**Lesson Four: Attribution Theory**

**4.1 Definition**

Attribution theory is based on the understanding of explanations and excuses which are applied to success or failure.

Attribution theory is defined as the way that individuals envision the success or failure of their own behavior or the behavior of others.

Attribution theory addresses how cognition and emotions together influence people’s behaviour. In view of attribution theory, people are constantly searching for reasons to explain why an event turned out the way it did.

Our perceptions of causality, rather than reality, are critical because they influence self-concept, expectations for future situations, feelings of potency, and subsequent motivation to put effort. While other factors may affect a person’s intent to put forth effort, perceptions of causality constitute an important stimulant to motivation.

**4.2 Attribution Theory Framework**

Weiner suggested three characteristics for explanations of success and failure:

* Whether the cause is seen internal or external; that is from the inside of the person or from the world around him; people and environment.
* Whether it is seen stable or unstable.
* Whether it is perceived controllable or not.

This theory states four explanations for success and failure in achieving the task in hand:

* Ability
* Effort
* Task difficulty
* Luck

The first two causes (ability and effort) are internal whereas the others (task difficulty and luck) are external. The first one is stable (if you have a high ability, you will succeed, and vice versa). The second one is unstable. The third one (task difficulty) is stable. The fourth one is unstable and unpredictable. Ability, task difficulty, and luck are uncontrollable; effort is the only cause that can be controlled by people.

One of the main assumptions of this theory is that people will attempt to maintain positive self-images: they always explain their success to their own effort and abilities but their failure to external factors (teachers or the environment they are in); factors over which they have no control.

* People who have been given a task then told that they failed will explain their failure to bad luck; but if told that they succeed, they explain their success to their intelligence.

Another main idea in this theory is that locus of control. A person with an internal locus of control is one who believes and explains his success and failure to his own abilities and effort. Whereas a person with external locus of control explains his success and failure to external factors such as luck, task difficulty and other people’s actions. (internal locus =self-efficacy).

Researchers have found that people’s grades and test scores differed according to their internal locus of control even these people have the same degree of intelligence; if they have high internal locus of control, they will have better grades and scores than those who have low internal locus of control. Students who believe that success is due to luck and teachers or other external factors, do not work hard.

**4.3 Implications for students**

Why some students always succeed but other always fail?

One explanation for this is their beliefs about causes of success and failure.

* **Locus of causality** determines academic self-esteem
* If I believe I have ability and can achieve success with effort, I have a positive self-concept as a student.
* If I believe that no matter how hard I try, I will not be successful, my impression of my ability and my self-concept suffer.
* If I believe my failure was a result of teacher indulgence or luck, my self-esteem is not enhanced.
* **Stability of causality** prompts a student to believe either that the future is predetermined or that it can be changed by effort.
* If I succeeded because I tried hard, then if I continue to try hard, I will succeed again.
* If my achievement was due to natural ability, I do not have to work hard. If my success was due to external elements, there is no point in trying.
* It is essential that students believe they have the ability to achieve success if they expend effort and that they anticipate less success if they do not try.
* **Controllability of causality** creates the feeling of being commander of one’s fate and is a powerful determiner of emotional health.
* To be buffeted by one’s environment produces a feeling of helplessness.
* If my success depends on me, it may be scary; but I am in charge.
* When I cannot affect what happens to me, I become a pawn of others. So, I must either become resigned to my fate or despair.
* Students must accept the fact that much of what happens to them is a result of what they do.
* By changing actions, they frequently can alter outcomes.

**4.4 Implications for teachers**

Attribution theory has meaning for the ways teachers respond to their students’ performance.

* **Locus:** it is essential that teachers diagnose where students’ learning leaves off and new learning needs to begin.
* If the learning is to be accomplished is too easy or impossibly difficult, effort is irrelevant. With a teacher’s accurate diagnosis and effective teaching, student effort should bring success. When students find the locus of causality is within themselves, they realize they can control success.
* A teacher’s delighted praise or impatient criticism can convey an unintended message about the student’s ability. Praise for success resulting from little effort teaches the learner not to work hard. Criticism for failure on a task that could have been accomplished with effort communicates to a student that s/he has the ability to succeed and should have put forth effort.
* **Stability:**
* Students need to believe that their ability to be successful is stable and that they control the effort necessary for success. By emphasizing that ‘you can do it if you try’, teachers convey to students that ability plus effort equals success.
* **Controllability:** The way a teacher responds to a student’s success or failure can signal the teacher’s belief as to whether the student is in control of success or failure.
* Teacher’s behaviours convey unintended messages to students, annoyance can say to a student that he had the ability to perform successfully and was responsible for the less-than-satisfactory performance. Sympathy and understanding can communicate that no matter how much effort a student expended, he could not have accomplished the task.
* For a teacher to accept less from a student than she is capable of doing can convince the student of your belief that even with effort, she does not have the ability to meet the expectations.
* Criticism of performance when the student could have done better communicates you have the ability.
* When examining the instructor’s influence on a learner’s locus of control, instructors can assist learners in developing an internal locus of control by utilizing learner-centered instructional strategies when presenting new content. By utilizing learner-centered instructional strategies, learners are able to acquire new knowledge in a manner where they are required to apply and utilize their knowledge in a practical setting. When utilizing learner-centered instructional strategies, the instructor becomes a facilitator of knowledge. Therefore, learners develop knowledge based on their experiences and interaction with the content, rather than through verbal instruction. When learners are taught through learner-centered instructional strategies, their internal locus of control is strengthened.