The Growth Mindset in the Bangladeshi EFL Context

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Abstract

In this paper, we report on the results of a questionnaire conducted with 160 teenage students in Bangladesh. The purpose of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of the students' beliefs in regards to the innateness of intelligence (i.e., their mindsets), especially whether students believed becoming proficient in English depended on having an innate skill and luck or could be nurtured through hard work and discipline. The results of the study suggested students in Bangladesh tend to have growth mindsets in their English studies. When the sample was divided into two groups according to their courses of study, it was discovered that students studying science had significantly stronger growth mindsets for English than students studying humanities.

Key words：Bangladesh（バングラデシュ）
English Education（英語教育）
Growth Mindset（グロースマインドセット）
High School Students（高校生）
L2 Learning Motivation（第二言語学習動機づけ）

1．Introduction

As humans, it is natural to consider the reasons behind the successes and failures in our studies. Some may place the blame for failures on uncontrollable circumstances: feeling unwell during the test; being unable to concentrate due to loud noises outside the classroom; not being liked by the teacher; or simply not having a talent for foreign languages. Others might blame themselves: not studying hard enough; not listening in class; wasting time on simple test items. The beliefs of whether one is in control over the success and failure of one's studies reflects the basic concepts of mindsets. Although the theories behind mindsets have received much support through investigations conducted in the field of psychology, the amount of literature conducted in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), especially in the Asian context, is still rather thin. In the present paper, the authors consider the mindsets of high school students in Bangladesh and whether they viewed their successes and failures to improve their English proficiency as dependent on their own efforts or relying on innate ability and luck. It is hoped that through the results discussed in this paper, a clearer understanding of students' attitudes towards studying English in the Asian context will be reached, giving language teachers hints to increase the motivation of their students to study.

2．Implicit Theories

One of the earliest works related to the concepts of mindsets was conducted by Seligman, Maier,

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and Geer (1968), in which the reactions of dogs to receiving inescapable electric shocks were observed. In the study, Seligman and his colleagues concluded that one's "perception of degree of control over the events in one's life seems to be an important determinant of the behavior of human beings" (p. 261). A few years later, Dweck (1975) argued that when one attributes failures to a lack of effort, rather than a lack of innate ability, one can be alleviated from the feeling of helplessness[2], that is, that one is out of control of the outcomes of one's behavior. After several studies considering what humans attribute towards their successes and failures (e.g., Diener & Dweck, 1980; Dweck, 1975), the concept of *implicit theories* (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995; Dweck & Leggett, 1988) was put forth as a reliable way of describing one's beliefs regarding the innateness of intelligence and reasons given for successes and failures to achieve one's goals. With the implicit theories receiving much support in the field of psychology, Dweck (2006; 2017) suggested the more accessible terminology of *mindsets* for the implicit theories and the sub-theories within (i.e., entity theory and incremental theory).

3. Mindsets

Reflecting the definition of implicit theories, the concept of mindsets refers to one's beliefs in the innateness of intelligence (Dweck, 2006; 2017). One may have a *fixed mindset*, described as an *entity theory* within the implicit theories literature, and believe that intelligence is fixed. Regardless of the amount of effort one produces, high proficiency will not be achieved unless one is born a natural in the field, or is considerably lucky. Put simply, one's success is out of one's control. On the other hand, a person with the *growth mindset*, coined *incremental theory* in the implicit theories literature, believes that intelligence and advanced skills can be nurtured through hard work and discipline. It is important to note, however, that it is highly unlikely that one will be purely growth-mindsetted or purely fixed-mindsetted (Dweck, 2017). As humans, it is natural to have mixed beliefs about the nature of intelligence and ability. For example, a student of music may feel practicing the cello every day will lead to higher proficiency; it has nothing to do with natural talent. On the other hand, she may also feel she will never be able to become a professional golf player, regardless of how hard she practices. Although it is ideal for one to have a growth mindset, it is equally important to realize that the fixed mindset is not always necessarily bad (Dweck, 2017).

Dweck (2015; 2017) also warns that the fixed mindset is not just about trying hard. Many educators fall into the trap of the *false growth mindset*, telling their students that if they try hard, they will be successful. The growth mindset, however, includes much more than just doing your best, requiring, for example, the use of metacognitive strategies and reflection on performances. A student who feels that just trying hard is enough and fails may completely lose his or her self-confidence and completely give up: the exact opposite of what the growth mindset is all about.

The concept of mindsets (and implicit theories) has received much attention in various fields of psychology and education. Much literature, for example, has especially warned of the potential dangers of possessing a fixed mindset. Blackwell, Trzesniewskil, and Dweck (2007), for example, suggested that students who have fixed mindsets may be inclined to cheat. Fixed-minded students are so concerned with how they look in front of others, they will go to great extents just to make themselves look more intelligent, cooler, or more successful. Cheating is one way this can be achieved. Another way to make oneself appear successful is to avoid taking risks in situations one feels he or she may not be successful. Nussbaum and Dweck (2008) argue that students with the growth mindset will be willing to take calculated risks; working at a slightly higher level than one's current ability will bring success

in the long run, even if one has to experience a few hiccups along the way (Vygotsky, 1978).

In the field of SLA, the number of studies related to mindsets has been lower in comparison to psychology, but steadily increasing over the past five years. Lou and Noels (2016), for example, suggested that it is vital for language teachers to look for ways to develop their students' growth mindsets as students with the fixed mindset felt "language aptitude is fixed and it determines their language success" (p. 29). It is also important to note that language students with growth mindsets will show more favorable attitudes to advice from teachers and accept corrective feedback in a more positive manner than those with fixed mindsets (Waller & Papi, 2017). Also, similar to the idea of mixed mindsets as mentioned by Dweck (2017), Mercer and Ryan (2009) suggested that mindsets are mixed for language learners, even within the language itself. That is, a student may have a growth mindset for writing, but at the same time have a fixed mindset for speaking.

In Mercer and Ryan's (2009) study, which looked at students in Austria and Japan, it was suggested that cultural background may also have an influence on one's mindset, especially in regards to language learning. A call was made for more investigations into how culture may influence one's mindset and comparisons of students from different cultural backgrounds. Leis and Barquero (2018) conducted one such study, focusing on high school students in Japan and Costa Rica. The results suggested the students in Costa Rica had significantly stronger growth mindsets for studying English, which may be as a result of the large number of tourists from the nearby United States. Because of this, students were able to closely feel the necessity to be able to converse in English and that when one made an effort to do so, it lead to success. In the present paper, the authors concentrate on the mindsets of students another culturally-different nation: Bangladesh.

4. English Education in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a monolingual country where about 98% people speak in Bengali (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2010). Moreover, Bangladesh is the only nation in the world whose people have fought for establishing the right place of their mother tongue (Banglapedia, 2012). Despite this, in a developing country with a large population like Bangladesh, knowing English means opening more doors to have better opportunities for higher studies and to get good jobs.

It is usual for Bangladeshi children to start learning English young: at either nursery school or kindergarten. But the overall outcomes of English education all over the country is not the same as students do not study under a unified educational system. The education system is divided into three major groups: English-medium schools, Bengali-medium schools, and religious schools. English-medium schools, where subjects are mainly taught in English, are mainly located in the large metropolitan areas, especially in Dhaka. Bengali-medium and religious schools are found all over the country. The curricula and textbooks are also very different among the three types of institutions. Generally, children from upper class families and upper-middle class families go to English-medium schools. Children from middle class and lower-middle class families go to Bengali medium schools. And the rest, children from lower-class families, go to religious schools.

Bangladesh is a small country with a large population. Around one third of the total population is under 15 years of age. So, the class size at most of the schools, especially in Bengali-medium schools, is very large. While English medium schools have small class sizes (i.e., less than 15 students in a class), a Bengali medium school usually has large numbers (i.e., more than 60 students per class). The schooling structure in Bangladesh consists of five years of elementary education, seven years of high school education (three years of junior secondary,

two years of secondary, and two years of higher secondary), and four years of undergraduate school in university.

Various studies have discussed the problems, difficulties, and challenges that are related to teaching and learning spoken English in Bangladesh. Some studies have been conducted in an urban environment, some in rural, and some in both. Hamid (2011), for example, conducted a research on the overall English proficiency of rural Bangladeshi school learners, and suggested socioeconomic factors created problems in English teaching and learning. On the other hand, Farooqui (2007) suggested the problems and solutions in the spoken English of the urban students lay with the lack of vocabulary, learners' shyness, and an insufficient knowledge of various topics. Siddique's (2004) study pointed out the administrative set up, teacher-centered classrooms, large classes, and cultural conflicts as the most common challenges prevailing for Bangladeshi students and teachers. Finally, Ahmed (2006) and Chowdhury and Shaila's (2011) studies pointed out that the large classes, lack of confidence, little access to a communicative environment, and students' shyness as the main hindrances to Bangladeshi students' success in learning and speaking English.

So, with the exception of English-medium schools and some famous schools in urban areas, English education throughout Bangladesh is faced with many challenges. In an attempt to overcome these challenges, teachers usually give English grammar instruction in Bengali or translate English passages into Bengali and have the students memorize or practice them to pass the examinations. Moreover, both the teachers and the students in the rural area have a little contact with English in their daily lives. However, despite having such difficulties, Bangladeshi students appear to have favorable attitudes towards learning English and accept the idea that learning English is essential in their lives. In this study, the authors wish to get a clear understanding of those attitudes.

5. This Study

Considering the difficulties being faced by students studying English in Bangladesh and, at least to the knowledge of the authors, that there have been no studies concentrating on mindsets for learning English in the sub-continent countries, the authors aimed gain a clearer understanding of students' beliefs in the value of expending effort in their English studies. It was hoped that the results would give language teachers in the sub-continent region hints on how to approach their English classes to strengthen the belief that hard work pays off.

5.1 Research Questions

Through the present study the authors aim to answer the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. Do high school students in Bangladesh generally have growth mindsets in their English studies?

RQ2. Do any significant differences occur in the growth mindsets of students in Bangladesh depending on their major of study?

5.2 Participants

A total of 160 students participated in this study. The average age was 15.51 (SD=1.36) and there were 83 female students and 77 male students. Within the sample, 63 students majored in science (female: 55; male: 8) and 97 majored in humanities (female: 28; male: 69). There were no significant differences in the ages of the two groups (p = .80).

5.3 Methodology

This study used a questionnaire created by Leis (2017), based on work of Crandall, Katkovsky, and Crandall (1965) presented in the students' native language (i.e., Bengali). In addition to items related to students' demographics, the questionnaire included a total of 24 items to get a general idea of the mindsets of the participants in six separate categories: English (4 items), mathematics (4

items), native language (4 items), physical education (PE) (3 items), general (4 items), and metacognitive skills (i.e., Self-reflection) (5 items). The students were required to respond to questions and complete incomplete statements by choosing one of two options. One of the options reflected a growth mindset and the other reflected a fixed mindset. After the students completed the questionnaire on paper, the results were recorded and analyzed using SPSS Version 23.

6. Results and Discussion

The first research question aimed to gain a general understanding the mindsets of high school students in Bangladesh. First, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to measure whether any significant differences existed among the categories of English, mathematics, Bengali, and physical education. Responses reflecting the growth mindset were given a score of two, and responses reflecting the fixed mindset were given a score of one.

The results showed that mathematics had the highest average score (1.82), followed by English (1.75), Bengali (1.74), and PE (1.45). The skewness and kurtosis suggested the data were distributed evenly enough to be considered satisfactory for analyses. The ANOVA showed that differences did indeed exist among the categories: F (3, 636) = 82.57, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .28$. Post-hoc Tukey tests were conducted to see between which of the categories these differences occurred. The Tukey tests showed significant differences existed between English and PE ($p < .001$), mathematics and Bengali ($p = .001$), mathematics and PE ($p < .001$), and Bengali and PE ($p < .001$). Although a statistically significant difference was not seen between English and mathematics ($p = .07$), the almost non-existent overlapping in the 95% confidence intervals (CI), suggested that students have rather stronger growth mindsets for mathematics in comparison to English. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for the four categories being focused on in this study.

Table 1
The Descriptive Statistics for English, Mathematics, Bengali, and PE.

Category	Average	SD	95% CI	Skewness	Kurtosis
English	1.75	.22	[1.72, 1.79]	-.57	-.36
Mathematics	1.82	.18	[1.79, 1.85]	-.78	.24
Bengali	1.74	.25	[1.70, 1.78]	-.79	-.13
PE	1.45*	.27	[1.40, 1.49]	.10	-.48

Note. Max: 2 (growth mindset) ; Min: 1 (fixed mindset) ; n = 160; *p = .001 in comparison to English.

Second, the items in the category of English were divided into growth mindset beliefs (*i.e., You have trouble understanding what your English teacher is saying in class. Why is this?* [*He/She is speaking too quickly. / You are not concentrating enough.*] ; *Your teacher gives you a good score in a speech given in English class. This is because...* [*...your teacher likes you. /...you practiced hard for the speech.*]) and growth mindset behavior (i.e., *You have a choice of two English courses at university. Which do you take?* [*An easier course that you will most likely pass without much trouble. / A challenging course that you will have to study hard for but still might not pass.*] ; *The person sitting next to you in English class has very good pronunciation. This is because...* [*...he/she has lived abroad for some time. / ...he/she practiced English pronunciation a lot.*]). The results of an independent-samples t-test showed that the students' beliefs in the growth mindset towards English education appeared to be very strong and significantly higher than growth mindset behavior, t (318) = 3.17, p = .002, with medium effect sizes (d = .35). A Pearson's r correlation analysis was also conducted to discover whether the strength of a participant's growth mindset beliefs would also give an indication of that participant's growth mindset behavior. The results were significant, r (158) = .26, p = .001. This suggests that those with strong beliefs in the growth mindset for English are also likely to display strong growth mindsets in their behavior in their English learning. Likewise, those with fixed mindset beliefs are likely to behave in a fixed mindset manner.

The results show that, more than any other subject, students in Bangladesh are confident that their efforts to study mathematics will be rewarded with high proficiency and success in their learning. Although a statistically significantly stronger growth mindset was not seen for mathematics over English, it was large, and the significant difference between mathematics and Bengali suggests that in general, students have powerful beliefs that efforts will be rewarded in science and mathematics, but when it comes to languages, innate ability might be more important.

It is interesting to note that PE was regarded significantly lower than the other subjects. This suggests an attitude among the students that when it comes to sports, "You either have it, or you don't." This was quite different from the situations in Japan and Costa Rica (Leis & Barquero, 2018), where PE ranked high.

Based on the findings, language teachers may be best to look for hints from mathematics in order to give their students the confidence to take calculated risks in their language learning. Encouraging students to look for patterns in language, for example, and even incorporating a little rote learning and memorization may help strengthen students' beliefs in their own potential to become highly proficient in the foreign language. Teachers also need to be highly aware of the language they use in the classroom, especially considering the large class sizes, and that the way the give instructions and praise (or scold) students will have a major impact on their attitudes to their learning. For more on effective use of language in the classroom, see Johnston (2012).

The second RQ looks at a comparison of the majors being studied by the participants with regards to having a growth mindset for studying English. Other categories were not considered in analyses. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for the two groups for English.

Table 2
The Descriptive Statistics for English Divided into Majors.

Major	Average	SD	95% CI	Skewness	Kurtosis
Science	1.80*	.20	[1.75, 1.85]	-.80	.31
Humanities	1.72	.22	[1.68, 1.77]	-.42	-.59

Note. Max: 2 (growth mindset) ; Min: 1 (fixed mindset) ; n = 160; *p = .001.

Independent-samples t-tests were conducted comparing the growth mindsets of the students towards English overall, then the students' beliefs and behaviors in their English studies as well. First, the results suggested that the science majors had significantly stronger growth mindsets towards English in general: t (158) = 2.24, p = .027, with medium effect sizes (d = .38). There were minor overlaps in the 95% CI.

However, no significant differences were observed in the results of the independent-samples t-tests when the students' responses were divided into growth mindset beliefs (t (158) = .64, p = .524) with large overlaps in 95% CI and only very modest differences for behavior (t (158) = 1.94, p = .05), which had minor overlaps in the 95% CI. Table 3 displays the two majors' descriptive statistics for growth mindset beliefs and growth mindset behavior.

Table 3
The Descriptive Statistics for Growth Mindset Beliefs and Behavior Divided into Majors.

Major	Category	Average	SD	95% CI	Skewness	Kurtosis
Science	Beliefs	1.80	.20	[1.75, 1.85]	-1.29	.58
	Behavior	1.75	.27	[1.69, 182]	-.36	-1.20
Humanities	Beliefs	1.78†	.31	[1.71, 1.84]	-.42	-.59
	Behavior	1.68	.24	[1.63, 1.72]	.64	-1.63

Note. Max: 2 (growth mindset) ; Min: 1 (fixed mindset) ; Science: n = 63; Humanities: n = 97; † p = .05.

The results suggest that, as was suggested in the discussion of the first RQ, students majoring in science appear to have stronger beliefs in the effects of their efforts to learn English. Therefore, the authors suggest that it may be worthwhile for teachers of students majoring in humanities to look to hints from classes conducted with science teachers.

The mindsets of students majoring humanities is still, as can be seen, very strongly towards the growth mindset, but with there being a significant difference between the mindset beliefs and the behavior of the humanities students (p = .002), teachers need to look for ways to encourage their students to put their beliefs into action.

7. Conclusions

In this study, the authors used the theories of mindsets to gain an initial understanding of the beliefs students in Bangladesh have towards their innate ability to become proficient in English. The results suggested that in general the students did tend to believe that the harder they worked in their English studies, the more successful they would be: a trait of the growth mindset. When the sample was divided into two groups according to their majors of study (i.e., science and humanities), science students appeared to have stronger growth mindsets. Furthermore, despite humanities students believing in the benefits of taking risks, the value of practice, and that mistakes can lead to success, these beliefs may not be reflected in their behavior. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers be aware that the students beliefs may not necessarily lead to the growth mindset; teachers need to have their students experience the benefits of having a growth mindset in their language studies.

The authors do acknowledge that this study is not without its limitations. For example, as with any study that relies solely on a questionnaire, the results may be due to how the participants felt on that particular day. In future studies, it will be beneficial to consider the mindsets over a longer period and on multiple occasions, not limiting the data collection to just one time. This will also allow researchers to consider the dynamics of motivation, in particular what experiences may strengthen or weaken students' growth mindsets.

The aim of this study, however, was to get a basic and general understanding the mindsets of students in Bangladesh. Based on the results discussed in the present paper, we hope that other researchers will consider following up this study with further investigations both in and out of Bangladesh, looking at, for example, urban and rural differences, various classroom activities that may affect the mindset of students, and how testing may change students' beliefs about the innateness of language aptitude. We ae confident such studies will lead to stronger beliefs among students that it is not a select few who can be successful in language learning, but, with a bit of hard work, anyone can do it.

Notes

1. Mamonul Karim was a visiting scholar studying at Miyagi University of Education from April 2015 to September 2018.
2. Helplessness refers to a feeling that one is not in control of the outcomes of one's actions. See Seligman (1972) for more on learned helplessness.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the students for providing their opinions regarding English education for this study and the teachers who gave up their valuable class time to help contribute the data used in this research.

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（平成30年９月28日受理）