



Influence of Student Engagement on L2 Writing of Filipino ESL Students: The Moderating Role of Academic Mindsets

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ABSTRACT

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While there is strong empirical evidence linking engagement, achievement, and school behavior, very little is known on factors of individual differences, which influence student engagement and second language (L2) writing. In this study, the researchers hypothesized that mindset, which is a learner's psychosocial attitude or belief that impels or inhibits academic work, intervenes between the relationship of student engagement and L2 writing. To test this, the researchers collected data from 216 ESL students in an engineering University in Manila, who accomplished two measures for student engagement and mindset and a reflective essay writing task for L2 writing. Results corroborate previous observation that cognitive engagement, psychological engagement, and growth mindset are associated with better L2 writing outcomes. With mindset as an intervening variable, the researchers found that ESL students with high engagement and a growth mindset, i.e., one's ability can improve with right intervention and effort, had highest scores in L2 writing as well. Students with a fixed mindset, i.e., one's ability will not improve regardless of intervention or effort, received the lowest L2 writing scores regardless of their levels of engagement. It is therefore suggested that L2 writing teachers endorse a growth mindset and promote a growth-supportive atmosphere in the ESL classroom.

KEYWORDS

L2 writing, individual differences, student engagement, mindset, growth mindset, fixed mindset

1. Introduction

Although the role of student engagement in the achievement of school outcomes is fairly established (Carini et al. 2006, Veiga et al. 2012), its interactions with factors of individual differences to explain second language (L2) writing outcomes remain understudied (Kormos, 2012). In this area of second language acquisition (SLA) research, previous studies had rather abundantly focused on L2 speaking and its cognitive and affective correlates (Amiryousefi 2018, Kelsen 2019, Macayan et al. 2018a, Quinto and Macayan 2019, Zhang and Ardasheva 2019). As a result, little is known about the influences of learner differences, such as beliefs (Sanders-Reio et al. 2014), interest (Ong 2015), self-efficacy (Castillo et al. 2020), aptitude and working memory (Mallahi et al. 2016), goal orientation (Quinto and Macayan 2020), and anxiety (Macayan et al. 2018b), on the L2 writing process, quality of the written output, and acquisition of L2 learning skills (Kormos 2012).

L2 writing is a daunting task for ESL writers who often have limited topical, rhetorical, and linguistic resources in the target language (Chu 2012). In this process, L2 writing teachers play a crucial role, since their feedback anchors student revisions (Wagner 2015). As such, these teachers must capitalize on the contribution of individual differences to provide effective and learner-sensitive instruction and feedback (Bakri 2015, Han and Hyland 2015, Oh et al. 2015, Rahimi 2015, Torrance et al. 1999, Yoon 2016). Given that individual differences variables are pivotal in “how language learners exploit the potential of writing to acquire an L2” (Kormos 2012, p. 392), it is imperative for the L2 writing teacher to understand these learner factors that impel or inhibit writing in a L2. L2 writing research is conduit to this endeavor as it could assist L2 writing teachers in delivering data-driven and research-informed instruction, feedback, and intervention on ESL students’ written work. Because research into the intersections of individual differences and L2 writing is only dawning, studies should shed light into many more learner variables, which have been examined in the area of L2 speaking (Kormos 2012) but not in L2 writing.

To redress this, the researchers examined the interplay between student engagement, L2 writing, and academic mindsets (Farrington et al. 2012) or the psychosocial attitudes or beliefs about oneself in relation to school work as a factor of individual differences in L2 writing output. Specifically, after establishing the individual influence of student engagement and mindsets on L2 writing, the researchers tested whether mindsets, i.e., growth or fixed (Dweck and Yeager 2019), interact between student engagement and L2 writing. The researchers collected data from 216 ESL students in an engineering University in Manila, Philippines, using two standard tests for student engagement and mindset and a performance task for L2 writing. To briefly anticipate the results, although the study found similar relationship between student engagement and L2 writing as reported in previous studies, ESL learners’ academic mindsets caused differences on the influence of student engagement on L2 writing. A growth mindset seemed to be particularly conducive to L2 writing even as levels of student engagement varied.

2. Student Engagement and L2 Writing

Engagement is the extent to which learners are committed in school and motivated to learn (Veiga et al. 2012). Appleton et al. (2008) further explains that student engagement specifically pertains to the varying degrees of engagement that learners exert on learning (cf. ‘school engagement’, Fredricks et al. 2004, Furlong et al. 2003). Since student engagement is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct, the researchers use student engagement to refer to more internal indicators of students’ effort towards learning, i.e., *psychological engagement*, which refers to “feelings of identification or belonging, and relationships with teachers and peers”, and *cognitive*

engagement, which is anchored on “self-regulation, relevance of schoolwork to future endeavors, value of learning, and personal goals and autonomy” (Appleton et al. 2006, p. 429).

An increasing number of studies have documented the benefits of engaging students in the L2 writing process (Fan and Xu 2020, Han 2017, Han and Hyland 2015, Hyland 2003, Lo and Hyland 2007, Norazmi et al. 2017). These studies posit that students who are engaged are able to better demonstrate expected educational outcomes (Klem and Connell 2004). However, this pursuit in L2 writing instruction can be overwhelming. Student engagement is influenced by several factors of learner differences (Viega et al. 2012) and is therefore not fixed (Lo and Hyland 2007). As such, L2 writing teachers have been encouraged to think of ways in raising student engagement in the L2 writing process. To this end, previous researchers have explored strategies such as flipped approach in writing instruction (Norazmi et al. 2017), new writing programs (Lo and Hyland 2007), teacher feedback (Hyland 2003), teacher support (Klem and Connell 2004), and peer feedback (Fan and Xu 2020) among others.

While there is a general consensus that student engagement impacts L2 writing positively, this assertion is often drawn from general studies of student engagement in school, often based on the work of Appleton and his colleagues (Appleton et al. 2006, 2008). It is therefore imperative that, along with teacher-led studies on engaging students in the L2 writing process, a separate line of inquiry is devoted to exploring factors of individual differences, which directly influence L2 writing processes and outcomes (Kormos 2012). This line of inquiry has seen a number of studies that examined cognitive and motivational factors in L2 writing (Bakri 2015, Mallahi et al. 2016, Oh et al. 2015, Ong 2015, Rahimi 2015, Sanders-Reio et al. 2014). By investigating student engagement and individual differences in L2 writing, researchers can provide nuanced and context-specific assertions regarding the role of learner variables in this less explored area of SLA research. Understanding how student engagement strengthens or weakens as a result of learner differences can ultimately guide teachers in crafting interventions and programs, which acknowledge that cognitive and motivational differences among learners lead to differential success in L2 writing (Kormos 2012).

3. Mindset as a Factor of Learner Differences

Decades of research into student motivation and student beliefs about intelligence and academic ability led to the widely embraced notion of mindset (Dweck 2006, Dweck et al. 2014). Farrington (2013) defines academic mindsets as psychosocial attitudes or beliefs about oneself in relation to academic work. These attitudes or beliefs influence human behavior (Dweck and Yeager 2019) and, in the context of learning, have been described as powerful constructs which impel or inhibit one’s academic work (Farrington 2013). Stanford University professor Carol S. Dweck whose research trailblazed current understanding of the psycho-motivational construct proposed two kinds of mindset and their influence on academic success: a *fixed mindset* and a *growth mindset* (Dweck 2006).

As a factor of learner differences, mindsets delineate students in terms of their view on the nature of intelligence. Students with a fixed mindset posit that intelligence is carved in stone (Dweck 2006) and therefore comes in fixed quantity, which they either have or not (Dweck et al. 2014). It is likely that these students have a desire to outperform others or avoid looking dumb by underperforming. Yet, these desires are not associated with perseverance efforts (Dweck et al. 2014, Farrington 2013). In contrast, students with a growth mindset believe that intelligence is malleable and can therefore be improved through effort and learning (Dweck et al. 2014). For these students, the brain and, by extension, intelligence is “like a muscle”, which becomes stronger through practice

(Farrington 2013, p. 6). Unlike a fixed mindset, a growth mindset is associated with mastery goals, in which student motivation for learning is geared towards mastery of knowledge or skill (Dweck et al., 2014).

Researchers, teachers, parents, and coaches have long endorsed the promotion of a growth mindset and overcoming of a fixed mindset. Robinson (2017) explains that a growth mindset improves how students approach their own learning and motivates them to pursue healthy study habits, leading to academic achievement and success in the long term. In the area of L2 writing instruction, Bai et al. (2020) found that a growth mindset, along with self-efficacy beliefs, had the highest predictive power on self-regulated learning and competence in writing in English. This positive influence is tapped in several recent studies, which examined pedagogical interventions that support a growth mindset, such as writing conferences (Truax 2017, 2018), reflective journals (Hussein 2018), mindset-embedded writing workshop (Schrodt et al. 2019), and design thinking (Yeager et al. 2016). The general agreement on the benefits of a growth mindset is often set against the backdrop that a fixed mindset leads to considerable impediments to student growth, particularly because it is very common among students and teachers (Wright 2018).

With the increasing number of studies that examine strategies to foster growth thinking and growth-supportive practices in the L2 writing classroom, studies that examine mindset as a factor of individual differences in ESL and EFL writing will be an equally important research agenda (Bai et al. 2020). Research into the influence of mindset, particularly as it interacts with other learner variables and in understudied contexts, will be useful in informing decisions and actions towards a culture of growth in the L2 writing classroom. As such, in this paper, the following questions were addressed:

1. Do student engagement and academic mindsets individually influence L2 writing among Filipino ESL students?
2. Do academic mindsets moderate the influence of student engagement on L2 writing among Filipino ESL students?

4. Method

4.1 Measures

Two self-report surveys and a writing performance task were used to collect data for this study. First, the Student Engagement Instrument (SEI) was used to measure student engagement (Appleton et al. 2006). The researchers used in particular the sub-measures for the more stable factors of cognitive engagement and psychological engagement to determine the extent of students' commitment and motivation to learn in school. The cognitive engagement measure consists of 14 items, corresponding to control and relevance of school work (9 items) and future aspirations and goals (5 items), while the psychological engagement measure consists of 19 items, which are grouped according to teacher and student relationship (9 items), peer support for learning (6 items), and family support for learning (4 items). Items in the SEI are accomplished along a four-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, and 4 = strongly disagree). Items were coded (and reversed items were recoded). Higher scores indicated higher levels of cognitive and psychological engagement. The components of SEI for cognitive engagement are both reliable with $\alpha = 0.88$. and $\alpha = 0.83$, respectively.

Second, Dweck's Mindset Instrument (DMI) was used to collect data for mindset. The 16-item instrument consists of eight items for mindset on intelligence and another eight for mindset on talent. The researchers used

only the items pertaining to intelligence, anchored on Professor Carol Dweck's theory of motivation and the associations between students' views of intelligence and school behavior (P'Pool 2012). Items are rated along a six-point agreement scale (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = mostly agree, 4 = mostly disagree, 5 = disagree, 6 = strongly disagree). Items 1, 2, 4, and 6 pertain to a fixed mindset, while Items 3, 5, 7, and 8 to a growth mindset. Scores for fixed mindset items are coded as is (1 to 6), while scores for growth mindset are coded in reverse (6 to 1); greater disagreement means closer to a fixed mindset. Sample items include "You have a certain amount of intelligence, and you really can't do much to change it" (Item 1 – Fixed) and "No matter who you are, you can significantly change your intelligence level" (Item 3 – Growth). A mean score for the eight items was calculated and the participants were categorized either as fixed mindset ($\bar{x} = 1.00-3.49$) or growth mindset ($\bar{x} = 3.50-6.00$). DMI is the most widely used measure of mindset with $\alpha = 0.94$.

Finally, for L2 writing, the researchers collected data from the institutional writing test, which had been scheduled parallel the data collection. Freshman students enrolled in the institution where the study took place take this test as an institutional entry requirement of an English for Academic Purposes class. The students were asked to individually write a reflective essay on the topic, "The one thing I would like to change in this world." Each essay was then evaluated using a writing rubric, which has been in use in the institution for ten years at the time of data collection (Quinto, 2014). Each student was given an overall writing score ranging from 1.00 (poor writer) to 5.00 (excellent writer) in 0.50 increments. A writing score of 1.00 generally meant that the written output was difficult to understand due to major flaws in sentence construction, grammar, and vocabulary. A score of 3.00 meant an adequate level of description with inputs to support the writer's idea, although, at times, tended to repeat ideas and committed some mistakes on sentence construction, grammar, and vocabulary. A score of 5.00 corresponded to an excellent level of description and audience awareness in writing; inputs richly supported the writer's idea and sentences, grammar, and vocabulary were correct in form and appropriate in content. Data from the writing task were treated as real scores with the students' writing score corresponding their actual writing ability.

4.2 Participants

Participants were engineering students as learners of English, which are a category of ESL learners increasingly becoming an interesting subject of language learning inquiry (Borlongan and Quinto 2015, Kassim and Ali 2010, Macayan and Quinto 2015, Quinto 2015, Quinto and Castillo 2016, Quinto et al. 2021, Radzuan and Kaur 2011), primarily for their being at the receiving end of efforts to produce 'global engineers' (Chan and Fishbein 2009, Lantada and Márquez Sevillano 2017, Riemer 2002, Shrestha et al. 2015, 2016, Spence and Liu 2013). In total, the researchers recruited 216 engineering students (male = 167; female = 49) enrolled in six different English for Academic Purposes classes in an engineering university in Manila, Philippines during the school year 2018-2019. Their ages ranged from 16-19 ($\bar{x} = 17.25$) at the time of data collection. They were selected purposefully based on their year level, enrollment in the EAP course, and willingness and consent to participate in the study. The institution where the study was set prides itself as a premiere engineering university, having been the first Southeast Asian university with programs accredited by the distinguished United States-based Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, Inc. (ABET).

4.3 Procedures

Since the participants were recruited from different EAP classes, it was necessary for the teacher to actively participate in the data collection as well. Initial consultations with teachers handling EAP classes took place in August 2018. Endorsements and approvals within the university and from different coordinators were secured. These were relayed to the teachers who gave consent to participate. The rationale of the study was discussed with them. Thereafter, they distributed individual consent letters to students containing information about the study. Once consents had been secured, data collection commenced in September 2018.

The participants accomplished the SEI and DMI in one sitting during one EAP class day. The researchers managed to retrieve 216 materials from students who accomplished the instruments. The essay writing task, meanwhile, happened two days after, during the schedule of the entry-level writing assessment in the EAP classes. To ensure consistency of writing scores, the teachers, who were recruited, were those who participated in the most recent language assessment calibration session, i.e., teacher-raters. During the session, which happened two months before data collection as part of the university's language assessment integrity efforts, a trained language assessment calibrator sat down with the teacher-raters to assess and discuss their evaluation of written samples of essay. For the teachers to be considered calibrated with the assessment standards, they should have been able to give an assessment score that is within an acceptable range, i.e., ± 0.50 , from the standard score, i.e., the calibrator's score. The goal of this session was for the teacher-raters to be able to use the writing rubric and scoring guide with greater consistency.

The teacher-raters were given sufficient time to read and score all reflective essays. Dataset had been completed in October 2018 as soon as all teacher-raters had been able to mark the students' essays and provide a copy of the scores. The researchers then tabulated all data in Microsoft Excel and the tabulated data were subjected in quantitative analyses. Inferential statistics was used to analyze the data. The researchers initially used main effects analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine the individual influence of cognitive engagement, psychological engagement, and mindset as independent variables on L2 writing as dependent variable. Then, the researchers proceeded with factorial ANOVA to test the interaction of mindset with each of the two factors of student engagement in predicting L2 writing scores.

5. Results

5.1. Individual Influences of Student Engagement and Mindset on L2 Writing

A first set of tests using main effects analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine the individual influences of the independent variables on L2 writing. Table 1 shows the results of the main effects ANOVA with cognitive engagement [$F(1, 212) = 29.97; p = 0.00; \eta^2 = 0.03$], psychological engagement [$F(1, 212) = 6.84; p = 0.009; \eta^2 = 0.12$], and mindset [$F(1, 212) = 44.37; p = 0.00; \eta^2 = 0.17$] as significant predictors of L2 writing test scores.

Table 1. Main Effects of Cognitive Engagement, Psychological Engagement, and Mindset on L2 Writing

Independent Variables	SS	df	MS	F	p	ηp^2
Cognitive Engagement	7.97	2	7.97	29.97	0.00**	0.03
Psychological Engagement	1.84	2	1.84	6.84	0.009**	0.12
Mindset	11.80	1	11.80	44.37	0.00**	0.17

** $p < 0.01$

Figure 1 further elucidates the significant relationship between each of the three independent variables and L2 writing. The graphs show that participants who had (a) high cognitive engagement, (b) high psychological engagement, (c) and growth mindset scored significantly higher in L2 writing than their counterparts with low cognitive engagement, low psychological engagement, and fixed mindset, respectively.

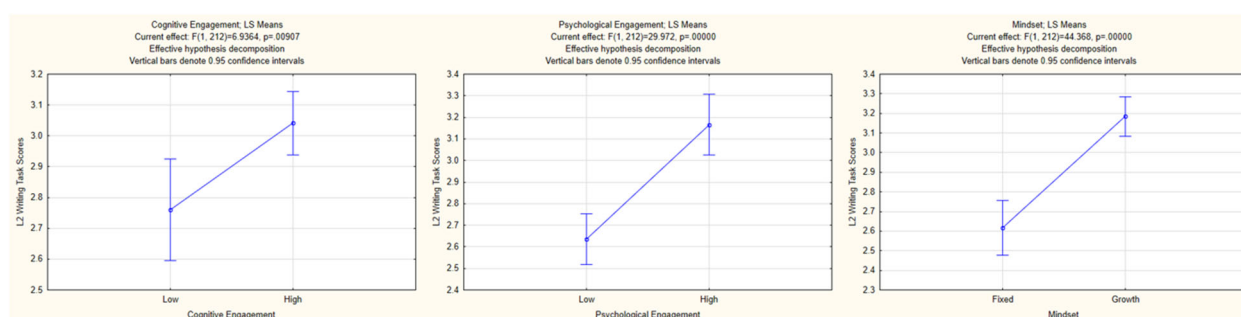


Figure 1. High Cognitive Engagement (a), High Psychological Engagement (b), and Growth Mindset (c) Predict Higher L2 Writing Task Scores

5.2. Moderating Role of Mindset on Student Engagement and L2 Writing

A second set of tests using factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine the interaction effects of the independent variables on L2 writing. Table 2 shows the results of the factorial ANOVA for cognitive engagement and mindset [$F(1, 212) = 46.27$; $p = 0.00$; $\eta p^2 = 0.17$] and for psychological engagement and mindset [$F(1, 212) = 4.48$; $p = 0.04$; $\eta p^2 = 0.02$]. These results reveal very significant and significant interaction effects on L2 writing test scores respectively. Figures 2 and 3 further illustrate the nature of these interactive relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable.

Table 2. Interaction Effect of Mindset on Cognitive Engagement and L2 Writing

Independent Variables	SS	df	MS	F	p	p^2
CogEng*Mindset	11.53	1	11.53	46.27	0.00**	0.17
PsyEng*Mindset	1.20	1	1.20	4.48	0.04*	0.02

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Figure 2 explicates the very significant interaction ($p < 0.01$) between cognitive engagement and mindset in predicting L2 writing scores. The graph shows that a growth mindset very significantly interacted with high cognitive engagement in predicting higher L2 writing test scores. Participants with this combination of cognitive engagement and mindset received highest reflective essay scores, compared with their counterparts who had low cognitive engagement or high cognitive engagement but with a fixed mindset.

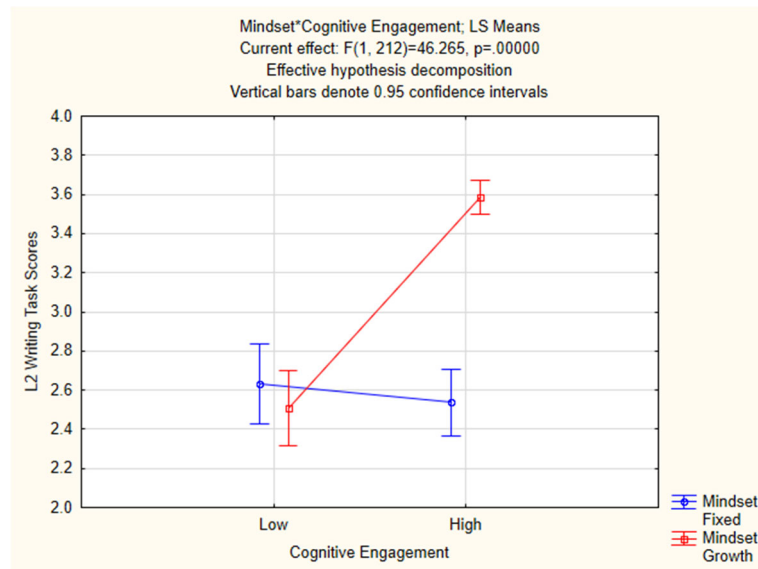


Figure 2. Growth Mindset Moderates the Influence of Cognitive Engagement on L2 Writing.

Figure 3 illustrates the significant interaction ($p < 0.05$) between psychological engagement and mindset in predicting L2 writing scores. The graph shows that a growth mindset significantly interacted with high psychological engagement in predicting higher L2 writing test scores. Participants with a combination of high psychological engagement and growth mindset received highest reflective essay scores, compared with their counterparts who had low psychological engagement or high psychological engagement but with a fixed mindset. A combination of low psychological engagement and fixed mindset yielded lowest mean scores for the written outputs.

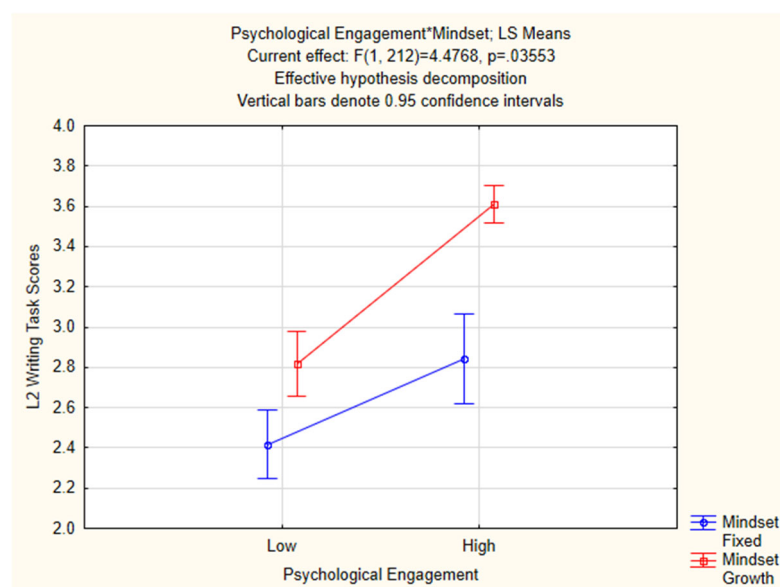


Figure 3. Growth Mindset Moderates the Influence of Psychological Engagement on L2 Writing.

6. Discussion

Several a priori assumptions guided this study on the influence of student engagement and the role of mindsets in the understudied yet emerging research agenda of individual differences in L2 writing. First, the researchers yield that, although engagement has been linked to better outcomes in achievement and school behavior, very little has been done in the context of L2 writing. This dearth in studies could be attributed to challenges in conceptualizing engagement, i.e., learner variable (Appleton et al. 2008) vis-à-vis school-related variable (Fredricks et al. 2004, Furlong et al. 2003). Second, the role of individual differences has been investigated in L2 speaking, but not so much on L2 writing (Kormos 2012). Finally, although researchers, teachers, parents, and coaches already and rightfully endorse the promotion of a growth mindset, primarily for its observed positive impacts on writing processes and outcomes (Bai et al. 2020, Hussein 2018, Schrodt et al. 2019, Truax 2017, Yeager et al. 2016), studies focusing on the interaction of mindset with other learner variables will produce nuanced and context-specific knowledge on this phenomenon and, most importantly, inform instructional and motivational efforts towards a culture of growth in the L2 writing classroom. Thus, the researchers examined the individual and interaction influences of student engagement and mindset on L2 writing among 216 engineering students as learners of English.

Consistent with findings in previous studies, student engagement (Appleton et al. 2006, 2008) and mindset (Dweck 2006, Dweck et al. 2014) were significantly and independently associated with higher L2 writing test scores. In this study, the researchers found that high cognitive engagement, high psychological engagement, and growth mindset resulted in higher-rated reflective essays among the ESL students. These findings are consistent with views on the links between student engagement, mindset, and achievement in school.

As regards student engagement, the researchers observed that students who were more engaged, i.e., more committed in school and motivated to learn (Viega et al. 2012), demonstrated better academic outcomes (Klem and Connell 2004). Higher levels of engagement resulted in higher-rated L2 essays (Lo and Hyland 2007). Theorizing student engagement as a multidimensional construct in this study also paved the way for the researchers to better understand indicators of student engagement and their influence on L2 writing. Both cognitive and psychological engagement (Appleton et al. 2006) were associated with better L2 writing essays, suggesting that intrinsic motivations for learning and the roles of significant others, i.e., parents, peers, and L2 writing teachers can be tapped to better engage students in L2 writing.

As for mindset, growth thinking among ESL students was associated with higher L2 writing scores as well. This positive association is consistent with the notion that a growth mindset improves students' approach and motivation towards learning and assists them towards better study behaviors (Robinson 2017). This finding lends further support for efforts to develop pedagogical interventions, which promote a growth mindset towards writing (Hussein 2018, Schrodt et al. 2019, Truax 2017, 2018, Yeager et al. 2016). L2 writing might, in fact, be an interesting area for mindset research. Although tested only for its impact on L2 writing test scores, it might be that students with a growth mindset, thinking that the outcome can improve through practice, engaged in writing steps that led to better written output, such as constant correction and revision during writing (Quinto and Macayan 2019). The importance of the growth mindset construct is further strengthened by the findings on its interaction with student engagement in predicting L2 writing. A growth mindset interacted very positively with either cognitive or psychological engagement. This significant interaction was observed for both high cognitive engagement and high psychological engagement. Equally important, in all possible interactions, a fixed mindset always translated in lower-rated L2 writing scores, even when the level of engagement is high. This detrimental

interaction with student engagement calls for efforts to raise the capacity of ESL students for growth thinking and away from the impediments of fixed mindset (Wright 2018).

7. Conclusion

The aim of the study was to examine the links between student engagement, mindset, and L2 writing. Engineering students ($n = 216$) who were learners of English as a second language (ESL) participated in the study by accomplishing two measures for student engagement and mindset and participating in a reflective essay writing task in English. The researchers found that cognitive engagement, psychological engagement, and growth mindset are associated with higher L2 writing test scores; (b) growth mindset interacts positively with high student engagement levels in predicting L2 writing test scores; and (c) fixed mindset always negatively impacts L2 writing outputs even as the levels of student engagement differ. These findings provide further support to the widely embraced benefits of growth mindset in academic work. At the same time, that the study had been set in the often-ignored area of SLA research, which is individual differences in L2 writing, the same findings offer an opportunity for researchers and L2 writing teachers to integrate growth mindset as students engage in the L2 writing process. Farrington (2013) stressed four general ways to do this, which the researchers operationalize to serve as anchors of growth-centered student engagement practices in the L2 writing classroom. Whether it is through growth-centered messages or growth-supportive teaching strategies, L2 writing teachers must train ESL students to think that (a) they belong to the L2 writing community, (b) they can succeed in L2 writing, (c) their L2 writing ability and competence, although maybe insufficient at the time, can grow through effort and practice, and (d) L2 writing has value for the students' present academic work and future endeavors. Through this, L2 writing teachers can effectively endorse a growth mindset and promote a growth-supportive atmosphere in the L2 writing classroom. Future research can design and test L2 writing interventions that tap the potential of these four growth-centered student engagement practices in supporting ESL students to write in English as a second language.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: Tertiary Education