

Developing a growth mindset with Harry Potter

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This paper focuses on the problem of learning anxiety in the EFL classroom and introduces the framework of the growth mindset as presented by Dweck (2006) as an option to overcome learning anxiety. The growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts; in contrast to a fixed mindset. Through the framework of the growth mindset, the activity of reading an episode on luck in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* and viewing it in the movie in class will be introduced. The high school students reflected on their own learning from this episode and tried to connect it with their own efforts.

本論は外国語としての英語を学習する上での不安とその解消方法のひとつとしてドゥエック(2006)の提唱するしなやかなマインドセットの枠組みに焦点を当てる。しなやかなマインドセットとは固定観念的なマインドセットとは対象を成す、努力しだいで基本的な資質を伸ばすことができるという信念に基づくものである。しなやかなマインドセットを念頭に置きながら、「ハリー・ポッターと謎の王子」の中で運に関する場面を本の一章を抜き出して読み、その後で映画の同じ場面をクラスで観た。高校生はこの場面を観ることにより、自分が努力する実際の例と結びつけて考察した。

MINDSET generally refers to the attitudes of people and the way they think about things. Brooks and Goldstein (2003) explain that to write about mindset means referring to “a set of ideas, beliefs, attitudes, skills, and assumptions, all of which guide our behavior relative to a specific topic or issue” (p. 4).

This paper will highlight an episode on luck and effort in the sixth book of the series titled *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (Rowling, 2005, hereafter *The Half-Blood Prince*) and show how this material was implemented in class through the frame of the concept of mindset. First, it explores the nature of fear and anxiety faced by language learners. Second, the concept of growth mindset proposed in Dweck (2006) will be explained. Finally, how materials from the book and the movie were used in a third-year high school students' class will be presented, together with samples from the essays of three students about luck and making efforts.

Anxiety in EFL classrooms

In this paper, I will focus on language anxiety among the various kinds of anxiety based on the research of MacIntyre and Gardner (1989), who mentioned that language anxiety is



relatively independent of general anxiety. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) described the situation of student's anxiety in learning a foreign language thus: "a distinctive complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arise from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128). Most recently, Horwitz (2010) claimed that language anxiety or foreign language anxiety is a situation-specific anxiety, similar to stage fright or test anxiety. Their illustrations remind us that foreign language learners in the classroom setting face a unique challenge compared to that of learning their native languages. This is so because the students are often expected to reconstruct the world they know by different rules compared to their own language and culture. As Kramsch (2009) observes, "Non-native speakers are assumed to dutifully learn new labels for things in the real world and to combine forms and sounds to refer to real-world events" (p. 27).

Based on her experience with Asian students in Hong Kong, Tsui (1996) asserts that learners are vulnerable to criticism and negative evaluations because the chances of making mistakes in language classes are greater than in other subjects. This statement indicates that fear of making mistakes in the classroom and avoiding criticism can spread through an entire class, which makes it more difficult for the teachers to connect well with the students. Such an atmosphere of anxiety will affect their motivation in learning.

Extensive research conducted by Agawa (2011) by asking 122 Japanese university students using self-evaluation questionnaires indicated that demotivated English learners tend to make less effort, which lowers their competence and in turn may raise their anxiety (p. 13). It shows that students who have less interest in learning or have very little motivation are locked in a vicious circle of lowering their competence and raising their anxiety.

As Wiseman (2003) observes, "Anxious people tend to have a narrow focus of attention and often fail to notice the oppor-

tunities around them . . . Lucky people are more relaxed about life and therefore notice the opportunities around them" (pp. 59-60). When we are bothered or anxious about something, our bodies are stiff and our minds are under pressure. People who think they are lucky can view the bigger picture and may have a chance of making a more balanced judgment.

The growth mindset

One way to reduce anxiety and liberate our students from pressure of making mistakes is to inculcate the framework of a mindset, or a type of intrinsic motivation. Dweck (2006) demonstrated this by employing two contrasting types of mindsets: a fixed mindset based on the belief that our qualities are carved in stone resulting in a need to constantly prove ourselves, and a growth mindset based on the belief that our basic qualities are things we can cultivate through our efforts, which suggests that through application and experience, everyone can change. Consequently, once we cage ourselves in a fixed mindset, we become unable to think outside of the box. On the other hand, people with the growth mindset will learn to have more flexibility, interest, and self-confidence which will allow them to apply themselves to the real world.

Table 1 charts out the contrasting nature explained in Dweck (2008) of the two mindsets, the fixed mindset and the growth mindset. While students with the *fixed mindset* care how they are judged, those with the *growth mindset* focus on their own learning. In the case of the fixed mindset, students avoid opportunities to learn if they know they might make mistakes (Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin & Wan, 1999; Muller & Dweck, 1998, cited in Dweck, 2008). When they actually make mistakes or reveal deficiencies, they hide rather than correct those mistakes (Nussbaum & Dweck, 2007). They are afraid of making an effort and perceive any effort that they do make as a sign that they are inadequate. Otherwise, if they actually had ability, such effort



would not be necessary. Once they face setbacks, they decrease their efforts and consider cheating (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007, cited in Dweck, 2008).

Table 1. Summary of two types of mindset (Dweck, 2008)

| | Fixed mindset | Growth mindset |
|---|--|---|
| Learning | Students reject opportunities to learn if they might make mistakes (Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998). | Students care about learning. |
| Attitude toward mistakes and deficiencies | They hide rather than correct them (Nussbaum & Dweck, 2007). | Students correct them (Blackwell et al., 2007; Nussbaum & Dweck, 2007). |
| Attitude toward effort | They are afraid of effort. They believe that if you have the ability, you shouldn't need effort (Blackwell et al., 2007). | Effort is a positive thing. In the face of failure, they intensify their efforts and look for new learning strategies. |
| Setbacks | They decrease their efforts and consider cheating (Blackwell et al., 2007). | Dweck states from her research (in Mueller & Dweck, 1998) that they outperform their classmates with fixed mindsets when they meet challenging school transitions or courses. |

In contrast, students with the growth mindset care about learning (Dweck, 2008) and correct mistakes (Blackwell et al., 2007; Nussbaum & Dweck, 2007, cited in Dweck, 2008). Effort is viewed as a positive thing and if they face failure, they will intensify their efforts and look for new learning strategies. Dweck states from her extensive research that when such students meet challenges, they outperform their peers with fixed mindsets (Dweck, 2008). She concludes that, in the long run, a growth mindset fosters growth.

Similar to Csikszentmihalyi's (1993) concept of flow, which includes elements such as clear goals, the opportunities for acting decisively, concentration of the task at hand, and a sense of potential control, Dweck's framework of mindset is practical in showing how students can be educated in dealing with setbacks. Results from six studies with fifth graders in Mueller and Dweck (1998) indicate that groups exposed to praise for their intelligence after completing their task responded negatively when they faced setbacks that prevented them from attaining their goals; groups exposed to praise for making an effort were less likely to feel disappointed by their low performance and continued to be interested in improving their performance. These experiments tell us that teachers need to be reminded that praise for efforts is the key to encouraging students to stay focused on achieving higher goals and helping them foster the growth mindset. Consequently, Dweck sends the message that having a growth mindset will make a difference in the learner's motivation, accomplishments, and the ability to learn. Having realized the importance of the value of continuous effort in attaining goals, I decided to look for material from the *Harry Potter* series which many of my students have been interested in for the past few years.

Luck and effort

While searching for a theme related to the growth mindset, I remembered using the episode of liquid luck in Rowling (2005).



In 2009, I used a part of this episode to compare the original English text with the Japanese translation *purely* to show the difference of the sentence structures and the expressions that each character in the story uses. However, I recognized that this episode on liquid luck contained a profound theme that might be interesting to my students. As a teacher, I assumed that my students have had experiences of both lucky and unlucky events in their lives. I thought it would be a good idea to let them read this episode and reflect on the role of luck and effort in their own learning.

The focus of this assignment projected the following three educational points: (a) by reading the episode of liquid luck over the summer, students had time to think for themselves about the positive effect of luck, (b) it provided an opportunity for them to compare luck and effort and to understand the importance of not only trusting to luck, and (3) it encouraged them to learn implicitly rather than explicitly the concept of the growth mindset; that is, a positive attitude toward making an effort and feeling lucky by doing their best.

Growth mindset in Harry Potter's episode on liquid luck

In *The Half-Blood Prince*, the episode on liquid luck takes place in the first class of Professor Slughorn, who teaches Potions (corresponding to Chemistry in the real world) to teenage wizards and witches in their school. Harry obtains a potion called *Felix Felicis*, a liquid luck that keeps a person lucky for a day. While other students faithfully follow the directions written in their textbooks, he wins the potion-brewing contest in class by secretly following the handwritten notes of the previous owner in the book, which he happened to borrow having forgotten his own. Those notes indicated practical shortcuts to brewing and enabled Harry to concoct a high-quality potion.

Table 2 summarizes the lessons I conducted using the chapter on liquid luck. The main focus of the course was grammar, although students were also given opportunities to watch movies in class four times a year. In my last class in July, the handout of the summer assignment comprised of two parts: (a) a quick fact-check quiz with answer choices and (b) a writing section focusing on what they learned from this episode and including their own experiences about luck. They could choose the language they wanted to use at this point: English, Japanese, or both. Also, students were told that they could answer the questions by focusing on items such as comparing liquid luck with fortune telling, explaining the cultural differences between liquid luck in the Harry Potter episode and *Omikuji*, a Japanese paper fortune, or contrasting luck with their own efforts. This guideline was included to encourage the students to go one step further rather than simply looking for an answer to what they would do if they won a bottle of liquid luck.

In the first class in September, 16 students watched the episode on liquid luck from the movie *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (Heyman, Barron, & Yates, 2009) and self-checked their writing before handing in their assignment to the teacher. In the following class, which was one week before the term test, they received feedback from their teacher. In the final week in September, they wrote their opinion about what they learned from the episode on luck in their tests. Although this question was similar to the one they had answered in the summer assignment, they now had to write a paragraph in English. The time for writing it was limited because this question was only a part of the term test which included various other questions on grammar.



Table 2. Summary of lessons using the episode from *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*

| Type of material | Chapter (length) | Assignments | Time of use |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| Book chapter | Chapter 9 (pp. 174-183) | Reading the episode on liquid luck during the summer and filling in the worksheet including an essay on writing what the student learned from the episode in Japanese or English. | Last class in July |
| Movie scene from the DVD | Chapter 8 of the DVD (4 min. 24 sec.) | Watching the same episode as above in the classroom using the English transcript of the scene (about 480 words). | 1 st class in September |
| Book chapter | Chapter 9 (pp. 174-183) | Feedback from the teacher of the students' summer assignment | 2 nd class in September |
| Book chapter | Chapter 9 (pp. 174-183) | Term test: An essay on what the student learned from the episode in English. | Final week in September |

Student reactions

Overall, the students thought that merely counting on luck does not work. Some students mentioned the importance of making an effort. Here are a few samples of their writing on making an effort versus counting on luck from the summer assignments collected in September 2010.

Student A

I suppose making efforts leads to luck...There is no easy way to progress. If I drank Felix Felicis, I would succeed only once. But luck can't continue. Efforts is [sic] essential to my life to succeed in everything.

A positive statement relating to effort such as “making efforts leads to luck” can be interpreted as a notion categorized under the growth mindset group in Table 1 which states “Effort is a positive thing.” Student A shows a realistic view of life when she mentions that “luck cannot continue” and that making an effort is essential in leading a successful life.

Student B

If the fortune I drew predicted very good luck, I would be very happy. But, even if it results to be a very bad luck, I don't mind. I make an effort to forget it...

Student B says she is ready to face bad luck. She is also brave enough to express her readiness to make an effort to forget it. This writing reminded me that luck has two aspects: good and bad. This student referred to the two sides of one coin, which is an important way of projecting the real image of things.

Student C

Felix Felicis is a great potion. I want it. But I am afraid of using it. If I depend on it, I would forget to work hard. I think that making efforts is more important than luck. When I was an elementary school fourth grader, I was poor at jumping long rope... I couldn't jump well. So I practiced very hard with my friends. My classmates and



teacher taught[sic] me good way and timing. It was to jump at rope's center. And I could jump well. I did my best at field day. To jump long rope was a success. I thought that making efforts is very important then...

Student C illustrates the danger of relying on luck. She values effort more than luck. This is also a good example of caring about learning, one of the important elements of the growth mindset in Table 1.

Student C's episode tells us that her willingness to make an effort inspired her peers and the teacher to actively support her learning so that she could accomplish her own goal. Her growth mindset had a ripple effect on people around her influencing them to share her problem and solve it with her. The English essay writing assignment over the summer revived the memory of this experience in her childhood. While I was reading it for the first time, I was surprised to discover the strength of Student C's writing since she was usually quiet in class.

All in all, my students reflected on the role of luck and effort seriously. Most wrote comments that indicated how they perceived the theme. However, a few students who had no problems writing sentences in our regular classes mentioned they did not know what to write. As a teacher, I should take this problem seriously and think of better ways to encourage them to reflect on and understand the importance of luck as a state of mind and the value of making an effort.

Discussion

Thinking about luck may help the students to decrease their learning anxiety. In addition, the concept of the growth mindset may (encourage?) them (to) focus on their individual goals for learning autonomously.

My students tend to think that in addition to luck, making their own efforts is essential to continue to be lucky. Applying this notion to Dweck's growth mindset, it shows they have a positive attitude towards learning.

However, one of the problems I face in teaching this concept is the Japanese translation of Dweck (2006). I assume there is little history to this concept in Japan and the translator of the book simply used the English term, transliterated as "*maindo-setto*," (Imanishi, 2008, p. 17).

Having said that, the concept of making an effort is familiar to our high-school students since they have to exert themselves daily in studying and in club activities. The growth mindset helps students shift their minds from the fixed mindsets or stereotypes that dominate their lives. By knowing how to foster the growth mindset, they have the option of taking more initiative in their own learning and experiences. It is hoped that they will utilize their opportunities for learning in a constructive way and that this perception will go beyond language learning and help them explore the wonder of their own lives.

As I write this paper in the wake of the March 11 earthquake and tsunami in the Tohoku area, which affected the whole nation physically and psychologically, nurturing a growth mindset takes on a new importance for Japanese students. In such a challenging time when people are likely to experience setbacks, I believe learning the concept of growth mindset will give the students an option to face reality squarely and improve their present state through their own efforts.

Future research

Possessing the growth mindset can be a powerful aid to language learning, and it is something that can be taught and developed in learners. As an EFL teacher, I am seeking to connect this notion of growth mindset further with the teaching



methods and materials I use including the Harry Potter stories. In addition, it would be interesting to conduct research on the role of effort in various situations: in school settings, sports or leisure time. Finally, comparative study of the concept of mindset in English and Japanese culture is a promising area for future research.

Bio data

Naoko Harada teaches at the Senior High School Affiliated with Japan Women's University. She finds inspiration in sharing Harry Potter episodes in class and is interested in learner autonomy.

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