

# Exploring Thai EFL University Students' Growth Language Mindsets: The Beliefs About the Role of Talent and Effort

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## ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore language mindsets of Thai English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners and to examine whether there is a significant difference in terms of age and year of study. Language Mindset Inventory (LMI) developed by Lou and Noel (2017) which consists of 18 five-Likert scale items divided into three categories i.e., general language intelligence beliefs (GLB), second language aptitude beliefs (L2B), and age sensitivity beliefs (ASB), was used to collect the data. Participants are 160 Thai EFL students from various year of study and universities who were enrolling in general English courses. The results show that Thai EFL university students have mixed language mindset ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = .51$ ) of all three categories, namely GLB ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = .54$ ), L2B ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = .43$ ), and ASB ( $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = .53$ ). One-way ANOVA results show that there is no significant difference between language mindset and age, as well as year of study. That means, Thai EFL university students' generally have various beliefs about the role of talent and effort in their language learning abilities. Giving the benefits of growth mindset in long-term language learning, it is important to develop a learning approach that promotes growth mindset in English language learning.

**Keywords:** Growth mindset, Language mindset, English language teacher, Higher education, General education.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Growth mindset or the beliefs that human capacities can be improved through efforts have been investigated in several studies across contexts. It is found that growth mindset has positive correlations with behavioral, cognitive, and emotional factors such as motivation (Blackwell et al., 2007), perseverance and learning strategies (Farrington et al., 2012), learning engagement (Aronson et al., 2002), group learning (Beckmann et al., 2012), self-esteem, resilience, and anxiety (Yeager & Dweck, 2012; King, 2012; Schroder et al., 2015), and academic achievement (Blackwell et al., 2007; King, 2012; Dweck, 2012). Given its influences on learning behaviors and performances, growth mindset is considered the fundamental non-cognitive factor of lifelong learning in the 21st century (Center for Curriculum Redesign, 2015). Hence, it has been introduced to the field of applied linguistics in relation to

individual differences, particularly learners' beliefs about their own abilities to learn languages.

Individual English language learners are different in terms of their intelligence, aptitude, learning style, attitude, motivation, personality, and belief (Brown, 2007). Among these factors, Horwitz (1999) stated that learner belief is the fundamental factor that influences language learning behaviors and performance especially in academic context. Learner beliefs originated from their own experiences or attitudes, values of the English language in their own sociocultural contexts (Mori, 1999; Tumposky, 1991), or some common assumptions based on previous research. Giving the importance of learner beliefs in language learning, the understanding of these belief could help teachers to identify the underlying language learning problems, clarify some misconceptions, change negative behaviors, or create positive learning experiences that promote autonomous learning (Cotterall, 1995).

In terms of language learning, learners have various beliefs about how they can learn a language such as the belief that some people have innate abilities or ‘language aptitude’ to learn a language, so they can learn anything with ease (Horwitz, 1999). Some people hold a strong belief about age sensitivity in language learning based on ‘The critical period hypothesis’ that it is harder for adult learners to acquire a second language (Henry, 2015). According to Lou and Noels (2019), it is possible that learners who recite in multilingual country have less fixed mindset about the ability to learn a new language. Besides, several studies found that English language agree that speaking is the hardest skill to improve. Therefore, it is worthwhile investigating language learners’ mindsets to identify the area where learners tend to have fixed mindset and to cultivate growth-oriented language mindset for further development.

People generally have different mindset towards specific domain of learning e.g., sports, arts, and language, whether it depends greatly on their innate abilities or efforts and practices. In terms of language learning, learners have various beliefs about how they can learn a language such as the belief that some people have innate abilities or ‘language aptitude’ to learn a language, so they can learn anything with ease (Horwitz, 1999). Some people hold a strong belief about age sensitivity in language learning based on ‘The critical period hypothesis’ that it is harder for adult learners to acquire a second language (Henry, 2015). According to Lou and Noels (2019), it is possible that learners who recite in multilingual country have less fixed mindset about the ability to learn a new language. Besides, several studies found that English language agree that speaking is the hardest skill to improve. Therefore, it is worthwhile investigating language learners’ mindsets to identify the area where learners tend to have fixed mindset and to cultivate growth-oriented language mindset for further development.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***2.1. Growth Mindset***

Mindset is a psychological factor that reflects individuals’ beliefs about their intelligence, aptitudes, or abilities to do something (Robinson, 2017) such as ability to learn math or to play sports. Particularly, it concerns whether these abilities rely mainly on innate attributes or they can be changed through efforts and practices. The term ‘mindset’ originated from Carol Dweck, an American professor of psychology who proposed the implicit theory of intelligence drawing on self-theories and theories of motivation (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). According to Dweck (2006), there are two distinct types of mindsets i.e., fixed mindset and growth mindset. People with a fixed mindset have a solid idea about their intelligence which depends greatly on natural-born

abilities; therefore, they place greater value on talent than effort. They might believe that successful people are gifted so they are able to learn anything with ease, and effort is needed only for those who lack natural talents. Fixed-mindset people also tend to set performance goal to show what they can do well and to avoid trying new things or mistakes that would reveal their imperfection (XXX). Those fears of not looking smart in turn impede themselves from improving and expanding their potential capacities.

Unlike the fixed mindset, people with a growth mindset are less fixated on their inborn abilities. They value effort in the learning process and believe that intelligence can be improved so they are willing to work hard and do things beyond their comfort level. They also tend to be more positive as they encounter difficulties or failure because they see these challenges as opportunities to learn and grow (Dweck, 2006). Growth-mindset people are more intrinsically motivated (Blackwell et al., 2007) and are likely to set learning goals which predict mastery-oriented behaviors and intention to continue such as applying learning strategies and responding to feedbacks (Lou & Noels, 2017) which contribute to brain development and learning success.

In academic settings, growth mindset has predictive power of learning achievement i.e., grade (Blackwell et al., 2007; King, 2012; Dweck, 2012) and positive learning behaviors such as perseverance, learning strategies (Farrington et al., 2012), and learning engagement (Aronson et al., 2002). Neuroscience studies also support that growth mindset people tend to handle stress better than people with fixed mindset as they are more flexible and adaptive in difficult situations. They express more positive emotions and have more self-esteem and resilience (Yeager & Dweck, 2012; King, 2012; Schroder et al., 2015) which benefit their well-being and relationship with others (Schroder et al., 2014; Moser et al., 2011). As they focus more on self-improvement and rely less on comparing their performances to others, they are less likely experience anxiety (Murphy & Dweck, 2016). It is, therefore, possible to conclude that growth mindset has positive impacts on long-term success and personal development.

### ***2.2. Language Mindset***

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In the past few decades, research on growth mindset has been acknowledged by educators in various domains including the field of language education. Some early investigations in psycholinguistics connect the concept of mindset to individual difference or learner belief about their own ability to learn languages or the beliefs about the roles of talents and efforts (Mercer & Ryan, 2010; Ryan & Mercer, 2012). Another series of research mainly focus on the relationships between language mindset and motivation, particularly goal orientations and meaning-making systems (Lou & Noels, 2016; 2017; 2019). The definition of ‘language mindset’ can be clearly explained by Lou and Noels (2019, p.2) as follow:

*Language mindsets are domain-specific beliefs about whether the ability to learn languages is malleable or not. These beliefs are distinct from linguistic-related cognitions (i.e., language-specific knowledge of grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, etc.), are related to emotional experiences, and have an important role to play in motivated action. Fixed language-mindsets are the beliefs that language learning ability is intractable - either a person has this ability, or he/she does not, whereas growth language-mindsets are the belief that this ability can be cultivated through effort and strategy.*

Besides the definition, it is important to draw a clear distinction between language mindset and other psychological constructs such as linguistics confidence, and self-efficacy (Sampasivam & Clément, 2014; Bandura, 2006). Although these concepts are related to individuals’ perceived competence to some extent, mindset does not always reflect individuals’ true abilities but the belief about oneself whether they think those abilities can be improved through effort and practice. For example, some people might believe that they can perform a particular language task well with confidence because they believe in their talents, but they might not believe that they can develop or expand their capacities. They might also adhere to the act of showing what they can do well and avoid challenging themselves because they believe that mistakes or failures would reveal their imperfections which also lessen their confidence.

Previous research agree that learner belief or language mindset is complex and dynamic as it involves several aspects of language learning. Some beliefs macro-micro...

Mindsets about learning a second or a foreign language might also differ from the general beliefs about verbal intelligence (Wenden, 1998), as Lou and Noels (2019) categorized into three main areas including the beliefs about 1) general verbal intelligence 2) second language aptitude and 3) age and language learning ability. As language learning consists of various language skills (e.g. reading, speaking, grammar, etc.), it is possible that some learners might have different beliefs about domains of language teaching (Mercer & Ryan,

2009). For example, mindsets about learning pronunciation skills tend to be fixed compared to grammar. These domain-specific mindsets can predict learning motivation, engagement, and performances. People with growth-oriented mindset tend to set learning or mastery goals, have lower anxiety or fear of failure times of difficulties, resulted in the intention to continue (Lou & Noels, 2017).

This research aims to explore language mindsets of Thai EFL learners and to examine whether there is a significant difference in terms of age and year of study.

### **3. METHOD**

This survey research aims to examine the extent to which Thai EFL university students’ mindsets in English language learning using Language Mindset Scale (LMS). The quantitative results were analyzed through IBM SPSS Statistics and presented as descriptive statistics. The qualitative results from an open-ended question were described using content analysis.

#### **3.1. Population and Samples**

Samples included 160 non-majored Thai EFL university students studying at a Thai public university from three main faculties - the faculty of business administration (44.6%), the faculty of applied science and engineering (24.4%), and the faculty of integrated social science (31.0%). Most were third-year students (43.5%), second-year students (37.5%) and there were some first-year students (19.0%). Only three percent of the participants indicated that they had studied abroad while some had travelling aboard experience (13.7%) and over eighty percent had no overseas experience (83.3%). Although gender and age are not concerned in this study, there were 23.2% male students and 76.8% female students aged between 18-23 years old.

#### **3.2. Research Instruments**

To measure EFL learners’ language mindsets, this study employed Language Mindset Scale (LMS) consisted of two main parts (34 items). The first part, language mindset, was applied from Language Mindset Inventory (LMI) developed by Lou and Noels (2017) and has been confirmed its reliability and validity to be used with university students. This instrument was adapted from the earlier version of general mindset test of Dweck (1999) and research on mindset in the field of language learning. For example, the qualitative study of Ryan and Mercer (2012) about the role of natural talents in language learning has revealed the variation of language learners’ beliefs concerning age, learning context, and language skill domains, and etc. The assessment, therefore, includes 18 five-point rating scale items about learners’ language intelligence beliefs that reflect both incremental belief or growth mindset (e.g. “You can always change your foreign language ability.”) and entity

belief or fixed mindset (e.g. “You have a certain amount of language intelligence, and you can’t really do much to change it.”). They were divided into three subscales of language mindsets: (1) general language intelligence beliefs (GLB), (2) second language aptitude beliefs (L2B), and (3) age sensitivity beliefs about language learning (ASB). All items were translated into Thai and checked by two experts in the field of translation and applied linguistics.

The trial version of LMS was tested its validity using the Index of Item Objective Congruence (IOC) with three experts in the field of English language teaching and psychology. The IOC indices of all 34 items, ranged from 0.67 to 1, indicated that the test was valid for data collection. The pilot study with a group of 35 non-majored senior students have also proved to be acceptable with Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of 0.75 before making a few adjustments on word choices for the final version. The results were interpreted accordingly, Fixed (1.00-1.80), Low growth (1.81-2.60), Mixed (2.61-3.40), Growth (3.41-4.20), and High growth (4.21-5.00).

**4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The finding shows that Thai EFL university students have mixed language mindset (M = 3.09, SD = .51) of all three categories, namely GLB (M = 3.20, SD = .54), L2B (M = 2.94, SD = .43), and ASB (M = 3.14, SD = .53). One-way ANOVA results also show that there is no significant difference between language mindset and age, as well as year of study. Means and standard deviations of growth language mindset are showed in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Means and standard deviations of growth language mindset

Year	N	Growth Language Mindset		
		Categories	M	SD
1	24		2.67	.55
		GLB	3.66	1.07
		L2B ASB	3.28	.51
2	46		2.52	.60
		GLB	3.16	.58
		L2B ASB	3.14	.49
3	90		2.66	.67
		GLB	3.36	.71
		L2B ASB	3.25	.60

**5. CONCLUSION**

According to the results, Thai EFL learners’ mindsets are varied to some degree depending on subscales or the specific belief about language learning. In general, the results of this study are align with the initial study using

LMI as the main instrument in that participants tend to agree with incremental statements more than entity statements in all three main domains (Lou & Noels, 2017). In other word, they believe that their language abilities will not improve without some overseas experiences. Due to the complex nature of mindset as stated by Mercer and Ryan (2009), language mindset cannot simply be divided in to two types. Base on the interpretation of the results, it is clear that there are various degrees of language mindsets, not only strong fix or strong growth mindset.

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