they used language learning software. They were also provided with directed grammar activities that emphasized meaning and grammar points and meaning. In the approach, the students were also required to keep a Reading and Vocabulary Notebook to inculcate responsibility. Class lessons also placed an emphasis on recognizing past semester exam questions and format. A pre and post test was carried out to assess the effectiveness of the instruction and hence the ability of the students to self help. This paper will discuss the findings of the study and offer recommendations for helping students who have fallen far behind due to many reasons.

Why do some tertiary students have a poor command of the English

language? Some blame the secondary school teachers while others suggest a non-conducive learning environment at home as the cause of this common malady. Other quarters point to the lack of adequate exposure to the English language as only a few hours a week is allocated for this subject. Whatever the causes are, students who enter tertiary learning from the Malaysian secondary schools come with a massive handicap compared to their peers. Not only do they have to contend with the change in the medium of instruction in private institutions of higher learning, they are also required to think, write and express themselves in English. Many students find this change traumatic and require a significant amount of time to adapt. While some are able to blend in effortlessly, others flounder due to their poor proficiency and the lack of ability to process information in English. The challenge for the tertiary English teacher then becomes even more complicated than the secondary school teacher. How can an average teacher help students who, for some reason or another, have not learned enough basic English to enable them to be functional in the English language at tertiary level? How does the tertiary English teacher motivate students and at the same time change their mind frame or schema of the English language? This is the basis of the exploratory study conducted on a class of Foundation students who are repeating the same English class for the second time. The study does not examine the causes of their poor proficiency but attempts to correct their handicap by teaching them to take responsibility for their own learning success and by making them reconsider their causal attributions. This is done by redesigning the course to include a CALL component and the use of Vocabulary Notebooks. The original syllabus of the English I class is primarily a reading skill class with a grammar component as well as writing at paragraph level. This paper will discuss this redesigned approach and will conclude with discussions of the effectiveness of the components of the approach as well as recommendations on how to help non-proficient students help themselves.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What causes poor proficiency among students? This question has been plaguing English teachers for many decades. Much research has been done about the probable causes. Findings from research postulate that socio-economic status plays a significant role in language achievement. Olshtain, Shohamy, Kemp and Chatow (1990), for example, found that students from a higher social-economic background did better at English than their peers who came from a low socio-economic background. Hart and Risley (1995) also determined that family economics played an important role in language acquisition in their study of language acquisition with children. Their research suggested that children from low-income families tended to be less exposed to the language at home and in general spoke fewer words. Some suggest that politics and patriotism are also factors. This seems to be reflected in the skewed number of students in the low proficiency band coming mostly from a particular racial group. Numerous studies also indicate that attitude and motivation are significant factors in achievement. These studies examine causal attributions and whether retraining can help underachievers.

Causal attributions are reasons people give for their success or failure. Heider (1958) first theorized the concept of internal and external loci of casuality. He proposed that ability and effort are internal causal factors while luck and effort are external factors. Weiner (1979) extended this theory by including controllability as another dimension affecting casual attribution. Under normal conditions, students often blame external uncontrollable factors such as test difficulty or the teacher's teaching ability and even bad luck for their failure to perform well. However, students often cite internal controllable factors such as their own ability and effort when they do well. A study by Forsyth and McMillan (1981), suggests that controllability has a significant effect on success or failure. They found that when students attribute good grades to factors that they can control such as their own effort and ability, they expect to repeat that success in the future. In contrast, failing students who attribute their lack of success to external factors outside their loci of

control (such as test difficulty or a poor teacher) tend to conclude that failure is inevitable.

Other research also indicates that the tendency to externalize failure does not facilitate learning. Putting the blame on outside or external factors also decreases help-seeking and effort on the part of the students. While some students are able to attribute failure to internal factors, they are unable to change their attributions resulting in self-blame. When self-blame reaches extreme levels, it can result in low self esteem, decreased motivation and persistence. On the positive side, however, several studies have shown that students who perform poorly can be retrained to facilitate academic performance. Noel, Forsyth and Kelley (1987), for example, carried out an experiment on a group of college students who scored Ds and Fs. As predicted, these students gave external attributions for their lack of success. The researchers then retrained these students to change their attributions from external to internal and controllable factors. On subsequent exams, the re-trained students did better than the placebo control group. Gagne, Yekovich and Yekovich (1993), also theorized that with careful design and teacher input, weak students with low self esteem can be re-taught that they can succeed by changing their causal attribution. However, they warn that attributions may be part of procedural knowledge (knowledge that produces behaviour) and thus require much effort and time to change. In short, a teacher who tries to re-train students may not see any significant changes during that particular semester. The next teacher who inherits the students is more likely to reap the benefits of the work started by the previous teacher. Skinner (1995) also warns that causal attribution retraining can be challenging. She theorized that it is not only the causes that are important but the students' perception of access to these causes as well. Thus, students would only put in effort if they believe that effort is an effective strategy.

In addition to causal attribution, much research has been done to examine the effectiveness of using Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) to improve second language achievement. While there is no one research indicating that CALL is superior to classroom instruction, there is ample evidence to

suggest that language learning can be enhanced through the use of computer based technology. Dunkel (1990) suggested that computer technology can be used not only to increase language proficiency, but also to enhance the learner's self esteem and overall academic skills. Kramsch and Andersen (1999) postulated that multimedia technology can provide authentic cultural contexts which enhance language learning. Others, such as Ehsani and Knodt (1998), point to the usefulness of using voice-interactive CALL to improve speaking skills. Findings from numerous studies also indicate that CALL supports vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension and help increase achievement. Ritter (1993) reports that in his study, 93% of his students preferred using CALL to learn new vocabulary as they found it fun. Most significantly, Ritter found that the students' anxiety levels were lowered when using computer based technology. When less anxious, they became more active participants in their own learning process. Ellis (1994) noted this relationship between affective factors and language acquisition. When students experience negative feelings about language acquisition, they become resistant to learning and may even shut off. Lowered anxiety and a positive emotional state can greatly increase students' enthusiasm and motivation. Donaldson and Morgan (1994) noted that "learning happens—perhaps not effortlessly, but at least willingly" (p. 56).

METHOD

The Respondents

The students in this case study were repeating Foundation level students who failed the first English course required by the university. The class consists of 28 young adults, five of whom were male international students from Yemen, Palestine and Iran. Their level of proficiency in general is quite low. Most write sentences with numerous gross errors in tenses and in subject verb agreement. Below is a sample of their writing:

Bicycle have two tire.
 A student can know the many news at right now and get know in the self.
 It will make the work of the teacher is not difficult and make least of responsibility.
 They want to use it in everywhere and everytime to save the people.
 Nowadays the teenager like to make something where the another people don't like.

TABLE 1
Student Causal Attribution of their Low English Language Proficiency

External	Internal	Affective
I also have difficulty to understand English question. (exam)	I think I'm very weak in English. My grammar is so bad.	I dislike in English subject.
I think this subject very difficult.	I'm so weak comprehension, grammar and speaking in this subject.	I'm always afraid when I'm in this class.
The lecturer did not tell about assignments before final exam and the necessary assignment must I send.	Lazy, my bad attitude. My grammar is very poor.	I very nervous when the lecturer call my name.
When exam, I don't know how to answer all the question.	I get lower mark in paragraph test because I'm very weak in grammar.	I fail ENGF 102 because I feel afraid and I don't know how to use grammar.
Not understand what do lecturer explain.	I think I have problem with vocabulary or structure or writing.	I think it can make me shame if what I speak is broken and wrong grammar.
I also absent to class because that class was bored.	I think that make me failed for it is I can not do well in grammar and comprehension.	I am feel fright to speak English while the lecturer do the discussions.
My lecturer had problems with me I don't know.	I also don't know how to speak in English but I understand what they talking.	
He (lecturer) didn't explain good or more about grammar. Final exam also was out of textbook my mean is the questions were out of text work and vocabulary were very hard for me.		

The students' causal attributions were, rather surprisingly, both external and internal. A few of the students who take responsibility for their own failure cite both external and internal factors, indicating a perception of low controllability as well as self blame and low ability. Those who cite external factors indicate uncontrollable factors. A few cited affective factors such as fear and great anxiety which compound the problem of self-blame and low self esteem.

Table 1 provides examples of the students' causal attributions and affective responses based on the responses that the students gave when asked to give reasons why they failed the English class the previous semester.

The Class Design

This class was re-designed especially to cater to the students' needs. While the other classes used the usual syllabus which is primarily reading, this class was modified to include lab sessions and individual reading and vocabulary notebook assignments. The primary focus was on helping students take responsibility for their own success by increasing effort (internal and unstable factor). Focus was also given to help students relate effort to ability and to stop blaming outside or external factors for their lack of success. The rationale behind this is that if students are encouraged to exert more effort, with time their ability will increase. The lab sessions which were held every fort night was an attempt to reduce language learning anxiety and to encourage self help. During the lab sessions, students used *Europlus*, a user-friendly English language computer programme. The table below summarizes the design of the classroom instruction.

The four components of the instruction are further described as follows in relation to how they are different from the normal English I class.

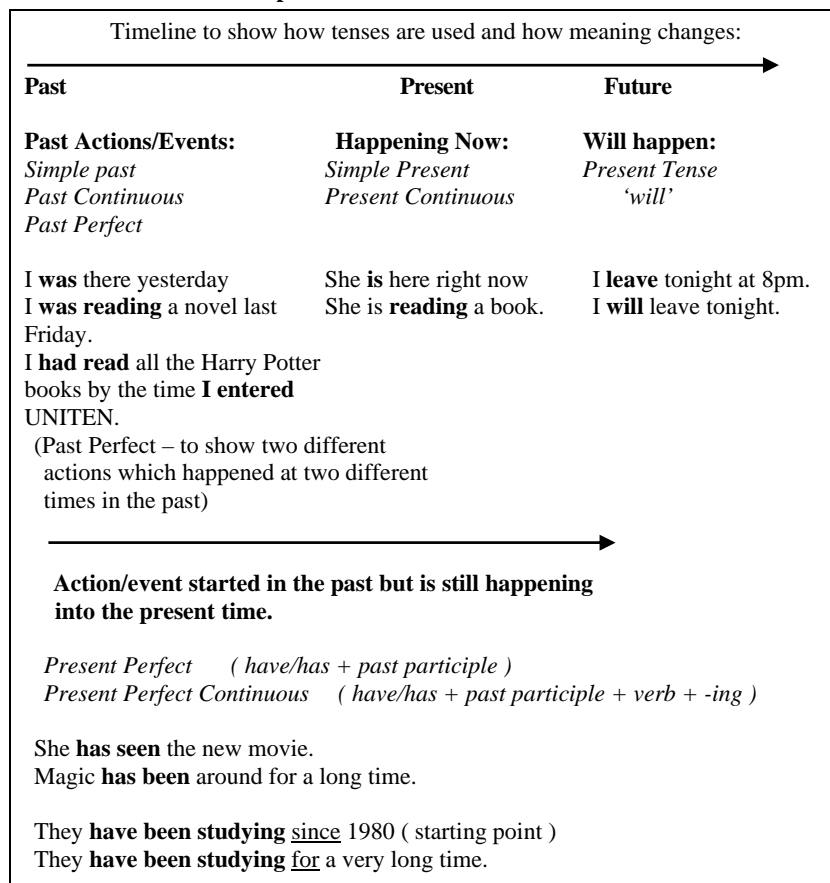
TABLE 2
Design of the Classroom Instruction

Component	Procedure and Objective
Grammar Instruction	Grammar is taught explicitly with emphasis on meaning and how meaning changes with changes in grammar.
Lab Sessions/Computer Softwares: <i>Europlus</i> computer software pre test & post test <i>Europlus</i> computer software exercises	Students are taught to self learn and at the same time lower class anxiety.
Vocabulary Notebook and Reading Activities: reading texts vocabulary writing sentences of new vocabulary items	Students paste all reading texts into the notebook given in class. These are graded by the lecturer to teach students to be responsible for coursework. Not only exams carry marks. Students are encouraged to read more than the texts given in class. More texts mean more marks (increased effort will equal to a better grade). Also, more effort will help increase ability . Reading comprehension is taught with a focus on helping students improve their vocabulary and understanding main ideas.
Test/Exam Review: review last semester's tests, quizzes and exams.	Students are exposed to the exam format so they understand what kind of answer is required. Familiarity also helps lower exam anxiety.

Differences: Grammar Instruction

Grammar instruction is taught explicitly and oral practice often followed input. This approach is different from what the students experienced in high school where the approach is communicative with no focus on form. During the class, students were also encouraged to see how meaning changes as the grammar changes. For example, the students were exposed to a grammar-time concept which attempts to help students rationalize the use of grammar as a syntactic system that incorporates grammar and meaning. The following is an example of a grammar handout explaining tenses in the English language.

FIGURE 1
Sample Grammar Handout on Tenses

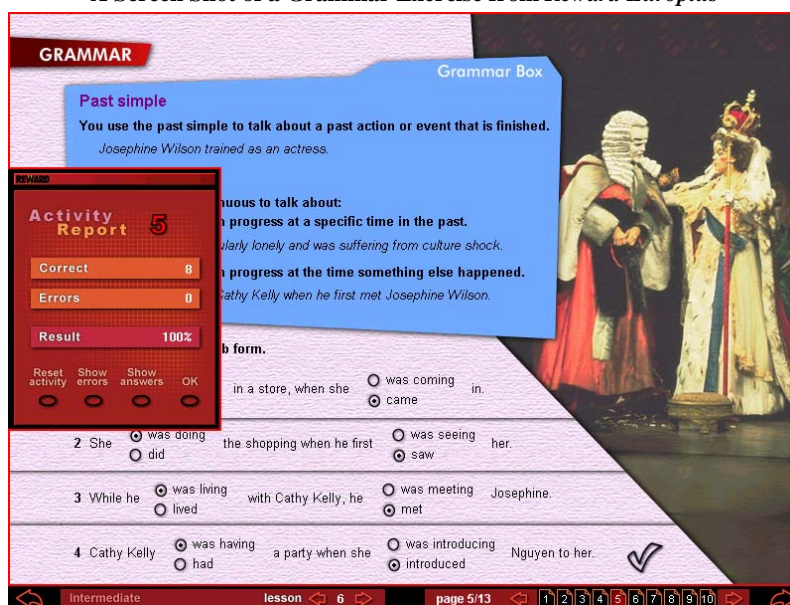


Differences: The Computer Software

For this class, students were taken to the language lab every fortnight to work on a software program called *Reward Europlus*. *Europlus* is a multimedia, multi-level English language program which has been used for many other classes at the institution, mostly with non-traditional students and

international students. During the second week of the semester, each student took a pre-test which determined the student's level of proficiency. The program then instructed the student to begin at the appropriate level. The approach is eclectic with exercises for all four skills. The program uses a multimedia approach with a recording function enabling students to compare their own speech utterances to native speakers. Like many language software, *Europlus* provides immediate feedback for each of its exercises to facilitate understanding and self-learning. At the end of the semester, the students took a post test to assess their language achievement. Figure 2 below is an example of a typical exercise page from *Reward Europlus*.

FIGURE 2
A Screen Shot of a Grammar Exercise from *Reward Europlus*



Differences: Vocabulary Notebook & Reading Activities

The class had no textbook as the students were reluctant to use the same

textbook they used the previous semester. Also, the text selected did not contain critical thinking skills or activities which were required in the final exam. Thus, the students were given a selection of reading texts taken from several sources. The texts selected for this class were graded from moderately easy to moderately difficult. The class began with the easier texts with emphasis on understanding main ideas and helping students increase their very limited vocabulary. The use of dictionaries was also encouraged for class discussion and class homework. As the semester progressed, the texts selected began to parallel the ones the students would encounter in their final exams. The question format that came with the texts were also prepared to be identical as the ones used in the examinations. Homework was given for each reading class and this was to be done in their vocabulary notebook. The students were informed that they should read more than what was done in class to enable them to improve their proficiency. As a reward for their extra effort, bonus marks or extra credit were given for work done in the vocabulary notebook. This was on top of the 10% already allocated for the vocabulary notebook as part of their coursework marks.

Differences: Test & Exam Review

A week before any class test was to be held, the students were given the same test they took the previous semester. During the class, the students were told to focus on the rubrics which indicated precisely what was required of them. Emphasis was given on understanding the questions and the types of answers that were probable and acceptable. Since the class tests were primarily grammar tests, students were taught to look for grammar markers (such as time indicators) and to rationalize the use of tense with meaning. They were also encouraged to study the grammar handouts (to put in extra effort) and stop answering blindly or guessing. Before the mid term and final examinations, the students also re-examined the previous semester's question papers. The previous semester, many of these students failed because they did not answer many of the required questions. The exam review activity was an

attempt to help students familiarize themselves with the exam format and to help students understand their past mistakes as well as lower exam anxiety. By doing so, it was hoped that with increased understanding and effort, the students may change their perception and consider success to be within their loci of control and thus controllable. This approach was a significant tool to help students overcome the tendency to cite external factors for their lack of success.

Throughout the duration of the instruction, student reaction and responses to the instruction were observed and noted by the first writer as participant observer. These reactions were also elicited through informal question and answer sessions during and after class.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In general, the initial findings of this exploratory study suggest that causal attribution re-training is possible if given more time and with more carefully planned classroom instruction. Causal attribution retraining used in the classroom was able to increase student performance. During the previous semester, the 28 students in the class had failed the English class with scores of less than 40. However, after causal attribution retraining, 24 of these students passed with a C+ (60 points) as the highest grade. Although four failed again, this can be attributed to their poor attendance. These students either did not come to class or had an irregular class attendance with no submission of coursework assignments. For these few students, the class was unable to reach them early enough to make an impact on their motivation. In terms of the response to the four components of the classroom instruction, the results were mixed with some components given a more positive response than others.

Students seemed to be willing to learn during the grammar instruction component of the class. This is especially evidenced by their readiness to ask questions. The emphasis on meaning in this component of the instruction

seemed to help students connect form with function. Time markers such as 'yesterday', 'right now', and 'then', for example, helped students discuss concepts related to time and may have allowed them to develop a greater sense of internal control over their language learning.

The CALL segment of the class instruction yielded more encouraging results. The students stated that they enjoyed the lab sessions and were less anxious in general. A few said that they learned much from the computer program. Lab attendance was also generally higher compared to regular classroom attendance which tended to fluctuate with very poor attendance on Fridays. Many students had to be reminded to stop working at the end of class time. Some also lingered and the instructor had to shoo them out of the lab.

The Reading and Vocabulary Notebook exercise designed to inculcate responsibility and to increase awareness about the importance of coursework at tertiary level did not work as well as hoped. Only three girls out of the 28 students did more reading than those required in class even though all students were told that the extra effort would be rewarded. In general the female students kept up with the class readings and exercises and faithfully kept them in the Vocabulary Notebook. The male students' attitude was poorer with many not bothering to do all the reading exercises. When these notebooks were collected for grading twice in the semester, not all the students handed in their notebooks. Those who did so also had many exercises not completed or missing. This would seem to indicate that these students failed to see the objective of the Vocabulary Notebook exercise and perceived it as insignificant. Perhaps this perception was influenced by the teaching approach in secondary schools where English classes were deemed 'lightweight' and required not much study or effort. There is also no emphasis on in-class evaluation in secondary schools as the bulk of marks come from mid term and final examinations. Thus, this strategy would also require some changes with more explicit and frequent teacher encouragement and reminders.

The test and exam review component yielded both positive and negative

results. While it managed to generate a marked improvement in class assessment during classroom assessment, this success was less obvious during the Mid Term and Final examinations. Additionally, when going over the previous exam papers during the second half of the semester, the students demonstrated a marked increase in anxiety as well as a decrease in motivation.

While conducting this component of the instruction, it was noted that attempts to motivate and increase student effort became very challenging during this component as the students seemed to resign themselves to either an internalizing perception of their low language ability or externalizing that the review exam was far too difficult. Attempts to make students answer by re-phrasing main ideas and not repeating words and phrases verbatim from the text were largely met with silence or answers like "I don't know." Questions which require an opinion from the students were often answered with responses such as "Don't have experience." A few of the international students also complained later that the exam texts and vocabulary items were not the ones discussed in class, rendering it impossible for them to answer the questions well. Clearly, for these international students, re-training to internalize instead of externalize causality would prove to be very challenging for any teacher. In reflection, the findings suggest that a more aggressive re-training of causal attribution than the one used in this study is required. Future classes may also need to include strategies to help students overcome their exam anxiety as this seems to be a significant affective factor in their language achievement.

In order to assess the effectiveness of the four components, a test which consisted of multiple choice type questions on grammar, reading and vocabulary was conducted prior to instruction and after instruction was completed. The test was part of the computer software used in the instruction and the same test was used before and after instruction. A paired samples t-test run on students' pre and post test scores revealed a significant gain in scores after the classroom instruction ($t = -3.469$, $df = 25$, $p < .05$, 2-tailed). Table 3 presents the results of the t-test in more detail.

TABLE 3
Pre and Post Test Mean Scores and Results of t-test

	Mean	df	t	p
Pre test	59.73	25	-3.469	0.002
Post test	64.73			

The results of the t-test indicate that the causal attribution retraining consisting of the four components as described in this study was effective and can therefore contribute to increased student proficiency.

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study suggests that helping students help themselves is a very challenging and demanding task for any dedicated teacher. First, the teacher has to deal with high truancy and affective filters among the students. As these students are studying IT or engineering at Foundation level, learning English was not a priority for them. This erroneous perception accounts for much of the poor attendance and limited effort shown in class. Being new students, they had not yet fully realized the implication of doing a five-year degree program in a university that uses English as the medium of instruction. Secondly, the teacher would have to be well-trained to help students make better causal attributions. It would also require great patience and alertness during class instruction to increase the students' awareness of their own negative causal attributions. Apparently, the motivation to come to class and complete assignments is unstable and in flux. Thus, in many ways, a teacher must be a counselor first and a teacher second. This would suggest that teachers who teach remedial English classes must have a sound understanding of how causal attribution works and how it can be manipulated to help the class. In addition, some knowledge of the counseling would probably also be beneficial.

In summary, examining students' causal attributions to make them better language achievers is an interesting area of research especially with students who are weak and/or reluctant to learn English. Although the exploratory

study in the use of several strategies in causal re-training was not a complete success, the findings would seem to indicate that with more training and knowledge as well as a better instructional design, it might be possible to help remedial students help themselves at tertiary level. Many teachers are fully aware of the problems causing poor proficiency, some not within their locus of control. Teachers cannot control the socio-economic status of their students. Nor can they undo psychological scarring, anxiety or fears the students bring into the classroom. But teachers can teach students that they do not have to expect failure all the time. They can change that perception by making students make better casual attributions and taking responsibility for their own learning. As the old adage goes-teachers can only teach but they cannot make students learn.

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