

INFERRING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GRATITUDE AND MINDSET IN EFL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Gratitude and mindset have recently gained attention in English as a foreign language (EFL) context due to their considerable benefits. This study examines the relationship between gratitude and mindset in language learning among undergraduate EFL students. Two online questionnaires were used to evaluate students' levels of gratitude, growth or fixed mindset, differences in gratitude and mindset based on gender and year level, and relationships among gratitude, growth, and fixed mindsets. Using convenience sampling, 106 students completed the questionnaires. Descriptive statistics indicated that students demonstrated high levels of gratitude but maintained a fixed mindset. Sophomore students emerged as the most grateful, despite also having a fixed mindset. Female students exhibited higher levels of gratitude compared to male students, who were more inclined to possess a fixed mindset. Correlational statistics showed a significant association between gratitude and a growth mindset. Analysis of open-ended question responses about other instances of gratitude experienced in class emphasised the roles of bilingual instruction and peer activities as contributing factors. The study concluded with a discussion of pedagogical implications, highlighting the importance of fostering thankfulness in the language classroom and raising awareness of the advantages of adopting a growth language mindset.

Keywords: EFL context; gratitude; mindset; relationship

Introduction

Language learning is a complex process that involves not only the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar, but also the development of various cognitive, social, and emotional skills. While many factors contribute to the success of language learners, the role of gratitude and mindset has recently emerged as a significant area of interest among researchers and educators. Gratitude, as a powerful positive emotion, can have a profound impact on a learner's mindset, influencing motivation, resilience, and cognitive functioning.

Gratitude in Language Learning

In the field of positive psychology, gratitude is defined as a response stemming from a moral agent, as proposed by Emmons and McCullough (2003). Generally speaking, a person who experiences gratitude expresses thankfulness towards their benefactor. Therefore, within the context of a language classroom, students may feel a sense of gratitude towards their teacher, which could prompt them to act responsibly during a specific period of time. Oxford (2016) pointed out that learners who express gratitude often exhibit high levels of well-being. In other studies, gratitude is beneficial to learning and well-being (Adler & Fagley, 2005; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh et al., 2008; Howells, 2004; King & Datu, 2018; Wangwang, 2015).

In a preliminary exploratory study conducted by Wilang (2022) among Thai students in an urban university setting, two factors of gratitude were identified which are positive reinforcement and language practice. The first factor encompasses gratitude antecedents such as encouraging students to improve, appreciating their outputs, and providing equal treatment to all students, among other things. The second factor covers situations where language practice is facilitated, ideas are shared, and productive activities are encouraged. Despite these findings, this study is still in its early stages, and further empirical evidence is required to fully understand the nature of gratitude within the context of foreign language learning.

Mindset in Language Learning

There is a substantial body of research on the role of mindset in language learning, particularly focusing on the distinction between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset. Language mindset, according to Lou and Noels (2016; 2017), pertains to the convictions that language learners have about their own capacity for language acquisition. Those with a fixed language mindset consider language learning ability as an inherent trait, and thus, believe it cannot be significantly improved with effort. Conversely, individuals with a growth language mindset, as described by Mercer and Ryan (2009) and Ryan and Mercer (2012), maintain the belief that one's language learning capabilities can indeed be improved through sustained effort and dedication.

In Thai urban context, prior research conducted among university students has revealed that these students predominantly exhibit a growth mindset (Puvacharonkul & Wilang, 2020; Wilang, 2022). Furthermore, a significant correlation was found between a growth mindset and perceived language proficiency. Interestingly, the study also found that a student's year level was not associated with either a fixed or growth mindset (Wilang, 2022).

In rural settings, various studies (Burnette et al., 2018; Shaari et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2023) have indicated that students often exhibit a fixed mindset, which may be attributed to limited opportunities and stagnant development in their communities (Hernandez, 2019).

The results of these studies highlight the impact of mindset on various aspects of the language learning process such as enhanced motivation (students with growth mindset can lead to increased motivation in language learning), increased resilience (students with a growth mindset tend to exhibit greater resilience in the face of setbacks and challenges, greater persistence) (students believe they can improve their skills through continued effort and practice, better learning strategies) (students are more likely to adopt effective learning strategies and be more flexible in their approach), higher achievement (growth mindset is associated with higher achievement in various educational domains), and improved self-regulation (students with growth mindset enable them to set realistic goals, monitor their progress, and adjust their learning strategies accordingly).

Gratitude and Mindset in Language Learning

Gratitude, as a positive emotion, can have a significant impact on various aspects of an individual's life, including language learning and mindset. The conceptual framework of gratitude and mindset in language learning can be visualised as a network of interconnected components that collectively influence the language acquisition process. By cultivating an attitude of gratitude, learners can foster a positive and growth-oriented mindset that enhances their language learning experience, ultimately leading to more effective and meaningful language acquisition. This framework can be used as a foundation for future research and educational practices aiming to promote the integration of gratitude and mindset in language learning.

In various disciplines, there is a positive correlation between gratitude, growth mindset, grit, and well-being (Banono, 2021; Campbell & Cokken, 2022). Some studies have specifically examined the mindset associated with gratitude (Balhip et al., 2022). Additionally, Wilson (2016) highlighted that the proactive engagement in gratitude practices enhanced students' focus and resilience. Therefore, considering the domain of positive emotions, there is a potential significant relationship between gratitude and mindset.

It is indeed plausible that grateful language learners are more likely to adopt a growth mindset and vice versa. Gratitude, as a positive emotion, can foster a more

optimistic and open-minded outlook, which aligns with the characteristics of a growth mindset. When learners appreciate the learning process and the opportunities it provides, they may be more likely to believe in their capacity for growth and improvement. Similarly, individuals with a growth mindset, who embrace challenges and view setbacks as opportunities for growth, may be more prone to recognising and expressing gratitude for their learning experiences. They may appreciate the support and resources they receive from teachers, native speakers, and fellow learners and acknowledge the value of their personal growth throughout the language learning journey. While the relationship between gratitude and growth mindset in language learning seems plausible, further research is needed to empirically establish the connection and understand the potential synergistic effects of these two factors. This understanding could lead to the development of targeted interventions and strategies to cultivate both gratitude and a growth mindset in language learners, ultimately enhancing the overall language learning experience and promoting greater success in language acquisition.

It is also possible that language learners with a fixed mindset may display a less grateful attitude towards certain learning experiences. As previously mentioned, a fixed mindset is characterised by the belief that one's abilities, including language skills, are innate and unchangeable (Dweck, 2006). As a result, learners with a fixed mindset may perceive challenges and setbacks as threats to their self-worth or as evidence of their limitations, rather than as opportunities for growth and development. This mindset could lead to negative emotions, such as frustration, disappointment, or even resentment, which may overshadow any potential feelings of gratitude. Learners with a fixed mindset may be less inclined to appreciate the support and resources available to them, as they may view their lack of progress as a reflection of their inherent inability, rather than as a result of their learning strategies or efforts. Furthermore, learners with a fixed mindset may undervalue the importance of the learning process itself, focusing primarily on performance and outcomes, rather than personal growth and development (Lou & Noels, 2017). This perspective could make it more difficult for them to recognise and express gratitude for the various learning experiences they encounter. However, it is important to acknowledge that the relationship between mindset and gratitude may be complex and influenced by various factors, such as individual personality traits, cultural background, and prior experiences. Further research is needed to better understand the relationship between a fixed mindset and gratitude in language learning and to explore potential strategies for fostering gratitude and a growth mindset in learners with various dispositions.

While the existing body of research highlights the significant benefits of gratitude and mindset in various aspects of learning and personal growth, there is a notable lack of research specifically exploring the relationship between gratitude and mindset in the context of English as a foreign language. This gap in the literature points to a need for more focused studies investigating the potential interplay between gratitude and mindset and how their combined effects may contribute to language learning success. By expanding our understanding of this relationship, researchers and educators can develop

more effective strategies and interventions to harness the power of gratitude and mindset in language learning settings.

Thus, this study examined the relationship between gratitude and mindset in language learning among undergraduate EFL students. The following questions are addressed:

- 1) To what do learners feel grateful in language learning?
- 2) What is their mindset towards language learning?
- 3) Is there a significant relationship between gratitude and mindset?

Methodology

This study followed a quantitative approach, primarily utilising questionnaires for data collection in a premier science and technology university located in northeastern Thailand. The rural town lies about 260 kilometres from Bangkok, Thailand's vibrant capital. In contrast to Bangkok, this area has limited environments where English serves as a lingua franca. Even though international programmes are offered in the university, it hosts a smaller percentage of foreign students compared to the universities in the capital.

The participants of the study were divided by their year level and gender. In terms of year level, there were 45 first-year students, 37 second-year students, 17 third-year students, and 7 fifth-year students. With regard to gender, 40 of the participants were male and 66 were female. The study employed convenience sampling to select participants.

The study employed two survey tools. The first was the Foreign Language Gratitude Scale (Wilang, 2022), containing 19 gratitude antecedents, chosen for its development from feedback by students in Thailand. Two factors, "Positive Reinforcement" and "Language Practice", emerged from a principal component analysis. "Positive Reinforcement" encompasses antecedents like "encourage to do better" and "foreign language activities are encouraging", while "Language Practice" features items such as "positive impact" and "productive activities".

The second instrument was the 12-item Language Mindset Survey (Puvacharonkul & Wilang, 2020). Six dimensions are examined: General Viewpoint of Own Ability, Challenges, Obstacles, Effort, Criticisms, and Success of Others. Each category presents items reflecting both fixed and growth mindsets. For example, in the Criticisms dimension, growth mindset learners anticipate constructive feedback, whereas their fixed mindset counterparts struggle with such feedback.

Both questionnaires were rendered in Thai to ensure clarity and ease of understanding for the respondents. The response options ranged from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (4). Regarding reliability, the Gratitude survey had a Cronbach's alpha of .92, showing excellent internal consistency. The Growth mindset statements achieved a respectable .76, while the Fixed mindset statements had moderate reliability (.56).

The questionnaire was constructed in Google forms and the link was sent to colleagues. They were requested to send the links to their students for participation. The guidelines or codes of relevant ethics employing human subjects follow the Declaration of Helsinki whereby all participants were informed of the nature of the research using a research protocol.

In terms of data analysis, both descriptive and correlational statistical methods were utilised. This involved computing mean scores and standard deviations, as well as determining correlation coefficients to examine the relationships between different variables.

The study employed a scale to gauge gratitude levels. Participants who registered scores from 1.00 to 1.75 were labelled as “Ungrateful”. Scores between 1.76 and 2.50 resulted in a classification of “Somewhat Ungrateful”. Those achieving scores from 2.51 to 3.25 were recognised as “Somewhat Grateful”, and participants with scores ranging from 3.26 to 4.00 were identified as “Very Grateful”.

For mindset evaluation, the average score was calculated, where a higher score in each domain signified an inclination towards either a fixed or growth mindset.

Results

With regard to the first research question on the level of gratitude among the participants (see Table 1) all antecedents of gratitude were interpreted as “Very grateful”. The item, “I would be grateful when my output becomes better in the English language class,” recorded the highest mean score, indicating it was the most agreed-upon sentiment among the participants. The item with the second highest mean score was “...when all are treated equally in the English language class”.

Table 1
Gratitude Survey

Item... I would be thankful/grateful/appreciative...	M, SD	Interpretation
<i>Positive reinforcement</i>		
... when I am encouraged to do better in the English language class.	3.47, .55	Very grateful
... when my mistakes or errors are corrected in the English language class.	3.57, .51	Very grateful
... when media resources are used in the English language class.	3.46, .55	Very grateful
... of practical knowledge shared in the English language class.	3.50, .52	Very grateful
... of examples provided in the English language class.	3.47, .62	Very grateful
...when all are treated equally in the English language class.	3.62, .54	Very grateful

... when the English language activities are encouraging.	3.37, .51	Very grateful
... of language practice provided in the English language class.	3.50, .57	Very grateful
... when the English language class is managed effectively.	3.53, .51	Very grateful
... when my English language output is appreciated.	3.35, .50	Very grateful
... appreciative of open mindedness in the English language class.	3.30, .55	Very grateful
<i>Language practice</i>		
... when comprehension is one of the goals of the English language lesson.	3.52, .60	Very grateful
... when I experienced a positive impact in my English language class.	3.46, .55	Very grateful
... of having students who can speak fluent English in the English language class.	3.53, .50	Very grateful
... when productive activities are done in the English language class.	3.45, .55	Very grateful
... when my output becomes better in the English language class.	3.64, .51	Very grateful
... when an advice is provided in the English language class.	3.55, .51	Very grateful
... when English language learning opportunities are provided.	3.59, .49	Very grateful
... when ideas are shared in the English language class.	3.45, .51	Very grateful

Table 2 shows that all aspects of the mindset assessment pointed to a prevalent fixed mindset among the participants. The students strongly agreed with the statement, "When other students do better than me in the English language class, it makes me feel inferior" (highest mean score of 2.75),

Table 2
Language Mindset Survey

Item	M, SD	Interpretation
<i>General viewpoint of own ability</i>		
I can do things differently in the English language class, but the important parts of who I am can't really be changed.	2.59, .75	<i>Fixed mindset</i>
I can always change basic things about the kind of person I am when I learn English.	2.18, .90	
<i>Success of others</i>		

When other students do better than me in the English language class, it makes me feel inferior.	2.75, .87	<i>Fixed mindset</i>
When other students succeed in our English language classes, I feel inspired.	2.00, .86	
<i>Challenges</i>		
In the English language class, I avoid to try things that are hard.	2.29, .81	<i>Fixed mindset</i>
Feeling challenged in learning English makes me want to try harder.	2.02, .83	
<i>Obstacles</i>		
I usually quit when something gets difficult in the English language class.	2.71, .95	<i>Fixed mindset</i>
I don't mind making mistakes in the English language class because I can learn.	2.18, .89	
<i>Effort</i>		
If I have to work hard during the English language class, it means I am not smart.	2.64, .92	<i>Fixed mindset</i>
The more difficult the English task is, the more motivated I become to put in effort.	2.40, .88	
<i>Criticisms</i>		
In the English language classroom, I dislike negative feedback on my performance even if it will make me improve.	2.41, .90	<i>Fixed mindset</i>
In studying English, I rarely take criticisms as personal attacks.	2.27, .93	

Table 3 reveals a high level of gratitude among all participants. However, when it comes to mindset, all year levels predominantly exhibited a fixed mindset, with the exception of third-year students who had equal mean scores for both growth and fixed mindsets. It is noteworthy to mention that second-year students, despite having the highest level of gratitude, predominantly held a fixed mindset.

According to the gender-based analysis, female students exhibited a higher level of gratitude compared to males. However, both genders predominantly displayed a fixed mindset, with males demonstrating a higher level of this mindset.

Table 3
Descriptive Results Based on Year Level and Gender

Background variable	Gratitude M, SD	Growth Mindset M, SD	Fixed Mindset M, SD
<i>Year level</i>			
1)n=45(	3.51, .34	2.19, .64	2.57, .56

2)n=37(	3.54, .37	2.03, .59	2.65, .50
3)n=17(	3.41, .32	2.42, .53	2.42, .35
5)n=7(	3.33, .36	2.33, .36	2.45, .18
<i>Gender</i>			
M)n=40(	3.44, .37	2.15, .63	2.60, .51
F)n=66(	3.52, .34	2.20, .59	2.55, .49

Table 4 indicates a significant correlation between gratitude and a growth mindset. Conversely, no correlation was observed between gratitude and a fixed mindset.

Table 4
Relationship between Gratitude and Mindset

	Growth mindset	Fixed mindset
Gratitude	.32**	-.11

**Significance at 0.01 level

Discussion and Conclusion

The study showed that Thai students, in general, exhibit a strong sense of gratitude in their language learning process, aligning with the findings of Wilang (2022). Some possible reasons could be cultural and Thais' high regard for teachers. In many Asian cultures, including Thailand, gratitude is a deeply ingrained value. This cultural emphasis on gratitude could potentially influence Thai students' approach to language learning, making them more appreciative of the learning process and resources available to them. Also, teachers are held in high esteem, and there is a strong tradition of showing respect and gratitude to them. This might translate into a generally grateful attitude towards language learning, as students appreciate the knowledge imparted by their teachers.

The findings on mindset among the participants in the study, however, is alarming. Unlike previous studies (Wilang, 2022), students have indicated fixed mindsets in all aspects of language learning. There could be several possible reasons why students in rural areas might exhibit a fixed mindset in language learning. Rural areas often have fewer educational resources compared to urban areas, including access to qualified language teachers, books, and technology. This lack of resources might lead students to believe that their ability to learn a language is fixed and cannot be improved significantly (Hernandez, 2019). Also, unlike in Bangkok, living in a rural area might mean less exposure to different languages and cultures compared to those living in urban areas. This limited exposure could lead students to believe they cannot become proficient in a foreign language, thus fostering a fixed mindset. If students in rural areas do not see examples of individuals in their community who have successfully learned a new language, they might be more likely to develop a fixed mindset about their own language learning potential. Another reason could be the traditional educational practices that emphasise rote

learning and do not encourage exploration and experimentation. If schools in rural areas are more likely to use such practices, this might contribute to students developing a fixed mindset.

It is possible that the intricate nature of these beliefs, or even the methodologies employed in this study, carry inherent limitations to the current study. Understanding these complex beliefs and the circumstances that foster them is essential. As such, upcoming research could probe more extensively into the wider psychological and societal repercussions of the detected fixed mindset attitudes. Further studies could also focus on students with fixed mindsets, examining the potential reciprocal relationships between gratitude, a fixed mindset, and language acquisition. Exploring other affective components, such as motivation and engagement, could also provide valuable insights.

Being grateful and having growth mindset are highly correlated as the former is reinforce of positivity (Adler & Fagley, 2005; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh et al., 2008; Howells, 2004; King & Datu, 2018; Wangwang, 2015). In this study, the relationship might be explained by several factors. As previously mentioned in the literature, gratitude is associated with positive emotions and resilience, both of which can promote a growth mindset. When individuals are grateful, they are more likely to have a positive outlook, which can help them view challenges as opportunities for growth rather than insurmountable obstacles. Like the findings in the current study, grateful individuals often appreciate not just their accomplishments, but also the process of learning itself. This appreciation can foster a growth mindset by encouraging learners to value effort, embrace challenges, and see mistakes as opportunities for learning and improvement. As gratitude involves recognising the support one has received from others, this recognition can promote a growth mindset by helping learners realise that their abilities and achievements are not solely the result of innate talent, but also the support and guidance they have received along the way. Lastly, gratitude can improve motivation and engagement, which are key components of a growth mindset. When learners are grateful, they are more likely to be motivated to learn and engage deeply with their learning, which can foster a growth mindset.

This study has demonstrated that undergraduate students in rural areas, while exhibiting high levels of gratitude in their language learning, predominantly hold a fixed mindset. Importantly, the findings also reveal a strong correlation between gratitude and a growth mindset. This underscores the complex interplay between students' attitudes towards language learning, their belief in their ability to improve, and their appreciation of the learning process. The patterns observed highlight the potential for interventions that aim to enhance both gratitude and a growth mindset in language learning settings, particularly in rural contexts. Perhaps a longitudinal study might provide a more in-depth understanding of how gratitude and mindset evolve in the realm of language learning as time progresses. And given that gratitude may be perceived as a personality trait among EFL students in Southeast Asia, particularly in Thailand, it seems plausible to design intervention studies addressing the myriad challenges associated with English language learning.

Promoting a growth mindset in language learning, particularly in rural areas, requires a multifaceted approach. Here are a few strategies teachers can employ.

- Emphasise that it is not just innate talent but also effort, strategy, and persistence that lead to learning and improvement. Praise students for their hard work and dedication, not just their outcomes.
- Create a classroom culture where mistakes are viewed as a natural part of the learning process, not something to be feared or avoided. When students make mistakes, guide them towards understanding what went wrong and how they can improve.
- Help students set language learning goals that stretch their abilities but are still within their reach. Achieving these goals can boost their confidence and reinforce the belief that they can improve their skills with effort and practice.
- Provide diverse and engaging learning materials and experiences to spark the interest of students in rural areas who have limited exposure to different languages and cultures in order to expand their horizons.
- Foster an environment where students can learn from and support each other. This can help them see that everyone struggles and improves, reinforcing the idea of growth mindset.
- Model a growth mindset by demonstrating enthusiasm for learning, openness to feedback, and willingness to make and learn from mistakes.
- Teach students about the concept of a growth mindset and its benefits explicitly through discussions, activities, or integrating mindset themes into the language curriculum.

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