Embracing the Growth Mindset in the Classroom

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High expectations for academic achievements. An emphasis on results.

Those are some of the pressures students face, and in my experience, they cause some students to consider almost any mistake they make to be a sign of failure. It is sad to see how kids, once being curious about the world, can become afraid of learning new things because of a fear of making mistakes.

As a teacher, I ask myself, "What can teachers do to reorient students toward progress, nurture their beliefs about effort, and teach them learning strategies upon facing setbacks?" One possible answer is to teach the growth mindset explicitly in the first lesson and reassert this throughout the school year.

According to Dweck (2006), "growth mindset" refers to the belief in the malleability of intelligence; those who have this mindset seize challenges and failures as opportunities for the growth of intellect. Dweck also proposed the "fixed mindset"—the belief in static intelligence; someone who has a fixed mindset would consider a failure to be not an opportunity, but a threat.

BENEFITS OF A GROWTH MINDSET

While students with a fixed mindset tend to give up easily on challenging problems or might even cheat in an effort to get high scores, students with a growth mindset own their knowledge and actively engage in the learning process (Dweck 2006). With a similar starting point in their academic profile, students with a growth mindset later outperformed those with a fixed mindset (Yeager and Dweck 2012).

By teaching students about the concept of growth mindset and ways to cultivate it, teachers can enhance the students' academic progress (Dweck 2006). This article offers

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concrete ideas to help teachers foster the growth mindset explicitly among their students. The lesson is flexible and can be applied to all levels, but I have had particular success using it with adolescents.

PROCEDURE

The lesson typically lasts 30 to 45 minutes. The steps are as follows:

1. Ask students what they do to stay strong (e.g., do physical exercises, play sports). Follow up by asking whether they can stay strong without doing anything. (The answer is "No.")

2. Tell students that our brains need to stay strong by doing exercise, too. Ask them an open question: "How can the brain do exercise?" Encourage students to suggest answers.

3. As a further answer to that question, lead to the video "Growth Mindset for Students" by ClassDojo. The video is available at http://bit.ly/2kHSGO8. (If you are unable to access the video or show it to your class, you can either read or have the students read the summary of the video, in Figure 1 on page 34.) For low-level students, you can pre-teach the vital vocabulary and phrases in the video, and while playing the video, you can consider breaking it into chunks, then repeating and/or explaining the dialogue to make sure students understand. For higher-level students, it's up to you whether to show the English subtitles. Remember that the main purpose of this lesson is to raise students' awareness of the growth mindset, not to test their listening skills.

4. Discuss the video with the students. You might want to guide the discussion with these questions:

   - Why does Mojo want to leave school? Do you sometimes have the same feeling that Mojo has?
   - What does Katie say to Mojo to convince him not to leave?
   - Do you think Mojo can improve in math? Why or why not?

5. Introduce the terms *mindset* (in this case, it refers to how we think about ourselves and our ability), *growth mindset* (people believe they can learn anything through their dedication and effort, so they are not afraid of mistakes), and *fixed mindset* (people think they have a certain, limited amount of ability, so they are often scared of making mistakes). Give an example of a student having a difficult English test and what the student would say if he or she has a growth mindset vs. a fixed mindset:

   - "I'll use some of the strategies I have learned so that I can improve." vs. "I give up."
   - "What should I do next time to improve my English?" vs. "English is not for me."
   - "I'm going to figure out how others can excel in English." vs. "Everyone can do the test well except me."

6. Divide the class into groups of no more than three or four students. Let them categorize given behaviors into either growth mindset or fixed mindset.

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Make sure that groups can come up with an explanation for each choice. The listed scenarios, below, are some that I created for my classes, inspired by those at San Diego Unified School District (2019), where you can find more scenarios. You can adjust them or create a new set based on your students' English level. Again, although students will use English to read and discuss the scenarios, the purpose of this activity is to let students evaluate the scenarios and understand the relevant concepts.

A. Felix is getting frustrated with a grammar exercise he is working on. He slams his pencil down, and the teacher comes over to him. She asks Felix what is wrong, and he replies, "I hate English. I am not smart enough to do this."

B. Leon gets high scores regularly in his weekly math assessments. When he comes home, he shows the results to everyone, sticks them on the refrigerator, and tells everyone how smart he is.

C. Tim is getting frustrated with the presentation he is working on. English is not his best subject, and he knows that he needs to ask for help. He calls his friend and says, "I followed the guidelines, but the ideas and organization don't look good. Could you listen to my presentation and help me improve it?"

D. Today is the first day of your new soccer team's season. After the match, on the way home in the car, you burst into tears and say that you never want to play again. You tell your mother that you didn't score, while your friend scored two goals.

E. Thuy is a talented student. She always earns a grade of A in English. When she comes home, after a vocabulary test at school, she tells her parents that it is not about the outcome of the test but about the effort she puts in learning all the words and how to use them.

F. Tony loves to play the violin, but he knows he needs to practice a lot to play well. Unfortunately, this week he didn't have much time to practice. When his violin class starts, he tells his teacher, "I was not able to practice much this week. Could we practice the difficult parts together today, and next week I will practice the whole song again?"

7. Tell students to work in their groups and convert the scenarios that show a fixed mindset into scenarios showing a growth mindset. If you like, you can have some groups share their ideas in a whole-class discussion.

8. Give students reflection time by asking them the following questions:

- What parts of English/English skills do you sometimes feel frustrated by?
- Can you improve yourself in those areas? How? (Possible answers: Do homework and learn vocabulary from the previous lessons; complete extra assignments; read more English books, stories, and articles; join an English speaking club at school; etc.)

9. Turn the "How?" question above into a goal-setting session. Have students make a list of three to five goals they want to achieve in the current semester, along

Mojo is a friendly monster who loves school, especially math. One day, something happened to him that he thought was terrible: the math problems got harder and he couldn't solve them. Mojo had a terrible thought: "I'm not smart enough for school! I should pack my things and leave forever."

Just then, he heard his friend Katie laughing and saying, "Mojo, you can't just give up."

Mojo said, "I have no choice. You are either born smart or not, and I realize today that I'm not."

Katie said, "Mojo, that's not how it works. Anyone can become better, and you just have to work at it. Your brain is like a muscle. When you try challenging things, like those hard math problems, you're giving your brain the exercise it needs to get stronger."

Mojo said, "Oh, is that really true?"

"Of course," said Katie. "It's like when you were a baby, and you didn't know how to talk. But you kept trying and exercising your brain until you could."

Mojo couldn't believe what he was hearing. If the brain is really like a muscle, does that mean anyone can learn to do more and more things, even him?

What do you think?

Figure 1. Summary of the lead-in video, "Growth Mindset for Students"

with their action plan for achieving them. Let students write the list on the first page of their notebook so that they can always see their goals. While students are writing, teachers can walk around, ask guiding questions, and make sure the goals are specific and realistic.

10. *Optional extension*: Group students and have them prepare a role play in which students convert a fixed mindset into a growth mindset upon facing challenges. Students can then role-play their scenarios for the class while others point out the statements and actions that reflect a fixed mindset or a growth mindset.

NOTES FOR TEACHERS

Introducing the growth mindset to students is just one step toward unleashing their potential in the classroom. Teachers can then implement the growth mindset in daily interaction through subtle verbal feedback, such as giving a compliment on academic achievement, or by restructuring their lessons, as teachers' behavior in the classroom can strongly influence children's mindset and motivation (Aronson, Fried, and Good 2002; Masten 2001; Mueller and Dweck 1998).

Suggested follow-up actions are as follows:

- Throughout the school year, provide students with time for self-reflection about the progress they have made toward achieving their goals in learning English. Let them revise their action plan for reaching their goals.

- Display posters showing the definition of *growth mindset* and quotations that illustrate the concept as reminders of the mindset students should have in the class. Consider asking students to create posters presenting

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what they understand about the growth mindset and the fixed mindset.

- Celebrate progress. If possible, in your assessment criteria or your management for rewards in your class, add a criterion for demonstrating the growth mindset and good behavior. As the growth mindset will be a new concept for most students, when you reward or give a compliment to students, do it publicly in front of the class and state the reasons why you are rewarding or complimenting the students. This action will help reinforce the growth mindset among students.

- Create high standards and a nonjudgmental atmosphere in the class. Students need to be aware that they will be challenged, but at the same time, they will get support from you and their peers.

- Compliment students' behavior, not their characteristics—for example, say, "That is a smart choice" instead of "You are so smart."

- Focus on progress, not the result. Instead of saying, "Yeah, that's right," say, "I notice you chose to use the guess-and-check strategy, and in the end, you got the right answer!"

- Encourage students by adding the word *yet* to any negative remarks they make. For example, if a student says, "It's too hard. I can't do it," you can turn the sentence into "I can't do it *yet*." Remember to emphasize the word *yet* when you say it. Let students repeat the sentence with *yet* until adding it becomes their habit.

- Acknowledge challenges and constantly remind students that mistakes are a normal part of learning.

- Reinforce purposeful and meaningful effort to foster the learning process. In other words, be mindful when you praise a student's efforts. Avoid making students feel good at the moment by saying, "Just try your best!"; if effort is unproductive and does not yield good results, it might even demotivate students in the long run. Instead, provide constructive criticism, appreciate their work, and add, "Let's talk about what you've done and what you can try next."

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