



## **Exploring Thai EFL Learners' Language Mindsets: The Beliefs about the Roles of Talent and Effort**

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### **Introduction**

Growth mindset, or the belief that human capacities can be improved through efforts and practices has been investigated in several studies across several contexts. For example, it was found that growth mindset has positive relationships with behavioural, 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), self-esteem, resilience, anxiety (Yeager & Dweck, 2012; King, 2012; Schroder et al., 2015) and academic achievement (Blackwell et al., 2007; King, 2012; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Given the positive influences of growth mindset on learning, it 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 ability to learn languages.

Individual language learners are different in terms of intelligence, aptitude, learning style, attitude, motivation, personality, and belief (Brown, 2007). Among these factors, Horwitz (1988) stated that learner belief is the fundamental factor that influences learning behaviours and performances, especially in academic contexts. Learner beliefs originate from experiences, attitudes, or value of the English language in the learner's own sociocultural context (Mori, 1999), or some common assumptions based on previous research. Hence, the understanding of these beliefs could help teachers identify the underlying language learning problems, clarify some misconceptions, change negative behaviours, or create positive learning experiences that promote autonomous learning.

There is a widespread belief that some people are gifted learners because they were born with special abilities to learn languages (Mercer & Ryan, 2010). According to Lou and Noels (2019), these beliefs can be called "language mindsets" and categorized into three main areas: general language intelligence beliefs, second language aptitude beliefs, and age and second language learning beliefs. It is also possible that learners might have different mindsets towards specific domains of language learning (Mercer & Ryan,



2010). For instance, learners tend to think that speaking relies more on talent as compared to reading skills.

Considering the benefits of growth language mindsets and limited research in the field, this research aims to explore Thai EFL language learners' mindsets, particularly the beliefs about the role of talent and effort, to provide useful information and pedagogical implications for future research. Hence, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent do Thai EFL learners have growth language mindsets?
2. To what extent do Thai EFL learners have growth language mindsets towards each language learning domain?

## **Literature Review**

### **Mindsets**

Mindset is a psychological factor that reflects individuals' beliefs about their intelligence, aptitudes, or abilities to do something (Robinson, 2017). Particularly, it concerns whether these abilities rely mainly on innate attributes, or 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 the Self-theories and the Theories of Motivation (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). According to Dweck (2006), there are two distinct types of mindsets, fixed mindset and growth mindset. Fixed-mindset people have solid ideas 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. People with fixed mindsets also tend to set performance goals to show what they can do well and to avoid trying new things or mistakes that would reveal their imperfection. Those fears of not looking smart in turn impede themselves from improving and expanding their capacities.

Unlike fixed mindsets, people with growth mindsets 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). People with growth mindsets are also more intrinsically motivated and are likely to set learning goals which predict intention to continue and mastery-oriented behaviours such as effort, applying learning strategies, and responding to feedback (Lou & Noels, 2017), which contribute to brain development and learning success.

In academic settings, growth mindset has predictive power for learning achievement, that is, grades (Blackwell et al., 2007; King, 2012; Yeager & Dweck, 2012) and positive learning behaviours such as perseverance, learning strategies (Farrington et al., 2012), and engagement (Aronson et al., 2002). Neuroscience studies also find that growth-mindset people tend to handle stress better than people with fixed mindsets as they are more flexible and adaptive in difficult situations. They express more positive emotions and have more self-esteem and resilience (King, 2012; Yeager & Dweck, 2012), which benefit their well-being and relationships with others (Schroder et al., 2015). 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), which means that growth mindset has positive impacts on long-term success and personal development.

### **Growth Language Mindset**

In the past few decades, research on growth mindset has been acknowledged by educators in various domains including the field of language education. Early investigations in psycholinguistics connect the

concept of mindset to individual difference or learner beliefs about their own abilities to learn languages or the beliefs about the roles of talents and efforts (Mercer & Ryan, 2010). Lou and Noels (2019) explain that:

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., 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 (p. 2).

According to Horwitz (1988), language learners generally have various beliefs about how to learn a language such as the belief that some people have language intelligence or aptitude, so they can learn any language with ease. Some people hold a strong belief about age in language learning based on “The Critical Period Hypothesis,” that it is harder for adults to learn a second language (Lenneberg, 1967). These beliefs are not necessarily concerned with learners’ actual intelligence and aptitude, but rather with the beliefs of their abilities to do so. Therefore, it is possible that successful language learners might have a fixed mindset while slow learners who work persistently might have a growth mindset. According to Lou and Noels (2017), it was found that language mindsets relate to goal orientations, as well as emotional and behavioural responses, especially in difficult learning situations. People with growth-oriented mindsets tend to set mastery goals and have lower anxiety or fear of failure which results in their intention to continue learning. These ideal characteristics provide great benefits in long-term improvement and success in language learning, as well as lifelong learning in other areas.

## Method

### Participants

The participants in this study included 160 non-major Thai EFL university students at a Thai public university from three main subject areas: Business Administration (44.6%), Science and Engineering (24.4%), and Social Science (31.0%). Most were 3rd year students (43.5%), 2nd year students (37.5%) and 1st year students (19.0%). There were 23.2% male students and 76.8% female students aged between 18-23 years old in the study sample. The larger proportion of females is typical in Thai universities at this time. Data was collected in the first semester of 2021 beginning in August.

### Research Instruments and Data Analysis

The survey consisted of three main parts. The first part included questions about demographic information. The second part included 18 five-point Likert scale items on language mindsets adopted from the Language Mindset Inventory (LMI) (Lou & Noels, 2019). The LMI has been confirmed in its reliability and validity to be used with university students and is divided into three main sections: General Language Intelligence Beliefs (GSB), Second Language Aptitude Beliefs (L2B), and age sensitive/Critical Period Hypothesis beliefs (ASB). Each item uses statements about growth mindset such as “You can always change your foreign language ability,” or fixed mindset such as “You have a certain amount of language intelligence, and you can’t really do much to change it.” The survey requires participants to respond as Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Undecided (3), Disagree (2), or Strongly Disagree (1). All items were translated into Thai and checked by experts in the field of psychology and applied linguistics before making a few adjustments for the final version. Finally, to determine the level of Thai EFL learners’ language mindsets towards each language learning domain, ten items were included in

the form of a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (talent/fixed mindset) to 5 (effort/growth mindset). These language learning domains included Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, Grammar, Vocabulary, Pronunciation, Communication, Work-related Language, and Language Testing. The mean scores of the LMI items which represented the level of language mindsets 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).

## Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected by the researcher in 2021 at the beginning of the semester which started in August using an online survey. The mean scores and standard deviations were analyzed using IBM SPSS statistics and presented as descriptive statistics.

## Findings and Discussion

### Research Question 1

Thai EFL learners' growth language mindsets were examined through 18 five-point Likert scale items adopted from LMI (Lou & Noels, 2019). The total mean score shows that Thai EFL university students have mixed language mindsets towards learning English ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = .51$ ). Specifically, participants have low growth mindsets in the GLB subscale ( $M = 2.66$ ,  $SD = .66$ ), and mixed language mindsets in L2B ( $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD = .71$ ) and ASB ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = .60$ ) subscales. The mean scores and standard deviations of language mindsets by majors and year of study are presented in Table 1 and Table 2 respectively.

TABLE 1  
*Means and Standard Deviations of Language Mindsets by Majors (N = 160)*

Majors	n	Language Mindsets			Interpretation
		Subscales	M	SD	
Business Administration	90	GLB	2.74	.72	Mixed
		L2B	3.39	.63	Mixed
		ASB	3.30	.70	Mixed
		Total	3.14	.53	Mixed
Science and Engineering	24	GLB	2.67	.55	Mixed
		L2B	3.66	1.07	Growth
		ASB	3.28	.51	Mixed
		Total	3.20	.54	Mixed
Social Science	46	GLB	2.52	.60	Low Growth
		L2B	3.16	.58	Mixed
		ASB	3.14	.49	Mixed
		Total	2.93	.43	Mixed

TABLE 2

*Means and Standard Deviations of Language Mindsets by Year of Study (N = 160)*

Year of Study	n	Language Mindset			Interpretation
		Subscales	M	SD	
1 <sup>st</sup> Year	57	GLB	2.75	.65	Mixed
		L2B	3.32	.62	Mixed
		ASB	3.30	.62	Mixed
		Total	3.12	.51	Mixed
2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	89	GLB	2.66	.60	Mixed
		L2B	3.44	.58	Growth
		ASB	3.22	.49	Mixed
		Total	3.11	.54	Mixed
3 <sup>rd</sup> Year	14	GLB	2.32	.50	Low growth
		L2B	3.05	.39	Mixed
		ASB	3.21	.32	Mixed
		Total	2.86	.26	Mixed

According to the results in Table 1 and Table 2, the GLB subscale shows the lowest mean scores of all three subscales, meaning that Thai EFL university students tend to believe that general language intelligence relies less on efforts, compared to other subscales which shows higher mean scores or levels of growth language mindset. On the other hand, the L2B subscale which shows the highest total mean score means that participants tend to believe that learning a second language requires more effort than talent. These findings are aligned with the interview results and the conclusions of Mercer and Ryan (2010) that language mindsets cannot simply be divided into two types due to its complex nature, as well as (Dweck, 2015) who stated that “everyone is a mixture of entity and incremental mindsets” (n. p.).

Although Lou and Noels (2017) was the first study that employed LMI to explore language mindsets, the main goals of that study were to introduce the instrument and to test the mindsets–goals–responses model, whether language mindsets were able to predict how language learners set goals and respond to difficult learning situations. Hence, the descriptive results of the study were not extensively discussed. Nevertheless, the written reflections of the study revealed more growth-mindset responses on GLB and L2B and more fixed mindset responses on ASB.

It is possible that language mindsets also rely on context, as Thai EFL learners in this study tended to be less fixated on age factors in second language learning, compared to language learners with diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds. The study on the perspectives of age-related factors in the Thai context also suggested that affective factors such as motivation or classroom factors seemed to be more important for Thai learners (Satienchayakorn, 2016). Finally, since the participants of this research are Thai EFL learners, the findings of this research also support the notion of cultural differences of language mindsets as found in Mercer and Ryan (2010), that Japanese EFL learners tend to value effort in learning more than Austrian learners.

## Research Question 2

To examine Thai EFL learners’ growth language mindsets towards each language learning domain, participants were required to rate each item using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (talent or fixed mindset) to 5 (effort or growth mindset). Overall, the results show that participants have mixed language mindsets towards several language learning domains, except for three low-growth domains, specifically, speaking ( $M = 2.51$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ), pronunciation ( $M = 2.53$ ,  $SD = .1.29$ ), and language testing ( $M = 2.54$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ). The mean scores and standard deviations of growth language mindsets towards ten language learning domains are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3

*Means and Standard Deviations of Language Mindsets towards Language Learning Domains (N = 160)*

Language Learning Domains	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Interpretation
Listening	2.66	1.02	Mixed
Speaking	2.51	1.11	Low Growth
Reading	2.91	1.12	Mixed
Writing	2.63	1.15	Mixed
Grammar	2.73	1.15	Mixed
Vocabulary	2.71	1.16	Mixed
Pronunciation	2.53	1.29	Low Growth
Communication	2.63	1.14	Mixed
Work-related Language	2.61	1.13	Mixed
Language Testing	2.54	1.15	Low Growth

The results in Table 3 clarify that some specific domains of language learning (i.e., speaking, pronunciation, and language testing) show slightly lower growth language mindsets, which supports the notion that individuals may have a fixed mindset in a specific domain and a growth mindset in another (Dweck, 2006). As also mentioned in the interview results of Mercer and Ryan (2010), some learners expressed different viewpoints or mindsets towards specific domains of language learning. For example, some Japanese EFL learners believed that speaking or pronunciation can hardly be changed through effort, especially when people get older, as this ability should be developed at a young age. However, they believed that some specific aspects, such as vocabulary, can be improved through practice and usage even though it is hard work.

This is similar to Thai EFL learners in this study as speaking shows the lowest mean score of growth language mindset. In relation to this, several studies in the Thai context have shown that speaking is the hardest skill to improve (Khamkhien, 2010; Tantiwich & Sinwongsawat, 2021) compared to content-based skills such as reading, grammar, and vocabulary, which show the highest mean scores of growth language mindset. Furthermore, it seems that affective factors such as motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence have some negative effects on speaking and testing abilities of Thai EFL learners (Chinpakdee, 2015; Oranpattanachai, 2013; Pattapong, 2015). Therefore, it could influence their language mindsets in some specific domains.

## Conclusion

The findings show that Thai EFL university students have mixed language mindsets of all three categories with the lowest mean score of growth language mindset in General Language Intelligence Beliefs. It also shows that participants have mixed language mindsets towards several language learning domains, except for three low-growth domains (i.e., speaking, pronunciation, and language testing). It can be concluded that Thai EFL university students' generally have various beliefs about the roles of talent and effort towards their language learning abilities. This study confirms the complex nature of language mindsets and provides some evidence of language mindsets in an EFL context for future research. Given 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. Finally, the results bring attention to the role of teachers and people surrounding students in affecting their growth language mindset.

## Limitations of the study

This study is the first phase of a research project that aims to develop an instructional approach to promote growth mindset in teaching English for undergraduate students. Future research will employ

qualitative approaches such as interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations for more insightful information from the perspectives of students and teachers.

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