

## Helping students achieve their best

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We are living in a rapidly changing world. Along with having a positive attitude we must also learn to adapt to new situations quickly. Knowing why we should do something is a good motivator for changing our behaviour and understandings. When students can explain their likes, wants, needs and frustrations to us we can more easily accommodate them in our lesson plans and teaching style. We are all eager to know why some students are more successful at learning or more eager to use the heritage language (HL) than others and many theories can give teachers insight about this question. In this issue of the IHLA newsletter I would like to discuss attribution theory and self-efficacy theory and hope that the reader can better understand how they relate to student motivation. At the end I offer a survey that you could adapt and give to students to determine how much they enjoy going to your HL school and what they think helps them learn best. September, the beginning of the school year, is a great time to learn about your new students. Then you could offer a similar survey in January and June and compare results: have you made a difference in your students' desire to use the HL? And in their ability to do so?

### *Attribution Theory*

Attribution theory argues that humans interpret events in terms of cause and effect. Our action or inaction is caused by an agent (e.g. ourselves, others) and/or external and internal circumstances. We may think that our successes or failures are caused by external circumstances or situations. We may also think that our successes and failures are caused by our own internal dispositions or choices. (Coleman et al. 2007) We may also think that these circumstances or dispositions are beyond our control. Unless we believe that we can change something our performance will not change.



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For example, if we plan a lesson and it does not go very well, we may attribute our poor performance to external circumstances such as forgetting some materials, the bad behaviour of a student or an unexpected event in the classroom (water leaking through the ceiling tiles). Or, we might consider the poor lesson the consequence of internal attributes: our lack of preparation time (“I should have started this on Wednesday instead of leaving it to the last minute.”), inability to understand how to do something (“If I had started sooner I could have called my friend and asked for help or checked on the internet for some examples”), or perhaps to a lack of motivation to change (“I have been doing this for 15 years and it has always worked so why invest time in something new”). If we reflect on the set of reasons we can see those that could be changed in the future (e.g. not forgetting important materials or creating more time) while others are beyond our control (e.g. student behaviour or a water leakage). Accepting responsibility and choosing to not have the same ‘reason’ come up again are part of the path of growth, improvement and change.

Attribution theory also applies to our students. For example, if they write a test and do not do very well, they may attribute their poor results to external

circumstances such as forgetting their notes, a bad teacher or a distracting noise in the classroom. On the other hand, they might attribute a poor performance or grade to a lack of preparation on their own part, going out with friends the night before, or perhaps to a lack of motivation to learn (internal attribution). They too can ‘blame’ performance on others or circumstances or accept responsibility and try to do better next time; better means changing the circumstances by creating more time or choosing to study instead of going out with friends (and postponing the visit with friends). Of course, they must believe that it is possible to change.

According to many research studies, students are always assessing their own performance; however, “most students appear to have inaccurate perceptions of their foreign language abilities, with nearly half of them over-estimating their future levels of performance” (Daley et al., 1999, Pg 8). Daley’s research team worked with a group of students for one year. At the beginning of the year they asked students to complete a survey based on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale. It asked students to describe how well they thought they would do in the course and what would make them succeed. At the

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end of the year the researchers collected all of the students' grades and compared their perception of their ability to succeed with their actual performance or grades. Together these combined sources offered insight into students' perceptions or beliefs of expected achievement and possible anxieties. Three categories of student beliefs emerged: self-enhancers, self-derogators and self-appraisers.

Self-enhancers are students who thought they would do better than their grades actually reflected. They tend to be "unrealistically optimistic about their ability to learn a foreign language" (Daley et al., 1999, p. 4). They seem to overlook the fact that effort is required to succeed and blame their poor grades on external circumstances (the teacher, the textbook, the lessons) instead of examining their own self discipline. They present themselves to themselves as being better than they actually are. This attitude of self-enhancement may also "stem from students' need to increase their feelings of self-worth" (Daley et al., 1999, p. 4) to overcompensate for something else in their lives. These students must develop the understanding that they must work hard in order to succeed in a course and develop the skills to do so.

Self-appraisers seem to be more self aware and perhaps even more course aware. They have a better idea that their studies need focus and time. They realize how much work is needed for success. They can judge the amount of work required to succeed in a situation and can adjust where necessary. They are more accepting of course goals and expectations and can more easily establish personal goals and outcomes. These students have a better sense of their achievements, capabilities and self.

Self-derogators tend to underestimate how well they will do because they do not desire to perform better. Often fearing failure, they set their standards low so that they are never too disappointed. Worst, they live a

self-fulfilling prophecy: each time they do not succeed they confirm to themselves that they are not able to succeed. They need to develop learning strategies and a greater belief in themselves.

Williams et al. (2004) also conducted a study with students of a second language. They asked students what helped them succeed or fail at learning and using the new language. The students described internal and external attributes. The internal attributes they frequently identify as the reasons for the quality of their performance include: their own effort, interest or motivation, their assessment of the easiness or difficulty of the task in comparison with the level of reward they will feel, the learning strategies they know and can use with minimal effort and their overall level of confidence in being able to achieve the goal. As for external reasons they attributed challenges and successes to their teacher, the materials they use (textbook, assignments, tasks), interest in the lesson, or their peers. See Figure 1.

In the HL classroom context, it is important that students have ample support during a lesson and in the community so that they can be more confident in their efforts. Students who do not see



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## Learners' perceptions of their successes and failures in language learning

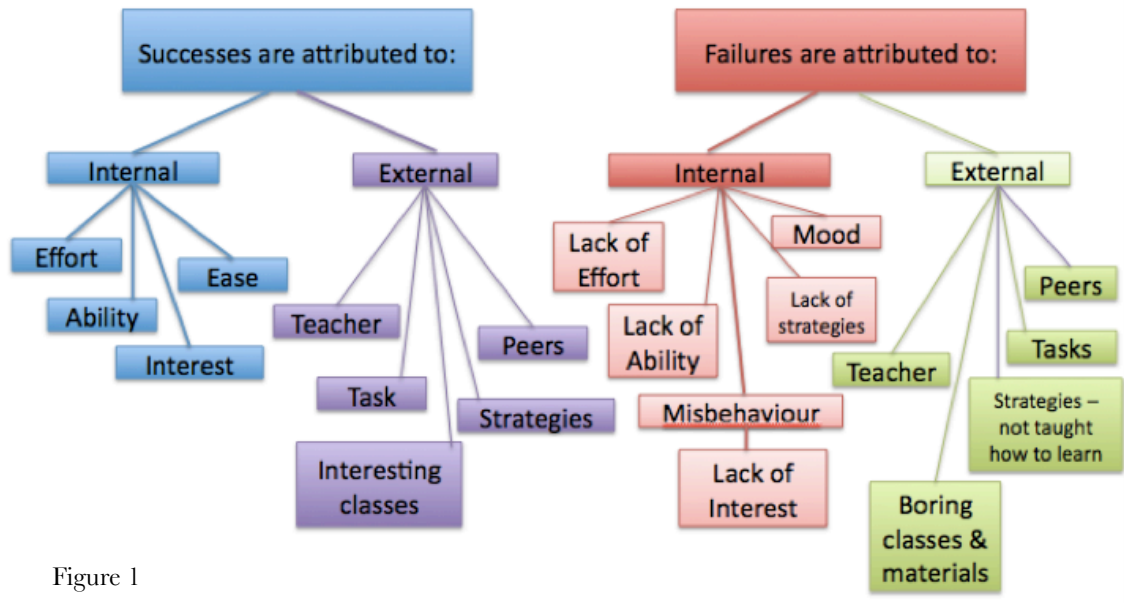


Figure 1

their own progress as a result of hard work may believe that they are “incapable” or “not smart enough”. Students who receive constant criticism at home may give up trying and reject all use of the HL or participation in the HL community.

### What is Self-Efficacy?

Self-efficacy refers to our perception of our capacity to perform according to expectations without reference to external rewards or reinforcements (Bandura 1997). In other words, we are more likely to take on a task if we believe that we can accomplish it. It is important that our perception of our own self-efficacy is only slightly above our actual ability level in order to promote growth in ability and skill. If we are too confident in our ability, the chances of disappointment are greater, which may result in a lowering of self-esteem. On the other hand, if we possess little or no self-confidence, there is no chance for growth because we will not even attempt to take on the task at hand in the first place.

For example, if a student’s average grade in class is high, his or her confidence level will also be high. However, if the student’s perception of self-efficacy is too high, s/he may not prepare

adequately for an exam (thinking that s/he does not need to prepare because his/her average is already high). But what if the majority of the grades collected for his average were based on homework assignments completed at home with the assistance of family members? Now, in the classroom on his or her own, the student may not be prepared. The student did not realize that s/he may have needed more independent practice.

Likewise, if a student’s average in class is low, s/he may not even try to do the work at all, thinking that his/her skills just are not good enough. However, the student’s average may be attributed more to the proper ratio of support and challenge being received in the classroom and not to actual ability. Because this student does not take on the tasks, there is no opportunity for growth of his/her abilities and skills.

Bandura (1994) describes two types of self-efficacy based on people’s attitude or style of coping and their way of confronting challenges. People with a strong sense of self-efficacy view:

- challenging problems as tasks to be mastered or opportunities for skills to be developed

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- develop deeper interest in the activities in which they participate
- form a stronger sense of commitment to their interests and activities, and
- recover quickly from setbacks and disappointments.

People with a weak sense of self-efficacy:

- avoid challenging tasks,
- believe that difficult tasks and situations are beyond their capabilities,
- focus on personal failings and negative outcomes, and
- quickly lose confidence in personal abilities.

The difference is significant: a person's sense of self-efficacy (strong or weak) greatly influences and may even determine how external variables are perceived and responded to. Are they barriers that can be overcome? How? With help? What kind of help?

In the context of a HL classroom, the teacher plays an important role in influencing a student's sense of self efficacy. This can be done by providing the appropriate amount of challenge and support. Figure 2 below is a conceptualization of this relationship presented by Daloiz (1986).

The relationship is best described as this:

- If there is low support and low challenge, there is no growth (stasis), as students are not pushed to their potential.
- If there is low support and high challenge, students feel frustrated, intimidated or overwhelmed and will not engage in the learning process. They retreat.
- If there is high support and low challenge, there is also no growth occurring because students receive too much help for a task that is too easy. However, they are receiving confirmation that they know and understand what has been learned.

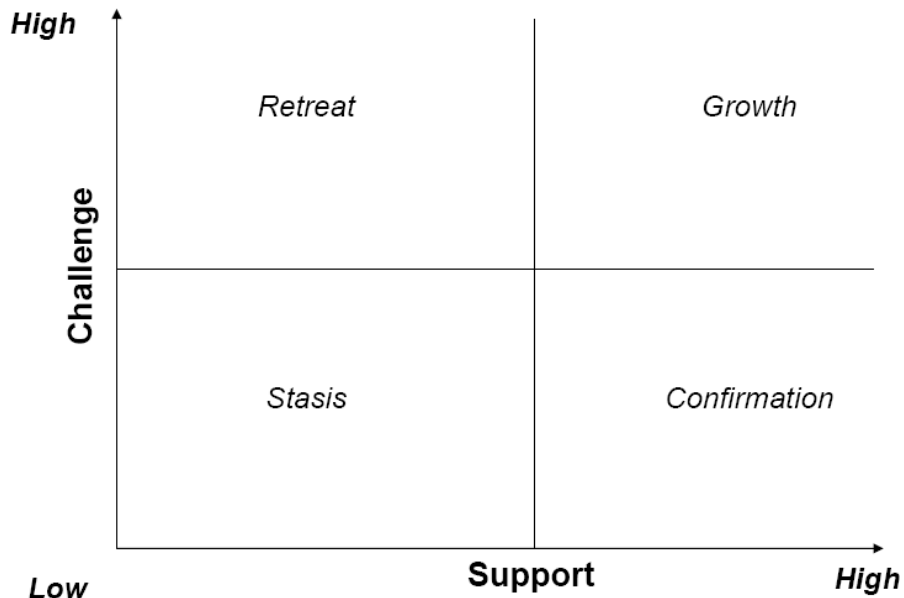


Figure 2: The relationship of support and challenge on student learning

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Only when there is high support and high challenge will there be growth and progress in the students' learning.

## *Suggestions*

Attribution theory and self-efficacy theory can help teachers in several ways. First, in order for teachers to best facilitate the learning for each student they should understand the source of a student's feeling of success or failure. This can be done by talking with students individually and observing their behaviours/interactions. Try to identify the students with inaccurate perceptions of their ability and target the anxious students. Help them work through their issues to prevent unrealistic expectations that could lead to disappointment, frustration and de-motivation. Identify the at risk learners and take steps to create required support through various learning strategies such as scaffolding. Discuss class expectations and ask students about the expectations they have on themselves; steer them towards goal attainment and set-up goals in terms of a task rather than a grade.

The more the teacher knows about the student, the better s/he can help the student learn better and produce better results. Develop a trusting and friendly relationship with each student and between students so that guidance can be offered and accepted. A student who is not exerting effort needs to recognize that increased success will come with increased effort. For example, by reviewing content regularly, doing homework or asking questions. Group work is helpful as students can practice speaking the language with each other in a non-threatening environment. Support from the teacher is also important - by providing genuine words of encouragement and positive, constructive and corrective feedback.

With the relationship of support and challenge in mind, teachers can adapt their instruction in the HL classroom to best facilitate learning. For example, support can be offered through templates, language ladders, scaffolding, fun and interesting homework assignments on the internet, visual cues around the classroom, or a good review/summary of a theme or grammar concept at the end of a lesson. Teachers can also challenge their students by presenting different topics for a written/oral assignment - each at varying difficulty levels

(differentiation) - so that each student can choose the topic that best suits their ability. Choosing practice tasks that utilize all of the multiple intelligences can also help students to become more aware of their abilities.

In the classroom, students' self-efficacy is also affected by comparing themselves to the success and failures of others (Bandura 1995). For example, a student may be unwilling to volunteer to read aloud a text written in the HL if s/he believes that his/her pronunciation is not as good as others in the class. Teachers can help create a good learning environment by keeping the affective filter of students low. They can select activities or games that minimize competition and foster encouragement and collaboration. Teachers may still offer competitive games, but regular regroup the team members so that students who are "losing" do not become discouraged and disengage from the game. Teachers can also choose a variety of games that tap into different multiple intelligences so all students have a chance to 'shine' in their abilities.

When a teacher knows why something seems to appeal to learners and helps them succeed, or not, the teacher is more empowered to develop lessons and choose tasks that will help them grow. To learn more about your students consider adapting and distributing the feedback survey sheet in Appendix A.

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## Appendix A: Sample survey to learn more about the internal and external variables your students think influence their successes and failures in the HL

Circle the number that best describes how you feel.

<b>Internal Factors</b>	☹				☺
How interested are you in studying the HL?	1	2	3	4	5
How easy is it for you to understand the HL?	1	2	3	4	5
How confident are you in your ability to learn the HL?	1	2	3	4	5
How much does your mood affect language learning for you?	1	2	3	4	5
How motivated are you to attend the HL school?	1	2	3	4	5
<b>External Factors</b>					
How many hours do you spend studying (speaking or using) the HL in a day?	1	2	3	4	5+
	☹				☺
How much does your teacher help you do better in The HL?	1	2	3	4	5
How much do your peers help you do better in the HL?	1	2	3	4	5
How often do you use strategies to help you do better in the HL?	1	2	3	4	5
How interested are you in the tasks or assignments you must do in the HL?	1	2	3	4	5
How often do you misbehave in the classroom?	1	2	3	4	5
How much support do you need to do tasks in the HL?	1	2	3	4	5
How much do you prepare before a test in school?	1	2	3	4	5
How much do you prepare before a test in the HL school?	1	2	3	4	5