

# Cognitive Theory and Motivation in the EFL Classroom

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ゲーリー J. ヘンシャイド, ELFクラスにおける動機づけと認知理論. *Studies in International Relations* Vol. 35, No. 2. February 2015. pp. 61 – 70.

多くのEFLの学生は、英語を勉強する動機付けが往々にして乏しい。これは多くの場合、認知のゆがみに起因している。また、人の感情や行動に影響を与える負の自己破滅的な思考（認知）がある。

デビッド・ベックによって確立されたカウンセリング認知療法はデビッド・バーンズらによって、英語学習における否定的な思考を健全な視点と入れ替える識別しやすくするためのモデルを提供し拡大した。

EFLにおける利用例を説明する。

## Introduction

Cognitive therapy involves licensed clinicians identifying their clients' *thinking errors*, and then helping them replace their negative, self-defeating thoughts with healthier and more self-fulfilling ways of thinking. Psychiatrist Aaron Beck, MD has been widely regarded as the founder of the cognitive approach to counseling since he first expounded his ideas in *The Diagnosis and Management of Depression* (Beck, 1967).

Many individuals who read books on cognitive theory may be self-treating anxiety disorder or depression; however, many others are probably just open to the idea that new perspectives may help them to improve themselves and to reach their full human potential, sometimes referred to as self-actualization. It seems quite natural and perfectly appropriate then that teachers could use cognitive principles to motivate their students to study EFL as well.

This paper begins with a brief review of literature related to the history of cognitive theory, and of common distortions and thinking errors that may affect the attitudes of students towards learning in the classroom. This is followed by a general background and description of possible cognitive distortions held by university students towards the learning of EFL in Japan. The paper will then analyze and discuss possible ways that EFL learners can replace negative, self-defeating attitudes towards learning English with more positive attitudes.

## 1. Literature Review

In order to better understand the effects of cognitive distortions on EFL learners, the paper will review some of the ideas advocated by leading proponents of cognitive theory in counseling psychology. The literature review will begin with a review of the early applications of the approach in counseling – it will then cite several sources to establish both the need and potential for applications of cognitive theory in EFL.

### 1.1 Development of Cognitive Theory

A prominent name commonly associated with the cognitive approach to counseling is Beck's former student David Burns, an adjunct clinical professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Stanford University (Burns, 1980). Numerous other counselors and psychologists use different methods, but they all help clients identify various harmful ways of thinking. The late Albert Ellis, for example is considered the founder of Rational Emotive Therapy, which aggressively confronts self-destructive thinking. The number of thinking errors on the various lists ranges from ten to fifty, however many therapists continue to favor the shorter list originally developed by Beck and later slightly adapted by Burns in the table in the appendix.

Experts at the Beck Institute for Cognitive Therapy have identified a dozen common thinking errors that can skew judgment and make it hard to appraise one's situation realistically (V. Andrews, 2000). Burns' list (see Appendix) includes ten very common and problematic ways of thinking, and judging from his words he considered it to be comprehensive: "Read over the following list of ten cognitive distortions that form the basis of all your depressions."<sup>1</sup> (Burns, 1980:32) Since we are going to borrow and apply concepts of cognitive therapy and apply them in EFL rather than in counseling the depressed, henceforth the word "clients" will be replaced with "students".

### 1.2 Irrational fears and common thinking errors in EFL

Failure can enhance progress toward one's academic goals, particularly when students understand the reasons that they failed. One study showed that students in Japan were not only more likely to receive corrective feedback upon failing exams than their North American peers, but that they were also more likely to learn from the experience of having failed and to succeed on subsequent attempts (S. Heine, et. al., 2001). In this light, rather than being a problem, failure could be seen as an opportunity to learn from mistakes and to improve oneself.

To a certain extent then, slight fear or nervousness can be good, and some maintain that the right type and level of fear can render it a powerful influence on motivation, with positive effects on mental acuity and learning. Unfortunately, in the EFL classroom, where practicing spoken English is essential, fear of making mistakes usually inhibits students from answering questions or commenting in class (McCroskey, et. al, 1985). Moreover, these fears may be compounded by cultural norms; for example, a well-known Japanese proverb says that "the nail that sticks up gets hammered down."<sup>2</sup> (R. Okada, 1955:28). The author will next attempt to expose such inhibitory fear as irrational.

Becoming fluent in English is an undertaking that takes even the most gifted individuals at least several years to accomplish, so average high school students can hardly expect themselves to be fluent by the end of high school, particularly since English is just one of several hard subjects that they are taking at any given time. Seen from this angle, the problem is not one of students lacking motivation, but one of students setting impossibly high goals and then feeling discouraged and defeated when they 'fail' to reach them. There are various reasons that students set unrealistically high demands on themselves, and now we'll analyze them in more detail by using Burns' classic list.

### 1.3 Should statements and all-or-nothing thinking

Pressure from parents and teachers may be partly to blame, but ultimately, the idea that students should or must be better in English arises mainly within themselves, and the overriding concern of most students is very likely to be the all-important objective of passing high school or university entrance exams.

Most university exams are multiple choice batteries that generally include a listening but not a speaking section, so students tend to be content with learning passive English skills and are less concerned with being competent at speaking English. This is unfortunate, because research indicates that English learners who are motivated by external factors such as passing exams generally make less progress than those who study with a genuine interest and desire for learning a language and its culture (H. Brown, 1991). Nonetheless, Japanese students are under heavy pressure to pass high school and university entrance exams, and academic stress has been cited by the Japanese National Police Agency (NPA) as a reason for students taking their own lives (E. Prideaux, 2007). They not only firmly believe they should pass them, some students are obsessed with the idea that they must do so.

Failing to meet ambitious goals and standards set by others, such as high test scores, would surely have negative effects on morale. In terms of Burns' model, at least three thinking errors can readily be seen: Students should meet the high expectations set by parents or teachers on tests (should statement) or consider themselves total failures (all-or-nothing-thinking), thereby negating any other point or value in learning (discounting the positive). (Burns, 1980:42)

Japanese students also tend to compare their English scores on international tests to those of their peers in other countries, and they worry that their scores have declined in recent years. International competition is all well and good, but the idea that students' scores are low and always will be needs to be recognized and dealt with as a baseless prophecy, another cognitive distortion (Burns, 1980; Boyes, 2013). As evidence to dispel the myth that standardized tests accurately measure ability for acquiring language, the author reminds his students of how quickly Japanese students improve their English skills after they've lived abroad in an English speaking environment for just a few months. The solution is simple: study abroad, or find the best methods that teachers and students are using abroad and apply them here.

## 2. Background

This section will briefly describe the contextual problem of how cognitive distortions may affect students who study EFL in general. This is followed by a brief description of the setting of students who study EFL at a private university in Japan, the focus of this paper. Finally, the section concludes with a brief description of cognitive distortions to be discussed and analyzed.

### 2.1 Statement of the Problem

Japanese students of EFL, like students of any rigorous course of studies, are often believed to lack motivation to learn English. Actually, as the paper will discuss later in more detail, the problem is not one of students lacking motivation entirely, rather many of them are motivated by external rewards or factors that are less likely to result in effective learning than if they were motivated by a genuine interest and love for

learning another language and culture.

A passionate interest and dedication to learning a foreign language is particularly hard in a notoriously insular society such as Japan. Despite an historic aversion to foreign influence that is still common today, many young people appear interested in learning English and other languages, but they often do not know how to learn effectively and do not have sufficient opportunities to practice using them.

The relatively small number of native or other fluent English speakers in Japan provides them with few reasons or chances to interact naturally, which surely leads many students to wonder what point there is in studying English for eight years, including six in junior and senior high school and another two years in college. Without any apparent need or purpose to work so hard, student motivation is prone to being affected by certain negative thoughts and attitudes towards the subject.

For example, a student might wrongly believe that he or she has very poor ability for learning English, or that he will never have any chance to use it anyway. Such thoughts are often entirely unfounded and irrational. Learning a foreign language is hard for everyone, yet many people master two or more languages and nobody can predict the future. The paper next provides a model for identifying and classifying these and various other cognitive distortions that negatively affect student motivation and achievement, and it then attempts to replace them with healthier perspectives.

## 2.2 Description of the setting

The subjects for this paper are undergraduate students at a private university in Japan who are majoring in international relations. In the author's impressions, which are based on more than 12 years of experience teaching English in several colleges and universities in Japan, most of the current students are highly motivated to learn English compared to students in other colleges and universities. Motivation in other schools and universities has seemed to vary more widely, and while some students appeared to be as strongly motivated to learn English as the students with career interests in international relations, others seemed far less interested or motivated to learn English.

Perhaps different attitudes towards learning a foreign language should be expected, since people quite naturally have different tastes and interests, and they are also influenced in different ways by their family backgrounds, teachers, friends and experiences. Generally speaking, however, university English classes appear rife with students in need for improvement in attitude, and while those students and their cognitions are the primary focus of this paper and are discussed in more detail in later sections, the same concepts are applied by many thousands of other individuals in various other settings, both inside and outside of education.

## 2.3 Cognitive Distortions

This paper relies primarily on David Burns' definitions of cognitive distortions and uses them to identify thoughts that might negatively affect students' motivation and attitudes towards studying English inside and outside of the EFL classroom (D. Burns, 1980:42). Other thinking errors that are less easily classified according to Burns' model will also be discussed, and examples of more positive perspectives are provided. Reflecting the diversity of the cognitive field, an expanded table of fifty cognitive distortions that others might find useful

in identifying negative self-defeating attitudes towards learning English was formulated by Alice Boyes (Psychology Today, 2013). Although the author's experience and frame of reference is in teaching high school and university classes, the same ideas can be applied to EFL students of any age and in any setting.

### 3. Discussion and Analysis

Now that the background and setting for the focus of this study has been given, this section of the paper will discuss and analyze more specifically how to overcome cognitive distortions that have an adverse effect on EFL learner outcomes, particularly with respect to university students who study EFL in Japan.

#### 3.1 Replacing negative thinking

Talk with almost any person who has learned a foreign language and they will probably admit what a huge challenge it was, with numerous moments of frustration along the way. The slow and incremental rate of improvement can make it hard to even notice oneself making any progress, and that could lead students with ample aptitude for acquiring a second language to give up the pursuit altogether, or at least to devote less time to it. And that would be a shame, because if would-be EFL students understood that language learning is a very long and gradual process for virtually everyone, maybe they would be more inclined to persevere and continue their studies.

In order to acquire new vocabulary, research indicates that learners generally need to come across a new word anywhere from five to sixteen times before it is finally understood well enough to be used correctly (Nation, 1990:41). If students were aware that learning came so slowly to most other students as well, and if they knew that that virtually all other students experienced feelings similar to language learning being one step forward and two steps back, they might not become discouraged so easily.

Another way of coping with the slow rate of progress is to take the longer rather than the shorter view. If one compares ones English not to one month or one year ago, but to where it was three or five years ago, it would probably be much easier to notice that a great deal of progress may have actually been made. That's been the author's experience during fourteen years of learning Japanese, and it seems reasonable to think it would be the same for Japanese students of English (although junior high students hopefully wouldn't need to look back more than a few months to notice some change).

Rather than lamenting the enormity of the challenge, or even worse, denying the obvious fact that learning a language is hard work, it would be far healthier to consider the difficulty of the challenge as the basis for opportunity. If learning English were easy, then anyone could do it, and if anyone else could do it, there would be little point or value in learning it yourself. One person's difficulty is another person's opportunity, and almost anything worth doing in life is hard – to expect it not to be is to live in delusion.

#### 3.2 Black-and-white thinking

Many teachers have probably noticed that students who hesitate to speak out spontaneously in class discussions often do much better when given sufficient time to prepare their answers in groups. But no matter how much the teacher encourages them not to worry about minor grammar mistakes, or assures them that

the only thing that matters is whether they can express themselves clearly enough to be understood, leading some classes in Socratic dialogue can be very frustrating, requiring that the teacher ask simple and leading questions to get students to share their thoughts at all. The possible embarrassment of making mistakes is one reason, but some students are probably spending too much time trying to reply in perfect English, which begs the question of how they became such English perfectionists.

Perhaps it would help to point out to them that they do not expect to be perfect in anything else they do. In baseball, a .300 hitter surely takes his turn at bat with confidence, and few students expect to get every answer right on a math test, or play every note perfectly on the piano. Why is it then that some students want to speak perfect English or none at all? Other students clearly enjoy pair work and group activities, feeling good that they can communicate in English despite limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge. Perfect English is not necessary for effective communication; in EFL class the perfect is the enemy of the good, and when students notice that their teacher is genuinely excited that they are communicating, perhaps their guards will come down on making mistakes.

### 3.3 Proactive vs. victim's stance

In light of all the negative thoughts that creep into and affect morale, not to mention the temptation to play video games or do almost anything besides study English, it's often a wonder to me that so many students overcome the odds and learn to express themselves as well as they do. And it's certainly no surprise that many become discouraged and suffer low morale, or perhaps even develop something of a victim's mentality, thinking, "poor me, I was born without any talent for learning English but I'm forced to take it anyway".

Selecting level-appropriate materials and content relative to students' lives are critical, and giving students plenty of compliments and encouragement, particularly for jobs well done, are important teacher responsibilities as well. Beyond that, it is this author's belief that students should be strongly encouraged to go beyond the minimal course requirements and utilize the many online and other resources available to them for studying and practicing on their own. In fact, most of my classes spend at least a half-hour each week exploring websites and searching for new ways to practice English, including some that are far less familiar or conventional than watching movies or listening to music.

For example, students are introduced to some of the newer online websites such as The Mixxer.com, [www.language-exchanges.org](http://www.language-exchanges.org), or shown how to meet language exchange partners in free magazines such as Metropolis. They are even shown the website for Sakura House, a large chain of foreign residence houses, and a fair amount of time is spent explaining the advantages of residing with foreigners, such as the reasonable cost to rent a room, but the main advantage is the unique opportunity to live together and practice English or other languages with native speakers in a natural environment. It's also a good idea to explain that around half of the residents are usually Japanese, which might encourage the curious but shy and fainthearted to consider a shared living arrangement. The idea is to show students that opportunities to practice English do exist in Japan, but that finding them requires thinking outside of the box.



### 3.4 Limitations of the cognitive approach

Teachers are not licensed counselors, and for that and a host of other reasons, they should be careful not to advise students on personal matters, or become personally involved with them. In the event that a student required special attention or professional counseling, the matter should first be referred to a Japanese teacher, preferably the homeroom teacher in a high school, or to a Japanese professor or someone in administration in a university. Despite their good intentions, foreigners are simply not qualified for such a role here, and even if it were legally allowed, their ability to counsel Japanese students would be limited by language and cultural barriers. With that caveat in mind, all teachers *are* expected to motivate their students to learn, and by using cognitive theory as its theoretical framework, this paper has hopefully provided useful examples of how its principles can be applied in the EFL classroom.

## CONCLUSION

People have practiced one form or another of cognitive therapy for millennia, and the wisdom of people from earlier times is evident in the immortal words of philosophers such as Aristotle and Confucius. Moreover, as V. Andrews noted, Shakespeare had a metacognitive awareness of the importance of one's thoughts when he wrote in Hamlet, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."<sup>3</sup> (Fixing Common Thinking Errors, 2000: Retrieved from WebMD online).

What Aaron Beck and his cognitive approach to therapy provided was a model for recognizing the various forms of dysfunctional thinking that surely afflict everyone at times to one degree or another. And beyond that, he and other leading proponents of cognitive therapy explained the importance of replacing one's self-destructive thoughts with more positive, healthier ways of thinking that are more likely to result in happiness and self-actualization.

This paper has exposed some of the faulty forms of thinking that probably affect a number of students as they struggle through the hard and often seemingly insurmountable task of learning EFL. That anyone would sometimes become discouraged pursuing a goal requiring years of study and practice, or that occasional remarks such as "I'll never be able to learn English" might occasionally be overheard would hardly surprise any seasoned teacher, let alone teachers who have attempted to learn a foreign language themselves; in fact, almost all of us have probably succumbed at times to similar thoughts and experiences ourselves.

One of the keys to forging ahead and to eventual success in learning a language is overcoming our self-defeating thoughts and replacing them with more positive perspectives. For once we understand that learning English, like any other worthy goal in life, is indeed quite hard, but that the difficulty itself is the basis for our opportunity, we are more likely to continue studying and practicing hard and to eventually succeed. In my opinion and in the opinion of thousands of mental health counselors practicing cognitive therapy, those who learn to see things this way, or who recognize other negative ways of thinking about their studies and replace them with more positive ones, are far more likely to achieve their goals than those who do not.

Numerous studies have shown the effectiveness of cognitive therapy in mental health counseling, and although studies are needed to prove it effective in improving motivation for learning EFL, it seems reasonable

to expect that it would be. In fact, to believe that the cognitive approach originally developed by Beck to treat the anxious and depressed could not also benefit EFL students is itself a cognitive distortion identified by Boyes as the “In-Group Error”<sup>4</sup> (Psychology Today, 2013: retrieved from webpage). Our field is rife with thoughts that would impede motivation for learning English, and this paper has provided a model and some hope that we as teachers have the means to help our students change their thoughts and to achieve their goal of learning English.



## Appendix

### Definitions of Cognitive Distortions (Burns, 1980:42-43)

1. **ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING:** You see things in black-and-white categories. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.
2. **OVERGENERALIZATION:** You see a single negative-event as a never ending pattern of defeat.
3. **MENTAL FILTER:** You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively so that your vision of all reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that colors the entire beaker of water.
4. **DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE:** You reject positive experiences by saying they “don’t count” for some reason or other. In this way you can maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences.
5. **JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS:** You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that would convincingly support your conclusion.
  - a. Mind reading: You arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you, and you don’t bother to check this out.
  - b. The Fortune teller error: You anticipate that things will turn out badly, and you feel convinced that your prediction is an already-established fact.
6. **MAGNIFICATION (CATASTROPHIZING) OR MINIMIZATION:** You exaggerate the importance of things (such as your goof up or someone else’s achievement), or you inappropriately shrink things until they appear tiny (your own desirable qualities or the other fellow’s imperfections). This is also called the “binocular trick”.
7. **EMOTIONAL REASONING:** You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are. “I feel it, therefore it must be true.”
8. **SHOULD STATEMENTS:** You try to motivate yourself with shoulds and shouldn’ts, as if you had to be whipped and punished before you could be expected to do anything. “Musts” and “oughts” are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When you direct should statements toward others, you feel anger, frustration and resentment.
9. **LABELING AND MISLABELING:** This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: “I’m a loser.” When someone else’s behavior rubs you the wrong way, you attach a negative label to him: “He’s a goddam louse.” Mislabeling involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded.
10. **PERSONALIZATION:** You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event which in fact you were not primarily responsible for. ”<sup>5</sup>

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  - 5 Burns p.42-43.