Revisiting Autonomy And Attributions: A Case In A Malaysian University

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ABSTRACT

Contradictions often occur when concepts that originated in the West are applied in other contexts. Such is the case when concepts like autonomy and attributions are introduced in the context of language education in Asia. The claim that autonomy is universally applicable is refuted when researchers revealed findings which indicate that some Asian learners appear more teacher-dependent than autonomous. In the case of attributions, the claim that people in general credit themselves for successful outcomes (self-enhancing bias) and blame others for poor outcomes (ego-protective bias) appears to contradict findings that revealed some Asian learners have the opposite pattern of attributions, namely self-critical tendency. Such contradictions suggest the need to consider a number of factors like social, cultural and political when interpreting such concepts. Studies undertaken in the Malaysian context propose students' socio-cultural backgrounds as the reason behind their general tendencies to be teacher-centred and self-critical in the learning of English. They suggest that societies that nurture its members to respect teachers may produce self-critical learners. However, no empirical study has been undertaken to establish the relationship between autonomy and attributions in the Malaysian context. This study is an effort to bridge this gap in knowledge. A questionnaire survey was administered to 169 students of a Malaysian public university and its findings revealed their general tendencies to be both teacher-centred and self-critical. Difference in proficiency levels has some minor influence on autonomy and attributions, and the relationship between them.

Keywords: autonomy; attributions; teacher-centredness; self-critical tendency; English as a Second Language

INTRODUCTION

Autonomy, a concept that originated from the context of language education in Europe, was introduced as an alternative to the traditional deductive teaching approach. Holec (1981) describes autonomy as an individual's ability to take charge of his own learning. Since the most popular accepted definitions of autonomy used to focus on the importance of personal autonomy, it has been linked to concepts like individualisation and independence (Benson, 2011; Schmenk, 2005). Additionally, it considered collective actions and decisions as an indicator of lack of autonomy.

Another concept that is closely related to autonomy and investigated in this study is causal attributions. According to Fösterling (2001), this type of attribution refers to people's attributions or explanations of why past successful and poor outcomes occurred. In the attempts to search for these causal attributions, people tend to have self-enhancement and ego-protective biases. Self-enhancement bias refers to an individual's tendency to take credit for their success instead of being accountable of their failure. In contrast, self or ego-protective bias refers to the tendency to blame external factors for failure (Kruger, 1999).

Contradictions often emerge when Western concepts like autonomy and attributions are applied to non-Western contexts like Asia. In the case of autonomy, several studies showed that its Western definition and concept may not necessary apply to learners in non-Western educational settings (Ho & Crookall, 1995; Palfreyman, 2003; Pennycook, 1997). In the Malaysian context for instance, studies have shown that Malaysian students have a general preference for teacher-centredness rather than autonomy in learning (Junaidah, 2007; Thang, 2009a & b; Thang & Azarina, 2007). Thus, if we were to evaluate these Malaysian students according to the Western concept of autonomy, they would be considered as non-autonomous. However, Thang (2009a & b) and Thang and Azarina (2007) found that despite this preference, the students also appeared capable of being autonomous. They argued that this preference can be a result of socio-cultural factors and therefore, cannot be used as the key evidence to support the case for a lack of autonomy.

In addition, Abdullah (2005) suggested that the preference for teacher-centred learning may be related to the state of the Malaysian education system which is used to the traditional deductive teaching approach. In these "chalk and talk" styles of teaching, the teacher disseminates knowledge to students who obediently listen to the lecture (Tengku Kasim & Furbish, 2010). Students therefore have been nurtured to view their teachers as the main provider of knowledge who has a major role in influencing their learning processes. Such traditional approach is seen as more teacher-centred as the classroom instruction is generally dominated by the teacher while the students become passive recipients of knowledge (Vighnarajah, Wong & Kamariah, 2008). Abdullah (2005) believed that when this teaching practice is combined with examination oriented teaching, especially at the secondary schools, students become more dependent on their teachers.

With regard to attributions, Weiner (1979) proposed that people in general tend to ascribe success to internal factors (self-enhancement bias) and attribute failure to external factors (ego-protective bias). The propagators of attribution theory asserted that these biases are universal in nature and hence, not influenced by any socio-cultural factors. Despite this assertion, some attribution studies revealed that many Asian learners tended to display a contradictory pattern of attributions, i.e. self-critical tendency. A self-critical pattern of attribution entails learners attributing success to external factors and failure to internal factors as in the case of Gobel et al. (2011) and Thang et al. (2011) studies. Thang et al. (2011) study for instance, revealed that Malaysian undergraduates in general attributed their success most frequently to a desire to get good grades and teacher influence. It also suggested students' high respect for teachers and self-critical tendency as communal characteristics in the Malaysian context. In addition, the researchers proposed the undergraduates' inclination to respect their teacher as a possible cause

behind their self-critical tendency, hence suggesting a possible relationship between attributions and autonomy.

Correspondingly, the present study proposes that students who prefer a teacher-centred approach to the learning of English (defined as being less autonomous in the Western context), will also possess self-critical characteristics. More specifically, students' high respect for their English teachers will drive them to attribute good performance to their teachers as they regard their teachers as the prime contributor to the success. Conversely, they will also refrain from blaming their teachers for their failure. However, further investigation needs to be undertaken to substantiate this, which is the purpose of this study.

AUTONOMY

Scholars have interpreted learner autonomy in different ways and various terms like 'learner independence', 'autonomous learning', 'self-direction' and 'independent learning' have been used to refer to similar concepts. Despite the different interpretations, most definitions agree that learners assume some kind of responsibility on their learning. In other words, autonomy involves the control that a learner has over his learning process. According to Benson (2011), this control has social consequences as it involves collective decision-making and actions. Benson's view was seconded by Sinclair and Thang (2009) who believed that as a social being, our choice not only implicates ourselves but also other people and the environmental factors around us. This is especially true in collectivist cultures like Asian culture, which promotes interdependence and connectedness among its members (Kitayama et al., 1997). Therefore, to address the needs of such society (in this case, the Malaysian society) who may find it impractical to exercise complete autonomy, promoting learner autonomy in education means "enabling learners to develop greater independence than they already have, if they want it" (Sinclair & Thang, 2009, p. 2). In the context of the present study, it is proposed that learner autonomy refers to learners' capability to learn and work on their own despite their preference to learn in teacher-centred environments.

Based on this definition, it appears that not all Malaysian learners readily accept the introduction of a more autonomous learning approach in the learning of English. Junaidah's (2007) study for instance revealed that her distance learner subjects were not confident in their own English ability and heavily relied on their teachers in various aspects of learning English. Furthermore, data on learners' perceptions towards the teachers' roles revealed that the learners perceived their teachers as an authoritative figure that plays a dominant role in their learning. Based on these findings, Junaidah (2007) concluded that the distance learners were not yet ready for autonomous language learning.

Thang has undertaken a series of studies that revealed contrasting findings from Junaidah's (2007). One of them was carried out on Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (the National University of Malaysia) (UKM) on-campus students to determine the reasons behind their indifference in improving their English proficiency and the extent of their autonomy (Thang, 2009a). The students in general were shown to be more teacher-centred irrespective of their different proficiency levels. Despite this tendency, the students did display autonomous characteristics and Thang (2009a) proposed that the

preference for teacher-centred learning is due to students' high regard for their teachers and does not necessarily mean that these learners are not autonomous.

In another study, Thang (2009b) compared the autonomy of undergraduates learning ESL in public and private universities in Malaysia. Data collected in the public universities revealed that there were two types of learning preference groups. One was the teacher-centred group who depended on teacher as a resource person, but at the same time displayed the desire to be autonomous in their learning. Two was the autonomous group who displayed strong characteristics of autonomy but still needed their teachers' support in order to move towards autonomy. Data collected from the private university indicated two types of learners. The proautonomous group had moved away from teacher-dependency while the teacher-centred group still held onto teacher-centred learning. Overall results indicated that students from both public and private universities preferred teacher-centred approach in learning ESL. Thang suggested the possibility that this phenomenon is caused by the spoon-feeding culture predominant in Malaysian schools and the influence of the Asian cultural values and outlook.

Thang's (2009a & b) studies revealed that the manner in which Malaysian learners were brought up and educated encouraged them to prefer certain learning type than another. Even though this preference made them rely more on their teacher, it did not stop them from developing the capabilities of being autonomous in learning English. This is verified by Thang's (2009b) study that indicated how students in private university managed to shift towards autonomous learning. Both studies indicated the need to consider social, cultural and political factors in implementing autonomy in the Malaysian context. Additionally, Junaidah's (2007) contrasting findings suggest that Malaysian distance learners may face more problems in developing autonomy than the on-campus learners.

ATTRIBUTIONS

Learners' attributions about past achievement is the main motivational component of attribution theory in education (Fösterling, 2001). The attribution theory that is of concern in the present study is the attributional model of achievement motivation that deals with learners' causal attributions for achievement (Weiner, 1974). Weiner stated that causal attributions in the achievement attributions domain mainly refer to "the perceived reasons for success and failure" (p. 51).

Men use four most general and important elements of ascription to interpret and predict the outcome of previous achievement-related events (Weiner, 1974). These elements are the degree of effort they expended (effort), the difficulty of the task in question (task difficulty), the degree to which luck influenced the outcome (luck) and the level of ability to complete the task (ability).

To analyse men's achievement attributions, Weiner classified attributions along three dimensions:

    (i) locus or locus of control, which consists of attributions that are either internal or external to an individual,

    (ii) stability, which concerns attributions that are stable or open to change, and

    (iii) controllability, which refers to attributions that are either within or outside of an individual's control.

Peter Gobel and his team of researchers extended on this model by adding several other attributions (Gobel et al., 2011; Mori et al., 2011; Thang et al., 2011). Table 1 presents their dimensional classification scheme that is used in this study.

TABLE 1. Gobel et al.'s dimensional classification scheme for causal attributions

| | Dimension | | |
Attribution	Locus	Stability	Controllability
Ability	Internal	Stable	Uncontrollable
Effort	Internal	Unstable	Controllable
Strategy	Internal	Unstable	Controllable
Interest	Internal	Stable	Controllable
Grade	Internal	Stable	Controllable
Preparation	Internal	Unstable	Controllable
Enjoyment	Internal	Stable	Controllable
Teacher (influence)	External	Stable	Uncontrollable
Class	External	Stable	Uncontrollable
Level	External	Stable	Uncontrollable
Luck	External	Unstable	Uncontrollable
Task (difficulty)	External	Stable	Uncontrollable

Source: Gobel et al. (2011)

As mentioned earlier, self-enhancement and ego-protective biases may occur in men's search of causal explanation (Weiner, 1992). These biases are driven by people's need to feel more proud rather than ashamed of themselves (Becker, 1968). This is why people's behaviour reflects their needs to maximise feelings of pride and minimise humiliation and shame. Similarly, these biases are believed to maximise the pleasure generated by success and minimise the pain linked with failure (Weiner, 1992).

In contrast to self-enhancement and ego-protective biases, self-critical tendency is more evident in some Asian cultures. Kitayama et al. (1997) suggested that the non-Westerns (like the Asians) distance themselves from self-enhancement and ego-protective biases because being brought up to be part of a social unit requires them to preserve meaningful social relationships that may be jeopardised if they display such conflicting biases. On the contrary, members of Western cultures display these biases because they want to prove their self-sufficiency and worthiness and preserve their autonomy. While self-enhancement is believed to maintain positive beliefs and emotions towards the self, self-criticism does the opposite as one develops negative beliefs and emotions towards himself (Kurman, Yoshihara-Tanaka & Elkoshi, 2003).

Studies conducted in the Malaysian context by Gobel and team (Gobel et al., 2011; Mori et al., 2011; Thang et al., 2011) revealed the presence of a self-critical tendency among its learners. Thang et al. (2011) who investigated the relationship between performance attributions and different university settings in Malaysian ESL context found that all groups of respondents were inclined to have stronger attribution ratings for success than for failure. They were also similar in attributing success more to the interest in getting a good grade and teacher influence. Two communal characteristics in the Malaysian context emerged from this study; high respect for teachers and self-critical tendencies. Both were evident particularly in the case of UKM students who were mostly Malays. The Malays usually have high respect for teachers and this may drive them to attribute good performance to their teachers, therefore emphasising the presence of self-criticism.

In another study, Mori et al. (2011) examined Malaysian university students' perceived success and failure attributions in learning ESL. The findings revealed a tendency for higher proficiency learners to attribute success more to their own effort and ability compared to learners of lower proficiency. In addition, they and those who perceived themselves as high proficient tended to attribute failure to class and interest-related factors. However, this finding was not applicable to lower proficiency learners who were more inclined to blame lack of effort and ability for their failure. The researchers explained that this might be due to the higher proficiency learners' being less self-critical of their failure and being more comfortable at attributing failure to external factors.

THE STUDY

Thang et al. (2011) have suggested that the presence of self-critical tendency may be due to learners' tendency to respect their teacher and not due to a lack of autonomy as proposed by the Western concept of autonomy. Thang et al. further proposed a possible relationship between attributions and autonomy. However, no studies have provided empirical evidence to substantiate the interplay between these two concepts.

This study will first investigate the influence of proficiency in English on autonomy and attributions. Then it would proceed to explore whether this difference in English proficiency level will influence the relationship between autonomy and attributions. To achieve the above objectives, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ 1: What is the influence of the students' English proficiency levels on the following:
   a) autonomy in learning English?
   b) attributions in learning English?

RQ 2: In what ways are the relationship between autonomy and attributions influenced by proficiency in English?

METHODS

RESEARCH DESIGN AND CONTEXT

This quantitative study utilised a questionnaire survey to gather data. The study was undertaken in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), one of the top five research universities in Malaysia initially established to fulfil the needs of students from Malay medium schools and religious schools to be educated at tertiary level. UKM was chosen as the context for the present study due to the findings of previous studies that showed the UKM undergraduates to be the most teacher-centred (Thang & Azarina, 2007; Thang, 2009b) and the most self-critical (Thang et al., 2011) compared to students from other Malaysian institutions. The relationship between teacher-centred and self-critical tendencies however, has not been verified through these research studies, hence the impetus to undertake this study.

SAMPLE POPULATION

The first and second year undergraduates of UKM's Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (FSSK) who were taking an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course were chosen for this study. Students who enrolled in this course differed in terms of their English proficiency level, which was measured based on their performance in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). Altogether, 142 students took part in this study. They were classified into two categories of proficiency:

    a) Lower proficiency category (students who scored MUET Bands 1 and 2), and
    b) Higher proficiency category (students who scored MUET Bands 3 and above).

There were 76 students (55.5%) from the lower proficiency (LP) category and 61 (44.5%) from the higher proficiency (HP) category.

RESEARCH TOOL

A questionnaire survey was employed to investigate the interplay between autonomy and attributions. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: sections 1, 2 and 3 (see Appendix for a sample of the questionnaire). Section 1 compiled the respondents' background information, whereas section 2: the Learner Autonomy Characteristics Questionnaire (LACQ)[i] examined the extent of respondents' tendency for autonomous or teacher-centred learning. All 18 items in LACQ were rated on a four-point Likert scale (4 for 'strongly agree', 3 for 'agree', 2 for 'disagree' and 1 for 'strongly disagree'). Section 3 consisted of two sets: Set A and Set B. Set A: the Attribution to Success Questionnaire (ASQ) examined respondents' attributions to success and requires them to choose one activity that they were successful at and rate the causal attributions for that particular activity. On the other hand, Set B: the Attribution to Failure Questionnaire (AFQ)[ii] investigated their attributions to failure and required them to choose one activity that they were poor at. Later they rated the causal attributions for that particular activity. Rating of causal attributions in ASQ and AFQ also used similar four-point Likert scale as in LACQ. The questionnaire was translated from English to Bahasa Malaysia (the Malay Language) to ensure the respondents' ability to comprehend and respond to the questions appropriately.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

The questionnaire was administered at the beginning of semester two, 2011/2012 session. It was distributed to the students during the EAP class and collected by the researcher during the next class. Students who failed to return the questionnaires on that day were asked to submit them personally to the researcher or to their course instructor by the following week.

      Altogether 169 copies of questionnaires were distributed. 142 questionnaires (84%) were returned but due to incomplete data, five questionnaires were discarded. The remaining 137 questionnaires (81%) were retained.

      The scores of the respondents were tabulated using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 16. The statistical tools used to analyse data were ranking of mean scores, factor analysis, reliability analysis and frequency count.

FINDINGS

The data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical tools. Ranking of mean scores and frequency count were the descriptive tools used whereas the inferential tool used was factor analysis and reliability analysis.

AUTONOMY

RANKING OF MEAN SCORES

The ranking of mean scores of LACQ items for LP and HP groups shows that the mean scores fall between 1.9 (approaching 'disagree') and 3.5 (between 'agree' and 'strongly agree'). Table 2 displays the ranking of top five items for both groups. A difference in the groups' general trends can be observed. The LP learners in general preferred a teacher-centred learning mode to learn English. The top four items (items 1, 6, 16 and 4) for the LP group are items associated with teacher-centred learning mode. Generally, they liked their teachers to explain everything to them (item 1), to frequently guide them in learning (item 6), to give them regular feedback (item 16) and to tell them all their mistakes (item 4). They however did not blindly follow their teachers as they considered it important to know the purposes behind the tasks that they are given (item 5). Analysis of all LACQ items shows that all items related to teacher-centred learning have a mean score above 2.5 (inclined towards 'agree') for the LP group, reiterating their general preference for a teacher-centred learning approach. Conversely, items related to autonomous learning have a mean score as low as 1.93 (approaching 'disagree'), suggesting their lower inclination to incline towards an autonomous learning approach.

Contrastively, the HP group seemed to be less dependent on their teachers. Despite highly rating two items associated with teacher-centred learning (items 1 and 16), three other items in the top-five category are associated with autonomous learning. The HP learners liked the opportunity to correct their own mistakes (item 3), to know the purposes behind the tasks given (item 5) and to always take the initiative when learning (item 7).

TABLE 2. Five items with the highest mean scores according to proficiency

Item No.	Items	LP	Ranking	HP	Ranking
1	I like the teacher to explain everything to us.	3.62	1	3.51	1
6	I need a lot of guidance in my learning.	3.45	2		
16	I think it is important for teachers to give us regular feedback on our work.	3.42	3	3.44	2
4	I like the teacher to tell me all my mistakes.	3.34	4		
5	I think it is important for us to learn about the purposes behind the activities given.	3.30	5	3.34	4
18	I like the opportunity to self-correct minor mistakes in my work.			3.38	3
7	I always take the initiative when learning about something.			3.33	5

* N for LP = 76, N for HP = 61

Table 3 provides the mean scores of the items in the bottom-five category for both LP and HP groups. There are two items related to teacher-centred learning (items 9 and 8) and three related to autonomous learning (items 2, 12 and 14). Items that indicate strong expressions of autonomy (items 12 and 14) are in the list of both LP and HP groups. In addition, the teacher-centred items in the list of both LP and HP groups are associated with a more traditional teaching approach with full teacher dominance. Since these items are in the bottom-five category, the results suggest that both groups of learners were also not inclined towards full teacher-centred learning.

TABLE 3. Items with the lowest mean scores according to proficiency

Item No.	Items	LP	Ranking	HP	Ranking
2	I think teachers should give us opportunities to select the units we like to learn.	2.88	14		
9	I like teachers who follow the text closely.	2.72	15	2.39	17
15	I do not have adequate management skills to learn on my own.	2.53	16	2.48	16
12	I dislike being directed on how to learn.	2.30	17	2.59	15
14	Students should be encouraged to challenge their teachers.	1.93	18	2.39	18
8	I believe it is necessary to have formal teaching to learn English.			2.77	14

FACTOR ANALYSIS

Factor analysis was carried out on the LACQ items for the combined LP and HP learners to identify groups of variables that are closely related to each other. The varimax R (orthogonal) rotation and Kaiser normalization procedure were used to compare factors amongst learners. To increase efficiency, all items that loaded below 0.4 (items number 9 and 15) were deleted and to reduce cross-loadings, lower loadings in cases of cross-loadings of items between both factors were also removed.

The initial analysis extracted six components from the sample with percentage of explained variance at 69.1. However, these factor solutions did not reveal any coherent patterns, thus the analysis was performed again and the factors were reduced to three. The explained variance for these solutions is 50%. Since it was difficult to distinguish Factor 1 and Factor 3, the analysis was performed again, this time with the factors limited to two. The explained variance for the two-factor solutions is 42.1% and a clear-cut pattern for each factor is now evident.

An analysis of the items in each factor reveals that both factors represent two different types of learning preferences (refer Table 4 for characteristics of Factors 1 and 2). Factor 1 represents the 'teacher-centred' group as its items indicate strong features of teacher-centredness. For instance, a careful scrutiny of its items reveals that the learners had the following characteristics: they regarded teachers as a resource to identify and correct their mistakes, they preferred teachers to keep giving them feedback and depended on their teachers to guide them and explain everything to them. They also felt it necessary for teachers to teach English formally. The learners did show some characteristics that are inclined towards autonomy like the desire to self-correct their mistakes, learning the purposes behind tasks and taking initiative in learning, but these

are not strong expressions of autonomy. Conversely, an analysis of all characteristics in Factor 2 reveals that the learners had the desire to choose what, where and how to learn, believed that they should be bold enough to challenge their teachers and disliked being directed on how to learn. These are strong expressions of autonomy, thus Factor 2 represents the 'autonomous' group.

TABLE 4. Characteristics of Factors 1 and 2

Factor 1: Teacher-centred group		Factor loading
Item No.	Teacher-centred learning	
4	I like the teacher to tell me all my mistakes.	.725
16	I think it is important for teachers to give us regular feedback.	.719
11	I like teachers who correct all my spoken mistakes.	. 719
13	I like teachers to frequently point out my mistakes.	.658
6	I need a lot of guidance in my learning.	.606
1	I like the teacher to explain everything to us.	.579
8	I believe it is necessary to have formal teaching to learn English.	.465
	Autonomous learning	
	I like the opportunity to self-correct minor mistakes in my work.	
18	I think it is important for us to learn about the purposes behind the	.676
5	activities given.	.628
7	I always take the initiative when learning about something.	.579
Factor 2: Autonomous group		Factor loading
Item No.	Autonomous learning	
2	I think teachers should give us opportunities to select the units we like to learn.	.915
14	Students should be encouraged to challenge their teachers.	.682
17	I think teachers should allow us to learn at our own pace.	.674
12	I dislike being directed on how to learn.	.651
3	I think teachers should give students opportunities to decide where and how to learn.	.548
10	I know my learning style and use it effectively.	.404

* Items number 9 and 15 were deleted as loadings are below 0.4

FREQUENCY ANALYSIS

Frequency analysis was carried out to determine each respondent's predominant learning preference. The analysis entailed calculating and comparing each respondent's mean score to items belonging to Factors 1 and 2. The factor with the higher mean score was regarded as the predominant style of that particular respondent. Table 5 shows the comparison of the number and percentage of respondents belonging to each factor.

TABLE 5. Respondents' learning preferences grouping according to proficiency

Grouping		LP	HP
Teacher-centred (TC)	Count	70	52
	%	94.59	86.67
Autonomous (AT)	Count	4	8
	%	5.41	13.33

The data reveal that majority of the respondents from both proficiency groups preferred teacher-centred as opposed to autonomous learning: 94.59% of LP learners and 86.67%

of HP learners. However, there is a slight difference of 7.92% between the LP and the HP groups, indicating that less HP learners preferred the teacher-centred approach compared to the LP learners. Additionally, the HP group had the higher percentage of autonomous learners (13.33%) compared to LP group (5.41%).

ATTRIBUTIONS

ITEM ANALYSIS

The ranking of mean scores for ASQ shows that the mean scores range between 2.38 (inclined towards 'disagree') and 3.62 (inclined towards strongly 'agree'). A deeper scrutiny shows that all attributions (except for 'ability') have a mean score above 2.5 (inclined towards 'agree'), suggesting that the learners credited their success to both internal and external factors. The findings also suggest that they regarded internal and external attributions as necessary in determining their success, with 'grade' being the most important (mean score above 3.5, indicating strong 'agreement').

Contrastively, both groups in general scored attributions for failure much lower than for success as suggested by the ranking of the mean scores for AFQ. The mean scores are between 1.56 (approaching 'disagree') to 2.72 (approaching agree). A more careful scrutiny shows that only one external attribution (task difficulty) was listed among the top five ranking items. The ranking suggests that in general, the LP and HP groups displayed a tendency to attribute their failure to personal factors, rather than to external factors. Tables 6 and 7 display the ranking of ASQ and AFQ items, respectively.

TABLE 6. Ranking of ASQ according to proficiency

Item No.	Items	Locus	LP	Ranking	HP	Ranking
9	Grade	Internal	3.62	1	3.52	1
12	Level	External	3.16	2	3.05	4
6	Teacher	External	3.16	3	3.20	2
11	Enjoyment	Internal	3.12	4	3.13	3
4	Interest	Internal	3.09	5	3.03	6
2	Effort	Internal	3.08	6	3.00	7
8	Class	External	3.08	7	3.05	5
3	Strategy	Internal	2.88	8	2.82	8
10	Preparation	Internal	2.86	9	2.67	9
5	Luck	External	2.80	10	2.67	10
7	Task	External	2.75	11	2.67	11
1	Ability	Internal	2.38	12	2.52	12

TABLE 7. Ranking of AFQ according to proficiency

Item No.	Items	Locus	LP	Ranking	HP	Ranking
1	Ability	Internal	2.72	1	2.56	3
7	Task	External	2.57	2	2.54	4
3	Strategy	Internal	2.54	3	2.66	1
10	Preparation	Internal	2.53	4	2.61	2
4	Interest	Internal	2.38	5	2.41	5
2	Effort	Internal	2.34	6	2.34	6
5	Luck	External	2.22	7	2.25	7
8	Class	External	2.21	8	2.25	8
12	Level	External	2.05	9	2.03	10

6	Teacher	External	2.00	10	2.10	9
11	Enjoyment	Internal	1.87	11	1.82	11
9	Grade	External	1.59	12	1.56	12

GROUPING OF ATTRIBUTIONS

The attributions in ASQ and AFQ were categorised into two according to their locus dimension. The 'internal group' comprises seven internal attributions: ability, effort, strategy, interest, grade, preparation and enjoyment, whereas the 'external group' has five external attributions: luck, teacher, task, class and level.

Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient analyses were performed to verify the reliability of each grouping of attributions. In the case of ASQ, the Cronbach's Alpha reliability value for the internal group was 0.74 for both LP and HP groups. Since the value was above 0.7, the internal consistency was therefore reliable. On the other hand, the reliability of attributions for the external group was 0.66 for LP learners and 0.62 for HP learners. 'Luck' attribution was taken out to increase the reliability value and it increased to 0.76 for LP learners and 0.67 for HP learners. Additionally, for AFQ, the reliability reading for the internal group was 0.74 for LP learners and 0.71 for HP learners whereas the reliability of internal consistency for the external group was 0.66 for LP learners and 0.81 for HP learners. These findings indicate acceptable reliability of attributions for all groupings.

FREQUENCY ANALYSIS

Frequency analysis was generated to determine each respondent's predominant success and failure attributions. The same procedure used to determine the respondents' predominant learning styles was used. Each respondent's mean score to items belonging to the 'internal' and 'external' groups was calculated and compared. The group with the higher mean score was regarded as the predominant success and failure attributions of that particular respondent. Table 8 displays the comparison of the number and percentage of learners belonging to each group.

TABLE 8. Respondents' success and failure attributions according to proficiency

Grouping		ASQ			AFQ	
		LP	HP		LP	HP
Internal	Count	30	25	Count	40	33
	%	43.47	43.1	%	57.97	57.89
External	Count	39	33	Count	29	24
	%	56.52	56.9	%	42.03	42.11

As shown in Table 8, the respondents attributed their success more to external than internal factors: 56.52% compared to 43.47% for LP learners, and 56.9% compared to 43.1% for HP learners. When it comes to failure, they generally attributed it more to internal than external factors: 57.97% compared to 42.03% for LP learners, and 57.89% compared to 42.11% for HP learners. These findings suggest the general tendency for the respondents to be self-critical of their performance albeit their proficiency levels.

Table 9 compares the relationship between autonomy and success attributions for both LP and HP groups. The data revealed that both LP and HP learners who preferred teacher-centred learning mode attributed their success more to external than internal factors. For LP learners, the percentage of those who attributed their success to external factors is higher than those who attributed their success to internal factors by 7.95%. For HP learners, the difference is higher, 20%. This suggests that the tendency of HP learners to attribute success to external factors is higher than the LP learners. With regard to autonomous learners, the differences for both LP and HP learners for external and internal factors will not be considered in view of the small sample size.

TABLE 9. Categorisation of LP and HP learners into ASQ groups

Proficiency	Preference	Grouping	Count	%
LP	TC	Internal	29	46.02
		External	34	53.97
	AT	Internal	2	50
		External	2	50
HP	TC	Internal	20	40.0
		External	30	60.0
	AT	Internal	4	57.16
		External	3	42.83

Table 10 provides data regarding learners' patterns of failure attributions. The data indicate that LP and HP learners who displayed teacher-centred learning characteristics were more likely to attribute failure to internal factors. For LP learners, the percentage of those who attributed their failure to internal factor is higher than those who attributed their success to external factors by 15.62%, whereas for HP learners, the difference is higher, 26.54%. This suggests that the tendency of HP learners to attribute failure to internal factors is higher than the LP groups. For autonomous learners, the HP learners seemed to attribute their failure more to external than internal factors but the sample size is very small hence this finding is less convincing.

TABLE 10. Categorisation of LP and HP learners into AFQ groups

Proficiency	Preference	Grouping	Count	%
LP	TC	Internal	37	57.81
		External	27	42.19
	AT	Internal	1	33.26
		External	2	66.74
HP	TC	Internal	31	63.27
		External	18	36.73
	AT	Internal	2	28.56
		External	5	71.44

DISCUSSION

RQ 1 a): What is the influence of the students' English proficiency on autonomy in learning English?

Item analyses conducted on LACQ items reveal the LP learners' general preference for a teacher-centred learning approach and lower inclination for an autonomous approach. The HP learners on the other hand, seemed to have rather similar tendencies for both learning approaches, and unlike the LP learners, they were less dependent on their teachers. Frequency analysis on LACQ items contradicts this to a certain extent. It shows that the LP and HP groups preferred the teacher-centred learning. However, the HP appeared less teacher-centred than the LP learners. These findings suggest a general preference for the teacher-centred approach among the EAP learners, regardless of proficiency levels. However, this tendency was more apparent among the LP learners who displayed greater need for their teacher to guide them in learning. Similar findings were found by Junaidah (2007), Thang (2009a & b), Thang and Azarina (2007) and Thang et al. (2011) who showed Malaysian learners' general preference for teacher-centred learning. Abdullah (2005) suggested that this can be a result of the Malaysian teachers' traditionally deductive and examination-oriented teaching style which is possibly a product of the Malaysian education system which is very top-down in nature.

Despite this preference, both the LP and HP groups displayed preference for some autonomous characteristics. This inclination is more apparent in the case of the HP group suggesting that they were more capable of acting independently. Both LP and HP groups however were not inclined towards complete autonomy nor a fully teacher-controlled learning environment as items associated with these two approaches ranked low among learners of both groups. These results are consistent with Thang's (2009a & b) and Thang and Azarina's (2007) which also demonstrated their subjects' abilities to learn English autonomously despite their preference for a teacher-centred learning mode. These findings therefore reiterate that learners' teacher-centredness in the Malaysian context does not necessary mean inability to learn autonomously and as pointed out by Thang and Azarina (2007), learners who are more at ease in letting their teachers point out their mistakes, guide them and motivate them may be capable of working independently.

RQ 1 b): What is the influence of the students' English proficiency on attributions in learning English?

Item analysis carried out on ASQ items shows that both LP and HP groups credited success to internal and external factors. This suggests that they regarded both types of attributions as necessary in determining their success. With regard to the AFQ items, data reveal that the LP and HP groups displayed a tendency to attribute their failure to personal factors, rather than to external factors. This indicates their inclination for self-critical tendency regardless of proficiency levels. Similar findings were found in previous studies undertaken by Gobel and his team of researchers (Gobel et al., 2011; Mori et al., 2011; Thang et al., 2011). These studies proposed socio-cultural factors to influence their subjects' pattern of attributions. Kitayama et al. (1997) also supported this view. Being self-critical is one of the ways for some of the Asians who are brought up in collectivist cultures to preserve meaningful social relationships.

RQ 2: In what ways are the relationship between autonomy and attributions influenced by proficiency in English?

Data show that the teacher-centred learners, regardless of their proficiency levels were more self-critical of their performance as they attributed their good performance more to external factors and their poor performance to internal factors. The autonomous learners appeared rather balanced in attributing their success and failure to internal and external factors. These findings therefore establish a relationship between the students' learning preference and attributions and offer proof to substantiate what was proposed by Thang et al.'s (2011) study, which suggested that learners' self-critical tendency may be due to their respect for their teachers. Subsequently, as these learners have high respect for their teachers, they may feel it more appropriate to attribute failure to themselves.

The findings do not indicate that proficiency levels have a major influence on the relationship between autonomy and attributions. Even though prior research have demonstrated the role of language proficiency in moderating autonomy and attributions respectively (Thang, 2009a & b; Thang & Azarina, 2007; Mori et al., 2011), no research has confirmed its influence on the relationship between both variables. It is proposed that such influence is minimal since Malaysian learners, regardless of their backgrounds and individual differences are accustomed to the traditional deductive approach that is commonly practised in Malaysia (Abdullah, 2005; Junaidah, 2007; Vighnarajah, Wong & Kamariah, 2008). As suggested by a previous study, when this approach is coupled with the examination oriented education system, learners become more reliant on their teacher (Abdullah, 2005) and perhaps more self-critical.

CONCLUSION

One of the limitations of the study is the small sample size. This is due to the limited number of HP students at the time the study was carried out. To balance the ratio of LP and HP students, the questionnaire surveys were not distributed to all LP students. However, the findings of this study support those undertaken previously by Gobel and his team of researchers (Gobel et al., 2011; Mori et al., 2011; Thang et al., 2011), Thang and Azarina (2007) and Thang (2009a & b) which strongly suggest the reliability of the findings of the present study.

To conclude, the findings establish a clear relationship between autonomy and attributions that is, teacher-centred learners are likely to be self-critical too. The self-criticality is generally manifested in the form of attributing success to teachers, and not blaming teachers for failure. The results to a large extent refuted earlier claims on autonomy and attributions by researchers in the West and supported more current studies in this field by Asian researchers (Gobel et al., 2011; Thang, 2009a & b; Thang et al. 2011) and in that sense is an invaluable contribution to this field of knowledge. It further backed earlier claims that Asian cultures would lead to these different perceptions and values on autonomy and attributions (Gobel et al., 2011; Kitayama et al., 1997; Thang et al., 2011). Since socio-cultural influence was not investigated in depth in this study this conclusion needs to be further investigated in future research to shed light on this matter.

IMPLICATIONS TO THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN MALAYSIA

The Malaysian policy makers' efforts to implement a less exam-oriented curriculum that promotes a more autonomous and critical learning among students through the National Higher Education Action Plan 2007-2010 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007) and Pelan Strategik Interim Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia 2011-2020 (Ministry of Education Strategic Interim Plan 2011-2020) (Ministry of Education, 2010) for instance, are a welcome change. However, in view of Malaysian students' preference for teacher-centred learning, these efforts would be more successful if the policy makers, institutions or teachers remember that such change should be implemented gradually. To adopt an automatic classroom for instance, Vygotsky (1978) suggests that the scaffolding or assistance provided by the teacher to be taken away only gradually as the learners steadily develop skills in becoming independent learners.

The introduction of 'attribution training' to both students and teachers should also be considered. Attribution training involves improving learners' beliefs in the causes of academic performance so that their future motivation, attitudes and behaviours for achievement can be enhanced (Dörnyei, 2001). Such training helps demoralised learners who lack the motivation to perform academically (Robertson, 2000) and prevents them from making negative attribution styles (Dörnyei, 2001). Teachers who are aware of the causes of their students' performance attributions can help promote positive attributions among their students and consequently lead them to be more in control of their performance. As little is known about attribution training in Malaysia, pioneering research will undoubtedly contribute significant input to the literature.

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APPENDIX

AUTONOMY AND ATTRIBUTION SURVEY

RESPONDENT'S PROFILE

Please complete the following.

1. Name: 3. Telephone number:

2. Email address: 4. Programme:

For numbers 5 – 13, please encircle the appropriate alphabet.

5. Gender: (A) Male
               (B) Female

6. Race: (A) Malay
              (B) Chinese
              (D) Indian
              (E) Others. (Please state _____)

7. Academic year: (A) One
                    (B) Two

8. Qualification upon enrolling into current academic programme: (A) Diploma
                                                  (B) Matriculation
                                                  (C) STPM
                                                  (D) Others

9. SPM grade for English: (A) A+ / A- / A atau A1 / A2
                            (B) B+ / B atau B3 / B4
                            (C) C+ / C atau C5 / C6
                            (D) D / E atau D7 / E8
                            (E) G atau G9

10. MUET: (A) Band 5-6
               (B) Band 3-4
               (C) Band 1-2

11. Age: (A) 21 years old and below
              (B) 22 – 30 years old
              (C) 31 – 40 years old
              (D) 41 years old

12. Mother tongue: (A) Malay
                                (B) English
                                (C) Tamil
                                (D) Chinese (Mandarin/Hokkien/Cantonese/Hakka etc.)
                                (E) Others (Please state _____)

13. Household income (monthly):   (A) RM1000 and below
                                        (B) RM1001 - 3000
                                        (C) RM3001 - 5000
                                        (D) RM5001 - 8000
                                        (E) RM 8001 and above

14. Your school information: (Please cross (X) the appropriate box that indicates your school location and type)

Level of schooling	School location		School type			
	Urban	**Rural**	**Day School (SK/SMK)**	**SJK (Cina/ Tamil)**	**Boarding school (SBP)/ MRSM**	**Religious school (SRA/ SMA/SMKA)**
Year 1-6						
Form 1-3						
Form 4-5						
Form 6/ Matriculation						

15. Parents' academic qualification: (Please cross (X) the appropriate box that indicates your parents' highest academic qualification)

Academic qualification	Primary school	Lower secondary school	Upper secondary school	Certificate/ diploma	Degree
Mother					
Father					
Guardian					

PART I

SURVEY ON LEARNER AUTONOMY

Learner Autonomy

In this section, we would like to find out your patterns of autonomy in learning English. Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with each statement.

SA   for "strongly agree"
A   for "agree"
D   for "disagree"
SD   for "strongly disagree"

1. I like the teacher to explain everything to us.	SA	A	D	SD
2. I think teachers should give us opportunities to select the units we like to learn.	SA	A	D	SD
3. I think teachers should give students opportunities to decide where and how to learn.	SA	A	D	SD
4. I like the teacher to tell me all my mistakes.	SA	A	D	SD
5. I think it is important for us to learn about the purposes behind the activities given.	SA	A	D	SD
6. I need a lot of guidance in my learning.	SA	A	D	SD
7. I always take the initiative when learning about something.	SA	A	D	SD
8. I believe that English can be learnt only through classroom teaching.	SA	A	D	SD
9. I like teachers who follow the text closely.	SA	A	D	SD
10. I know my learning style and use it effectively.	SA	A	D	SD
11. I think teachers should make us aware of the strategies that can be used to learn English more effectively.	SA	A	D	SD
12. I don't like being directed on how to learn.	SA	A	D	SD
13. I think it is important for English teachers to motivate us.	SA	A	D	SD
14. Students should be encouraged to challenge their teachers.	SA	A	D	SD
15. I do not have adequate management skills to learn on my own.	SA	A	D	SD
16. I think it is important for teachers to give us regular feedback on our work.	SA	A	D	SD
17. I think teachers should allow us to learn at our own pace.	SA	A	D	SD
18. I like the opportunity to self-correct mistakes in my work.	SA	A	D	SD

PART II

SET A

THE QUESTIONNAIRE (SUCCESS)

[A] Think about you past experience in your English class. Try to remember a time in which you **did particularly well** on an activity in the class. The activity you are thinking of might be listed below. If so, choose **one** activity. If the activity is not listed below, choose the **"other"** and describe the activity in the space provided.
For each item, choose only one activity.

Reminder: Choose only ONE activity from this list.			
1 (A)	Reading texts using appropriate strategies	3 (A)	Giving a presentation and/or speech
1 (B)	Answering comprehension questions	3 (B)	Role play
1 (C)	Learning vocabulary	3 (C)	Giving opinions/sharing ideas in class/groups
1 (D)	Understanding grammar	3 (D)	Answering teacher's questions
1 (E)	Translating texts and passages from English	3 (E)	Examination (on speaking)
1 (F)	Reading and summarizing texts	4 (A)	Writing a summary
1 (G)	Quizzes and exams (on reading)	4 (B)	Writing paragraphs
2 (A)	Understanding a listening passage using appropriate strategies	4 (C)	Writing diaries and/or portfolios
2 (B)	Listening and repetition/ dictation	4 (D)	Writing a report
2 (C)	Listening and note taking	4 (E)	Quizzes and exams (on writing)
2 (D)	Quizzes and exams (on listening)	4 (F)	Other. If the activity is **not listed** above, describe the activity here.(The activity can be on reading, writing, listening or speaking) _____ _____ _____ _____

[B] There may have been many reasons why you did well on the activity you have chosen. The following statements are possible reasons why you might have done well. Read each statement and choose the letter that indicates the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement.

SA   for "strongly agree"
A   for "agree"
D   for "disagree"
SD   for "strongly disagree"

1. I have strong skills in English.	SA	A	D	SD
2. I tried very hard.	SA	A	D	SD
3. I used the right study or practice methods.	SA	A	D	SD
4. I had interest in the activity.	SA	A	D	SD
5. I had good luck.	SA	A	D	SD
6. The teacher's instruction was appropriate.	SA	A	D	SD
7. The task was easy.	SA	A	D	SD
8. I liked the atmosphere of the class.	SA	A	D	SD
9. I had interest in getting a good grade.	SA	A	D	SD
10. I was well-prepared.	SA	A	D	SD
11. I like English.	SA	A	D	SD
12. The level of the class was appropriate.	SA	A	D	SD

SET B

THE QUESTIONNAIRE (FAILURE)

[A] Think about you past experience in your English class. Try to remember a time in which you **did particularly poorly** on an activity in the class. The activity you are thinking of might be listed below. If so, choose **one** activity. If the activity is not listed below, choose the **"other"** and describe the activity in the space provided. For each item, <u>choose only one</u> activity.

Reminder: Choose only ONE activity from this list.			
1 (A)	Reading texts using appropriate strategies	3 (A)	Giving a presentation and/or speech
1 (B)	Answering comprehension questions	3 (B)	Role play
1 (C)	Learning vocabulary	3 (C)	Giving opinions/sharing ideas in class/groups
1 (D)	Understanding grammar	3 (D)	Answering teacher's questions
1 (E)	Translating texts and passages from English	3 (E)	Examination (on speaking)
1 (F)	Reading and summarizing texts	4 (A)	Writing a summary
1 (G)	Quizzes and exams (on reading)	4 (B)	Writing paragraphs
2 (A)	Understanding a listening passage using appropriate strategies	4 (C)	Writing diaries and/or portfolios
2 (B)	Listening and repetition/ dictation	4 (D)	Writing a report
2 (C)	Listening and note taking	4 (E)	Quizzes and exams (on writing)
2 (D)	Quizzes and exams (on listening)	4 (F)	Other. If the activity is **not listed** above, describe the activity here.(The activity can be on reading, writing, listening or speaking) _____ _____ _____ _____

[B] There may have been many reasons why you did poorly on the activity you have chosen. The following statements are possible reasons why you might have done poorly. Read each statement and choose the letter that indicates the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement.

SA   for "strongly agree"
A   for "agree"
D   for "disagree"
SD   for "strongly disagree"

1. I have weak skills in English.	SS	S	T	ST
2. I did not try very hard.	SS	S	T	ST
3. I used the wrong study or practice methods.	SS	S	T	ST
4. I had no interest in the activity.	SS	S	T	ST
5. I had bad luck.	SS	S	T	ST
6. The teacher's instruction was inappropriate.	SS	S	T	ST
7. The task was difficult.	SS	S	T	ST
8. I did not like the atmosphere of the class.	SS	S	T	ST
9. I had no interest in getting a good grade.	SS	S	T	ST
10. I was ill-prepared.	SS	S	T	ST
11. I do not like English.	SS	S	T	ST
12. The level of the class was inappropriate.	SS	S	T	ST

[i] The LACQ was devised and used by Thang and her colleagues in their studies on learner autonomy of Malaysian students (Thang 2009a & b; Thang & Azarina 2007)

[ii] Both ASQ and AFQ were first used by Gobel and his team of researchers in their series of attribution research based on Vispoel and Austin's (1995) study.

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