

Encouraging a Fresh Start in English Learning for First-Year Japanese University Students with Language Anxiety

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Article information	Abstract
Article history: Received: 4 Oct 2024 Last revised: 29 Apr 2026 Accepted: 29 Apr 2026 Available online: 30 Apr 2026	<i>Many Japanese students enter university with lingering anxiety from their English learning experiences in high school, which often hinders their performance in university English courses. This paper presents a case study investigating the causes of language anxiety and exploring strategies to help first-year Japanese university students engage more positively with English learning and reduce their anxiety. Nine first-year students with English-related anxiety volunteered to participate in a one-month project aimed at restarting their English learning and enhancing their study strategies and self-study habits. This project began with focus group interviews to explore their perspectives on English and their learning-related anxiety. Participants then engaged in self-study over the one-month period, using new learning strategies provided by the author. Most participants scored higher than the class average on English review tests administered during the project. Post-project follow-up interviews revealed improvements in participants' study habits and attitudes toward learning English. However, one participant, whose implicit beliefs about language learning differed from those of the others, showed little change. These findings suggest that early intervention programs supporting first-year students in their transition from high school to university can play a crucial role in encouraging a fresh start and fostering effective learning strategies. Given the small sample size, this exploratory study provides preliminary insights to inform future research.</i>
Keywords: Language anxiety First-year university students Mindset theory Learning strategies Motivation in EFL learning Japanese EFL context	

INTRODUCTION

Language learning experiences from Japanese high schools continue to have a lasting impact on students' attitudes toward English as they transition to university. Figure 1 below illustrates a major concern in Japan: the decline in English proficiency among young people. According to the EF (Education First) English Proficiency Index, Japan's global ranking fell from 30th in 2015 to 96th in 2025 among 123 countries. This decline is particularly evident compared to other Asian countries, where Japan dropped from 6th to 18th during the same period (EF, 2015, 2025). Ihara and Komai (2021) identify four major factors contributing to Japan's low

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English proficiency: (1) the English education system, (2) structural differences between Japanese and English, (3) psychological aspects and attitudes, and (4) differences in communication styles between Japanese and Americans. Among these, the English education system is regarded as the most influential (Ihara & Komai, 2021). Although government reforms in the 1980s aimed to replace traditional cramming and centralized teaching with “active learning” across all levels of education (Kariya, 2024), this system has failed to achieve key outcomes, such as improved communicative competence in English, and remains widely criticized (King, 2013; Kosuge, 2021; Miyashita, 2017).

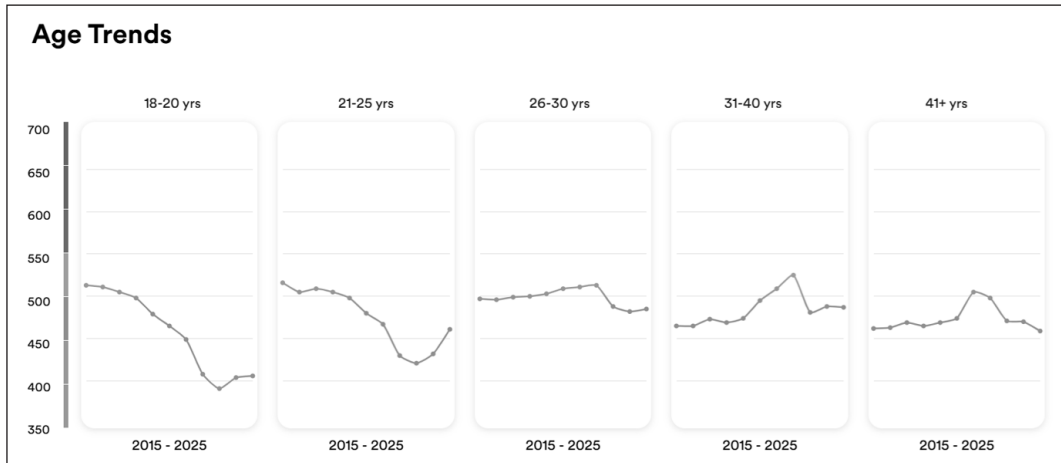


Figure 1 Japan's age trends in English proficiency level
EF English Proficiency Index 2025 (<http://www.ef.com/wwen/epi/regions/asia/japan/>)

The government's policy to employ communicative methods in English education from elementary school to high school may have contributed to a further decline in Japanese English proficiency, creating serious challenges for university-level English education in Japan (Ono, 2007). Communicative activities such as oral reading, pair work, and English games are often poorly implemented due to a lack of sequencing and insufficient feedback (Kosuge, 2021). In particular, teachers should be aware of the risks of introducing game-based activities in lessons, as both teachers and students may focus on enjoyment rather than core learning objectives (Kosuge, 2021). Koyama (2021) points out the challenges and limitations of recent Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Japanese public schools. “Large class sizes, grammar-based tests, time constraints, lack of experienced teachers, and inappropriate teaching materials often result in teacher-centered lectures, translation exercises from English into Japanese, predominant use of the Japanese language, memorization of dialogues, and whole-class repetition led by the teacher” (p. 6). On the other hand, Sakai et al. (2010) argue that communicative lessons are not productive for learners with low proficiency, and teachers' low English proficiency is also an issue in conducting communicative lessons. While Ono (2007) warns against the underestimation of grammar and vocabulary learning, Ishida (2021) argues that basic grammar lessons and vocabulary training are essential for developing greater confidence in students' English language abilities. Furthermore, high school students still learn English through conventional methods, while teachers try to introduce communicative English in elementary school and junior high school. Kosuge (2021) criticizes traditional

English-to-Japanese translation in high school, which may prevent students from understanding English and increase their stress. The Japanese education system is producing a language learning paradox; after years of experiencing ineffective English language learning, learners feel they can neither understand nor use English at a proficient level. As a result, Japanese people perpetuate the idea that they are inherently poor at English (Ihara & Komai, 2021). Nevertheless, a majority of Japanese people aspire to become fluent English speakers (Furuie & Sakurai, 2014).

Today, many university students do not expect to become proficient English users, and many have nearly given up on improving their English skills. According to Ishida (2021), more than half of the students at her university feel they are not good at English, and many began experiencing difficulties with English grammar in junior high school. Makino (2013) explains that many university students have negative feelings and anxiety about learning English because they could not keep up with their English lessons in high school. Consequently, developmental English education is widely offered in Japanese universities, where students receive remedial instructions in basic grammar. Kobayashi (2018) laments that even most students at top-tier universities in Japan do not imagine that they will work globally using English fluently unless they major in English. Despite the government's aim to cultivate global human resources, many Japanese university students wish to develop speaking skills to enjoy casual conversations with foreigners, rather than pursuing global careers (Furuie & Sakurai, 2014).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Demotivation and learning anxiety

Past studies have identified key factors related to second language (L2) learning motivation, learning anxiety, and demotivators (Muir & Dörnyei, 2013; Sakaki & Kikuchi, 2009). Lileikiene and Danileviciene (2016) argue that foreign language anxiety is a significant obstacle to L2 acquisition, and factors such as low achievement, negative evaluations by teachers, and negative experiences in the language classroom contribute to language learning anxiety. According to research by Afrough et al. (2014), demotivation is attributed to teacher incompetence, a lack of technological resources, and limited opportunities for communicative language use. On the other hand, Aydin et al. (2020) highlight that test anxiety affects learners' motivation because they worry about failing tests, receiving negative assessments, and not meeting their parental expectations.

Moreover, Sakai and Kikuchi (2009) suggest that the main English learning demotivators for Japanese senior high school students are the learning contents, materials, and test scores. They also point out that Japanese students may not see the purpose of learning English. Generally speaking, many Japanese people live in a society where they seldom encounter situations requiring English, except in some urban areas. As a result, some may perceive English as a language reserved for a select group of intelligent individuals, with little relevance to their lives.

Implicit theories related to motivation, self-esteem, and personality

Multiple beliefs and theories shape learners' concepts of success, motivation, and behavioral choices. Learners' motivation and behaviors are influenced not only by their abilities but also by their implicit theories of intelligence (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Uebuchi & Ooashi, 2019). Even motivated learners pursue two different types of goals based on their theory of intelligence: the incremental theory of intelligence or the entity theory of intelligence (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Uebuchi & Ooashi, 2019). Learners who believe intelligence is fixed and cannot be increased through effort tend to set "performance goals," aiming to receive positive evaluations of their abilities and avoid appearing incompetent. In contrast, those who believe that their intelligence can be developed through effort set "learning goals" to improve their abilities. Dweck and Leggett (1988) refer to the former group as "helpless individuals" and the latter as "mastery-oriented individuals." According to Dweck and Leggett (1988), helpless individuals set performance goals regardless of their confidence level to gain positive evaluations and demonstrate competence. They tend to choose easier tasks to avoid failure and believe that expending significant effort implies a lack of intelligence. As a result, they are unlikely to choose challenging tasks, as these might threaten their self-esteem. In contrast, mastery-oriented individuals set learning goals to enhance their abilities. They are not afraid of failure and do not avoid effort because their primary goal is to improve their skills. They believe success is achievable through effort and value the process of striving when faced with challenges. They do not value easy tasks, as these do not contribute to their development (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Uebuchi & Ooashi, 2019).

In a recent study, Yeager and Dweck (2020) rephrased the implicit theory of intelligence as "mindset theory," defining it as "the responses when people face challenges or setbacks" (p. 8). Therefore, it is believed that students holding more of a "growth mindset" (mastery-oriented individuals) achieve more successful results in school than those having more of a "fixed mindset" (helpless individuals), even if their intelligence levels are equal (Yeager & Dweck, 2020). Furthermore, Scherer and Campos (2022) offer a revised interpretation of traditional mindset theory. Their item-level meta-analysis of the Implicit Theories of Intelligence Scale (ITIS), conducted with university students, reveals that fixed and growth mindsets are correlated constructs rather than mutually exclusive. This suggests that learners can naturally hold both fixed and growth mindsets simultaneously.

The present study aimed to identify which type(s) of mindset are held by participants who experience language anxiety, as their mindset may influence their motivation to continue studying or hinder their sustained effort in learning.

Learning strategies

Researchers and educators have long sought effective methods to cultivate independent and self-regulated L2 learners (Butler, 1998; Wang & Zhan, 2020). To address demotivated L2 learners, various learning strategies have been developed (Cook, 2016; Coyle, 2013; Grenfell & Harris, 2017; Vann & Abraham, 1990). Researchers have also aimed to identify successful learning strategies to support demotivated learners (Cook, 2016; Griffiths, 2015; Vann & Abraham, 1990). These strategies are generally divided into two categories: direct strategies,

which develop language competency, and indirect strategies, which support language learning activities (Cook, 2016). Direct strategies include memory strategies (creating associations, applying images and sounds, reviewing effectively, using physical actions), cognitive strategies (practicing, transmitting and receiving information, analyzing and reasoning, organizing input and output), and compensation strategies (guessing to compensate for gaps in listening and reading comprehension, overcoming speaking and writing difficulties). Indirect strategies include metacognitive strategies (creating a personalized learning system, arranging and planning, evaluating learning progress), affective strategies (reducing anxiety, encouraging oneself, managing emotional states), and social strategies (asking questions, cooperating with others, empathizing with others) (Cook, 2016; Grenfell & Harris, 2017; Griffiths, 2015; Ishibashi, 2016).

Despite their proven effectiveness, learning strategies are seldom emphasized in Japanese classrooms. Aydin et al. (2020) point out that students with anxiety tend to use a limited number of strategies, which contributes to their test anxiety. Accordingly, the present study primarily introduced indirect strategies to the participants, as these are considered more suitable for building confidence and reducing emotional barriers. In addition, the study aimed to broaden the participants' range of learning strategies to help them improve their study habits.

Vision and directed motivational currents

In addition to introducing indirect learning strategies, the present study also incorporated a vision-building component to further support learners' motivation. It may be challenging for many young Japanese students to envision their ideal future selves as confident English users. As Ihara and Komai (2021) point out, many students do not believe in their abilities or potential as English users due to past experiences. However, Muir and Dörnyei (2013) advocate that learners create a clear vision of their future selves. If learners can vividly imagine how they want to be in the future, they can experience an imagined reality. This enhances their emotional engagement and motivates them to achieve their ideal selves. Furthermore, when students pair this clear vision with well-defined goals and a structured plan that includes necessary sub-goals, they can generate sustained motivation — known as Directed Motivational Currents (DMCs) — to pursue their long-term aspirations (Muir & Dörnyei, 2013). Creating a clear vision of one's ideal self is a crucial strategy for maintaining students' motivation. However, this concept is not widely practiced in the Japanese educational context. Therefore, the present study included vision-building as one of the indirect strategies to encourage the participants' self-study. By encouraging students to visualize their ideal future selves and set clear goals, the intervention aimed to foster sustained motivation. If this concept is accepted by students with anxiety, it may lead to significant advancements in supporting Japanese students' motivation.

CURRENT STUDY

Aim

This study aimed to explore effective learning strategies to support university students who experience anxiety about learning English. In addition, the study aims to collect data on the

causes of participants' negative feelings toward English and their learning beliefs. Based on the study aims, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: What are the causes of negative feelings and anxiety toward learning English among Japanese university students?

RQ2: How does mindset theory relate to students' motivation in learning English?

RQ3: What learning strategies do participants find effective for improving their study habits and motivation?

Participants

The participants in this study were recruited by the author, who was also the lecturer for "Comprehensive English," a mandatory course for all first-year students at a Japanese public university in Hiroshima. The author called for volunteers in the first lesson, specifically targeting students who agreed to try new learning strategies to overcome their language anxiety.

It is important to note that students were informed that their decision to participate would have no impact on their grades or standing in the class. Five female students from the management department and four from the education department volunteered to participate in the study. To protect anonymity while allowing for clearer reference in the findings, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant and used in the data presentation.

Table 1
Participants' demographic information and pseudonyms

Pseudonyms	Gender	Age Range	Program of Study
Ichi	Female	18 to 19 years old	Education Department
Rin			
Budo			
Mika			
Puri			Management Department
Sen			
Haru			
Pot			
Ika			

METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a case study approach, which is well-suited for exploring participants' past experiences and feelings in depth, allowing for the identification of significant patterns and themes (Chapelle & Duff, 2003). As the author was also the lecturer of the course, several steps were taken to minimize potential bias in conducting the study. This study consists of three stages:

Stage 1: focus group interviews

Initially, focus group interviews were suggested for each group (one group for students majoring in management and the other for students majoring in education). All participants agreed to begin with focus group interviews, as they were all first-year students who had not yet formed many friendships and were willing to talk with new friends. A focus group interview was conducted with each group to identify the causes of their negative feelings and anxiety toward learning English. Although focus groups may not be suitable for discussing sensitive topics, they offer advantages because the data generated are socially constructed through the interaction of group members, which can yield insights different from those obtained in individual interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). It was anticipated that the participants would engage in active conversation by sharing their past experiences and negative feelings during the interview, as they were all female students facing similar challenges.

Stage 2: One-month self-study with learning strategies

Following the focus group interviews, participants were provided with a list of indirect learning strategies (see Appendix 1) to improve their study habits. The author conducted a brief training session to explain the purpose and use of each strategy, using examples to aid understanding. Additionally, the author facilitated a group discussion in which participants explored various factors hindering their self-study, including physical fatigue, smartphone distractions, and psychological stress, such as anxiety. Based on this discussion, the author encouraged participants to try several indirect strategies depending on their individual situations. They were free to choose and apply the strategies that best suited their needs during the one-month self-study period.

Among those strategies, some specific strategies were recommended to maintain their motivation, such as creating a vision for their future, writing down their dreams or hopes, finding the best study environment, anticipating obstacles to successful self-study, and creating a coping plan (Halvorson, 2020), as well as generating feelings of gratitude, compassion, and pride (DeSteno, 2020). At the same time, all the participants set a target score of at least 60% on each English test, which allowed them to earn the credits for the Comprehensive English course. In one month, they were scheduled to take three tests in the English course. Since the participants were concerned about these tests, the author suggested several necessary tasks and encouraged them to engage in self-study to perform well.

To minimize potential bias arising from the dual role of the author as both teacher and researcher, she deliberately avoided direct interactions with the participants in her capacity as a teacher to ensure fairness for all students. However, she occasionally offered brief encouragement to the participants, and when they attempted to talk to her as part of their indirect strategies (i.e., social strategies), she was willing to respond.

Stage 3: Individual interviews

After a one-month trial period of using the learning strategies, individual interviews were conducted to discuss the participants' self-study experiences, test scores, the effectiveness of the

learning strategies, changes in their feelings, and their beliefs about learning. A questionnaire (using a five-point Likert scale) and a list of learning beliefs accompanied the interviews. The list of learning beliefs used in the individual interviews was created by the author with reference to previous studies on mindset theory and learner cognition (e.g., Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Uebuchi & Ooashi, 2019). It was designed to include both growth and fixed mindset items in a mixed order to reduce bias, and participants were encouraged to reflect on each item and share their own thoughts freely during the interviews, including the reasons behind their beliefs.

The individual interviews followed a semi-structured protocol. After reviewing the questionnaire responses and the belief list, participants were invited to reflect on their experiences and elaborate on their choices. Open-ended questions were used to encourage discussion, such as “Which strategies did you find most helpful?,” “How did your feelings toward English change?,” and “Do you think your beliefs about learning have shifted?.” During the interviews and interactions, the author maintained a neutral and supportive stance, avoiding any evaluative comments. Participants were encouraged to express their honest thoughts and experiences. The shift from focus group interviews to individual interviews was made to better understand each participant’s strategies, feelings, and future visions without the influence of other participants.

RESULT

To address the research aims, this study examined the participants’ past experiences, their learning beliefs, the effectiveness of the focus group and learning strategies, and test scores.

Past experiences and feelings toward English (focus group interviews)

The recorded interview data were transcribed and analyzed thematically to uncover the participants’ feelings and experiences related to their negative attitudes toward English. Although no formal coding was used, the author categorized the responses based on common themes that emerged across the interviews. To enhance transparency and authenticity, representative quotes from participants were included to illustrate each theme.

All participants actively exchanged their feelings and experiences during the focus group interviews. While one participant was answering the author’s questions, others expressed agreement and sympathy toward the speaker, often with nods and verbal affirmations. However, they all reported having disappointing experiences with English during junior high school or high school, stemming from low test scores, the ranking system, class placement based on tests, lengthy and difficult reading comprehension exercises, and pressure from teachers and friends who excelled in English.

Grammar and vocabulary difficulties were common among participants. When asked about the areas they struggled with besides speaking (as many Japanese students, even those who are good at English, find speaking challenging), most participants cited grammar, with some

also mentioning listening and vocabulary building. Many participants shared that their struggles with English grammar began in junior high school, as none of them attended cram school back then. For example, Mika shared that she did not attend cram school and began struggling with English grammar midway through her first year of junior high school. Since then, she focused on memorizing words and sentences, which did not help her comprehend longer sentences in high school, leading to consistently low test scores. Of the nine participants, five reported having difficulties with English since junior high school, while four indicated that their struggles began in high school. Ika recalled that she memorized grammar points for tests in junior high school. However, she realized in high school that she did not understand them. Consequently, she neglected those grammar points altogether. These statements reflect the participants' frustration with grammar and reliance on memorization as the only solution.

On the other hand, Budo mentioned that she asked friends and teachers questions in junior high school; however, in high school, the pace of lessons accelerated, and class placements based on tests put immense pressure on her. Puri remembered that she had more opportunities to try new things in junior high school; however, in high school, she was forced to read long and difficult texts, which demotivated her every time she encountered unfamiliar words. For reading comprehension, most confessed that they only guessed the content based on familiar words. In addition, various factors further contributed to their demotivation to learn English. Ika, for instance, was disheartened when she saw a friend's test score, which was much higher than hers, despite studying just as hard as her friend for the university entrance examinations. Haru feared answering questions in high school English classes because her teacher would look angry if she answered incorrectly. Budo and Mika disliked the proficiency-based learning system, while Ichi was frustrated by the teacher's constant encouragement to "try harder."

Despite these negative experiences, many participants said, "I don't hate English." Puri and Sen acknowledged that English is difficult but recognized its importance as a global language. They expressed a desire to learn English, believing it would make life more convenient and allow them to live anywhere. Haru noted that learning English is unavoidable, as so much information, like company websites and instructions, is in English. Although most were not interested in English music, movies, actors, or books, and preferred watching English movies dubbed in Japanese, they hoped to visit foreign countries someday. None of the participants had traveled abroad, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented them from going on school trips to places like Hawaii, Singapore, or Malaysia. Pot said, "I want to see many things abroad and understand the differences between Japan and other countries." Rin added, "I want to see historic architecture and things we can't see in Japan. I want to broaden my perspective."

By participating in this project, the students indicated high hopes of rekindling their interest in learning English—not for entrance examinations, but for their future. Budo and Rin hoped to feel more relaxed and confident in English classes. Pot expressed a desire to read English newspapers more easily. Most participants emphasized improving their study habits to increase their English proficiency rather than earning credits for the English course, except for Ichi, who focused more on the latter.

Relationship between mindset beliefs and motivation (individual interviews)

All students had an individual interview with the author after one month, and they talked about their learning beliefs by selecting either growth or fixed mindset beliefs provided by the author (see Appendix 2). As shown in Table 2, everyone had more growth mindset beliefs on learning than fixed ones.

Table 2
Number of growth and fixed mindset beliefs selected by each participant

	Growth mindset beliefs	Fixed mindset beliefs
Haru	6	0
Puri	6	0
Ika	5	0
Budo	4	0
Rin	4	1
Mika	4	1
Ichi	4	1
Pot	3	2
Sen	2	1

Haru and Puri selected all the growth mindset beliefs and no fixed items, and they did very well on the tests, as seen in Table 3. Everyone except for Ichi agreed “Making mistakes is important for the next learning experience.” Seven participants believed “Understanding is more important than having the correct answers.” Six participants believed “Intelligence increases with effort,” “We should make an effort to increase intelligence,” and “Learning is interesting.” While most participants favored growth-oriented beliefs, a few expressed fixed mindset tendencies. For example, Pot said she met some intelligent students in high school, and therefore, she believes that intelligence cannot be increased by effort alone. Mika said, “I do not want to try something challenging, because if I fail, I will lose my confidence.” Pot also mentioned that she would avoid a challenge to keep her self-esteem. Notably, only Ichi agreed with the statement, “Good results with less effort mean we are more competent,” reflecting a fixed mindset perspective.

Effects of the focus group and use of learning strategies (individual interviews)

During the individual interviews, the participants also talked about their self-study and how they used some indirect strategies while answering the questionnaire (see Appendix 3). Most participants recalled that setting the target score (60%) at the beginning was very effective and became a good guidepost for them to keep studying. For example, Pot said, “Once we set the target score, I was determined to exceed it.” Her average score of 92.7 far exceeded the target score of 60. Budo said, “If I had not set the goal, I would have thought that 50% of the score would be just my level. However, I felt I could have done better even though I had 80% this time.” Budo’s scores were all above 80% in the three tests. Ika expressed her feelings toward the target score, “We all shared the target score at the beginning, and I would feel bad if I did not reach the target.” Furthermore, the target score gave them a sense of achievement when their scores exceeded it, except for Ichi. Ichi confessed she did not motivate herself like

others and did not plan well for the tests. She said, “When I got a good score, I felt I did it! But after a while, I lost the sense of urgency.”

According to the questionnaire, the focus group interviews motivated all the participants, yet did not put them under much pressure, except when they felt down or were not studying hard. Every participant felt that other participants were working hard to achieve their goals, although most did not take it as stressful, but rather exciting and encouraging. Haru, Puri, and Mika shared almost the same feelings about the group as they said, “We did not talk much with other participants; however, there was an atmosphere of everyone working hard together.” Sen regarded it as “positive pressure.” In addition, most of them appreciated a little support from the lecturer (the author). Rin was happy to talk to the author in the classroom and said, “When you gave me a little encouragement such as ‘You did well today,’ I felt impressed, and I was in a good mood. Also, I started to feel comfortable asking you questions.” Haru said that she felt the author was watching over them without saying anything. Ultimately, their interaction with the author exemplified successful use of the social strategies. Most said joining this project was a good opportunity to start studying English again, not for the entrance examination but for their future. Haru said, “I was fighting against the enemy named entrance exams, but now I feel like investing in myself.” Ika appreciated this project because she was about to give up studying English. She said, “I decided to study English again and my efforts paid off.” Moreover, most of them, except for Ichi, answered that they would continue studying independently. Sen bought a new vocabulary book to use for future study. Ika decided to try smartphone apps for vocabulary building. Pot and Puri liked the list of strategies and would try new ones, such as making a schedule and dealing with their fatigue. Haru started to enjoy her self-study more with less stress thanks to her improved study habits. The questionnaire results also indicate that some of them were still doubtful about their English skills and future improvement. Sen, Budo, and Mika confessed that they were not confident in their English skills even though the test results were good. They believed that they did well on the tests because they prepared well for the tests, which does not mean their skills improved.

During the interviews, the participants discussed the effects of the strategies, the distractions they encountered, and the countermeasures they used during self-study. Most of the participants employed various metacognitive strategies to improve their study habits. Many found it easy and effective to make the most of in-between times, such as commuting on the train or waiting for friends. They also identified effective times of day or week and comfortable places to study. Pot made a to-do list and enjoyed crossing items off as she completed them. Ika sent herself reminder emails to encourage her to study. In addition, Pot and Ika recognized that their smartphone could be a significant distraction. Therefore, Ika placed her smartphone in a different room while studying. Although Pot needed her smartphone nearby in case of important calls, she still managed to concentrate on her studies. Their comments indicated that both participants were able to become aware of potential distractions by using a metacognitive strategy and took steps to control these distractions. In contrast, Ichi was not very motivated to use strategies and spent much time watching Instagram and playing online games almost daily.

Additionally, most participants used affective strategies, such as not pushing themselves too hard and appreciating their parents' support. When they felt sleepy, Sen ate something sweet, while Rin drank water and walked around her house to refresh herself. Other participants admitted that they often felt too tired to study due to their busy university schedules, part-time jobs, or household chores (Mika, for instance, lives alone in an apartment). However, they still tried to eat something, study just a little, or go to bed early to recover from fatigue. Rin remarked, "I was sometimes slow to start studying because English is still not my favorite subject." Some of them also employed social strategies and vision-based strategies. Sen and Rin discussed study methods with friends, wrote down their goals and wishes, and posted them on the wall for motivation. However, everyone found it hard to create their future self as a proficient English user, as one month was not sufficient for them to boost their confidence in their English skills.

Test results

Over the month, the participants engaged in self-study for their tests as they promised. They had three tests (two listening tests and one textbook review test) in the Comprehensive English course. Although their target score was above 60%, most of their test scores were much higher than that, with most scoring above the class average, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Participants' test scores during the one-month intervention period

	Listening 1 (Apr. 19)	Textbook review (Apr. 26)	Listening 2 (May 6)
Ichi	76	56	78
Rin	84	74	76
Budo	84	80	86
Mika	94	88	90
Average scores (Education)	70.9	75.2	83.3
Puri	80	92	94
Sen	54	66	82
Haru	86	100	96
Pot	94	86	98
Ika	74	80	70
Average scores (Management)	69.6	76.4	82.6

DISCUSSION

This study first aimed to identify the causes of negative feelings and anxiety toward learning English among Japanese university students (RQ1). As intended by the author, the focus group interviews successfully revealed a range of emotional and experiential factors contributing to their anxiety. Interestingly, the atmosphere during the interviews was cheerful and relaxed, although the participants discussed discouraging experiences. They all appeared excited and happy, which might appear surprising. However, based on the author's observations and their comments during the interviews, this reaction seemed to stem from a sense of relief in finding peers with similar struggles and a renewed hope to restart their English learning.

The participants of this study had some common aspects. They were all female students, and they had never been abroad. They did not go to cram school in junior high school. According to the focus group interviews, a lack of a foundation of English grammar skills made the participants feel uncomfortable with English. As the participants of this project said, their insufficient grammar base in junior high school put them in a difficult position in high school. Most of them did not find ways to compensate for the grammar problems, and they just memorized grammar points and read long, difficult texts by picking up familiar words. Kosuge (2021) warns that grammar teaching is not very beneficial but stressful in high school, because teachers use many grammatical terms and students believe memorizing them is learning English grammar. Regardless of hard work, they continued to have poor scores on English tests and had classrooms based on their English proficiency levels. Still, they studied hard for university entrance examinations under great pressure. These disappointing experiences led them to have negative feelings toward learning English, and they were almost giving up on improving their English skills. With all things considered, a lack of initial understanding of basic English grammar in junior high school led them to suffer in high school, and their experiences demonstrate the background of many Japanese students who cannot see the hope of improving their English skills even after they enter the university. However, a few of the participants of this study had a strong desire to understand English grammar. According to Kominato (2021), understanding grammar points improves learners' motivation significantly, and many students who have negative feelings toward English do not always hate grammar.

Regarding their learning beliefs (RQ2), all the participants had more growth mindset beliefs than fixed ones. For example, all the participants except Ichi agreed that "Making mistakes is important for the next learning experience," and seven agreed that "Understanding is more important than having the correct answers." These beliefs reflect a willingness to embrace effort and learning processes, which are central to mastery-oriented motivation (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Moreover, six participants selected "Intelligence increases with effort," "Learning is interesting," and "We should make an effort to increase intelligence," indicating that they believe in the potential for improvement through sustained effort. Lastly, only five of them agreed with "A teacher is a resource to improve yourself." This suggests that half of the participants do not have the experience they benefited from teachers' assistance in their past learning.

As Scherer and Campos (2022) argue, learners may simultaneously hold both growth and fixed mindset beliefs. This perspective helps interpret the mixed responses observed in this study, where most participants showed a tendency toward growth mindset beliefs, yet some retained fixed beliefs that may hinder sustained motivation. Therefore, it is premature to conclude that the participants of this study are mastery-oriented students. From this perspective, educators need to find out which mindset beliefs have more influence on learners' motivation. For example, the belief that "Good results with less effort mean we are more competent," which only Ichi agreed with, can be one of the critical reasons to prevent learners from making efforts. This belief represents the core concept that helpless individuals hold: "Expending significant effort implies lack of intelligence." Dweck and Leggett (1988) explain that students' beliefs about the value of effort can determine their mindset: whether they believe that making an effort indicates a lack of ability, or that effort leads to achievement.

Individual interviews also provided the participants with an opportunity to show their personal feelings toward the project and their beliefs on learning without being interrupted by other participants. As a result, they turned out to be different individuals, with personalities, degrees of negative feelings, skill levels, and motivations. In particular, Ichi looked different from other participants, regarding motivation level and goals. Although she was happy to join this project and felt supported by other participants and the author, she was not motivated enough to continue her self-study, or she did not expect future improvements by using learning strategies. While other participants cared more about others' test scores, Ichi did not express her strong motivation to outperform others. Therefore, getting a good score did not motivate her very much. She mentioned that she needs to find an interest in learning English itself.

Before discussing the effectiveness of the learning strategies (RQ3), it is important to clarify the distinct roles of the focus group interviews in this study. The focus group interviews primarily served to explore the participants' emotional and experiential background related to English learning anxiety (RQ1). However, these sessions helped foster a sense of solidarity and initial motivation. During the focus group interviews, they successfully formed a small community where they could share similar feelings and support each other to continue their self-study for the English tests. This was a crucial moment for them, as they had no friends in the new university environment and were full of anxiety. The author believes that this opportunity itself functioned as one of the most effective learning strategies for the first-year students. As they had created a supportive environment after the focus group interviews, they were able to receive invisible emotional support from other participants and the author, even though the direct interaction was limited.

Although test scores alone cannot directly indicate re-motivation, the participants' performance during the intervention period provides important contextual insight. All participants had long histories of test anxiety and consistently low scores throughout junior and senior high school. Therefore, the fact that most of them maintained scores above the class average during the project is atypical for this group. This pattern suggests that the supportive environment formed through the focus group interviews, combined with their engagement in self-study, may have contributed to a temporary shift in their attitudes and learning behaviors.

According to their test results over one month and post-project interviews, all the participants, including Ichi, made efforts by using the strategies to improve their skills and did well on the tests. Most of them tried several indirect learning strategies, particularly metacognitive and affective ones, and found them effective. These strategies were relatively easy to adopt and familiar enough for them to start with. For example, many participants used metacognitive strategies such as setting goals, managing distractions, and creating study schedules. Affective strategies, including stress management and self-encouragement, also helped them maintain motivation. These findings suggest that learners tend to adopt strategies that are easy to integrate into their daily routines and require relatively low cognitive load. This may explain why metacognitive and affective strategies were used more frequently and effectively than social or vision-based strategies. The variability among participants — particularly those who struggled to manage distractions or lacked motivation — also indicates that not all learners can adopt these strategies without explicit guidance. Therefore, some forms of strategic learning

may require more structured instruction or longer time frames to become effective. This interpretation aligns with Hayat et al. (2020), who suggest that learners' academic performance is positively related to their self-efficacy, positive emotion, and metacognitive learning strategies. Dweck and Leggett (1988) argue that students with fixed mindsets often use limited strategies and may not achieve their goals, while students with growth mindsets revise strategies as they think failure is not due to their ability but ineffective strategies and lack of effort. This perspective helps explain why most participants, who showed more growth mindset beliefs, were able to engage with the strategies effectively. However, vision-based strategies, such as imagining their ideal future selves as confident English users, were more challenging. It might be natural that learners with anxiety need more time to build confidence in their English skills before they can envision ideal future selves. Additionally, envisioning ideal selves is not commonly emphasized in the Japanese educational context. Therefore, educators could offer more opportunities to young children to practice creating ideal future selves at school. Furthermore, Kubo (1999) suggests that it is not easy for learners to accept a new learning strategy if they do not understand the effectiveness of the strategy, even though they are encouraged to use it. Thus, educators need to explain the effects of learning strategies and how to use them in detail.

Incorporating strategy instructions and vision-building activities into early English education may help learners develop both confidence and long-term motivation

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This project for the first-year students was meaningful because psychological intervention can be useful for the participants at the beginning of the transition into a new environment (Elliot et al., 2017). Starting a new life can be threatening, especially for first-year university students, who start living alone, apart from their families, for the first time. They are full of expectation and anxiety.

Most of the participants in this study mentioned that they felt supported by other members and the author. The messages from the author were always short, but a little encouragement can be very effective if the timing is appropriate (Elliot et al., 2017). As a result, they decided to start studying English again of their own will, thanks to this project. Otherwise, they might have given up studying English because they did not expect much improvement in English skills after long and tough study for the entrance examinations.

Kubo (1999) suggests that learners can understand what to do and reduce their mental load if they are presented with appropriate goals and strategies based on their abilities. Therefore, the positive effects of supporting first-year students with anxiety should not be underestimated, given that "a brief affirmation, belonging, or mindset intervention may bring immense effects (Elliot et al., 2017, p. 677)." Indeed, the participants of this study had a good start in college life as they built constructive communication with their lecturer (author) and classmates with some learning strategies and support. Moreover, most participants mentioned that they can see the value and hope of studying English for their future.

Also, educators may need to consider how mindset theory affects learners' motivation and can encourage students to believe that hard work will lead to a great future for them. Dweck and Yeager (2021) insist that students' growth mindsets can lead them to high achievement and happiness in their lives, and teachers holding more of a growth mindset can create a classroom where students foster more growth mindsets.

Furthermore, every educator should remember that each student has different characteristics and learning targets under various conditions. Therefore, educators should respect each student and encourage them to find appropriate learning strategies to foster independent learners (Griffiths, 2015). In addition, as "conscious attention to learning strategies is beneficial and strategies are teachable (Cook, 2016, p. 147)," developing an early support program for first-year students to teach learning strategies is essential to improve their learning habits dramatically. Aydin et al. (2020) suggest that teachers can guide students to develop learning strategies to decrease their negative feelings and improve their performance. Hayat et al. (2020) insist that "without metacognitive learning strategies, it is not easy to achieve academic success even when learners hold positive emotions (p. 9)."

Last but not least, a support program to teach learning strategies may need to be devised to appeal to a wide range of students, because students who have more anxiety or more fixed beliefs may not come out voluntarily to ask for assistance. Therefore, educators can create a mandatory session or even a short time in the classroom to introduce learning strategies by distributing a list of them to all first-year university students and encouraging them to try them out. Fostering more independent learners in university may change the trend of young Japanese people's English proficiency level and cultivate students with bright ideal future selves. Makino (2013) is concerned about the lack of university teachers who are willing to play active roles in supporting students with language anxiety. As Makino (2013) insists, isn't it too early for university students to say, "I wanted to be fluent in English?" This question reminds us that educators must take proactive roles in supporting students before they lose hope.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. First, all participants were female students, and the number of participants was small. For future research, a broader student population, including male learners or students with varying levels of anxiety, should be considered.

Second, the mindset belief items were selected and presented by the author, which may have introduced bias in how participants interpreted and responded to them. A more neutral and validated instrument may be needed in future studies.

Third, the training and explanation of learning strategies should be more carefully planned to facilitate participants' understanding. In future studies, not only the list of strategies but also their purpose, use, and expected effects should be clearly explained.

Finally, the short duration of the intervention (one month) may not have been sufficient for participants to fully engage with more abstract strategies, such as envisioning ideal future selves. Future research should consider longer-term interventions and a more diverse participant pool to enhance the reliability and applicability of the findings.

Such efforts will contribute to developing more effective support systems for learners with language anxiety and improving English education practices.

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APPENDIX 1

The list of learning strategies given to the participants

Metacognitive Strategies

1. Review past strategies: What worked well? What didn't?
2. Create a study schedule.
3. Find comfortable places, times, and days for self-study.
4. Anticipate potential distractions and devise measures to handle them.
5. Develop methods to monitor your progress.
6. Make a daily to-do list.
7. Utilize in-between time effectively.
8. Evaluate your performance regularly.

Affective Strategies

1. Consider ways to manage fatigue.
2. Prepare a variety of study methods to prevent boredom.
3. Avoid raising the stakes too high.
4. Practice gratitude for what you have.
5. Find ways to relieve stress.
6. Don't dwell on past performances or results—focus on the future.
7. Avoid overworking when you're busy or feeling unwell.

Social Strategies

1. Ask your teacher or friends about problems.
2. Discuss learning strategies with your friends.

Vision

1. Visualize yourself achieving your goal scores. Consider what steps you need to take to get there.
2. Imagine your ideal future self, confident and competent in English.
3. Create a roadmap to reach your ideal future self.
4. Write down your aspirations and display them where you can see them regularly.

APPENDIX 2

Post-session questionnaire items on the mindset theory

(G = growth mindset belief, F = fixed mindset belief)

(Referred Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Uebuchi & Ooashi, 2019)

1. Intelligence increases with effort. (G)
2. Intelligence does not change easily with effort. (F)
3. We should make an effort to increase intelligence. (G)
4. Good results with less effort mean we are more competent. (F)
5. A teacher is a resource to improve yourself. (G)
6. A teacher is a person who judges your achievement and provides rewards. (F)
7. Learning is interesting. (G)
8. Making mistakes is important for the next learning experience. (G)
9. I don't want to try things that I might fail to achieve. (F)
10. Understanding is more important than having the correct answers. (G)

Post-session questionnaire results about learning beliefs

	Haru	Sen	Pot	Mika	Ika	Rin	Budo	Puri	Ichii	
Q1. (G)	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6/9
Q2. (F)		✓	✓							2/9
Q3. (G)	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		6/9
Q4. (F)									✓	1/9
Q5. (G)	✓			✓			✓	✓	✓	5/9
Q6. (F)						✓				1/9
Q7. (G)	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6/9
Q8. (G)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		8/9
Q9. (F)			✓	✓						2/9
Q10. (G)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	7/9
G	6	2	3	4	5	4	4	6	4	
F	0	1	2	1	0	1	0	0	1	

APPENDIX 3

Post-session questionnaire items

1.	Do you think you did well in your studies during the past month?
2.	Do you think your hard work paid off?
3.	Did you find it helpful to set a target score for the tests to motivate you?
4.	Did you find it encouraging to have a focus group to motivate yourself?
5.	Did you feel pressured by the existence of the focus group?
6.	Did you feel supported by your lecturer?
7.	Do you feel more confident in your English skills now?
8.	Do you think you can study English independently from now on?
9.	Are you happy to have participated in this project?
10.	Can you see a possibility that you will be a competent English user in the future?

Post-session questionnaire results about the project (a 5-point Likert scale)

(1 = strongly disagree / 5 = strongly agree)

	haru	sen	pot	mika	ika	rin	bud	puri	ichi	mean
Q1.	4	4	4	2	4	4	4	5	2	3.66
Q2.	4	2	5	3	4	5	4	4	3	3.77
Q3.	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	2	4.66
Q4.	4	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	4	4.66
Q5.	4	4	2	1	2	2	1	2	4	2.44
Q6.	5	5	5	4	5	5	4	5	4	4.66
Q7.	4	1	4	1	3	4	3	4	1	2.77
Q8.	5	4	4	4	4	5	4	5	2	4.11
Q9.	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4.88
Q10.	4	1	4	2	4	3	3	4	1	2.88
mean	4.4	3.6	4.3	3.1	4.1	4.3	3.8	4.4	2.7	