Mindful use of praise

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A 'Mindful' Use of Praise

Take a look at the following statements. Which ones have you used yourself or heard other people use?

·You did so well on such a difficult test - well done!

·You're so good at languages – a real natural!

·Great job! - I can see you worked hard and stuck at it.

·Your score on that listening test was great- you have a real ear for languages.

·I'm so impressed. You really thought about the best way to solve that problem.

·You just walked that test with no effort at all – how impressive!

Now consider how these expressions of praise may affect learners.

As teachers, we are often told of the need to offer praise and encouragement to students, but we rarely discuss the different kinds of praise we use or their effects. Nor do we discuss the various hidden messages about the nature of ability and learning that may be contained within these words of praise. It may be the case that using the wrong kinds of praise has long-term detrimental effects on learners and their learning. In this conceptual piece, we would like to introduce a theoretical construct from psychology known as 'mindsets' to help us to consider the possible effects of the various forms of praise we give to our students.

What are mindsets?

Mindsets refer to the deep-rooted beliefs that individuals have about the nature of intelligence and the relative importance of innate talents over conscious, strategic effort. According to research by the American psychologist Carol Dweck, people often either view

ability as being a fixed, given quantity – a fixed mindset; or they see ability as something that can be developed and improved through effort and hard work – a growth mindset (Dweck, 2000, 2006). In reality, rather than the stark dichotomy implied by much of the literature, most people tend towards one mindset or the other to differing degrees (Murphy and Dweck, 2010), and therefore it may be more useful to conceive of these mindsets as forming a continuum as opposed to a simple dichotomy.

A particular characteristic of mindsets is that people do not need to "have one sweeping theory that cuts across all human attributes" (Dweck et al., 1995, p. 269), but rather they can hold different, and possibly even contradictory, mindsets in many diverse areas of their lives, including their beliefs about the nature of personality, relationships, creativity, athletic ability, or musicality. A logical extension of this is that people may also have specific mindsets for language learning. Applying Dweck's basic framework, we have described a fixed language learning mindset (Mercer and Ryan, 2010) as when a person believes that language learning success is attributable primarily to natural talent or an innate ability that cannot be changed, and a growth language learning mindset when someone believes that linguistic abilities can be largely developed as a result of effort, dedicated practice and hard work.

Why are mindsets so important?

Mindsets reflect a way of thinking that guides and directs a person's behaviour, effort and motivation, connecting various key aspects of an individual's psychology. Those who hold a fixed mindset see talent as the key to success and feel that having to exert effort is a sign of weakness; effort is something for those who lack talent. Their driving goal is to look smart without expending any effort. These people also tend to fear failure and this can lead them to avoid challenges and to give up easily when faced with difficulties. A fixed mindset can thus

disempower learners, leaving them helpless, confined by the limits of their supposed 'innate' abilities. In contrast, people with growth mindsets believe in their capacity to improve, driven by a desire to learn and develop their abilities or intelligence. This leads them to seek out new challenges and opportunities for learning; they persist in the face of difficulties and see effort as the key to success. This puts learners in control of their own development and success, and it can be highly empowering.

Believing that you have to look smart and that having to work hard is a sign of a lack of ability is a terrible combination of beliefs for any learner to hold, but for foreign language learners the consequences may be even more profound. Learning a foreign language is a long, arduous process that demands sustained effort and motivation over an extended period of time. Almost all language learners encounter difficulties and 'failure' at some point, therefore it is especially important that they hold a growth mindset to help them cope with potential setbacks. In order to achieve linguistic proficiency, learners need to develop an approach that encourages persistence, long-term motivation, learning-oriented goals and a willingness to embrace strategic hard work over an extended period of time. These are all characteristics consistent with a growth mindset.

How realistic is a growth mindset?

Naturally, a fundamental question arises as to what degree intelligence or abilities, including language abilities, are innate. There is no straightforward answer to this question (for an overview, see Howe et al., 1999); however, a considerable body of research shows that the brain has considerable capacity for change and growth throughout one's lifetime, known as neuroplasticity (Schenk, 2010). This suggests that fundamental intelligence and abilities can be enhanced through learning and focused deliberate practice over time (Ericsson et al. 1993). Of

course, not everyone can become an Einstein or a Mozart, but everyone does have the potential to improve their abilities, if they are prepared to make the necessary investment in terms of time and effort and have access to an environment conducive to learning (Howe, 1999).

Within the field of education, several researchers and educators have highlighted the benefits of a view of intelligence as modifiable (Feuerstein et al., 2010; Lucas & Claxton, 2010). For example, Lucas and Claxton (2010, p. 8) emphasise the potential for learning that is unleashed when the myth of fixed intelligence is dismissed and explain that when "intelligence is seen as itself learnable, then a whole different set of educational possibilities become thinkable". In respect to language learning, conceptualisations of aptitude, which have tended to view this as a fixed quantity, are also changing as aptitude is increasingly understood as multifaceted and variable, depending on the context and skills concerned (Ranta, 2008). Such a view recognises aptitudes as being abilities that can be enhanced and emerge from interaction with other influential variables, such as contextual factors and motivation, in a range of settings and across different skill areas. Together these developments in understandings about the brain and language aptitudes suggest that encouraging educators and learners to hold growth mindsets about language learning is justifiable.

Can mindsets be changed?

Fortunately, despite the fact that mindset beliefs are so deeply held, research has shown that it is possible to change them with positive effects on learning. In an intervention study carried out in New York, Blackwell et al. (2007) encouraged one group of learners to view the brain as a muscle that can become stronger, the more it is exercised. The students were essentially taught that their intellectual growth was something they could influence and control through their own efforts. The results were encouraging and showed an improvement in both the

learners' grades and motivation. Indeed, other researchers have also found improvements following growth mindset training interventions in terms of test scores, motivation and enjoyment (Aronson et al., 2002; Good et al., 2003). Based on the intervention workshops employed in some of these studies, Carol Dweck and Lisa Blackwell have also developed a software programme to encourage learners to understand how the brain works and how its functioning can be improved through effort and practice (http://www.brainology.us/) and feedback on its use has also been encouraging.

How does praise affect mindsets?

Mindsets develop gradually from a whole range of experiences and contextual influences. One of the key influences on how learners come to view the nature of ability and learning stems from the cumulative effect of the feedback and praise that they receive over the years, as Dweck (2007b, p.34) explains, "Praise is intricately connected to how students view their intelligence". If learners are praised for their intelligence (a product-oriented view of learning), they tend to move towards a fixed mindset, but when learners are praised for their efforts or strategies (a process-oriented view of learning), they are more likely to develop a growth mindset. It is possible to distinguish between two basic types of praise: ability praise and effort praise.

If we refer once again to the statements at the beginning of this article and consider which statements are encouraging a growth mindset, we can see that only the third and fifth statements do so. Given the long-term advantages of holding a growth mindset and the risks associated with holding a fixed mindset, we need to ensure that we offer learners praise in ways that foster a growth mindset and this means we need to praise effort, strategies, persistence and progress rather than achievement outcomes or underlying fixed abilities.

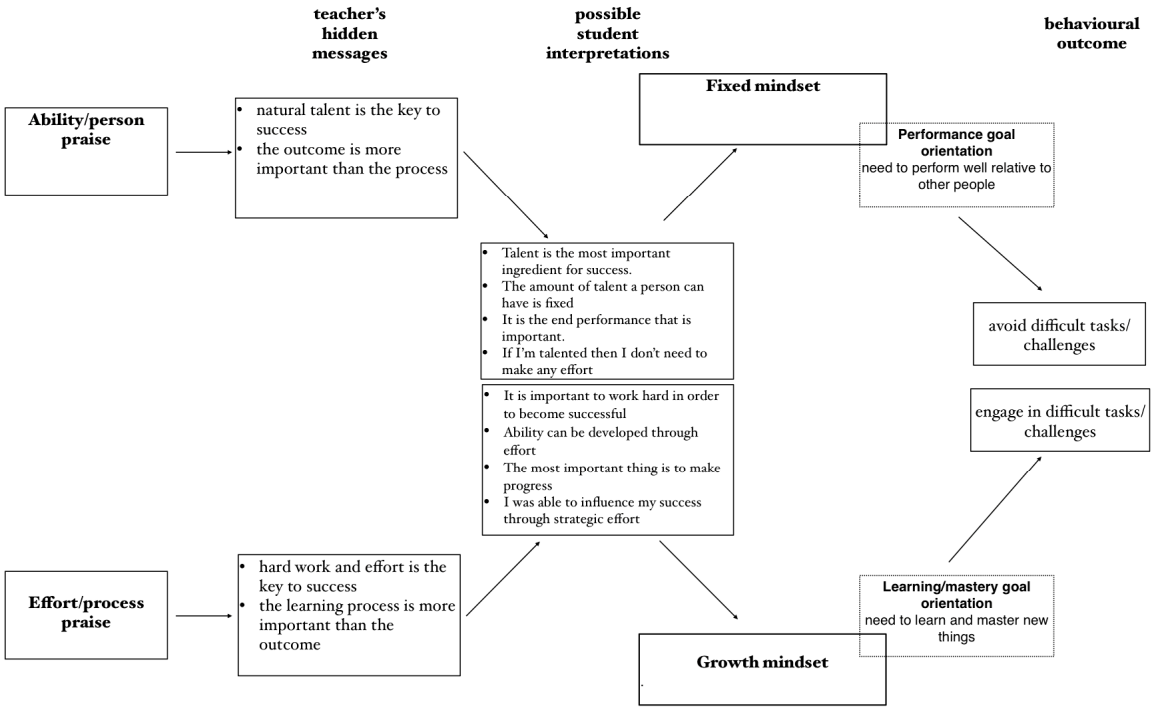

Figure 1: Types of praise, mindsets, goals and behaviour

Let us consider what happens when we use different forms of praise. Figure 1 offers a simplified outline of how praise from teachers can affect the formation of mindsets, shaping attitudes to learning goals, challenge and risk. When a student receives ability or person praise, they receive hidden messages about the nature of learning and ability which suggest that success is attributable to a fixed entity. If s/he then believes that they have this natural ability, then they may believe that it is not necessary to work hard, as success would not require effort given that it stems from innate talent. As a result of these beliefs, such a student may tend to set only performance-oriented goals in which the main concern is to display how talented they are to others. As a consequence, they may become reluctant to attempt more challenging tasks because

the possibility of failure is also a potential threat to their sense of self, given that their abilities are considered an innate, fixed part of their self. Such learners reject opportunities to learn or be challenged in favour of the chance to 'appear talented' to others.

In contrast, if we praise learners' strategies, efforts and progress in learning, then we send messages about the malleability of abilities and the value of effort and hard work. Students are thus empowered to believe in their own capacity to improve their skills and develop their competencies. This can engender a growth mindset which encourages learners to be more willing to seek out opportunities for learning, persist in the face of difficulties and exert strategic effort in the pursuit of learning goals. It can help them to set mastery-orientated goals in which the primary aim is to enhance their abilities and make progress in their learning.

Effective praising and feedback strategies

So, how can we ensure that we use praise that is likely to facilitate a growth mindset? Clearly, individuals enjoy receiving praise of all kinds and even praise about ability can contribute to positive affect and enhance motivation in the short-term; however, as has been shown, such praise can have extremely detrimental effects on learners' long-term learning behaviours and attitudes. The first stage for us as teachers is to become sensitive to and aware of the forms of praise that we currently use. To this end, it may be useful to record ourselves in class and listen to and reflect on our use of praise either on our own or together with a colleague; sometimes talking through and discussing the implicit messages in our feedback can be a revealing experience about our own deeply-held mindsets.

Essentially, "children should be praised for the process of their work (e.g., focusing on the task, using effective strategies, or persisting on challenging problems) rather than for the end product and the ability that produced it" (Mueller & Dweck, 1998, p. 50). Praise needs to

separate ‘the deed from the doer’ (ibid) and focus on the action or process, not on the person or product. In particular, teachers need to take care with the wording of praise to ensure that they do not inadvertently signal a fixed mindset. As Kamins and Dweck (1999) found, praise that focuses on the person is likely to lead to fixed mindset characteristics, whereas praise centred on the process is more likely to lead to growth mindset behaviours and attitudes. This message can also partly be conveyed through other linguistic cues, such as whether praise is generic or non-generic (Cimpian et al., 2007). Generic wording expresses some general, stable characteristics such as ‘Yuki has a great memory for new vocabulary’, whereas non-generic wording refers to experiences in specific contexts or on particular tasks, such as ‘Yuki has found a great way of learning the vocabulary in this unit’.

Teachers also need to provide other forms of feedback besides praise, especially in the event of unsuccessful outcomes. Naturally, teachers can, if appropriate, praise efforts made but in such cases, it is also important to provide constructive feedback on the process of learning, such as offering learners practical ideas of how to improve through the use of different strategies or more effective ways of channelling their time and effort. In the Japanese learning context, given the literature on Japanese educational values which highlights the central role of a *ganbaru* (effort/ persistence) theory of learning (see Singleton, 1989), great care needs to be taken to emphasise this strategic component as opposed to promoting a blind unreflective persistence. Learners also need to be discouraged from blaming external factors for their mistakes or failures, factors such as luck, unfair scoring, or the effects of personality traits they may regard as fixed, such as ‘shyness’, instead praise should be measured to encourage learners to consider those factors within their control and how they could work differently towards more successful outcomes. Additionally, learners need to be deterred from dismissing difficulties in learning a

language by simply devaluing the subject. Teachers need to help learners to gain and maintain their motivation and interest in the subject by highlighting areas of personal strength and individual agency in shaping their own abilities.

Finally, care must also be taken with the praise implicit in the role models that we present to students. Clearly, learners are not only influenced by praise directed at themselves but they also respond to the nature of praise and feedback given to others, as well as to models presented in popular culture or teaching materials. Ideally, we need to be presenting learners with positive role models that highlight the role of strategic effort and persistence in achieving success. Critically examining the biographies of supposed 'natural-born geniuses', such as Einstein or Mozart, can help to dispel the myth of their innate talents and highlight the role of contextual affordances and personal investment in their success (Howe, 1999). In language learning, particular care may need to be taken when discussing the success of language learners who have been abroad and supposedly 'effortlessly acquired' the language. Whilst we would strongly encourage people to seize opportunities for travel and personal growth, we need to remain cautious that we do not inadvertently engender a fixed mindset in which the context of 'abroad' becomes the agent of learning, rather than any active or strategic behaviours on the part of the learner (Ryan & Mercer, 2011). Instead, it would perhaps be motivating for learners to have as role models peers who have achieved high levels of proficiency without necessarily having been abroad, individuals who have developed their linguistic skills through their own efforts and dedication in formalised learning settings.

Summary

In the psychology literature, mindsets have been shown to have a powerful effect on learners' behaviours, attitudes and motivations. As language educators we should be keen to

encourage our learners to adopt a growth mindset, which can be empowering and have long-term positive effects. One way to do this is for teachers to create a learning atmosphere of trust and growth. It is not only our explicit statements that contribute to this atmosphere; the implicit messages we transmit through our behaviour, the role models we present and our use of praise all play a vital role. Teachers need to take care not to judge learners' supposed innate talents or abilities and to avoid classifying learners according to who is 'good at' languages and who is not. Instead, we need to create an environment that supports learners in the ongoing process of learning and reflects our own values and respect for learning. We should not necessarily want all learners to score an 'A' on tests, but we should want them to score 'A' for commitment and effort. We need to ensure that we transmit messages that show the value of effort, progress and persistence and avoid praising fixed innate abilities and effortless achievements. There is much deserving of praise with learners who work hard, exert conscious effort, display persistence and make progress – however small or large those steps may be. Whilst we are cautious about not wishing to set up unrealistic expectations for some learners, we do feel that everybody can develop their potential and improve their abilities and this idea of growth can be empowering for every single learner. Indeed, the optimism underlying a growth mindset should inspire all teachers. "As educators, we want all of the students we teach to profit from our efforts. A growth mindset – ours and theirs – helps students to seek learning, to love learning, and to learn effectively" (Dweck, 2007a, p. 9).

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