

A mindset for EFL: learners' beliefs about the role of natural talent

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This article explores the role of the psychological construct of 'implicit theories' or 'mindsets' in the context of foreign language learning. It considers psychology-based research of the construct in respect to the EFL context and reports on a small exploratory study using interviews carried out with tertiary-level learners in Austria and Japan. The authors wish to argue for the relevance and importance of the construct for ELT, explore some of the potential issues raised by the initial study, and consider some of the pedagogical implications arising from both the literature and the findings.

Introduction

The belief that certain individuals are born with a special, remarkable talent in a particular field is not uncommon. Such beliefs are particularly widespread in fields of endeavour such as sport, the arts, and music; some people are considered naturally sporty, artistic, or musical, and it is implied that others without this natural talent can never hope to reach the same or even similar levels of achievement.

In the foreign language learning (FLL) domain, the belief that certain individuals are naturally gifted language learners, are 'born language learners', or are simply 'good at languages', is one regularly encountered among language learners, teachers, and researchers. In L2 acquisition research, such 'talent' is defined as aptitude and in recent years there have been significant developments in our understanding of language learning aptitudes (see, for example, Sternberg 2002; Robinson 2005). In this current article, our concern is not with aptitude per se, but rather with learners' beliefs about the role of aptitude. If a learner believes that he or she possesses some form of talent for languages and attributes their achievements to this, is this likely to promote or impede successful language learning?

What are mindsets?

The concept of 'implicit theories' or 'mindsets' has been developed by Carol Dweck and her associates and describes a 'world from two perspectives' (Dweck, Chiu and Hong 1995; Dweck 2006). These two perspectives are the 'fixed mindset' (or entity theory) and the 'growth mindset' (incremental theory). We have chosen to use the more readily understood term mindset, as opposed to implicit theories which is widely used in the psychology literature, as we feel it is more encompassing and better conveys the

comprehensive nature of the construct and its considerable impact on other areas of an individual's psychology and behaviour (cf. Dweck op.cit.).

Simply put, mindsets represent some of the basic assumptions individuals make about various human attributes, such as intelligence or personality. Some people may regard such attributes as being static or fixed; for example, an individual may believe that some people are born intelligent or immoral, and there is nothing that can be done to change these fundamental traits (a fixed mindset), while others may regard these traits as being more malleable and that humans always have the capacity to change them (a growth mindset).

However, it would be an oversimplification to assume that a person's mindset forms a simple dichotomy; either a growth or a fixed mindset. In fact, as Dweck (op.cit.) points out, it is possible for an individual to have a growth mindset in one particular domain and a fixed mindset in another; for example, an individual could simultaneously believe that artistic ability is a fixed entity, you either have artistic talent or you do not, while they may believe that sporting ability is something that can be developed through concerted effort and practice.

Our purpose in this article is to conceptualize FLL mindsets based on individuals' beliefs about the respective roles of talent and effort in the language learning process. A person believing in the central importance of a 'gift' or 'natural talent' for successful language learning could be said to have a fixed mindset, while someone who has greater faith in the power of their own efforts and hard work to affect their language learning abilities could be said to hold a growth mindset.

In order to explore some issues surrounding the concept of mindsets in the FLL field, this article will consider data generated by an exploratory study in tertiary-level EFL contexts in Austria and Japan.

The study

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with volunteer, first-year EFL learners at universities in Austria and Japan in autumn 2008. A total of nine learners participated in the interviews: five in Austria and four in Japan. The interviews centred on a series of open-ended questions that were formulated based on a reading of the relevant literature and on findings from a single-case longitudinal case study carried out as a pilot study by one of the authors. All the interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. The data generated were initially coded on a line-by-line basis using the qualitative data management software Atlas.ti. The data were then analysed using a grounded theory approach that employed further focused codes, supercodes, and families of codes to explore connections and generate theoretical hypotheses which are discussed in the findings below.

Discussion of findings

A mindset continuum

In the data, many learners made statements that appeared to suggest a certain mindset. Some learners seemed to believe that natural talent plays the key role in successful language learning, which we took to be indicative of a fixed mindset, whereas other learners appeared to hold beliefs strongly suggestive of the value of hard work and the potential to influence their ability through practice and effort, which we took as indicative of a growth mindset. However, in most cases, the data indicate something more

complex than a simple dichotomous choice: effort or talent. Rather than having either one mindset or the other, the key differentiation across learners appears to lie in the extent to which an individual seems to have one mindset that dominates. Consider, for example, the data from one of the female Austrian participants:

I saw people who were really talented but they cannot reflect on this talent, they were lazy, they didn't want to study or work hard or try hard and so it doesn't help them very much, it maybe helps to pass some exams, you know, but it doesn't really make good grades . . .
(I#3: 159–163)¹

It's 60 hard work and maybe 40 natural ability. (I#3: 187–188)

The data suggest that, even within one domain such as FLL, mindsets may be best considered as lying on a continuum. At either extreme would be learners who hold either a strong fixed or strong growth mindset, but most individuals are likely to fall somewhere in between. Rather than there being a simple dichotomous division between either one mindset or the other, it may be more appropriate to think of learners as having a tendency towards a particular mindset to varying degrees.

Domain-specific mindsets

Consistent with the literature in mainstream psychology (Dweck 2002), we also found evidence of learners having differing mindsets across different domains such as music, sport, geography, and language learning. Of particular interest for the foreign languages domain was the suggestion that this distinction might also occur at the skill-domain level within EFL, implying a further sublevel of skill-specific mindset beliefs:

There are some things that I definitely work hard on but then there are some things that I think, oh, that will come with reading like prepositions or articles. (I#4: 553–556)

In other words, a learner may hold differing mindsets across different skill domains or aspects of the language. For example, a learner's mindset about speaking skills could possibly differ from their mindset about writing. Consider, for example, these beliefs expressed about pronunciation:

The flesh, the muscles are formable as long as you're a kid. When you're used to a certain movement you can't relearn it or whatever. (I#2: 193–195)

This data extract suggests that the learner believes that your pronunciation cannot be changed or improved through hard work and effort, as your ability for this skill is fixed already at an early age—a statement suggestive of a fixed mindset about pronunciation. In contrast, another learner expresses a different set of beliefs about the nature of vocabulary learning:

If you, for example learn the vocabulary from the vocabulary book, you have to practise them, I always try to use them when I study them, but it's sometimes also in conversations you can not use all of them, but it's also important that you have just already learned them, then you forget them a bit and then if you read them you know, ah, that means that and that. So, that you just try to keep them in mind and just repeat the vocabulary but it's also hard work. (I#5: 231–239)

In this case, the learner appears to be expressing a belief that it is possible to improve your range of active vocabulary through hard work and focused use of specific strategies—statements suggestive of a more growth mindset. Clearly, learners hold different beliefs about different language skill domains and our interpretation of the current data is that this could lead to different skill-specific mindsets about FLL.

However, the potential variation and complexity involved in this aspect of FLL mindsets were highlighted by a crucial difference between the two national groups. In the Japanese data, it was notable that the learner beliefs tended to be expressed on a more global level, and the learners generally appeared to see language learning as a more unified entity with less differentiation between the skill domains than their Austrian counterparts. It would be interesting to explore whether the difference in the groups observed here was a product of cultural factors or more a function of language proficiency. Since the Japanese participants tended to have lower levels of proficiency in English, it may be that, as proficiency levels rise, finer distinctions are made between different domains and aspects of language learning.

Cross-cultural comparison

Comparing the two data sets, we discerned a further noticeable difference across the two groups concerning the types of mindsets that predominate—a finding that could possibly stem from cultural differences. In the Japanese data set, all the learners appeared to tend towards a growth mindset with a strong expression of a belief in the potency of effort. Interestingly, their belief in the value of effort appears not to be specific to FLL but connected to a much greater emphasis on the role of effort in all forms of learning and across subject domains, for example:

So I think talent is important but only talent is not enough. I think we need effort and hard work. This is very important. My character is stupid, so I need to make efforts for everything because if I don't make efforts, so my ... it's not just sports ... it's English and study. I need effort. (I#8: 55–59)

Given the rather homogenous nature of the responses in the Japanese data, in contrast to the Austrian data which evinced more variation in the mindsets held by the learners, it is worth considering whether the Japanese learners' responses reflect the participants' actual mindsets or possibly a socialized script about the relationship between talent, hard work, and achievement. In all the interviews carried out in Japan, the learners strongly emphasized the importance of hard work and effort for success. However, it is worth considering the somewhat contradictory nature of the statement below in which a learner explains how important hard work is for success but then concludes that if a person does not have good spoken English, then it is because of their brain—an attribution actually suggestive of a more fixed mindset:

I So which is more important the natural talent or hard work?

R Hard work. (Laughs) Why? (Laughs) Ahh ... some people, if that person didn't ... in some cases, people who study hard but they don't speak well.

I Ok, so what's stopping them speaking well?

R The brain. Their brain. (I#6: 254–259)

We conclude, therefore, that further research is needed to clarify to what extent learners' responses may be being driven by a script about what is important for successful language learning and to what extent this could be culturally- or contextually based. It is possible that in the interviews learners may be providing responses that conform to socialized scripts and in reality their behaviour may reflect a different set of underlying actual beliefs (cf. Pavlenko 2001; Mercer 2007). We speculate that there could be two possible kinds of script for mindsets: one in which learners explicitly assign a central role to natural talent, but in fact their actual behaviour could be more suggestive of an underlying belief in the value of hard work to enhance their ability. In the second possible script, a learner could claim to believe that the key to success lies in concerted effort, but, in fact, their defeatist behaviour in the face of failure or lack of persistence or hard work could perhaps indicate an underlying belief in natural, effortless, talent.

Level or goal

The data also contained statements connecting learners' mindsets with their goals and the ultimate level they wished or believed they could attain. In the Austrian data, for example, a learner, who appears to have a strong growth mindset given the emphasis she places on hard work and strategy use, says the following about the role of talent in successful language learning at a certain level:

I think that natural ability is quite important, but, at, a certain level I think can be reached by everybody or achieved by everybody who wants to, but you have to be gifted if you really want to do interpreting and translation. (I#5: 245–248)

This particular learner regards interpreters and translators as having attained the highest level of language learning achievement; others defined this ultimate level of achievement as being native speaker like. In whatever way a learner chooses to define their perception of an ultimate level of achievement, there is a suggestion in the data that learners believe that such 'perfection' is only achievable by those with an innate talent for languages. The statement below illustrates this point:

If my hoped [*for*] level is very high then I may need a little special talent but just for normal communication and making friends, I don't need any talent. (I#8: 85–88)

[Italics added]

It seems evident that if a learner believes that natural talent is necessary in order to achieve a high level of proficiency, then they would need to believe that they possess such talent in order to attain such a goal. Similarly, believing you do not possess such talent implies that a learner would be likely to set lower goals and not even attempt to strive for such 'perfection'. The data thus suggest that mindsets may play a crucial role in the goal setting of language learners.

The role of social comparison processes

Another salient dimension to the findings concerns the role played by social comparisons in the formation of mindset beliefs (cf. Ommundsen 2001). We found many examples across the interviews of learners comparing themselves or others with peers. These social comparisons were then used

by the learners as an explanation for their belief in the role of talent, for example:

I And do you think that there is such thing as a natural ability for languages?

J Yes, I do, because if I compare people in our class, for example, there are really hard-working people and people who just do nothing but get the same grades. (I#4: 347–352)

Learners also frequently used comparisons referring to the relative ‘speed’ (for example I#8: 80) or ‘ease’ (for example I#1: 120) of learning the language to explain why they themselves or another had a talent for languages, for example:

I was really able to learn faster than the other kids . . . (I#3: 114)

As some learners appeared to use and refer to social comparisons more than others throughout their interviews, it is worth considering whether this tendency may contribute to individual variation across learners in respect to their mindsets.

Effortless acquisition or conscious learning?

Related to the idea about the relative ease or speed with which one learns a language is a distinction that learners seem to make between acquiring and consciously learning a language, for example:

I never learned English like I would sit on my desk and then learn, study something. I always did it unconsciously. (I#3: 202–203)

In the data, some learners seem to believe that if you can merely acquire the language without conscious effort, then you are talented at languages, but if you have to work and study, you cannot be naturally gifted for languages.

Another learner whose data suggests that she has a particularly strong fixed mindset about language learning explains how she believes that you simply have to go abroad to ‘pick up’ (I#2: 127) the language naturally:

. . . because you need to live in the country of the, where the language is spoken that you’re learning, you need to . . . (I#2: 947–948)

Elements of her and others’ data raise questions about whether some learners may equate a stay abroad with effortless acquisition, in contrast to more conscious, strategic hard work and effort which some learners appear to more typically associate with formalized classroom instruction. Thus, beliefs about a natural, effortless type of language acquisition during an extensive stay abroad do not seem to correspond with growth mindset beliefs emphasizing the role of effort and hard work. Indeed, the nature of the relationship between these sets of beliefs may suggest an area of mindset research that may be of particular relevance and interest to the domain of FLL.

Link to strategies

A final further consideration concerns a possible link between mindsets and strategy use. Throughout one particular interview (I#5), there is clear evidence that the learner holds a growth mindset and a belief that she can succeed in learning English if she works hard enough and persists; however,

she also makes clear that her willingness to work hard is not enough if she is unaware of appropriate strategies and techniques of how to learn, as the data extract below shows:

... my level was very low and, at first, I was also kind of shocked because of the other people who were speaking so well and I asked myself again and again how I should try to improve myself and get better. (I#5: 76–79)

This implies that although a growth mindset can encourage a learner to work consciously and actively towards improving their own abilities, this may only be effective if the individual also feels that they are equipped with the skills and know-how to do so. Thus, teaching practices, instructional techniques, and learners' metacognitive strategy knowledge could be important dimensions that influence the actual effectiveness of a particular mindset.

Pedagogical implications

At this initial exploratory stage, the conclusions that we can draw are inevitably tentative. Nevertheless, the findings of this study, especially when considered in conjunction with the existent literature in psychology, are encouraging. In the literature, it is generally suggested that educators should aim at promoting a growth mindset in learners (Dweck *et al.* 1995), as such a mindset tends to encourage learners to persistently exert more effort, cope better with setbacks or failure, and develop a more positive learning attitude. Considering the limited findings from this small-scale study, the concept of mindsets seems to present an influential framework that may affect learners' approaches to language learning, inform pedagogical practice, and suggest exciting future research directions.

Teacher feedback

One way in which learners may develop a particular mindset is through their interactions with teachers. Dweck (2002) has emphasized that some forms of feedback and encouragement may incorporate implicit messages suggestive of a certain mindset. Thus, teachers need to take care not to inadvertently suggest a fixed mindset through the types of feedback and praise that they give to learners. In order to foster a growth mindset about language learning, it seems advisable to focus feedback on learners' efforts, the process of learning, and beliefs about developing one's ability through hard work.

Internal comparisons

Since our limited data also suggested that one of the principal factors underlying the formation of learners' fixed mindset beliefs may be their social comparisons with others, it may be useful practice for teachers to encourage greater internal reflection within learners and support them in setting goals that imply a sense of personal progress relative to themselves and not in competition with others (cf. Ommundsen 2001). Reference to one's own achievements and the subsequent developing of a sense of personal progress may help to nurture a growth mindset.

Discussing learner beliefs

As has been found elsewhere (see, for example, Horwitz 1988; Cotterall 1999; Mori 1999), the learners in this study appear to have clearly developed beliefs about the nature of language learning. Therefore, it may be worth educators investing time in discussing learners' beliefs explicitly, in order

to perhaps lessen the influence of any which may be inhibiting the development of a growth mindset towards EFL learning generally, or even towards a specific skill–domain such as speaking, pronunciation, or writing. One particular potentially limiting belief that we would like to highlight concerns the view that high levels of attainment are only possible through effortless natural acquisition within the context of a stay abroad, in contrast with a perceived lower level of potential attainment for language consciously learnt through classroom-based instruction. Indeed, the relationship between beliefs about different levels of achievement, various approaches to language learning, and mindsets could be an area of great significance within the foreign language domain.

Strategic effort

Finally, the data suggest that, even in cases where a strong growth mindset exists, learners may feel frustrated and helpless without the tools and metacognitive knowledge of strategies to put their effort to focused use. Therefore, in addition to helping learners to adopt a more growth-orientated mindset, teachers may also need to engage in instructional practices which equip learners with the necessary strategies and skills to ensure their efforts lead to actual improvement (cf. Braten and Olaussen 1998).

Implications for further research

The exploratory nature of this study means that these initial findings have generated many questions which further research will need to address. First, the full complexity of learners' mindsets needs to be better understood, particularly when conceived of in terms of a continuum, and research tools need to be developed that are sensitive enough to discern such differences across learners. Research also needs to be carried out at various language proficiency levels, in order to examine the relationship between mindsets and a learner's language level. It will also be interesting to examine the extent to which learners may hold more domain-specific mindsets across skill areas within FLL. Another key undertaking for future research concerns the potential role played by culture in mindset formation and the extent to which cultural scripts may influence self-reports of learners' mindsets. Indeed, it will be important to explore the role of various other factors and processes which may contribute to mindset formation such as social comparison processes, other learner beliefs, and learners' experiences in other subjects.

Many additional important questions remain beyond the scope of this small-scale study, but the potential for future studies in this little-researched field within FLL is considerable. For example, it would be of particular interest to examine the nature of possible relationships between actual achievement and mindsets and also the ways in which mindsets may vary across individuals and contexts. Generally, in order to develop a more comprehensive theoretical model of mindsets in FLL, research will also need to consider how mindsets interact with other key factors such as strategies, motivation, personality, self-concept, proficiency, and actual aptitudes.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the concept of mindsets could play an important role within the ELT context, given their potentially powerful influence on learners' approaches to language learning, their goals, and ultimately their

success and eventual level of attainment. It is possible that FLL is a domain in which the fixed mindset may be particularly prevalent, given the widespread belief in the importance of natural talent or aptitude in successful language learning. It is worth reiterating once again that we are not questioning whether aptitude really does play a significant role in language learning success or not. Rather we are keen to explore the extent to which learners believe success in FLL is attainable through hard work or based largely on natural talent and how this belief actually impacts on their learning. Clearly, further research is now needed to support educators in better understanding their learners' mindsets as well as their own and to establish pedagogical approaches that could encourage a growth mindset in language learning classrooms.

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Note

1 Referencing conventions for data extracts: '1' is used to refer to interview data. The first number (for example #3) refers to the number of the interview from which the extract is taken. The following numbers (for example 159–163) are the line numbers of the transcript.

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