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Dweck's mindset theory and the teaching of foreign languages: Reflection from the language classroom

Abstract

The article explores the application of Carol Dweck's Mindset Theory to foreign language teaching. It outlines the distinction between fixed and growth mindsets and discusses how these beliefs shape learners' motivation, resilience and classroom engagement. Drawing on research into language mindsets and learner motivations across different educational settings, the paper examines implications for classroom practice: the redefinition of error, the role of process-focused feedback, collaborative tasks and formative assessment. Particular attention is paid to the emotional dimension of language learning and to the teacher as a model of a growth. The article concludes with practical strategies for fostering growth-oriented beliefs in the language classroom and highlights the need for coherence between teacher discourse, assessment culture and institutional practices.

Keywords: mindset theory, growth mindset, fixed mindset, foreign language teaching, learner beliefs, feedback, assessment

Carol Dweck's Mindset Theory has garnered significant attention in education in recent years, providing a crucial framework for understanding learners' behaviour, motivation, and achievement (Dweck, 1999; Dweck, 2006; Blackwell, Trzesniewski, Dweck, 2007). While much of this research has concentrated on fundamental academic disciplines like mathematics or science (Goldhorn, Wilhelm, Spatz, 2022), the theory is also pertinent to foreign language acquisition, where advancement is frequently gradual and accompanied by significant emotional reactions (Gregersen, MacIntyre, 2014; MacIntyre, Gregersen,

Mercer, 2016). Studies on language mindsets suggest that ideas about the malleability of language proficiency influence engagement, perseverance, and success in the L2 classroom (Mercer, Ryan, 2010; Lou, Noels, 2019). Comparative analyses of learner motivation across various educational environments underscore the interplay between personal beliefs and localized classroom cultures (Lanvers, Chambers, 2019). This reflection examines how the difference between fixed and developmental mindsets might influence foreign language instruction, emphasising classroom procedures, evaluation, and teacher-student interactions.

Dweck (1999; 2006) posits that those with a fixed mentality see their talents and intellect as immutable characteristics, whereas those with a growth mindset regard these attributes as malleable and capable of enhancement via work, strategic application, and perseverance. This difference is especially significant in language acquisition, since learners often face new problems and observable faults (Mercer, Ryan, Williams, 2012). Individuals with a fixed mentality often see challenges as confirmation of their inadequacy in language acquisition, sometimes expressing sentiments such as, "I will never sound like a native speaker", implying that achievement is mostly contingent upon innate ability rather than the learning process. In contrast, learners with a growth mindset see problems as a standard aspect of language acquisition rather than as evidence of their shortcomings. In a foreign language classroom, where students often encounter misunderstandings, mispronunciations, and performance anxiety, these beliefs substantially influence engagement, desire to communicate, and resilience (Mercer, Ryan, Williams, 2012; Lou, Noels, 2019).

A significant aspect of Mindset Theory for language instruction is the conceptualisation of mistakes. Conventional educational settings often see errors as indicators of failure that have to be reduced or penalised. This technique may inadvertently reinforce a fixed attitude; if mistakes are seen as signs of insufficient ability, students can refrain from speaking, take fewer chances, or avoid demanding assignments to save their self-esteem. Language instructors might frame mistakes as inherent, anticipated, and pedagogically beneficial (Dweck, 2006; Mercer, Ryan, 2010). For example, during speaking exercises, a teacher may see repeating patterns and then address them collectively – "Here are some forms that emerged during our discussion today" – instead of openly scolding individual students. This method conveys that errors serve as a source of knowledge for further learning rather than as proof of incompetence.

The wording and tone of teacher criticism are vital in fostering a development mentality. Praise centred on individual attributes that highlight inherent ability (e.g., "You possess exceptional talent in languages") might confine learners to a static identity, since failures may subsequently be seen as a deficiency in talent. Feedback needs to emphasise effort, methods, and progress, consistent with the differentiation between person and process appreciation (Dweck, 2006; Blackwell, Trzesniewski, Dweck, 2007). Observations such as "You employed a significantly broader vocabulary than last week", "Your pronunciation has improved since you started practising regularly", or "I appreciate how you verified your comprehension with follow-up questions" shift learners' focus to elements they can control. They confirm the notion that language proficiency develops progressively over time.

The design of classroom activities is also significant. Acquiring a foreign language inherently fosters teamwork, which may strengthen growth-oriented views (Mercer, Dörnyei, 2020). Collaborative assignments, such role-plays, information-gap exercises, project work, or peer editing, enable learners to watch one another's learning processes. When students exchange techniques (for instance, "I recall this word by associating it with…") or assist peers in rephrasing statements, they recognise that competency is developed interactively rather than predetermined. Educators may enhance this impact by encouraging groups to briefly reflect on their approaches to communication obstacles, rather than only focusing on the outcome. This metacognitive effort assists learners in associating success with processes like planning, monitoring, and strategic resource utilisation, which corresponds with contemporary discourse on engagement and classroom culture in language teaching (Mercer, Ryan, 2010; Mercer, Dörnyei, 2020).

The emotional dimension of language acquisition is intricately linked to one's worldview. Communicating in a foreign language sometimes engenders sentiments of vulnerability; learners may apprehend mockery, adverse evaluation, or a diminished reputation. Students with a fixed mentality are more inclined to see this pain as validation of their identity as non-language people. In an environment that prioritises development, anxiety may be reconceptualised as a typical response to venturing beyond one's comfort zone. Studies in positive psychology and second language learning have shown the strong connections among emotional experience, perspectives, and motivation (Gregersen, MacIntyre, 2014; MacIntyre, Gregersen, Mercer, 2016). Recent studies indicate that emotion control and perceptions of academic stress are intricately linked to L2 motivation and perseverance (Mega et al., 2014). Educators may exemplify growth-oriented perspectives by recounting their own language acquisition experiences, including instances of humiliation, and by illustrating how persistent effort resulted in measurable advancement. This personalises the learning experience and reminds pupils that even those regarded as experts began as novices.

Assessment processes are essential in conveying the true ideals of an organisation. If language classes depend only on high-stakes, summative evaluations emphasising correctness at a certain moment, students may conclude that their performance reflects their inherent ability. This method perpetuates a fixed-ability narrative – one either has the language or does not –resulting in the test outcome being seen as a label rather than an indication of development. In typical educational settings, this often results in a predominance of multiple-choice assessments, singular oral presentations, and grades that mostly reflect accuracy rather than effort, methods, or the variety of attempts undertaken (Lou, Noels, 2019).

To foster a development mentality, assessment may more effectively use formative functions. Frequent low-stakes exams, brief diagnostic assessments, portfolios of written assignments, speaking logs, and straightforward self-assessment checklists assist learners in seeing language acquisition as an ongoing process rather than a singular, significant evaluation at the term's conclusion. For instance, students might document their oral performance at various intervals throughout the semester and analyze these recordings concerning fluency, lexical diversity, and level of automatization; the instructor, in response,

can primarily provide feedback on advancements – what has improved and what has emerged for the first time – rather than concentrating solely on the quantity of errors (Lou, Noels, 2019). This aligns with studies on self-regulated learning, indicating that effective learners deliberately organise, monitor, and assess their work (Mega, Ronconi, De Béni, 2014).

A crucial factor that fosters growth-oriented ideas is the clarity of evaluation standards. Transparent, accessible criteria – preferably developed together with the class or at least publicly deliberated – explicitly delineate the assessment parameters and the pathways for learners to enhance their performance levels. Through the analysis of example works, such as anonymized passages from students' writing, the instructor may collaborate with the class to delineate characteristics of "sufficient", "good", and "very good" replies. This diverts focus from the grade itself to an educated emphasis on quality, assisting students in seeing grades as feedback rather than personal evaluations (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, Dweck, 2007).

A judicious amalgamation of teacher evaluation, self-assessment, and peer assessment may enhance learners' feelings of agency. Basic self-assessment forms completed post-project, concise peer feedback (such as one successful aspect and one recommendation for improvement), or reflective entries in language learning journals, all reinforce the notion that feedback is not solely the domain of the teacher but a communal resource within the classroom. Consequently, evaluation transitions from being a selection instrument to a transparent, cohesive component of the learning process, entirely aligned with the tenets of a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006; Lou, Noels, 2019).

Integrating mindset-informed ideas into language instruction presents some obstacles. A potential danger is reducing the concept of a growth mindset to a simple slogan, instructing pupils to just have self-belief, without altering the foundational structures and behaviours. If assessment systems, grading standards, and daily classroom interactions are mostly performance-oriented, students may see the growth-mindset message as mere rhetoric (Lou, Noels, 2019). A further difficulty emerges from cultural and institutional disparities. In some situations, students are familiar with teacher-centred, examination-focused education and may at first, oppose more process-oriented learning methods, as seen by studies on language mindsets in Austria and Japan (Mercer, Ryan, 2010; Ryan, Mercer, 2012). Consequently, efforts to cultivate a development mindset must be consistent and enduring, bolstered by individual teacher introspection and institutional rules.

The teacher's perspective is of paramount significance. An educator who unconsciously maintains rigid beliefs regarding specific groups of students – such as "this group is deficient", "older learners cannot attain fluency", or "students from a certain background lack motivation" – may unintentionally convey diminished expectations. Students often recognise these mindsets, which may subsequently manifest as self-fulfilling prophesies. In contrast, educators who endeavour to embrace a growth mindset regarding their students and their own professional competencies are more inclined to experiment with innovative methods, solicit feedback on their instruction, and engage in ongoing professional development (Mercer, Ryan, Williams, 2012; Mercer, Dörnyei, 2020). Thus, Mindset Theory advocates for a re-evaluation of our perceptions of students and promotes a wider culture of learning and transformation within the teaching profession (Dweck, 2006).

Effective strategies for cultivating a growth mindset in the foreign language classroom may encompass: establishing classroom norms that explicitly promote effort, experimentation, and help-seeking as commendable behaviours (Mercer, Dörnyei, 2020); employing straightforward visible-thinking routines, such as "I used to think… Now I think…", to assist students in articulating changes in their understanding and confidence (Dweck, 2006); incorporating regular written reflections, wherein learners succinctly describe challenges faced, their responses, and strategies they wish to explore in the future (Zhang et al. 2022); showcasing a diverse array of language role models, including highly proficient non-native speakers, to challenge the notion that only "naturally gifted" individuals can achieve success (Mercer, Ryan, 2010; Gregersen, MacIntyre, 2014).

Each of these techniques underscores the fundamental notion that language acquisition is a protracted endeavour, allowing all learners to progressively advance from their own starting points.

In conclusion, incorporating Dweck's mindset theory into foreign language instruction provides a comprehensive framework for re-evaluating pedagogy and classroom culture. By normalising errors, emphasising feedback on processes rather than individuals, creating tasks that promote collaboration and reflection, and employing diverse, formative assessments, educators can assist students in perceiving challenges as an anticipated and beneficial aspect of language acquisition rather than a threat to their self-esteem. Simultaneously, mindset theory encourages educators to contemplate their views on students' potential and to embrace a professional demeanour characterised by curiosity, adaptability, and a commitment to ongoing learning. This strategy fosters linguistic competency and equips learners to confront wider educational and life problems with enhanced resilience and confidence.

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Streszczenie
Teoria nastawienia Carol Dweck w nauczaniu języków obcych: refleksja z sali lekcyjnej

Artykuł omawia zastosowanie teorii nastawienia Carol Dweck w nauczaniu języków obcych. Przedstawiono różnicę między nastawieniem z góry ustalonym (sztywnym) oraz nastawieniem rozwojowym, a także wpływ nastawienia na motywację, wytrwałość i zaangażowanie uczniów. Odwołując się do badań nad tzw. nastawieniem do nauki języka i motywacją w różnych kontekstach edukacyjnych, omówiono wpływ przekonań uczniów na ich pracę w klasie: redefinicję błędu, rolę informacji zwrotnej, znaczenie współpracy oraz oceniania kształtującego. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono emocjonalnym aspektom komunikacji w języku obcym oraz roli nauczyciela w kontekście modulowania nastawienia rozwojowego. W zakończeniu zaproponowano konkretne strategie dydaktyczne sprzyjające kształtowaniu nastawienia na rozwój w klasie językowej i wskazano na konieczność spójności między przekazem nauczyciela, kulturą oceniania a praktyką instytucjonalną.

Słowa kluczowe: teoria nastawień, nastawienie rozwojowe, nastawienie stałe, nauczanie języków obcych, przekonania uczniów, informacja zwrotna, ocenianie