

Raising Teachers' Awareness of Students' Mindsets in EFL Learning

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Received: 2020-07-21 Revised: 2021-01-12 Accepted: 2021-01-20

Abstract

Mindsets have been extensively proved through many previous existing studies to play a promising role in learners' learning accomplishment. Based on such studies, learners with a growth mindset tend to persevere toward their long-term goal, which subsequently promotes their learning achievement. Holding a fixed mindset, on the other hand, can diminish learners' learning persistence and eventually blocks the learning achievement. Realizing such a crucial role of the mindset in learners' learning success, the present study was conducted with the aim of investigating the mindsets students hold in EFL learning. The participants consisted of 101 second-year undergraduate university students majoring in English and enrolled in a course titled '*Paragraph Writing*'. The findings reveal that students typically possess two mindsets: their perception of failure, criticism, and success of others reflects a growth mindset; in contrast, their negative perception of challenges and mistakes displays a fixed mindset. Such findings should, more or less, remind foreign language teachers to be more concerned about students' mindsets. Subsequently, it should encourage them to gather more insights into how to nurture the students' growth mindsets for the students' future growth in any settings they may find themselves in.

Keywords: mindsets, growth mindset, fixed mindset, belief in intelligence

Introduction

One of the ultimate goals of education is to lead learners towards achievement in academic learning and, of course, success in other aspects of their life. What has been found from the current situation is that in the same education system, while many learners become achievers, many others encounter failures. Although learning curricula have been rigorously designed to build successful learners, it is undeniable that not all learners are capable of achieving the program learning outcomes as stated in the curricula. This obviously holds true in the English Learning Program as it has been found based on the researcher's first-hand English teaching experience that throughout their four years at the university, some students were unable to be successful learners in their English learning; nevertheless, many, even with insufficient English background at the beginning, could become high English learning achievers. Simply put, the same academic inputs the curricula provide can result in different levels of learners' attainment. In addition, students' initial level of ability does not determine their final level of accomplishment.

Unquestionably, educational processes involve not only academic inputs, but also other underlying factors which somehow either boost or obstruct learners' achievement. Many educational psychologists as well as educators have long been pondering factors affecting learners' success. The most influential recent theory, which clearly explains why some become successful and others fail, was proposed by Dweck (2006). It states that what determines learners' success is their mindsets. Based on Dweck's studies, students'

perception of intelligence, or ability, reflects their mindsets. Those with the belief that intelligence is changeable and can be developed possess a growth mindset, hence reach higher achievement. In contrast, those who perceive intelligence or ability as an unchangeable entity manifest a fixed mindset; therefore, they have a greater tendency to give up before achieving their goal. This perception of intelligence by students shapes their academic performance, which subsequently determines their academic success. Duckworth (2016) posits that the main factor predicting individuals' success is grit, which engenders passion and perseverance for very long-term goals, and the crucial factor fostering any individuals' grit is a growth mindset, as proposed by Dweck (2006). Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, (2007) likewise confirm that a shift in students' stance toward a belief that intelligence is malleable rather than fixed causes positive effects on their attitude and motivation that subsequently promote academic success.

As evidenced in previous studies, mindsets play a dominant role in learners' success as such mindsets profoundly influence their learning perseverance and the responses to challenges which eventually effect learning accomplishment. Learners with a growth mindset hold a strong belief in developable ability, so that they are likely to persevere for their long-term goals. Learners with a fixed mindset, on the other hand, perceive their ability as fixed, which can diminish learning persistence and eventually blocks learning achievement. Such different assumptions about ability cause distinct personal traits and behaviors. According to Dweck (2006), fixed mindset learners consider ability as an inherent given, and something that is static. Thus, these learners are likely to avoid difficulties and challenges as well as failure, resulting in limitation of their growth in a meaningful way. Those with growth mindsets, on the other hand, hold vigorous commitment to, and persistence towards, their goal. They believe in the power of effort as the means to overcome difficulties and embrace challenges, which generates resilience. Failures are perceived as opportunities to stretch their existing potential and a forceful springboard for growth. These qualities are undoubtedly required in the present problematic and unpredictably changing world. For this reason, the growth mindset is a crucial personal attribute which should be instilled in all learners in order to assist them in maintaining their learning passion and inspire them to strive for their goals both personally and professionally.

In learning English as a Foreign Language, students inevitably encounter many different challenges and difficulties which consequently cause discouragement and demotivation. Herein, they require a growth mindset as a psychological tool to cope with such negative learning obstacles and forcefully activate their learning persistence with productive perception about their own potential. This will eventually enhance their long-term development in all aspects of their life, including their academic growth.

As a teacher, the researcher believes that students walk into a class with different mindsets and these mindsets influence their academic performance, which later predicts their learning success. Giving instructions without an awareness of students' mindsets can lessen the effectiveness of learning towards expected outcomes. This study, therefore, was conducted to examine students' mindsets in learning English with the hope that the results of the study will remind language teachers to pay closer attention to their students' mindsets before and during delivering instructions. It is expected that such close attention will motivate teachers to gain more insights into how to foster the learners' growth mindsets, which in turn, will greatly contribute to the students' life-long growth.

Literature Review

The question about what makes individuals successful has long been a controversial issue among regular psychologists, educational psychologists, and educators, resulting in different postulated theories. A recently influential and internationally accepted one among

these is theorized by Dweck (2006), namely mindset (previously known as implicit theories of intelligence), which is defined as individuals' implicit beliefs about their basic qualities. Robinson (2017, p. 18) views it as "a set of attitudes and beliefs about abilities, such as intelligence." According to Dweck (1999, 2006, 2010, 2012), there are two kinds of mindset, namely growth mindset (associated with incremental theory) and fixed mindset (identified with entity theory). Individuals with a growth mindset consider intelligence as something that can be developed or changed over time through effort and learning. They firmly encounter challenges, view setbacks as an opportunity to learn and grow, consider criticism as a motivation to improve themselves, and feel inspired by the success of others. Such a set of thoughts and beliefs is an undeniable key factor pushing learners towards the goals they have set. Conversely, those with a fixed mindset believe that their intelligence is an inborn trait which is unchangeable so that effort is considered irrelevant. They avoid challenges and feel fear of failures, considering them as evidence of a lack of intelligence. They neglect criticism, and feel threatened by the success of others. Holding this fixed mindset is likely to undermine the commitment to achieve their goal. Evidently, the mindset each individual holds subsequently shapes their life and certainly indicates their tendency toward success. Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, (2007) added that with equal intellectual ability, students' perception of intelligence influences the quality of their reaction to academic tasks. Students tend to overcome difficulties through their effort if they hold the belief that intelligence can be developed. In contrast, those with the belief that intelligence is fixed tend to give up when they encounter difficulties. However, they noted that holding an assumption of intelligence as a malleable entity does not imply that students will hold equal intelligence or learning potential; instead, it means that "for any given individual, intellectual ability can always be further developed" (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007, p. 247).

At school, students with different mindsets perform differently, which definitely yields distinct academic results. As Dweck (2010) remarks, these mindsets solidly influence students' behaviors at school, in that students with a growth mindset consider challenging tasks as a chance to learn and stretch their potential. Consequently, they are encouraged to take risks and embrace all kinds of challenging tasks which effectively promote their growth. In contrast, those with a fixed mindset focus more on being thought of as smart. Hence, they are likely to avoid complicated learning tasks which threaten their self-perception as a smart person, which certainly impedes their learning improvement.

Previous studies have confirmed the significant effects of students' mindsets on their performance or behaviors at school as well as their learning attainment. Zeng, Hou & Peng (2016), for example, found that students' possession of a growth mindset had positive effects on their school engagement, which was described as positive emotional and psychological commitment to their learning behaviors. Moreover, Aditomo (2015) concluded, based on research findings, that having a growth mindset in terms of academic ability helped students maintain their motivation upon encountering failures, which subsequently led them to academic attainment. Similarly, Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, (2007) noticed that those students who believed that their intelligence was alterable firmly stuck to their goal and they insisted on working hard, invested more effort, and were likely to adopt new strategies to handle obstacles. Simply put, students with a growth mindset responded to barriers in a more positive way than those who manifested a fixed mindset. By this positive response, those with a growth mindset were later found to be more successful at school. Claro, Paunesku, & Dweck (2016) additionally confirmed that growth mindset was a remarkable predictor of accomplishment.

Although many empirical studies concerning mindsets in the field of education have been conducted throughout the decades, most, if not all, were carried out in the field of sciences or mathematics. Very few studies, if any, are found in the context of EFL (English

as a Foreign Language) or ESL (English as a Second Language) learning. In the Thai context, very few studies have been found to exist in any field, and none have been found in EFL or ESL education. Hence, the present study was conducted with an aim to investigate students' mindsets in the EFL class in order to create better understanding of perception of learning capacity. Based on this understanding, it may be assumed that teachers will gain insights into how to help their students reformulate their mindsets, which will subsequently promote learning achievement and future growth.

Research Objectives

The objective of this study was to examine students' mindsets in learning English.

Limitations of the Study

The study was conducted with students who studied English in a course titled 'Paragraph Writing'. Hence, the responses might only reflect their mindsets in terms of English learning. These findings might not apply to other fields of learning.

Research Methodology

Participants

The study was conducted with an intact group of 101 second-year undergraduate students majoring in English and enrolled in a course titled 'Paragraph Writing' in the first semester of the academic year 2019. They were informed that the investigation was not a part of the course assessment, so their personal information was not required and the responses would be used for educational reasons only.

Research Instruments

The current study employed a mindset investigation form as a research instrument to collect data. The mindset investigation form was specifically designed to examine students' mindsets pertaining to their English learning ability and to determine whether they are growth mindset or fixed mindset English learners. The form was designed based on the characteristics of growth mindset and fixed mindset persons as defined by Dweck (2006). The form was piloted and revised three times before being employed in the main study in order to ensure that the responses obtained reliably reflect students' mindsets. The questions were formulated to elicit students' perception of intelligence and their responses to challenge, failure, mistakes, effort, criticism, and the success of others. The form contained 2 parts: 15 questions in the first part required students to choose one from two choices provided indicating either (a) growth mindset or (b) fixed mindset. An open-ended question was provided in the second part of the test in order to manipulate the obtained data to recheck students' responses in the first part. To ensure the reliability of the investigation form, it was tested twice with the same group of students. The time interval between the first and the second administration was ten weeks. The results revealed a correlation between the responses given in the first and second tests.

Data Collection

At the beginning of the semester, the mindset investigation forms were given to students to examine the set of their minds. Their names or any personal information were not asked for in order to ensure confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The data from the first part of the test were classified into two categories, as either growth mindset and fixed mindset. Content analysis was employed to analyze the students' responses in the open-ended part. The data were then divided into two columns. The first column included the responses which exhibited students' growth mindset, and those which reflected their fixed mindset were placed in the second column.

Findings

With the aim to examine students' mindsets in learning English, an investigation of their mindsets was conducted with the results being shown in the following table.

Table 1

Students' Responses on the Mindset Investigation Form

Questions	Growth Mindset	Fixed mindset
1. What level of difficulty would you like this course to be offered?	25.74	74.26
2. Would you like the teacher to deliver the instruction in English or Thai?	64.36	35.64
3. What kinds of topics should be given for writing in this course?	16.83	82.18
4. How would you feel if the teacher assigns difficult work?	60.40	39.60
5. How would you feel if you get negative feedback?	70.30	29.70
6. How would you feel if you got a lower score than your classmates?	78.22	21.78
7. Do you ask the teacher when you don't understand some part of the lesson?	72.28	27.72
8. Do you usually answer questions in class?	42.57	57.43
9. What do you think is the reason that you cannot do well enough in some subjects?	94.06	5.94
10. What do you normally do when you fail, or get a very low score?	83.17	16.83
11. What do you think is the reason that you cannot do some assignments successfully?	71.29	28.71
12. If you feel the teacher has assigned a topic which is too difficult, what would you want the teacher to do to help you?	84.16	15.84
13. When you are not successful in doing something difficult, what will you tell yourself?	87.13	12.87
14. What are your worries in English class?	23.76	76.24
15. Do you like it when the teacher asks you to answer questions?	43.56	56.44

As displayed in the table above, the obtained data reveal students' mindset as points on a continuum. That is, they seem to hold a growth mindset at one end and a fixed mindset at the other. When considering their responses in the face of challenges as elicited through questions 1 to 4, they tend to prefer easy tasks and to avoid difficulties or challenges. However, most of them prefer a class conducted in English to one conducted in Thai. In regard to their perception of effort (questions 9, 12, and 13), most of them tend to believe in the value of effort. They are likely to consider effort as a path to achievement and they consider failure as the result of insufficient effort rather than a deficiency in their intelligence (question 11). As for the reaction to failures (questions 7, 8, and 10), the data also reflect their growth mindset in that they persist in working further when encountering setbacks. Similarly, the data fall towards the growth mindset column with regard to responses to criticism (question 5) since most of them seem to perceive a positive side of criticism as a means to help them improve their work. Furthermore, most of the students do not feel threatened by the success of their classmates; rather, they focus on improving their own work (question 6). However, being afraid of mistakes (questions 8, 11, 15) seems to be a major barrier for most of them, especially fear of mistakes committed in front of other people. Hence, their responses to mistakes tend to reflect a fixed mindset.

In the second part of the mindset investigation form, students were asked to express their additional opinions on how they wanted the course to be delivered or any other opinions they wanted to express. Their responses to this part were voluntary, meaning that they had an option whether they wanted to express any opinions or not.

Students' responses substantially confirm their negative perception of challenge and mistakes. Many of them, for example, expressed the following hopes regarding the course: (1) "The content should be simple and easy to understand," (2) "I want the teacher to make the content easy and help me understand easily," (3) "I want the teacher to give me the trick that will enable me to understand the content easily," (4) "I want the teacher to make the content simple so that I can understand it easily," or (5) "I want the test to be easy." Some students even wanted the teacher to teach only what was going to appear on the test, and nothing else. As for the language used for instruction, most of them wanted the teacher to apply both Thai and English so that it would be easier for them to understand the content being delivered. Obviously, these responses reflect students' negative perception of challenge and reveal an attitude toward effort which seems to contradict their responses in the first part. The requests for easy and simple learning processes and learning tasks seem to imply students' avoidance of relying on their own effort and a tendency to place the burden of their learning success on teachers. Although the data in the first part reveal their perception of effort as a crucial factor for their success, it seems they fail to put such perception into practice. Only a few students insist on applying further effort to their learning and consider learning as their own responsibility. These said, for instance: (1) "I want to practice writing more and more to improve my writing skill," (2) "I want the teacher to teach entirely in English because I want to improve my English," or (3) "The teacher should regularly assign some homework so that we can practice our skills."

In terms of their responses to mistakes, their comments evidently affirm their negative disposition toward mistakes. Many of them firmly expressed their concern about making mistakes in front of others. For instance, some of them noted, "The teacher should not ask students to answer questions one by one." They are likely to associate mistakes with being looked upon as either smart or stupid. That is, if you make mistakes, you are not smart. Some of them added that the teacher should walk to each student's desk when checking their understanding; otherwise, they dared not ask any questions because they did not want to be looked at as stupid or laughed at. They seem to be more inclined to be concerned about looking smart than to consider mistakes as a means to help them learn and improve.

Manifested through research findings are the mindsets the students hold when entering an EFL classroom. The avoidance of challenges and difficulties as well as the fear of mistakes could obviously be perceived, so their assumption of the benefits of effort is still doubtful. Unquestionably, these negative responses to challenges and difficulties, and the fear of mistakes are the major barriers to students' academic growth, not to mention their professional achievement. For this reason, as teachers, we cannot overlook the role we can, and should, play in fostering a growth mindset within our learners to ensure their well-being in both an academic setting and subsequent professional settings.

Discussion

As prior research studies, such as that of Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck (2007) and Dweck (2006), have suggested, students' belief about whether their ability is alterable plays a remarkable role in their motivational dynamics in their learning achievement. It is also confirmed by Dweck (2012) that people's belief in their core qualities as either something fixed by nature (fixed mindset) or something changeable through continuous effort (growth mindset) does matter since these mindsets have been shown to predict different levels of academic success. In addition, many previous studies, especially Dweck (2006), Zeng, Hou & Peng (2016), and Claro, Paunesku & Dweck (2016), have confirmed that a growth mindset is a crucial indicator of an individual's accomplishment.

Based on the findings from this study, although some students' responses in the first part of the investigation form somehow contradicted their responses in the second part, the

fixed mindset which was reflected through their avoidance of encountering challenge, the fear of committing mistakes and the ignorance of the value of their effort is quite obvious. In a foreign language learning context, these are important factors which significantly obstruct students' learning achievement. As Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck (2007) implied, students' fixed mindset causes negative effects on their attitude and motivation which, according to Naimon (1978, as cited in Krashen, 1981, p. 33) and Oxford and Shearin (1994), are important factors determining learners' success in developing their second or foreign language. However, it should be noted that this report of the findings does not, by any means, place blame on the learners; rather it aims to help teachers picture the mindsets their learners hold so that they can help the learners change their mindsets, or nurture the growth mindset among the learners. According to Yeager and Dweck (2012, pp. 303), "students' mindsets can be changed." Also, Dweck (2010) and Robinson (2017) add that teachers can help students develop their growth mindsets. With a growth mindset, based on Dweck (2006), individuals embrace challenge, welcome mistakes, and value effort. Through these growth mindsets, learners are assumed to be able to achieve academic success, which in this context means foreign language learning. Without a doubt, a growth mindset is a must-have trait for all learners. The question of how learners' growth mindsets can be instilled is left as a challenge for teachers to further explore.

Conclusion and Implications of the Findings

The current study was conducted to examine students' mindsets prior to their learning of English in a paragraph writing course. The findings reveal students' combination of both growth and fixed mindsets. Their perception of failure, criticism, and success of others reflects a growth mindset. On the other hand, a fixed mindset could be traced through their perception of challenges and mistakes. It is unclear how the students perceive the effort, then, as their responses in the first part and second part of the investigation form are inconsistent. However, students' avoidance of challenges or difficulties could imply that their belief in the value of effort is somewhat superficial and possibly not informing actual practice.

The findings imply that different students hold different mindsets and their mindsets are like points in a continuum. That is, they hold growth mindsets in response to some issues and yet could apparently hold fixed mindsets regarding others. Hence, it is of paramount importance for teachers to examine the students' mindsets before commencing the instruction in order to assist the students in preparing or changing their mindsets to boost their learning effectiveness.

According to Dweck (2006), individuals' brain improvement could be detected through their encountering of challenges or difficulties. Implied through the findings is that students' avoidance or negative disposition towards challenges or difficulties causes unfavorable impacts on students' learning success. Hence, encouraging the students to change their reaction to challenges is an essential task for teachers. Certainly, it can start from fostering students' growth mindsets. After all, difficulties and challenges are parts of living which no one can avoid. It is how they are perceived and handled life matters.

Based on the findings, students' fear of committing mistakes is quite obvious, especially in an EFL classroom in this context. According to Brown (2000), taking the risk of being wrong is considered a crucial quality of successful language learners. Consequently, foreign language teachers, perceiving mistakes or risks as learned lessons for further development, should primarily assist their students in diminishing their fear in order to promote learning attainment. Helping learners consider mistakes through a growth mindset perception could be one promising alternative to encouraging them to see the positive side of mistakes.

In addition, the findings further reveal that students' perception of the value of effort is quite superficial. That is, they seem to realize the important effects of effort on their success; however, they are likely to fail to seriously apply its value in practice. This may, in turn, impede their learning achievement as, according to Dweck (2006) and Duckworth (2016), effort is a crucial factor predicting individuals' success.

The current study findings have clearly revealed students' negative view towards challenge or difficulties, the superficial perception of the value of effort, and the fear of committing mistakes which are considerable and critical barriers to the students' learning growth. The findings should contribute sufficient concrete evidence to draw substantial agreement among teachers that such barriers when found must be minimized if students' long-term development, both academically and personally, is truly sought. Fostering students' growth mindset can be a promising solution, as many empirical studies previously mentioned in the present study have clearly confirmed. However, a growth mindset is a matter of nurture, not nature. It is teachers' challenge to explore how to nourish the students' growth mindsets. It probably has to start from ensuring that the teachers themselves possess growth mindsets, especially the basic belief in individuals' abilities as developable traits which could actually be nurtured.

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