

# Optimism and pessimism in teaching process

Svetlana Stancekova<sup>1</sup>, Katarina Chvalova<sup>2</sup>, Ervin Weiss

## Abstract

This paper aims to investigate attribution theory and its links between optimism and pessimism and reveal how they influence a student's success in learning a foreign language. Optimism and pessimism attest to attribution styles, thus reflecting the learner's success or failure in learning a foreign language, while raising the importance of intrinsic motivation in the teaching process. Accordingly, Weiner's (1994) reasons to which learner's attribute their past success creates motivational dispositions, ensuring that students will not take up the previous activity again. The research interest focuses on two aspects. One presents the association between depression and a pessimistic explanation of negative events, whilst pointing at the shift of research from helplessness, depression and pessimism towards the relationship between optimistic attribution style and psychological well-being. The other one represents optimistic attribution style and thinking associated with higher grades, which may lead to either increased persistence or to relaxation and withdrawal of effort. The first aspect concerning pessimistic thinking may entail not only helplessness, but also the passivity of students. This way research into optimism and pessimism in the context of attribution theory might testify about the teacher's approach to learners at his/her classes.

## Keywords:

attribution	achievement
Success	optimism
Failure	pessimism

## 1 Introduction

Nowadays there is a rising trend among people to incline either to optimism or pessimism. How optimistic or pessimistic someone feels affects not only their behaviour, but also their decisions in future. Optimism is underpinned by the belief in a better future, that upcoming phenomena will be positive, while pessimism lies in the belief that those phenomena would be rather negative, prevailingly evil or unjust. These individual differences between optimism and pessimism cause different behaviour among people in how they go about reaching their aims.

Several viewpoints and theories exist about optimism and pessimism, while this paper presents Seligman's concept of optimism as an explanatory style and his relation to attribution. The explanatory style testifies to the individual's perception of causes of particular events in their life, being attributed to them.

## 2 Optimism and pessimism as explanatory styles

Peterson and Seligman (1984) state that explanatory style represents the usual way of explaining events that have already happened. Křivohlavý (2012) claims that an explanatory style represents one's own attitude to the world around us, the way the individual looks at his/her life. This style of thinking is stored in one's self,

<sup>1</sup> Affiliation of author 1, <sup>1</sup>Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, 1, Tr. A. Hlinku 1, 949 74, Nitra, Slovakia, [svetlana.stancekova@ukf.sk](mailto:svetlana.stancekova@ukf.sk)

<sup>2</sup> Affiliation of author 2, <sup>2</sup>Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, 1, Tr. A. Hlinku 1, 949 74, Slovakia, [katarina.chvalova@ukf.sk](mailto:katarina.chvalova@ukf.sk)

but it is not unchangeable, as it develops during life based on experience, especially in childhood, while usually being formed and stabilized during adulthood.

Explanatory style consists of three dimensions:

- Dimension of stability
- Dimension of globality
- Dimension of internality

Dimension of stability depicts whether the cause of a particular situation occurs in the future or not. The stable cause represents a long-lasting factor that affects the events over a long period of time. On the other hand, a non-stable cause appears only when it is a short-term cause. Dimension of globality examines to what extent the cause affects the individual in a particular situation, if it is specific, or situations in other fields of their life when it is global. Specific causes affect only the limited kinds of events, while a global cause has impact on a wide spectre of life events of individuals.

Dimension of internality shows whether the individual was able to influence a particular situation or not. An internal cause emphasizes whether the individual could influence the situation, while an external cause depicts that the situation was the result of somebody else's acts or other circumstances that could not be prevented.

According to explanatory style and its dimensions, people are divided into optimists and pessimists (Seligman, 1998). Optimists assign external, stable and specific causes to past negative situations. On the other hand, pessimists label these causes as internal, stable and global (Peterson, Barrett, 1987).

When an optimist faces a negative event, he interprets it that way, that it has happened only one time and it is not about to happen again. It does not affect his life over a long period, but only for a short period of time, as it is caused by other external circumstances or a different person, or this cause is not going to affect other spheres in his/her life. Conversely, the pessimist assigns the cause of the negative event to himself, as he is going to be affected by this period for a long time and he is going to encounter it also in fields of his/her life.

The way people attribute causes to their success and failure is underpinned by the differences between optimists and pessimists, which is known as causal attribution. To form one's self-reflection, i.e. to what extent a person is an optimist or pessimist and the way he acts, does not represent objective causes of one's success or failure, but interpretations that are related to those causes.

There are four ways of attributing causes that are a part of this principle, responsible for the success or failure of individuals. Alternatively, they can be linked with external factors or one's behaviour (dimension of internality). From the other point of view, the causes can be found in temporary factors or stable, long-term conditions (dimension of stability).

In the 1980s, Weiner (1986) investigated the attribution process, while extending the theories of attribution to the field of performance motivation. He developed a classification system where people attribute the reasons for success or failure. In a simple case, the scheme of performance attribution 2 x 2 is used:

Table 2: Performance attribution scheme 2 x 2

	INTERNAL	EXTERNAL
STABLE	abilities	task difficulty
UNSTABLE	effort	luck

An individual's preferred clarification has a strong impact on the level of his/her optimism and his self-confidence. Attributing one's success to his skills and failure to external circumstances testifies more about his optimistic approach to tasks than someone who reasons their achievement by his/her happiness or appropriate external conditions, while justifying failure by his/her inexperienced skills.

Schooling, by its nature, is saturated with moments of academic success or failure, leaving students seeking explanations as to why they may or may not be successful in school. Researchers have thus endeavoured to understand the interaction between attribution styles and learning (Weiner, 2010; Weiner & Sierad, 1975). A slightly optimistic outlook, one in which a student believes he will gain future success and is capable of improving upon past failures, is seen as advantageous. Such a belief comes from attributions of personal controllability to academic situations, with successful events being viewed as stable and failure as malleable, characterized by thoughts such as "I succeeded because I have the ability to achieve" and "I failed because I didn't use the correct learning strategy". In contrast, a maladaptive attribution style involves

pessimistic expectations of future failure, where failure is considered crucial, and success is viewed to be beyond one's control, e.g. "I only succeeded because I was lucky, it won't happen again" and "I failed because I am not clever enough".

The link between maladaptive attribution styles and academic underachievement has been well processed (e.g., Au, Watkins & Hattie, 2010; Chan & Moore, 2006; Shmulsky & Gobbo, 2007). Students supporting adaptive attribution styles have been shown to have higher levels of self-concept, to work harder and be more determined when facing challenges (Marsh & Martin, 2011; Núñez et al., 2005). While students holding maladaptive attribution beliefs have been observed to attest the following: low self-belief and motivation, limited effort, task avoidance, and little persistence (Hsieh & Kang, 2010; Swinton, Kurtz-Costes, Rowley & Okeke-Adeyanju, 2011). Of the above-mentioned factors, self-perceptions have attracted arguably the most attention. The degree to which an individual believes himself to be capable of meeting a goal impacts the extent to which that student invests time and effort in the learning activity, and subsequently what he achieves (Pinxten et al., 2014; Yeung, Craven & Kaur, 2014). With research observing these trends in the last decades (Chan & Moore, 2006; Swinton et al., 2011), there has been growing insight into the potential for interventions targeting attribution styles to struggle with lifelong student underachievement.

Conversely, an explanatory style is either based on feelings of hopelessness or helplessness that are linked to the concept of emotions and our own health. It can therefore be claimed that people can be divided into various groups in terms of the effort they put into maintaining their own health, as well as the behaviour they display. A recent study focuses on the relationship between healthy behaviour and optimism/pessimism (Dosedlova, 2014).

An explanatory style is also recognized as a theory of optimism and is also characterized by attributing external, unstable and specific causes to failures and negative experience. On the other hand, attributing internal, stable and global causes to such negative events is included in a pessimistic explanatory style. Furthermore, Seligman and his colleagues assert that the explanatory style is changeable and argue that a pessimistic explanatory style can be modified into an optimistic explanatory style (Seligman et al., 1988).

Recent studies have shifted their focus into attributional style research from helplessness, depression and pessimism toward the relationship between an optimistic attributional style and psychological wellbeing (Cheng & Furnham, 2001, 2003; Sanjuan & Magallares, 2009). To measure the attributional style, the "attributional style questionnaire (ASQ)" was formed (Peterson et. al., 1982, Seligman et al., 1979). The first studies were conducted applying three parameters of the attributional style: internality, stability, and globality. Unfortunately, the internality parameter was excluded in more recent studies (Martin-Krum, Sarrazin, Peterson and Famose, 2003, Peterson and Vaidya, 2001; Peterson et al., 2001) and theoretical works (Abramson et al., 1989; Peterson, 2000; Seligman, 2002).

As Seligman (1975) showed, there have been arguments in favour of a controllability parameter, since it was proven that experienced inability to control events leads to helplessness and depression. Moreover, studies applying a controllability parameter pointed to its significance, as it was found not only as a reliable predictor of depression, loneliness, and anxiety, but also as a reflection of positive emotional reactions and positive future expectations and performance (Deuser & Anderson, 1995). Subsequently, a number of new questionnaires measuring the attributional style have been developed, including controllability scales ASAT, Anderson & Arnoult, 1985; WASQ, Ashforth & Fugate, 2006; ASAT-III, ASAT-IV, Anderson & Riger, 1991; CDS, Russel, 1982; SFASQ, Gordeeva, Osin, & Shevyakhova, 2009).

Moreover, there were also studies into research examining the association of an attributional style for negative events with academic and sport achievement. In terms of its outcomes, this investigation was extended and showed a number of contrasts. As a result, the optimistic attributional style was examined in some studies in connection with higher grades (Martinez & Sewell, 2000; Peterson & Barrett, 1987; Rowe and Lockhart, 2005, Yates & Yates, 1995), while in other studies it was associated with lower levels of academic achievement (LaForge and Cantell, 2003; Yee, Pierce, Ptacek & Modzelesky, 2003).

An optimistic attribution style for negative events may have its pros and cons. Optimistic thinking may promote hope and lead to increased persistence, but it may also lead to relaxation and withdrawal of effort. Alternatively, pessimistic thinking can cause helplessness and passivity, but it might also result in putting much

more effort and energy into activity from the teacher's side. For instance, students who attribute pessimistic explanations to their poor examination performance had to spend more time getting ready for their studies for the next exam (Follette & Jacobson, 1987).

Seligman et al. (1979) in early testing adjusted the helplessness theory, reporting the scores of internality and stability of positive events on the ASQ and inversely linking them with depression. However, that relationship weakened comparing to the one related to negative situations. A meta-analysis of 104 studies conducted by Sweeney et al. (1986) attested this finding, and it became common practice for measuring attribution styles, considering only negative events or calculating a composite difference score by subtracting positive event scores from negative event ones.

Needles and Abramson (1990) introduced a model of recovery from depression, hypothesizing that depressed people with a tendency to attribute positive life events to global and stable causes are likely to become hopeful when positive events occur; the research consisted of depressed college students.

In more recent studies (Cheng & Furnham, 2003; Rigby & Huebner, 2005; Sanjuan & Magallares, 2009; Sanjuan, Perez Garcia, Rueda, & Ruiz, 2008), interpretations of positive events were shown to be important predictors of psychological well-being, self-esteem, and effective coping strategies. Given that research has devoted little attention to the association between the attribution style for positive events and the learner's achievement, there is a need to take a closer look at those gains and therefore additional research with a link to teaching foreign languages would be very enriching. In the academic field, it was found that higher mathematics achievement in elementary school children was associated with the optimistic explanatory style for positive events (Yates & Yates, 1995), but in a sample of law school students, it was linked with performance in a negative way (Satterfield et al., 1997). As a result, more research needs to be conducted with different age groups and in educational and professional contexts.

Moreover, Satterfield et al., (1997) states that optimistic interpretations of positive events made a negative impact on academic success and the performance of law school students. Another study (Gibb, Zhu, Alloy & Abramson, 2002) has found a connection between the attribution style for negative events and academic performance in college students to be dependent on their academic ability levels. Pessimism was discovered in relation to lower GPAs in students with lower ability, but was beneficial for high-ability students.

For instance, Martin-Krumm and Salama-Youness (2007) revealed that the effect of attribution style on school grades was affected by expectations of success.

### 3 Research objective and research sample

As attribution theory has been mostly investigated in relation to motivation, we consider the question of assigning the reasons for success and failure crucial in the field of psycholinguistics as it is related to a foreign language. This is due to the individual's opinion of his/her success or failure in the process of foreign language acquisition and one's seeking for options and ways how to achieve his/her success. Consequently, the aim of the research is to find out how and to what pupils assign their success in learning a foreign language.

For the purposes of this research, the following research question was formed:

When it comes to the dimension of stability, are students optimists in foreign language learning or is the dimension of stability related to performance in a foreign language?

### 4 Research methods and respondents

The research was conducted in 2016 and 2017 with the participation of 135 pupils from lower-secondary and upper-secondary schools in Bratislava. The average age was 15 years old. The German language was considered a second foreign language for respondents in English. The pupils were given the questionnaires JASQ (Junior Attributional Style Questionnaire) which they completed; this questionnaire was developed from the questionnaire AASQ (Academic Attributional Style Questionnaire that was created by Peterson and Baretto

(1987), which aims to investigate optimism and pessimism as an attribution style. The questionnaire AASQ was adapted according to university students' needs and their life experience. It contains negative hypothetical situations that might appear in the students' life. The questionnaire JASQ was adapted for students of lower secondary and upper secondary schools and consisted of 12 questions, such as failure in a test, fear of retaking a school year or the inability to find a book important for learning. Each of these situations contains four questions. The first question asks about the main cause, the main reason for this negative event, where the respondent should write about it. The remainder of the questions develops this cause where the respondent is supposed to label on a 7-grade Lickert scale to what extent he would be able to influence this cause, whether it can be repeated in future and whether this cause affects only this type of situation or not.

## 5 Results

Table 2 depicts descriptive statistics in terms of the dimension of stability from the questionnaire JASQ. Optimists assign external, unstable and specific causes to negative past situations. On the other hand, pessimists determine these causes as internal, unstable and global (Peterson, Barrett, 1987). The higher score the respondent achieves, the more pessimistic their explanatory style.

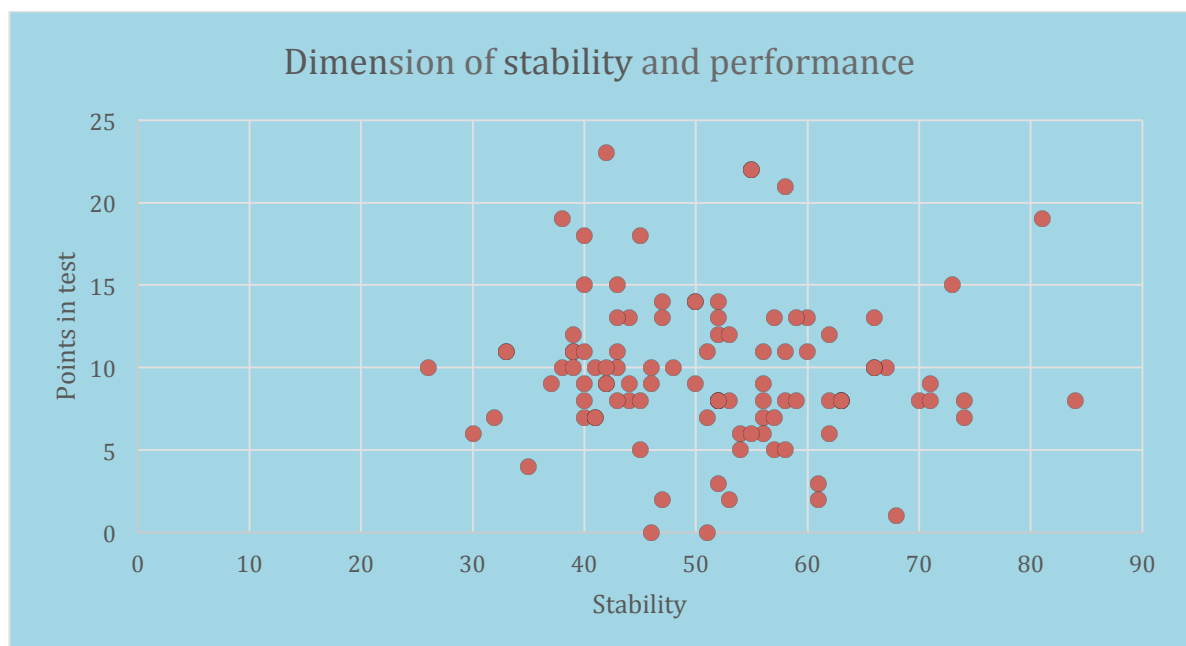
Table 2: Descriptive statistics of questionnaire JASQ results

Dimension	Mean	Median	Modus	Stdev
Stability	4.331793	4	4	1.730273

Legend: Mean – average, Stdev – standard deviation, Min – minimum value, Max – maximum value

Based on the research results, the respondents assign their failure rather to stable causes owing to the dimension of stability, so it seems that research participants incline toward a pessimistic explanatory style. Failure is interpreted in the following manner: "it always happens this way and it is not going to be changed." Individuals attribute their lack of success to stable causes and they feel negative about it, as this cause resulted in their failure in the past and was present in the future and can be associated with one's negative thinking about the future.

Graph 1: Points reached in the didactic test in terms of dimension of stability



Graph 1 depicts performance and its association with the following data: i.e. the number of points reached by the respondents in the didactic test compared to the dimension of stability of questionnaire JASQ. Respondents who reached a higher score in the test (more than 15 points), are considered fairly optimistic people. They see the causes of failure as unstable and temporary, unlikely to be repeated in similar future situations. On the other hand, respondents with the lowest test score and their explanatory style tend to be pessimistic. They consider the causes of their failure as either stable or temporary.

## 6 Discussion

When learning a foreign language, a learner is interested in achieving particular aims that can be seen either as the success or failure of a particular individual, and so related to performance motivation. In the education field, Dařílek and Kaločová (1991) found out that successful pupils assign their success to stable or specific causes in a variety of courses, while less successful pupils saw causes of their failure rather in coincidences and external circumstances, e.g. task difficulty. Moreover, Schulman (1995) states that optimism as an explanatory style is related to success in the school. A number of successful students in our research showed themselves in a more optimistic manner, while they see causes of negative situations in unstable factors.

Our research aimed to find out about the links between failure and the perception of a negative situation in comparison to performance in learning the German language, as it is reflected in the dimension of stability. Kusak and Dařílek (2003) state that the typical interpretation of students' success is internal, perceived as efforts and skills that they put in, as well as failure that is explained by external causes, such as coincidence or task difficulty. This was proven by those respondents who showed better performance in the German language. Here we talk about a phenomenon referred to as self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 2000). Consequently, when a person sees the positive result of his/her activity, that everything will go the right way, e.g. he/she will be successful in the test at school and put in more effort, so it would come true (Sharot, 2012). It may be claimed that most of the remaining respondents incline fairly toward pessimism, as a number of pupils need to cope with negative experiences in school, so they become pessimists in terms of school achievement. School pupils often lack a positive emotional mood and do not pay enough attention to emotionality (Petlák, 2014). It might be also related to teachers expressing their causal attributions to pupils and adopting them subconsciously. As the teacher is seen as a dominant factor in the teaching process (Stranovská, Stančková, 2017), he/she should form an environment where the pupil moves to optimism and so toward trusting his own skills and knowledge. Therefore, requirements for students are set too high and because the goals they have chosen are difficult to meet; this means their lack of success depicts a negative image of themselves and so strengthens their interpretation of their failure to internal causes, as their skills are not sufficient enough (Schmalt, Langens, 2009, Fries, 2010).

Therefore, teachers should be aware of the theory of explanatory styles and put effort in understanding the explanatory styles of their students in the teaching process. As a result, it is necessary to talk to pupils and listen to them. If the teacher deals with students in the right way, he/she can form their personality in an appropriate way and so meet the demands of their teacher. Consequently, their impact can be proved in the following manner: when a teacher requires more from their students, they can achieve better results than those learners who were labelled negatively. Pessimists need to experience success when learning, so the teacher can expect better achievement. For this reason, optimists should be regularly motivated by the teacher.

## 7 Conclusion

Attribution success or failure represents a number of factors affecting foreign language acquisition that are often seen as a complex phenomenon. Our research proved that the attribution process varies with different respondents and thus opens up new channels for further research. Attribution of success and failure can be

compared with an interest in a foreign language and can also be contrasted with the performance that pupils gain with their attribution style. The analysis and comparison of the optimistic and pessimistic explanatory styles could play an important role in foreign language acquisition. As only a small amount of research has been conducted into the attribution field, discovering new ideas in this area might be helpful for investigating foreign language acquisition, not only for pupils, but also for teachers.

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