

Research Article

Exploring the Interplay of Mindset and Emotion in EFL Learning through an Attributional Lens

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ABSTRACT

Grounded in attribution theory, this study explored how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' attributional reasoning interacts with their mindsets and emotional experiences during the process of foreign language learning. A qualitative design was utilized, involving semi-structured interviews and an open-ended questionnaire with 34 EFL learners across elementary, intermediate, and advanced proficiency levels. Data were collected over a 12-week period. Participants completed the Success Attribution Open-ended Questionnaire and engaged in interviews. Findings showed that learners who demonstrated a growth mindset tended to attribute success to internal and controllable factors. This, in turn, led to positive emotions such as enjoyment and hope. However, learners with fixed mindsets attributed setbacks to perceived lack of ability and experienced frustration. The results provided empirical support for the interdependence of cognitive and affective dimensions in L2 learning and emphasize the interplay between learners' mindsets and emotions. This study adds to our understanding of L2 learner psychology by integrating attribution theory, mindset, and emotion. It offers insights into how learners' attributional reasoning forms their emotional and motivational trajectories, providing both theoretical and pedagogical implications for fostering growth-oriented and emotionally supportive language learning environments.



Introduction

Second/foreign language (L2) learning is a complex psychological process which is influenced not only by linguistic and cognitive factors but also by learners' interpretations of their experiences, their beliefs about ability, and their emotional responses (Tian & McCafferty, 2022). Understanding how these cognitive and affective dimensions interact helps teachers understand why some learners persist in their learning while others lose their motivation (Jiang et al., 2024). Attribution theory (Weiner, 2014) provides a framework for understanding how learners interpret their experiences in L2 learning and how their interpretations influence their motivation and emotion. In L2 contexts, learners attribute outcomes to factors such as effort, ability, teacher support, and learning conditions (Faber, 2019; Hsieh & Schallert, 2008; Shurovi et al., 2025; Soriano-Ferrer & Alonso-Blanco, 2020). These attributions are important because they influence learners' emotional reactions and future behaviors. In the language classroom, these attributional patterns strongly shape learners' willingness to participate and their resilience when they face challenges (Fischer & Luiz, 2024).

Building on this foundation, research on learners' beliefs about their abilities has brought the concept of mindset to the forefront. Mindset theory which is closely related to attributional reasoning focuses on learners' beliefs about whether their ability can change (Dweck, 2006). A growth mindset fosters persistence and adaptive coping while a fixed mindset often leads to avoidance and frustration after failures (Khajavy et al., 2020; Lou & Zarrinabadi, 2022; Yeager & Dweck, 2020; Zarrinabadi et al., 2022). Moreover, mindset and attribution are not independent constructs. Recent research (Zhang et al.,

2021) suggests that learners' mindsets shape the way they interpret attributions and thus influence the emotional and motivational consequences of success or failure.

Recent scholarship in language learning and teaching has increasingly recognized the role of learners' psychological dimensions, particularly their mindset and emotions, in shaping their language learning outcomes (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016; Fathi et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Lou & Zarrinabadi, 2022; MacIntyre & Vincze, 2017; MacIntyre et al., 2019). In line with the 'affective turn' in second and foreign language research (Pavlenko, 2013), this renewed attention highlights the pivotal role emotions play in the language learning process. Emotions play a central role in language learning by influencing learner motivation and engagement which ultimately affects their achievement (Dewaele, 2015).

The above constructs offer complementary perspectives on the cognitive and affective processes that shape L2 learning. Attribution theory explains how learners interpret their success and failure, mindset theory reveals how beliefs about their ability influence these interpretations; on the other hand, emotion research highlights how such beliefs and attributions influence their affective experiences. Despite their conceptual overlap, few studies have examined these concepts in an integrated manner, particularly within EFL contexts where exposure to the target language is largely classroom-based. Existing research has predominantly relied on quantitative designs that establish statistical associations among these constructs. Consequently, little is known about how learners themselves interpret the relationships among their causal explanations, beliefs about language ability, and emotional experiences as they navigate

everyday language learning. To address this gap, the present study examined how EFL learners interpret their language learning experiences through the interrelations among attribution, mindset, and emotion. Furthermore, it explored how both attributional patterns and mindsets influence their affective responses to language learning. Therefore, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1. How do EFL learners attribute their successes and failures in second language learning, and how are these attributions related to their underlying mindsets about their language ability?

RQ2. How do learners' attributional patterns and mindsets shape their emotional experiences during the process of L2 learning?

Literature Review

Attribution Theory and L2 Learning

Attribution theory which was first introduced by Heider (1958) and later developed by Weiner (1976, 2014), explains how individuals interpret the causes of events and how these interpretations form their emotions, motivation, and behaviors (Zhang et al., 2021). In L2 learning, common attributional causes include effort, ability, interest, teacher quality, and learning conditions (Gobel & Mori, 2007; Guan et al., 2024; Mori et al., 2010). Recent research emphasizes that these attributional causes are not merely explanatory but have motivational and affective consequences. For instance, Shurovi et al. (2025) examined how learners' achievement attributions relate to their basic psychological needs and motivation. They showed that adaptive attributions significantly enhance intrinsic motivation among EFL learners. Similarly, Guan et al. (2024) found that learners who attributed L2 writing

performance to internal causes such as effort and ability reported greater behavioral and emotional engagement, whereas those who emphasize external causes like luck or contextual factors showed low engagement. These findings suggest that attributions are cognitive and motivational mechanisms that link learners' interpretations of their success and failure to their persistence and affective involvement in L2 learning. Moreover, scholarship on attributions in learning has shown that they are context-sensitive and are influenced by cultural norms (Mori, 2010) and are linked to learner variables such as self-efficacy (Hsieh & Kang, 2010), motivation (Kálmán & Eugenio, 2015), and persistence (Hsieh & Schallert, 2008). Recent studies (Fischer & Luiz, 2024; Nakamura, 2018) suggest that adaptive attributions, particularly those emphasizing controllable, internal factors such as effort, are associated with greater willingness to communicate and engagement in language learning. Taken together, this body of scholarship establishes that attributions carry motivational and affective consequences, however it does not adequately explain how these consequences are filtered through learners' broader beliefs about the malleability of their ability. It remains unclear whether the same attribution carries the same emotional weight for learners who see ability as fixed versus improvable. This is a question this study began to address by considering attribution alongside mindset.

Mindset and L2 Learning

Mindset theory (Dweck, 2006) offers a complementary perspective by focusing on learners' beliefs about the malleability of their ability. Recent theoretical models (Zhang et al., 2021) have conceptualized mindsets and attributions as intertwined concepts. That is,

learners with a growth mindset view language ability as improvable through their effort and strategy. Growth mindset has been linked to higher motivation and more adaptive learning behaviors (Khajavy et al., 2020; Lou & Zarrinabadi, 2022). In contrast, learners with a fixed mindset believe that their language ability is innate and unchangeable and therefore, it can lead to avoidance of challenges and vulnerability to negative emotions after setbacks (Yeager & Dweck, 2020). Scholarship on L2 mindset has shown that learners with growth mindsets use metacognitive strategies more frequently and have greater levels of enjoyment (Zarrinabadi et al., 2021). Studies employing interventions in EFL settings have demonstrated that targeted instruction about how to adapt in different learning situations can shift learners' mindsets and lead to higher levels of proficiency (Lou & Noels, 2020; Zhao et al., 2023). Building on Weiner's (2014) causal framework, Zhang et al. (2021) argue that learners' mindsets may affect how they interpret the stability of these causes. For instance, learners who have a growth mindset tend to perceive their ability as unstable and therefore improvable. In contrast, learners with a fixed mindset regard their ability as stable, which often results in helplessness and reduced motivation after failure. These findings indicate that mindsets operate as both antecedents and moderators of attributional reasoning and emotional experience in L2 learning. What this literature has not yet established empirically, especially in EFL settings, is how mindset and attribution jointly manifest in learners' own accounts of their success and failure, that is, whether learners' explanations for change in their motivation and mindset can themselves be read as evidence of an underlying growth or fixed orientation.

Emotions in L2 Learning

Emotions in language learning are defined as complex psychological states which involve learners' physiological, cognitive, and behavioral changes (Elahi Shirvan et al, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). In educational psychology, achievement emotions refer to emotions that are directly related to achievement activities (e.g., studying, participating in class) or achievement outcomes (e.g., success or failure on examinations) (Pekrun, 2006). Pekrun's Control-Value Theory classifies these emotions according to their valence (positive vs. negative), activation (activating vs. deactivating), and whether they are linked to learning activities or achievement outcomes. Examples include enjoyment, hope, and pride as positive emotions, and anxiety, frustration, shame, and boredom as negative emotions. These emotions influence learners' motivation, engagement, self-regulation, and academic performance.

In the context of L2 learning, emotions include both positive and negative affective experiences that influence and are influenced by the learning process (Dewaele, 2015). These affective states are different from moods because of their intensity, and from motivation because they involve immediate experience (MacIntyre, 2002).

The study of language learners' emotions has shifted over the past two decades which reflects broader trends in educational psychology. Current L2 emotion research emphasizes three key trends. First, studies examine the co-occurrence of positive and negative emotions. For example, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2016) view FLE (Foreign Language Enjoyment) and FLA (Foreign Language Anxiety) as the "right and left feet" of language learners. Second, researchers are investigating contextual influences such as

classroom environment and the relationship between teachers and students (Li, 2020; Wu & Kabilan, 2025). Third, scholars explore emotion fluctuations, as shown in Waninge et al.'s (2014) study of motivation and anxiety. Considering the above studies, emotions in L2 learning can be understood as the affective outcomes of learners' attributional reasoning and mindset orientations (Weiner, 2014; Zhang et al., 2021). Even so, the emotion literature reviewed above largely treats affective experience as a general outcome of the L2 learning context rather than as a direct consequence of the specific causal explanations and ability beliefs learners hold. Little is known about which attribution-mindset combinations correspond to which emotions in learners' own words

Interplay of Attribution, Mindset, and Emotion in L2 Learning

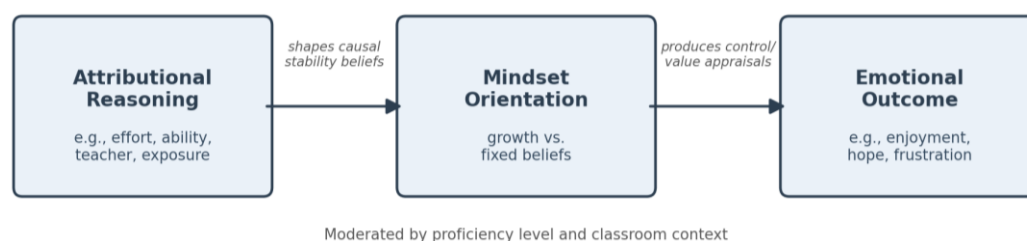
The above studies emphasize that attribution, mindset, and emotion are interrelated components of learners' cognitive-affective systems that influence their motivation in L2 learning. Attribution theory highlights the way learners' causal explanations for their success and failure influence their emotional and behavioral responses (Guan et

al., 2024; Weiner, 2014). Mindset theory, on the other hand, explains how learners' beliefs about their ability guide these attributions and moderate their effects (Lou & Zarrinabadi, 2022; Zhang et al., 2021). Emotions, in turn, are the affective outcomes of these attributional and mindset processes caused by learners' motivation in different stages of their learning (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016; Fathi et al., 2024). Despite increasing recognition of these links, (e.g., Zhang et al., 2021) little empirical research, particularly in the EFL context, has examined how these constructs interact.

Figure 1 summarizes the conceptual model that guided the present study's inductive analysis. Building on Weiner's (2014) attribution theory, Zhang et al.'s (2021) attribution-mindset framework, and Pekrun's (2006) control-value theory, the model proposes that learners' causal attributions for success and failure inform their broader mindset about the stability of their ability, and that this mindset, in turn, shapes the control and value appraisals that give rise to specific emotions. The model presented here provides the interpretive lens for the qualitative analysis reported in the study.

Figure 1

Proposed conceptual model linking attribution, mindset, and emotion



Overall, the literature indicates that attributional reasoning, mindset, and emotion are mutually influential rather than

independent psychological constructs in L2 learning. Exploring these interrelationships qualitatively can provide deeper insights into

the processes through which learners make sense of their language learning experiences and negotiate their cognitive and emotional responses.

Method

Context and Participants

The context of this study is situated within a private language center in Iran. Learners enrolled in EFL courses at three proficiency levels: elementary, intermediate, and advanced. The curriculum focused on skill development in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The courses were part of the language center's regular offerings and were designed to enhance learners' communicative competence in English through a blend of instruction and practice. The courses followed the *American English File* series by Oxford University Press which integrates the four skills. Each group of learners used a textbook appropriate for their proficiency level: Book 1 for elementary learners, Book 2 for intermediate learners, and Book 3 for advanced learners. In order to enhance learning, classes were held in a conventional classroom environment equipped with contemporary teaching tools like audio and video equipment. Pair work, group discussions, role-plays, and problem-solving exercises were all part of the highly engaging sessions. The courses were held 12 weeks and each session lasted 90 minutes. Many participants reported limited exposure to English outside the classroom which indicated the critical role of classroom learning for their language development.

Participants of the study were 34 EFL learners. They were both male and female aged between 17 and 38 years. Aligning with the study's objective, a purposive sampling method was employed to select participants.

Therefore, three preexisting classes, each representing a proficiency level, were included in the study: beginner level (13 learners: 5 males and 8 females), intermediate level (11 learners: 3 males and 8 females), and advanced level (10 learners: 6 males and 4 females). These three intact classes were purposively selected because they represented the full range of proficiency levels offered at the language center, which allowed us to examine whether learners' attributional and mindset patterns differ across developmental stages of L2 proficiency. Access to the classes was also facilitated by the fact that they were taught by one of the researchers. Most participants had a similar educational background. They had studied English for six years during junior and senior high school. At the beginning of the course, most learners reported limited opportunities or necessity to use English in their daily lives. This highlighted the importance of their classroom experiences in shaping their language learning outcomes. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. To ensure ethical compliance, participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and used solely for research purposes.

Instruments

Two instruments were used to collect data: an open-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview.

Success Attribution Open-ended Questionnaire. The questionnaire, developed by Nakamura (2018) and previously used to examine attributions and emotions in L2 learning, began with a scaled item asking participants to rate changes in their mindset toward learning English on a 7-point scale from 1 (very negative) to 7 (very positive),

followed by an open-ended question asking learners to explain the causes of these shifts. The same format was used for a second pair of items about motivation: participants rated changes in their motivation to enhance their L2 skills on a scale from 1 (very demotivated) to 7 (very motivated) and then explained the rationale behind their ratings. The motivation items were retained in this study because learners' open-ended explanations for motivational change frequently referenced the same causal factors (effort, ability, instruction) used to explain mindset change, and so served as a converging, triangulating source of evidence for learners' mindset orientation.

Semi-Structured Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand how EFL learners experience their language learning and the impact of these experiences on their emotions and mindset toward language learning. The interviews complemented the open-ended questionnaire and allowed a deeper exploration of learners' personal narratives. Questions were designed based on the literature on emotional engagement in L2 learning (e.g., Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Ross & Rivers, 2018) and focused on learners' enjoyment of learning and using English and their feelings about their experiences. See appendix A.

To ensure that participants could freely voice their opinions, the interviews were conducted in Persian. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes and was audio-recorded for transcription and analysis.

Data Collection

The study's data collection took place around 12 weeks and involved three stages. After obtaining approval from language center officials, three EFL classes representing elementary, intermediate, and advanced

proficiency levels were selected to participate. The classes were taught by one of the researchers. Throughout the course, participants engaged in lessons aimed at improving their language proficiency. Students filled out the Success Attribution Open-ended Questionnaire at the end of the course, which examined their mindset and motivation toward English learning. Semi-structured interviews were carried out one week later. The semi-structured interviews were a crucial component of the data collection process which focused specifically on the emotional dimensions of the participants' language learning experiences.

Data Analysis Procedure

To identify patterns, themes, and categories representing participants' emotional experiences and mindset toward learning English, data collected from the semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions were analyzed using content analysis. Interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim to ensure the authenticity of participants' voices, and responses to the open-ended questions were carefully examined before the analysis began. Open coding was used in the first stage of analysis, in which the data were divided into meaning units and given descriptive codes. Codes were then grouped into broader themes and subthemes. Emotion coding combined semantic coding (where participants explicitly named an emotion) and latent coding (where emotions were inferred from participants' descriptions of their experiences).

To support the trustworthiness of the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), an expert in language teaching independently coded a portion of the data and verified the resulting thematic categories. Inter-coder agreement

was calculated at 83%, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion to reach consensus, supporting the dependability and confirmability of the coding. Credibility was further supported by the extended engagement with participants across the 12-week data collection period.

Table 1

The Number of Positive and Negative Statements for Changes in Motivation and Mindset

	Positive Changes	Negative Changes	Total
Mindset			
Beginner	9	3	12
Intermediate	10	1	11
Advanced	9	2	11
Motivation			
Beginner	10	3	13
Intermediate	10	2	12
Advanced	11	2	13

Six themes were extracted from the content analysis of the negative and positive statements given by the EFL learners: effective L2 instruction, increased L2 exposure, L2 improvement, enjoyment, and approval of the teacher were themes extracted from learners' positive changes in mindset and motivation, while inefficient L2 skills was the only theme extracted from learners' negative changes in mindset and motivation.

Table 2 presents the themes along with sample extracts translated from Persian to English. Of the 78 attributional statements made by learners, effective L2 instruction was the most frequently mentioned theme in the category of positive changes. For instance, one learner stated, "The teacher's instruction and explanations were very helpful." Several students cited enjoyment as one reason for the positive changes; they attributed their positive mindset toward L2 learning and motivation to learn L2 skills to the enjoyment they

Findings

L2 Learners' Attributions of Success and Failure

Table 1 presents the distribution of attributional statements provided by EFL learners concerning their mindset and motivation toward learning L2. These statements were derived from participants' responses to both the open-ended questions and the interview questions and were classified into positive or negative categories.

experienced during the program. One learner, for example, said, "When I knew the answer, I felt happy, and this made me have a positive feeling about learning English."

Another theme for positive changes was increased L2 exposure. Learners believed that in their daily lives, they had few opportunities to use English, while the English course they took provided ample opportunities to practice. Therefore, this increased exposure to English had a positive effect on their motivation to learn L2 and their mindset toward English.

EFL learners also attributed their positive mindset and motivation to the improvement of their L2 skills. For instance, one learner stated, "I feel more willing and motivated to learn English because I realized that my speaking got better." Other students discussed the positive feedback they received from their teacher as an influential factor in their positive mindset. For example, one learner stated, "I

felt confident because the teacher gave me a compliment.”

In the statements attributing the negative changes in motivation and mindset, the most commonly mentioned theme was learners' perceived inefficient L2 skills during the

program. Due to the small number of statements attributed to negative changes, this was the only theme that emerged from the analysis.

Table 2

Themes Extracted for The Positive and Negative Changes in Motivation and Mindset

Theme	Sample Extract
Effective L2 instruction	The teacher used good reading strategies.
Enjoyment	I really enjoyed speaking activities in class.
Increased L2 exposure	I could use English twice a week during the course.
Improvement of their L2 skills	I think my reading got better.
Positive feedback from Teacher	The teacher gave me a compliment.
Inefficient L2 skills	The listening activities were too difficult for me.

Table 3 illustrates the number of attributional statements for each theme across the three levels.

Table 3

The Number of Attributional Statements for Each Theme

	Beginner		Intermediate		Advanced	
	Minds et	Motivatio n	Minds et	Motivatio n	Minds et	Motivatio n
Effective L2 instruction	5	8	4	10	9	14
Enjoyment	15	18	16	11	11	10
Increased L2 exposure	0	0	4	3	8	12
Improvement of their L2 skills	14	11	16	19	7	5
Positive feedback from Teacher	7	9	5	3	4	2
Inefficient L2 skills	2	1	0	1	1	2

Tables 4 and 5 present mindset and motivational changes for the three levels, respectively. The most significant distinction between the three groups of learners was that certain themes did not appear in one group while they appeared more frequently in another group. For instance, the beginner level learners did not mention increased L2

exposure at all while it was most cited by advanced learners as the reason for positive changes in their mindset (66.66%) and motivation (80%).

Table 4*The Percentage of Attributional Statements for Mindset*

	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
Effective L2 instruction	27.77%	22.22%	50%
Enjoyment	35.71%	38.09%	26.19%
Increased L2 exposure	0%	33.33%	66.66%
Improvement of their L2 skills	37.83%	43.24%	18.91%
Positive feedback from Teacher	43.75%	31.25%	25%
Inefficient L2 skills	66.66%	0%	33.33%

Table 5*The Percentage of Attributional Statements for Motivation*

	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
Effective L2 instruction	25%	31.25%	43.75%
Enjoyment	46.15%	28.20%	25.64%
Increased L2 exposure	0%	20%	80%
Improvement of their L2 skills	31.42%	54.28%	14.28%
Positive feedback from Teacher	64.28%	21.42%	14.28%
Inefficient L2 skills	25%	25%	50%

On the other hand, positive feedback from the teacher was frequently cited by beginner-level learners for changes in their mindset, while advanced group learners did not refer to it as much. Inefficient L2 skills accounted for approximately 25% of the attributions for changes in motivation among beginner and intermediate learners, while the proportion was 50% for the advanced learners.

Another notable distinction among the three groups was the share of positive feedback received from the teacher. The beginner-level learners' statements showed that they valued positive feedback provided by the teacher for changes in their mindset (43.75%) and motivation (64.28%) significantly. However, advanced learners did not consider it as much; the proportion of statements for this theme was 25% for mindset and 14.28% for motivation.

As for the second component of RQ1 which focused on how these attributions relate to learners' mindsets, the analysis of the data showed a consistent pattern which linked

attribution content to mindset orientation. Attributions to internal, controllable causes, such as improvement of L2 skills and effective L2 instruction, were consistently framed by learners in growth-mindset terms. In other words, they described their ability as something that had changed or could still change through effort and practice (e.g., "I realized that my speaking got better"). By contrast, statements which attributed negative change to perceived inefficient L2 skills were framed in more fixed-mindset terms, treating limited ability as a stable characteristic rather than a temporary or improvable state. This pattern was consistent across the three proficiency levels, though it was most stated among advanced learners, whose relatively higher rate of inefficient-L2-skills attributions for motivation (50%, Table 5) coincided with more fixed-oriented language about their limitations.

L2 Learners' Emotional Experiences

The results of the open-ended questions and interview data showed that enjoyment, hope, and frustration were the three emotions our EFL learners across the three proficiency levels felt. Findings also demonstrated that enjoyment and hope were the two most prominent emotions expressed by the learners in the three groups.

Enjoyment

The emotion of enjoyment was the most frequently discussed emotion during the interviews. Notably, the nature of the emotion learners referred to varied from one learner to another. In contrast to some emotions that learners explicitly named, enjoyment was often inferred by the researcher from learners' comments.

For example, Sara, one of the learners, shared an experience that was significant to her. Although she did not use the actual word "enjoyment," her comments indicated that she was referring to it:

"During the pair work or group work, we were allowed to share our opinions with our classmates we were close with. This was so much fun and at the same time relaxing because the pressure of speaking in class was gone."

Although the participant did not explicitly use the word *enjoyment*, the excerpt was coded as enjoyment based on its description of a pleasurable and relaxing learning experience.

Furthermore, the aspects of the class that learners described as enjoyable varied among different learners. Beginning-level learners were more concerned about making mistakes during speaking activities; therefore, pair work and group work were more enjoyable for them. In contrast, intermediate and advanced

learners reported enjoyment in class discussions where they could express themselves and share their ideas.

Beginning-level learners shared their enjoyment of being "able to understand English better than before" and "learning new things".

Beginning-level learners expressed enjoyment in "learning new things" or being Intermediate and advanced learners, however, reported enjoyment in being "able to read and listen to many texts" and "being familiar with foreign culture."

In the attributional statements, which were mostly categorized as positive feelings, advanced learners described a sense of "being refreshed by reading English texts in class." Two intermediate learners reported that their negative feelings toward English had decreased as a result of participating in this course. Additionally, two beginning-level learners emphasized that they felt their minds were "opening" when using English. This sentiment was echoed in the statements made by intermediate learners as well. The experience of learning English and getting to know another culture was both enjoyable and eye-opening for them.

Hope

The emotion of hope was another prominent theme expressed by learners at the three levels regarding the influence of the English course on the changes they experienced. They expressed hope as an outcome of the English course for their future circumstances.

One beginning-level learner expressed his sentiment about the positive effect of the course, emphasizing the need to use English for communication:

"I hope one day I will be able to speak English fluently and successfully communicate"

with the people of other countries.” A similar feeling was expressed by an intermediate learner: *“The course gave me hope that I will have no problem speaking English.”*

For both learners, the hope they felt about using English in the future after completing this course is closely connected to their desire to achieve proficiency in the language. Importantly, this sense of hope was, at least in part, a direct outcome of their participation in the English course.

Hope was also frequently cited by advanced-level learners, particularly when discussing their future goals. For instance, one advanced learner expressed her desire to use English when traveling to a foreign country:

“One of my concerns when we travel abroad is to interact with the people there. I hope to improve my English so much that when we travel to Canada next summer, I can speak fluently.”

The comments made by different groups of learners reveal a significant link to the concept of motivation. Participating in the course not only gave them hope that they could achieve their goals in learning English but also motivated them to continue learning L2. Nonetheless, it's important to note that hope conveys a less defined vision compared to the clarity of actual goals.

Frustration

Unlike the positive changes, learners also referred to their negative emotions, such as feelings of shock, disappointment, and shame. One of the most frequently mentioned negative emotions was frustration.

One beginning-level learner expressed his feelings of frustration regarding his perceived inability to express his opinions in English during discussions:

“Almost every time we have a discussion in class, I feel frustrated because I can't express my emotions and thoughts in English exactly. In fact, I actually have more to say than I manage to communicate.”

When asked to clarify what he meant by having more things I want to say, he elaborated that the classroom setting limited their conversations because of the teacher's guidelines and the specific discussion topics:

“I was often not that interested in being limited to talk about a particular topic. Therefore, I felt unable to successfully participate in the conversations and discussions with my teacher and classmates.”

He was referring to his perceived inability to engage successfully in L2 interactions with others, which was the reason for his frustration. Similarly, an advanced-level learner explained her occasional frustration about her perceived inability to communicate and make rapid progress.

Sometimes, she felt that she wants to learn more to communicate better with others and feels unhappy and frustrated with her progress at the same time. She shared:

“Sometimes I think, I need to learn more so I can talk to people, but other times, it just makes me feel down and frustrated. I even ask myself, “Why did I spend so much money on learning English if I'm still not good enough?”

It's clear that she struggled with communicating in English, and these challenges deeply influenced her emotions. Her perceived failure and success were closely related to how well she could interact with others. This in turn affected how strongly she experienced those emotions.

Discussion

The study explored how EFL learners attributed their mindset and motivation

changes and how these attributions connect to their emotional experiences. Regarding the first research question, the findings showed that learners mainly attributed successful language learning experiences to internal and controllable factors, including effective instruction, increased language exposure, and perceived improvement in their L2 skills. These attributional patterns were closely associated with growth-oriented beliefs about language ability. The findings align with Zhang et al. (2021) in that attributions and mindset are intertwined mechanisms that guide learners' affective and behavioral engagement. This highlights earlier scholarship on the social dimension of attributions in EFL settings where classroom interactions are the primary contexts for linguistic exposure (Mori et al., 2010; Guan et al., 2024). This supports earlier findings that contextual affordances, such as teacher feedback and classroom climate, significantly influence learners' interpretations of their success and failure (Li, 2020; Wu & Kabilan, 2025).

Findings also showed the differences in attributional statements among learners at the three proficiency levels. The most notable difference between the three groups was that certain themes did not appear in one group while they appeared more frequently in another. For instance, advanced learners attributed positive changes in mindset and motivation to increased L2 exposure, whereas beginner learners cited positive feedback from teachers as a main influence. Furthermore, beginner learners' statements indicated that they valued positive feedback from the teacher for changes in both their mindset and motivation significantly, while advanced learners did not consider it as much. Our findings support earlier research showing that language mindsets are related to learners'

motivation and responses to feedback (Yao et al., 2021; Yao & Zhu, 2024). However, this study extends this line of research by qualitatively illustrating how learners' attributional reasoning shapes the significance they attach to teacher feedback across different proficiency levels. The findings also highlight that teacher feedback functions not only as instructional support but also as an attributional cue that influences learners' mindset and emotional experiences.

The links between language mindset and motivated behavior of L2 learners in general and their responses to feedback has been documented by existing research (Yao et al., 2021; Yao & Zhu, 2024).

The significance of teacher approval among beginner level learners reflects their dependency on external validation. However, advanced learners' emphasis on increased L2 exposure and improvement of their L2 skills indicates their growing autonomy and intrinsic motivation. As noted by Kálmán and Eugenio (2015), exposure to the target language often serves as a turning point, especially for advanced learners. The finding that perceived L2 improvement and increased L2 exposure were the primary attributions for positive change reinforces the role of a growth mindset in promoting learner motivation. Learners who can achieve progress through practice demonstrated a growth mindset orientation (Dweck, 2006; Wang et al., 2025). This supports Zhang et al. (2021) and Guan et al. (2024), who found that learners who have internal attributions display higher engagement and persistence. On the other hand, attributing lack of progress to uncontrollable causes such as inefficient L2 skills was associated with frustration which reflects a fixed mindset (Yeager & Dweck, 2020).

With respect to the second research question, the findings demonstrated that learners' emotional experiences were closely linked to their attributional explanations and mindset orientations. Learners who interpreted success as resulting from controllable factors generally reported positive emotions such as enjoyment and hope, whereas learners who perceived difficulties as reflecting stable limitations in their ability experienced frustration. Enjoyment was found by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2016) as fostering motivation and resilience. The prominence of enjoyment among beginner learners may be explained by their sensitivity to supportive classroom experiences and successful completion of manageable learning tasks. Positive classroom interactions and opportunities to participate without fear of evaluation have been shown to enhance foreign language enjoyment, particularly among less proficient learners (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016; Li, 2020).

Similarly, expressions of hope align with Pekrun's (2006) control-value theory, indicating that positive emotions arise when learners perceive agency and control over their outcomes. Hope was expressed across all proficiency levels but was oriented toward different goals. Beginner learners associated hope with developing basic communicative competence, whereas advanced learners linked it to future real-world language use, such as travel or professional communication. This is consistent with research suggesting that learners' goals become increasingly self-directed and future-oriented as proficiency develops (Pekrun, 2006; Kálmán & Eugenio, 2015).

In contrast, frustration reflected moments of incongruence between their effort and their perceived ability. This duality of positive and

negative emotions emphasizes the bidirectional nature of emotion and cognition in L2 learning (Fathi et al., 2024). Frustration appeared more frequently among advanced learners despite their higher proficiency. One possible explanation is that advanced learners often set more demanding performance standards and become increasingly aware of the gap between their current proficiency and their desired level of communicative competence. This finding aligns with previous L2 emotion research showing that higher proficiency does not eliminate negative emotions but may instead shift their sources from basic language difficulties to more nuanced communicative expectations (MacIntyre & Vincze, 2017; Wang et al., 2024).

Overall, the findings extend the attribution-mindset model proposed by Zhang et al. (2021) to attribution-mindset-emotion nexus. Our findings show that learners who interpret their success and failure through controllable causes are more likely to experience adaptive emotions such as enjoyment and hope, which in turn reinforce motivation. On the contrary, fixed attributions that are linked to uncontrollable causes increase frustration. These insights emphasize that L2 learning is not merely a cognitive process but a socio-affective experience that is influenced by learners' mindsets, causal reasoning, and emotional paths.

Conclusion

This study examined how EFL learners' attributional reasoning interacts with their mindsets and emotional experiences in the process of L2 learning. The findings revealed that learners mainly attributed positive changes in their mindset and motivation to internal and controllable factors such as

effective L2 instruction, increased L2 exposure, and improvement of their L2 skills. Additionally, they attributed negative changes to perceived inefficiency in their L2 skills. The three proficiency levels expressed enjoyment and hope as the main positive emotions. This highlights learners' growth-oriented attributions, while frustration reflected their fixed attributions.

The study provides empirical support for the interdependence of cognitive and affective dimensions in L2 learning. It demonstrates that learners' belief systems, that is, how they explain their success and failure, have influence on their motivation and emotional resilience. The findings highlight that learner with adaptive attributions and growth mindsets develop higher levels of emotional engagement in EFL contexts. The findings show the importance of fostering positive learning environments where learners feel encouraged. The findings also offer practical implications for language teachers by suggesting the implementation of teaching practices that emphasize growth-oriented attributions.

In conclusion, the findings of this study emphasize the importance of viewing L2 learner psychology as a dynamic system in which emotions, mindsets, and attributions evolve through interaction with classroom affordances. Future research should explore how everyday classroom experiences shape language learners' long-term trajectories of motivation and mindset. They can focus on showing *what* changes in learners' cognitive and affective domain and *how* and *why* these psychological shifts occur. At the pedagogical level, the results suggest that teachers play a pivotal role in developing learners' attributional patterns and mindset orientations. This is often achieved through

the type of feedback, emotional environment, and learning opportunities they create. Therefore, teacher education programs should raise teachers' awareness of their influential role in learners' mindset and attribution orientations as well as their emotional experiences. This study has several limitations. First, the sample was drawn from a single private language center in Iran using purposive sampling of three intact classes, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other institutional or cultural contexts. Second, the Success Attribution Open-ended Questionnaire was administered retrospectively at the end of the 12-week course, which may be subject to recall bias in learners' reports of how their mindset and motivation changed over time. Third, one of the researchers also taught the classes involved in the study; while confidentiality was assured and interviews were conducted by design to allow learners to speak freely, this dual role may have influenced participants' willingness to disclose negative experiences. Future research should investigate how classroom practices and teacher feedback shape learners' mindset orientations and emotional experiences over time. Comparative studies across proficiency levels and instructional contexts would clarify how these psychological processes develop throughout the language learning journey.

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Appendix A.
Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Can you describe your overall experience of learning English during this course?
2. What factors do you think have contributed most to your successes in learning English?
3. What factors have made learning English difficult or prevented you from making progress?
4. Have your beliefs about your ability to learn English changed during the course? If so, how?
5. Do you think anyone can improve their English ability through effort and practice? Why or why not?
6. What emotions have you most frequently experienced while learning English during this course?
7. Can you describe a classroom experience that made you feel particularly positive or negative?
8. How have your explanations for your successes or difficulties influenced your motivation to continue learning English?
9. How have your beliefs about your English ability affected your emotions during the learning process?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences, thoughts, or feelings regarding learning English?