

The Effect of Positive Psychology in SLA: From Fixed Mindset to Growth Mindset

第二言語習得におけるポジティブ心理学：フィックス・マインド
セットからグロース・マインドセットへ

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ABSTRACT

Falout (2016) contends that students can often lose self-confidence, subjective control, motivation, and meaning in their learning when they are in certain educational contexts, particularly where language education is compulsory. Japanese students are considered by Falout (2016) to be at high risk of encountering such environments. As a step towards overcoming such difficulties, this paper investigates the effectiveness of a program of positive psychological instruction to assist students in developing self-regulation and academic perseverance.

KEYWORDS: Positive psychology, Perseverance, Growth mindset

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many researchers and educators have started to cast a spotlight on positive psychology. In 2014, the first international conference on Psychology of Language Learning was held in Graz, Austria and in 2016, a book titled “Positive Psychology in SLA” was published. Followed by much research focusing on the psychology of language learning, Oxford (2016) claims the beginning of the “EMPATHICS” vision in the psychology of well-being for language learners. Emotion and empathy, meaning and motivation, perseverance, agency and autonomy, time, hardiness and habits of mind, intelligences, character strengths, and self-factors are the components of the EMPATHICS vision. All the factors are related to each other in a complex manner. In this paper, one of the components, perseverance, is the focus to search for a solution for helping learners achieve progress. The background of this research is that, through research on autonomous learning, the author has learned that students’ psychological state greatly influences autonomous learning and teachers could train students to be more autonomous by teaching them explicitly, yet, they cannot guarantee that their students will continue to be autonomous after a semester. What students need after a semester is “perseverance” to continue to be an autonomous learner. Therefore, the author incorporated the theory of

positive psychology into her class activities to investigate the factors for perseverance. These activities were developed by the author on the premise that Dweck's (2016) mindset theory would help students become more autonomous and have grit in learning English. Dweck, a psychologist, explains the concept as:

Those with the growth mindset, you believe you can develop yourself, then you're open to accurate information about your current abilities, even if it's unflattering. What's more, if you're oriented towards learning, as they are, you need accurate information about your current abilities in order to learn effectively. (Dweck, 2016, p. 11)

Dweck (2016) claims that successful people have a "growth mindset" and others have a "fixed mindset", yet anyone can change their mindset once they adopt the "growth mindset". In this paper, the author will introduce the method she used in her class and explore the practical implementation of positive psychology in English classes. There are two questions this research focuses on:

1. How effective is the Growth Mindset (GM) training to improve academic perseverance?
2. Does academic perseverance correlate to English test scores?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of perseverance for language learners is often discussed by SLA researchers, however, the definition of perseverance differs depending on the researchers. Gardner (2001) claims that persistence (closely related to perseverance) is one of the three key factors in language learning motivation together with enjoyment and desire to achieve a goal. As mentioned above, Oxford's (2016) EMPATHICS vision includes perseverance. She argues that there are three elements in perseverance: resilience, hope, and optimism. Oxford's definition of perseverance includes the elements of optimism whereas Gardner sees persistence (perseverance) as a trait of continuity. Duckworth, a psychologist who claims grit is important in learning, states that perseverance seems to be a key factor in determining long-term success (Duckworth, 2016). Duckworth (2016) explains that grit has two components: passion and perseverance. She developed the grit scale which contains ten 5-point Likert questions to show how gritty you are. The score on passion and perseverance are proportional to each other. According to her study, most people score a bit higher on perseverance than passion and the results show that passion and perseverance are not exactly the same. She explains her own score in her book, which was perseverance 5.0 and passion 4.6, and analyzes that "strange as it sounds, staying focused on consistent goals over time is more of a struggle for me than working hard

and bouncing back from setbacks” (p. 57). Whether or not language learners continue their study might be affected by their optimistic characteristics which are the result of a complex web of psychological states common to human beings. Therefore, it is not easy to clearly define the term perseverance. For this paper, the author defines perseverance as a student’s ability to maintain continuity in learning even when they face difficulties.

3. METHOD

This investigation was conducted over two semesters at a Japanese university. The first semester started in October 2017 and ended in January 2018. The second semester was from April 2018 to July 2018. The participants during the first semester were 67 first-year and second-year Japanese university students and the participants during the second period were 69 first-year and second-year students. At the beginning of each semester, students were asked to fill out a questionnaire. The questionnaire was created based on Van Blerkom’s (1996) survey questions to investigate academic perseverance. The questionnaire utilized a 5-point Likert scale and consisted of 17 questions (Appendix A). During the semester, students were exposed to materials that provide information about Growth Mindset (GM). Also, they completed a couple of self-reflection sheets to further comprehend the benefits of GM and encourage them to apply the theory to themselves. At the end of the semester, students filled out the same questionnaire in order that they might be compared with the results from the first questionnaire. Also, the participants were asked to provide written feedback regarding the GM training, which will be explained in the next section, at the end of each semester. Both questionnaires and the written feedback were anonymous and they were not graded assignments. The second semester participants of this investigation took the TOEIC IP Listening and Reading test as part of their regular curriculum. To further comprehend the results of the questionnaire, the correlation between their TOEIC score and the result of the questionnaire were analyzed. Participants were provided bilingual consent forms along with both questionnaires and also one regarding the use of their score. Only the results of those who consented were analyzed in this study.

4. MATERIALS

The author incorporated many motivational and influential materials in class, to raise students’ awareness on academic perseverance (the GM training), and she investigated the effects of such training on students’ perseverance. Materials used in this study are categorized into two types: input activities and output activities. As for the introduction of GM, a video from a TED Talk was shown to the participants. “Grit: The power of passion and perseverance” by psychologist Angela Duckworth. In her video, she mentions that one of the keys to improving perseverance is to have GM. For the second input activity, the concept of Carol Dweck’s GM was introduced in class. Followed by 5-weekly activities where participants were asked to reflect on their own experiences with perseverance and focusing on their goals. The worksheets for these activities were devised based on Feldman's (2017) workbook for grit. The author arranged some questions to suit Japanese

university students and translated them into Japanese so as to provide full comprehension for all the participants.

5. RESULTS

The questionnaire data from both the first and second semester participants were analyzed. Table 1 shows the results of the pre-test and post-test questionnaire on perseverance. The data shows that there is a slight decrease in academic perseverance in both post-tests. During the first semester, the post-test questionnaire was conducted during the last week of the semester when students had to complete a lot of big assignments and assessments. The author’s inferential observation is that they had a lot of anxiety concerning whether or not they could really make it through the semester, and this may have negatively influenced their responses compared to the beginning of the semester when they were still optimistic about classes. To eliminate the possibility of negative responses because of students’ anxiety at the end of the semester, during the second semester the post-test questionnaire was conducted three weeks before the end of the course. However, the results were the same as the first semester showing a slight decrease in academic perseverance.

Table 1
Pre-test/Post-test Questionnaire Results (first semester)

	Pre-test			Post-test	
	n	M (SD)		n	M (SD)
Academic perseverance	67	2.89 (0.3)		67	2.77 (0.4)

Pre-test/Post-test Questionnaire Results (second semester)

	Pre-test			Post-test	
	n	M (SD)		n	M (SD)
Academic perseverance	41	2.99 (0.3)		41	2.88 (0.4)

To further investigate if the GM training affected students to any degree, students were asked to give feedback on what they learned from the GM training materials. There were a couple of mixed feelings (positive and negative) comments but most of the reflections were positive. The mixed feeling feedback shows that some participants were still skeptical about the possibility of developing their own GM. Dweck (2016) calls this situation ‘mixed mindset’. They express the importance of having grit but they still believe that a GM (or grit) are inborn characteristics. Here are the examples of mixed mindsets in this research (Comments from students were not modified):

“I learned that efforts and grit are very important. But I think that efforts are not all. I think that not only effort but also IQ and talent are important. From now on, I will believe that the ability to learn can change with effort.”

“I think grit is a talent, however, I believe we will be able to have grit as long as we are conscious about the concept.”

Even though the academic perseverance scale shows a decrease in both semesters, many wrote positive comments on GM training:

“This story is very interest. I give a good result if I change mind. I know grow mindset is important.”

“I think that grit is very important. And, I learn that gritty and talent are different. Also, Growth mindset is great idea. But from now on, I don’t know that how to raise growth mindset. So, I want to study about grit. I learn gritty to watch the video.”

“I listen this video. I am impressed. I often give up. but give up is not good. To hear her story, I think that it was important to never give up.”

“The video which I watched had a good effect on me. I changed the mind about English. When I watched the videos, I became positive. I thought I wanted to use English actively and improve my English. So it is very good to be exposed to those inspiring videos in class.”

“I remember that TED’s grit movie. I was encouraged by the movie, and I knew (learned) about grit first time. Sometimes I think it is hard to go to school and get classes. But I try to come to school and bring homeworks. It is simple thing for everyone, but I’m lazy...”

Considering the fact that many participants gave positive feedback on the GM training, the result shows that it affected their ways of thinking towards English learning in a positive way. Nevertheless, if having perseverance is not connected to their English grades, students might not show interest in having the GM training. Therefore, in this study, the author also wanted to find out if academic perseverance has a correlation with academic performance. The correlation between academic perseverance and TOEIC score was investigated using Pearson’s product-moment correlation coefficient. As shown in Figure 1, there is a slight positive relationship between their academic perseverance and their TOEIC score ($r=.31$), indicating that having perseverance may be a key to improving their English skills.

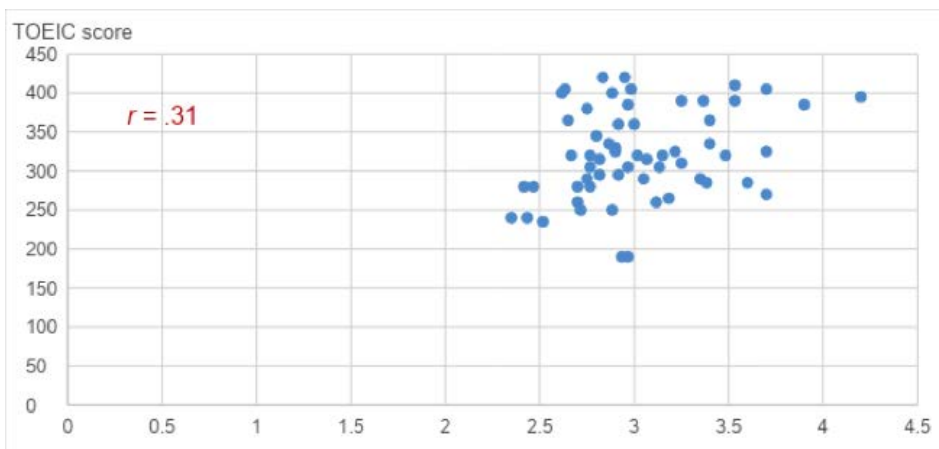


Figure 1. Correlation of Academic perseverance with TOEIC score. (Valid responses: n = 59).

6. DISCUSSION

As shown in the results section, exposing students to materials to enhance GM did not affect the participants' academic perseverance scale points in a positive way within a four-month semester. However, despite the fact that their points went down at the end of the semester, most of them gave positive feedback to what they learned in class. Even though the questionnaire was conducted a little earlier during the second period, it was still given to the participants toward the end of the semester, so they could have been feeling the pressure for upcoming assessments. Yet, their feedback to GM training was positive and they expressed their desire to continue pursuing a GM. This shows that it might be too premature to conclude that explicit training of GM does not affect students' academic perseverance. To investigate if GM training will improve students' perseverance, a longitudinal study is necessary. The data shows a slight correlation of academic perseverance to TOEIC scores ($r = .31$), which indicates that if teachers can enhance students' perseverance, they could help their students improve their English proficiency as a result.

7. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the author wants to denote these three points below. For research question 1 concerning how effective the (GM) training is in improving academic perseverance, the author believes:

1. In general, Japanese university students may show lower academic perseverance toward the end of a semester.
2. Students' reactions to Growth Mindset appear are positive, and they express their desire to change their mindset through the training.

Research question 2, asked whether academic perseverance correlates with English test scores or not, and this study observed:

3. A slight correlation between academic perseverance and TOEIC scores. By improving academic perseverance, they might be able to improve their English skills as well.

From the results of this study, the author concludes that although students' perseverance rate decreased at the end of the semester, it might be beneficial for language teachers to foster students' perseverance in their classes.

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APPENDIX A (Questionnaire for Academic Perseverance)

このアンケートは学生の学習意識を調査するもので、成績とは一切関係ありません。また、個人情報研究以外の目的で使われることはありません。

氏名： _____ / 日付 _____, 2018

Part I

- A) This is not at all descriptive of me.
自分には全く当てはまらない
- B) This describes my behavior on rare occasions.
稀に当てはまる
- C) This describes my behavior about half of the time.
半分くらい当てはまる
- D) This describes my typical behavior.
ほぼ当てはまる
- E) This is extremely descriptive of me.
完全に当てはまる

1. Once I start an assignment, I am highly motivated and work continuously on it until it is completed. 一度、何か課題を始めたら、やる気が高まり、最後までやり遂げる方だ。

2. I have a severe problem with procrastination. 私は何でも後回しにしてしまう癖がある。

3. At home, I was always very good about completing chores without delay. 家では、雑用（洗濯・掃除など日常のすべきこと）は後回しにせずきっちり行うのが上手い。
4. I can remember times in my life when I never seemed to be able to complete tasks that I started. 今まで、やり始めた課題が終わらないのではないかと感じたことが何度かある。
5. The most difficult thing for me is getting started on an assignment. Once I start, I find it relatively easy to complete. 一番難しいのは、何かの課題を始めることで、始めてしまえば、割とやり遂げるのは簡単だと思う。
6. In college, I always make it a habit of reading text assignments before class. 大学では、授業の前にリーディングのテキスト課題を読むことを習慣付けている。
7. If given a choice between working on an assignment and watching television, I often choose to watch television. 課題をするか、テレビを見るかという選択だったら、よくテレビを見る方を選ぶ。
8. When I have an assignment to complete, I often remember other assignments, chores, tasks, etc. that seem more important. 課題を終わらせなければならない状況で、もっと重要な他の課題や雑用や宿題などをよく思い出す。
9. I consider myself a highly organized person. 自分自身は、とても計画的な人間だと思う。
10. I find it very easy to motivate myself to complete a task. 何かの仕事をやる遂げるためのやる気を出すのは簡単だと思う。
11. I tend to cram for exams. テスト勉強は詰め込み（一夜漬け）が多い。
12. When preparing for exams, I typically spread out my studying over several days. テスト勉強をする時、資料や教科書類を机に何日も出しっぱなしにすることが多い。
13. When a term assignment is assigned, I begin working on it soon after it is made. 大きな課題が出された時、すぐにそれに取り掛かる。
14. I usually start term assignments a week or two before they are due. 大きな課題は締め切りの1週間から2週間前に始める。
15. I tend to think of myself as lazy. 私は怠け者な方だと思う。
16. I could complete assignments much more easily if I didn't have so many other important things going on in my life. 自分の生活の中でこんなにも多くの重要なことが起こっていなければ、もっと楽に宿題や課題が行える。
17. I have difficulty setting priorities, deciding what needs to be accomplished first. 優先順位を決めるのが苦手で、何を先に終わらせるべきか決め兼ねる。