

## Examining non-native second language teachers' decremental beliefs toward their target language proficiency

### What this research was about and why it is important

It is common for non-native second language teachers (NNL2) to feel like that over time they are losing proficiency in the target language, yet we know little about this phenomenon. The language mindsets framework, a burgeoning area in L2 education research in recent years, offers a novel lens to examine this issue from a theoretical perspective. Individuals may believe that language competence can be improved through effort and strategy (growth mindset) or that language competence is an inborn trait that cannot be developed (fixed mindset). In addition to the two established mindsets, researchers infer that highly proficient L2 learners may have beliefs that their language competence can decrease (decremental mindset). To validate this inference, we surveyed a sample of 969 secondary school non-native English teachers from six municipalities in one province in southern China. We found that these teachers believed that they might lose their English proficiency to different degrees, and that demographic variables (i.e., age, teaching location, and teaching level) played an important role in this process.

### What the researchers did

- We recruited 969 secondary school non-native English teachers from six municipalities in one province in southern China.
- We asked the participants to assess their three kinds of language mindsets (growth, fixed, and decremental mindsets), as well as their effort beliefs toward English proficiency loss (e.g., "if you don't practice enough, you will lose your English ability") and their motivation to maintain English competence.
- We examined whether decremental mindset (i.e., one's language competence can decrease) exists among NNL2 teachers.
- We investigated the group memberships of the teachers based on their diverse language mindsets patterns, and examined the differences in demographic variables between teachers from different groups.
- We also explored the associations between decremental mindset, effort beliefs, and prevention-focused motivation.

### What the researchers found

- NNL2 teachers indeed hold decremental beliefs toward their L2 proficiency. Decremental mindset has a positive relationship with fixed mindset but a negative relationship with growth mindset.
- There were three groups of teachers: moderate, low, and moderate-high decremental mindset teachers.
- Moderate-high decremental mindset teachers were the oldest among the three groups. Junior high teachers (21.08%) were more likely than senior high teachers (17.83%) to endorse a moderate-high decremental mindset. Urban teachers (40.14%) were more likely than rural teachers (32.12%) to endorse a low decremental mindset, but less likely (17.38% vs. 23.84%) than rural teachers to be moderate-high decremental mindset holders.
- All teachers' decremental mindsets could lead to effort beliefs about target proficiency loss. However, only certain moderate-high decremental mindset teachers' relatively stronger decremental beliefs were associated with the prevention-focused motivation.

### Things to consider

- Existing literature has consistently documented a three-group language mindsets pattern, and this pattern held true even after the addition of the decremental mindset to the framework.
- Although moderate-high decremental mindset teachers were the oldest in this study, their mean age was only 40.88, far from common retirement ages. It is possible that certain teachers may become high decremental mindset teachers five to ten years later.
- Junior high teachers were more likely to be moderate-high decremental teachers, probably because teaching low-level students can increase the likelihood of NNL2 teachers' perceived proficiency loss. Also, the disadvantageous socio-economic environment in rural areas may contribute to rural teachers' stronger decremental beliefs.
- NNL2 teachers should be reminded that the goal of L2 learning is never to reach native-like proficiency, and that they do not need to feel overanxious about their L2 loss. They are qualified L2 teachers as long as they can effectively use the language in L2 teaching routines, which include classroom management, understanding and communication of lesson content, and student assessment and feedback.

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