

PROMOTING A GROWTH MINDSET APPROACH IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDENTS: MOTIVATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR TEACHERS AND LEARNERS

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Abstract

From a psychological perspective, the process of learning a foreign language follows these stages: willingness, excitement, discouragement, and final balance. In each phase, learning is driven by the volume of input/output/feedback, constant and/or renewed motivation, the focus of learners, the reinforcement from social interactions, the consolidation by repetitive reviewing and the commitment to long-term memory. Both students and teachers have a role to play in each of them. This paper will focus on theories and teaching methodologies supporting motivation throughout these phases applied to foreign language acquisition, following psychologist Dweck's exploration of "growth mindset". Mindset and identity are established at a very young age. "Fixed mindsets", a belief that intelligence and talent are predetermined, can prevent learners from exploring and trying. Moving from a fixed to a growth mindset can have a profound impact on students' learning ability and personal view, especially in learning a language in which attempting and being resilient are key in today's teaching approaches, such as the Communicative Approach (CA) or the Task-Based Learning Approach (TBLA). The issue of how to test mindset, shift to and support growth mindset is currently of interest in the literature and will be explored as a state of the art in foreign language learning.

1 Introduction

Language acquisition is a complex competency requiring effort and an extensive time commitment from learners to reach mastery. The role of mindsets presented by Carol Dweck as the "New Psychology for Success" (2006) is now widely acknowledged in education and beyond, after her 40 years of research into the field proved motivational factors to be more important than cognitive factors for success. Promoting an incremental or "growth mindset" in the classroom (the instructors' mission) or for oneself (the students' involvement) to support perseverance in the face of challenges and encourage efforts over results proves to have a huge beneficial impact for students. As language learning is domain-specific, by reviewing the literature on the topic, this article will look into language mindsets, or how a growth mindset impacts two of the language acquisition variables: language intelligence and language motivation.

2 What is a “growth mindset”?

A mindset, or a mental attitude, is the disposition that predetermines a person's interpretations of situations. In other words, it is a system of belief that the human brain uses to monitor and process information in order to respond to events or circumstances. For example, a banging noise during the night can be filtered as normal (city noise) or threat (burglary attempt) depending on how anxious a person is. Carol Dweck, professor of psychology at Stanford University, has researched the education field, fascinated by the diversity of attitudes exhibited by students regarding success and failures. She proved that students' behaviours are actually linked to their mindsets (Dweck, 1975; Dweck, 1999). After decades of studies and extensive evidence, she provided a new approach about success, based on two predominant concepts, for which she coined the terms “growth mindset” vs “fixed mindset” (Dweck, 2006).

By definition, everyone has a mindset: on the one hand, people with a fixed mindset think that their intelligence or talent are fixed entities that they cannot change. Hence students can break down when they fail at tests. On the other hand, growth mindset people believe that their intelligence, talents and abilities can be developed through persistence, effort and hard work. Hence students will try new strategies after poor grades or ill-terminated projects.

The category of fixed mindsets seeks to avoid challenges, as these can lead to failure. They put a very strong evaluation on every piece of information they receive, but efforts and feedback are seen as fruitless as they show limitations (“you don't get it.”). Fixed mindsets have been identified in children as young as 3.5 or 4 years old, when they become able to evaluate themselves and can become upset after a mistake or a criticism. Conversely, a growth mindset embraces struggles because of the possibility to learn, improve or reach mastery; positive feedback after a mistake is perceived as a learning experience; generally speaking, growth mindset implies persevering, trying new things, being a risk-taker, ie. positive learning behaviours (see Fig.1).

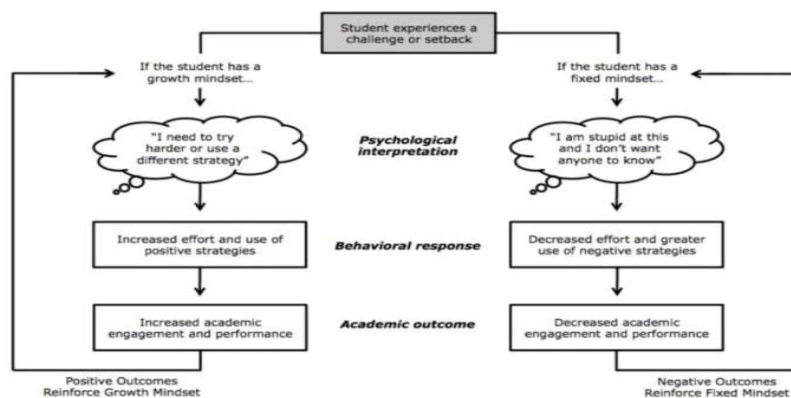


Fig. 1. The recursive process for growth mindset versus fixed mindset, as found in PERTS (Project for Education Research that Scales). See <https://www.perts.net/>

Two important findings of Dweck and her team's long research into mindset are that, firstly, each person exhibits a mixture of fixed and growth mindset. Secondly, the particular mindset a person has can be changed. A fixed mindset can be acknowledged and triggered into a growth-mindset, and the other way around. Based on the fact that the mindset is a decision guiding system and a self-worth assessment system, they proved that successful people all have an underlying growth mindset: in other words, motivational factors are even more important than cognitive factors for success.

Cognitively, the neuroplasticity of the human brain has been proven: recent advances in brain imaging have shown evidence of the concept that started to be discussed in the 1880s. Neuroscience has indeed reinforced the idea of growth in another field: the brain has been revealed to be far more malleable than was thought. Based on individual practice and efforts, neural networks grow new connections and strengthen existing ones, and even speed transmission of impulses. Proper nutrition and sleep habits, asking questions and appropriate strategies impact the process positively as well. The next step of linking growth mindsets, brain development and achievement seemed logical: Carol Dweck and Lisa Blackwell went indeed into developing an interactive computer-based workshop, called Brainology, in 2008, that teaches students how to make their brains work better and build these types of new connections, an image and perspective that students received as extremely empowering. Nevertheless how long lasting and transferable to future tasks is this teaching? According to (Cook & Artigo, 2016), even if many randomised trials were conducted, a longer perspective is still required.

On the other hand, in recent years, the popularity of the concept of growth mindset has also led to a false growth mindset concept reduced to putting forth effort and distributing praises regardless of the outcome. Growth mindset flourishes in a certain context when efforts created some learning progress or success. As Dweck points out: "The mindset ideas were developed as a counter to the self-esteem movement of blanketing everyone with praise, whether deserved or not." (Gross-Loh, 2016). Rather than focusing on the praises, keeping in mind that all individuals are a mixture of fixed and growth mindsets supports the process of finding and eradicating the triggers turning the fixed mindset on (eg. being out of a comfort zone, encountering someone who excels at something one prides oneself on, etc.).

To summarise the research on the growth mindset's benefits, we want to point out that learners are more likely to exhibit the following positive learning behaviours: they embrace challenges. They consider that the mistakes they make are learning opportunities and recover better from poor results. Not only do they listen to but they seek feedback. They persevere with difficult tasks and develop deeper learning strategies. They practice and renew strategies. They ask questions to improve. They are risk-takers. The central idea of the growth mindset relies on the "process praise", that is to say how hard work, good or new strategies, or an appropriate use of resources lead to a certain amount of improvement. This article seeks to review growth mindset in the different domains it has been researched, with a view to show how it is highly transferable and actionable in language acquisition.

3 Literature review about growth mindset

3.1 Growth Mindset, a concept widely explored in many educational areas

Dweck and the studies she conducted with many partners showed that a student's mindset is a critical factor with regards to her/his motivation to learn and her/his tenacity to solving difficult

problems (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007). In parallel, developmental psychologists looked into when the developing human becomes capable of problem-solving, and how it develops (Bruner J., 1973; Brown 1990). Their research validated the needs of problem-solving skills education at school as early as kindergarten. In other words, given the extensive research by psychologists that students who possess a growth mindset will notably outperform their peers in tackling problem solving, then the challenge faced by educators consists in implementing a growth-mindset foundation in the classroom.

Strategies have been incorporated in classrooms by instructors to foster growth mindsets in a diversity of contexts. Research has been conducted in different subjects such as mathematics, academic success, educational technology, sciences, sports, music, medicine, computer science, with minority groups to close the achievement gap, and varied age groups: in primary, middle and high schools, colleges and universities, etc. Language acquisition has not been explored so much, though, and will require a separate development in the next chapter.

These past years, the concept of growth mindset has also spread out of the education world, being taken on by companies eager to develop innovation and productivity... Research has also been conducted by Dweck and consulting firm Senn Delaney regarding its application in business, how a growth mindset leverages leadership or performance management, leading Carol Dweck to propose the concept of “Organizational Growth Mindset” (Dweck, 2014).

Learning a new language is by itself a process to grow one's brain. Genetics and neurosciences have denounced biological determinism. Although not everyone will or want to become a polyglot, a language learning mindset can be based on some predisposition, but mostly on controllable factors, such as effort and conscious hard work, in order to successfully contribute to language mastery. Within the dynamic process of language learning are intertwined genetic predisposition, the learner's environment, and his/her motivation and abilities; a growth mindset fosters the complex and ongoing process of the diversity of skills and the multiple brain connections the language learner needs to develop.

3.2 Growth Mindset and foreign language acquisition

Burnette et al. thoroughly reviewed the literature (2013) to find out that there was surprisingly no systematic research into mindset about language learning. Yet language acquisition operates as a specific educational domain with regards to its unique dynamics: to support successful learning, learners' motivations must be sustained outside of the classroom in order to encourage both interactions with the target community and resilience in the classroom (Gardner, 2010).

Mercer and Ryan (2010; Ryan & Mercer, 2012) aligned with Dweck's growth mindset theory about their research on language beliefs (1999), pointing out that people believe either that language intelligence is fixed or that language intelligence is changeable. Indeed lots of learners are still “fixed” upon two myths: language acquisition is a difficult process full of challenges and that takes some innate talents to succeed. A growth mindset will leverage foreign language acquisition, in contradiction to the idea of a given talent predicting success or the good result to tests such as MLTA (Ranta, 2008, p.151.) In 2001, Horwitz pointed out the fact that many language learners are deterred by the struggles and the perceived failures on a fairly long learning process, which shows in the drop-out rate of Chinese courses in Australia of 94% in 2010 (Asia Education Foundation, 2010). Among all myths, the “natural-born linguist” appears as still being very strong (Mercer, 2010) and because most learners will believe that without an

“ear” for or a predisposition for languages, they will not succeed, the role of mindset seems crucial to support the learning process and avoid the repetitive traps of a fixed mindset. However Barcelos & Kalaja (2011) studied the language learners at different study periods (high school, college) and location (home country, abroad) and showed that language learners have different expectations and needs, and are able to change their language beliefs accordingly in relation to their learning situation and interactions with teachers, peers, and environment.

Most importantly, following Gardner (2010), we argue that language acquisition is based on two central but independent variables, namely language intelligence and language motivation. Lou and Noels studied university students using priming (2016) to reveal that language learners will adapt their goals and consequently their reactions in setback situations: in other words, it showed the possibility of changing how people think about the nature of language intelligence and thereby influence their language motivation.

4 Strategies to leverage growth mindset for foreign language learning

Language acquisition is often described in literature as a process, natural or not, by which people learn a second or a foreign language. In order to facilitate, encourage, support, initiate, or simply ease this process, teachers have been shifting over the last century from traditional approaches based on memorisation and application of grammatical rules and vocabulary into methods focusing on satisfying the natural students’ need of socio-pragmatic communication and interactions in a foreign language.

Referred to learner-centred approaches to language teaching, the Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLTA) and the Task-Based Learning Approach (TBLA) are the two most common approaches used in foreign language classes nowadays. The latter especially (TBLA) has marked a more or less implicit break from the former for the past 15 years when “action” replaced “communication” in language learning.

4.1 Task-based learning approach in language learning

Considered as one of the standards these days, TBLA is derived from Dewey’s research about the crucial role of experience for effective learning. To achieve such a goal, students have to perform a language “task” defined by Willis (1996, p. 173) as an activity “[...] where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome.”

While CLTA offers to simulate communicative interactions mimicking the real ones with role-plays, story tellings, or discussion and arguments, TBLA considers the learner not only as a language user but also as an active and social agent who, through the performance of tasks, develops implicit and explicit second language knowledge and gradually becomes more proficient in understanding and producing the target language for meaningful purposes. (Skehan, 1998; Ellis, 2002). When switching from an interaction (= talking with others) to what C. Puren (2002) calls “co-action” and Claire Bourguignon “communic-action” (= acting with the others), the language learners will be engaged in collaborative task-based activities resembling real-life situations. Sometimes, this activities will even be performed in real life thanks to interactive technologies such as social or collaborative networks or any other numeric environment.(Nunan, 1999). An example of a task eventually performed in real life could be:

At the end of the session(s), you will be able to understand and to write an advising post about traveling tips on an online French community website dedicated to travels and trips.

Willis (1996) outlined three “task phases” for a practical and efficient use in classroom. Each task, during the cycle, has different purposes and characteristics which capture the students’ attention and interest in the language that will be used when achieving the target task.

Table 1. Task-based lesson plan model (Willis, 1996, p. 38)

Pre-task		
Introduction to topic and tasks		
Teacher explores the topic with the class, highlights useful words and phrases. Learners may be exposed to examples.		
Task cycle		
Task	Planning	Report
Students do the task in pairs or small groups. Teacher monitors; mistakes do not matter.	Students prepare to report. Accuracy is important, so the teacher stands by and gives advice.	Students exchange or present reports. Teacher listens and then comments.
Language focus		
Analysis	Practice	
Students examine then discuss.	Teacher conducts practice of new words.	

The pre-task phase or “task presentation stage”: This task is regarded as a preliminary step to the topic and task and includes activities such as brainstorming, answering questionnaires, listening comprehension of native speakers doing the task, watching videos pre-teaching new structures or highlighting useful vocabulary and key sentences to perform the task or conduct the project. The teacher identifies and introduces a motivating topic for the students. Due to limited numbers of contact hours, budget constraints and high time consumption that the pre-task activities require, more and more institutions turn to the flipped model instruction as defined by Bergman and Sams (2012): students are invited to see a short video online, perform simple exercises and read a few pages about a particular topic before coming to class where they will have more time to practice what they learnt online and to perform the task.

During the task stage, students engage in real world activities that require speaking and/or writing and understanding by listening and/or reading. Learners are free to use any kind of language to achieve the pre-set outcome under the teacher’s monitoring. With the desire to promote real communication or the exchange of meaning rather than forms, teachers are expected to let communication flow. Students are generally working in pairs or in small groups which require adaptation for those students used to working individually or those used to whole class instruction. During this stage, students constantly face challenges: from choosing the right

linguistic forms to express their ideas to planning how to present the outcome of their work, learners take the leading role in their own learning. They are risk takers while the teacher acts more like a facilitator by providing feedback as needed.

Finally, students report their conclusions to the class by exchanging and comparing final products. Then language should be analysed by using examples from the classroom tasks performed. Students review phrases in context and take notes of the language they need. At this stage, teachers may assign homework such as online post-class activities to practice new words or structures. At the end, students complete a task evaluation form and a self-assessment form, and the teacher completes his or her own assessment rubrics.

4.2 Task-based learning approach and growth mindset

We have not identified any study in the foreign language acquisition domain investigating the direct impact of a specific teaching approach on growth mindset; within the literature, the majority of studies investigate the impact of interventions directly teaching about implicit theories on participants. However, a mid-term survey at the Centre for Modern Language of Nanyang Technological University of Singapore reveals that 69.5% of beginner French students exhibit a growth mindset when following a “communic’action” approach. (The surveyed cohort comprises 3 levels and 82 students. All the surveyed students have a CEFRL A1 to A2 levels). The proportion increases for students that have already studied 3 levels at NTU: 75% of level 3 students show a growth mindset versus 61% of level 1 students. While different reasons may explain this discrepancy, one hypothesis consists in exploring how this teaching approach could support students in switching mindsets or developing a growth mindset.

Since task-based learning instruction focuses more on competencies than results and highly engages the student in his or her learning, we think that it promotes and fosters a growth mindset among students. Lou and Noels (2016) explained in their “mindset-goals-responses” model that “incremental learners focus on incrementing their knowledge and acquiring competency. They are motivated by opportunities for learning and achievement for its own sake.” (Lou and Noels, 2016, p. 23)

Besides, during all the three main task stages, students are exposed to more difficulties, struggles, failures, confusions, anxiety, criticisms, etc. from their peers than they would with a traditional methodology. Lou and Noels (2016) described a category of beliefs highlighting whether second/foreign language aptitude (L2B) is fixed or can be improved. As reported in literature, students with a fixed mindset, who are likely to prioritise performances over learning, may quit language learning (Donohoe, Topping, Hannah, 2012; Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015) while students with a growth mindset will persevere when faced with challenges and attribute failure to lack of effort rather than a lack of ability (Donohoe et al., 2012).

As TBLA provides plenty of different open-ended activities (brainstormings, discussion, etc.), we think that this approach may help students to switch to a growth mindset.

Furthermore, TBLA especially and CLTA to a lesser extent change the dynamics between facilitator and learner by increasing student’s involvement in classroom activities and peer to peer interactions. As interactions between students and facilitator are definitely intertwined (O’Kane, 2007), any change in the relationship will eventually affect both parties: facilitator's

mindset and student's beliefs. Shumow and Schmidt (2013) also suggested that the teaching practices employed, and student- facilitator interactions, impacted students' beliefs about intelligence. More recently, Bonne and Johnston (2016) investigate the effect of small changes to facilitator practice on students' beliefs about intelligence and academic achievement, such as making students' progress explicit and increasing students' self-efficacy, and found out that changes were effective in building students' views of intelligence.

With the significant emphasis given to collaborative learning as well as self and peer assessment, we can conclude that the new facilitators' and students' roles encouraged by the TBLA promote not only a growth mindset but also play a significant role in changing student language mindset.

Lastly but not least, the increasing use of technologies in TBLA for the pre-task or post-task stages allows continuous feedback on ongoing effort, denotation of progress through competencies gained, and personalized material challenging and engaging students. As explained by Kazakoff and Mitchell (2017), new technologies should help students with fixed mindset to take greater risks in their learning and to persist more on challenging activities when they fail.

Furthermore, newest technologies change teaching practices that help students to switch mindset. A few recent studies found out that the facilitators' practices influence students' mindset. John Hattie's research (2012) conducted a meta-analysis that found out a variety of classroom level practices have a strong impact on student learning, for example teacher-student relationships and type of feedback.

5 Conclusion

Psychologist Carol Dweck's extensive research in the field of mindset has proven that motivational factors can be more important than cognitive factors for success in the form of what she named a "growth mindset." Multiple studies showed that students possessing or being able to switch to a personal decision guiding system and a self-worth assessment system that rely on problem solving and perseverance have performed better than peers believing in their own intelligence only. Although their lasting results must be established in the long term, growth mindsets both require and positively impact brain development.

It is all the more true in the specific domain of foreign language acquisition where constant/renewed motivation over mistakes and failures are needed by learners on one side, praises for effort, continuous feedback for renewed effort and even for students' smallest improvement by teachers on the other side.

As the most recent teaching approaches such as the Task-Based Learning Approach (TBLA) leverage students' personal involvement into their learning and is based on a risk-taking behaviour (constant exposure to new tasks), we think that TBLA and mindset are not only closely intertwined but may help each other to a certain extend to change mindsets and to foster a growth mindset among students.

Further studies based on evidences should be conducted to reach a final conclusion on this lead.

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