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## Privileged Leadership: Teaching English Learners With Fixed Mindsets

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# Growth and Fixed Mindset Language in English Learners and Their Teachers

**By Alex Lituchy**

# Growth vs. Fixed Mindset



- Growth mindset – believing that anyone can learn a concept or skill through practice
  - More likely to have higher grades in 7<sup>th</sup> grade
  - More likely to have higher GPAs in college
- Fixed mindset – believing that people can be innately good or bad at a task
  - Makes children “demotivated to learn”
  - Less likely to take risks
  - Ex) believing one is stupid for getting something wrong

# Methodology

## Observations in 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade

- Mainstream classroom teacher
- Teacher of newcomer English learners
- English as a Second Language teacher
  
- Interview with Professor Summer Clark
- Workshop on teaching growth mindset in Early Childhood



# I observed English learners using fixed mindset language.



One child in twenty minutes:

- "I'm stupid."
- **"I can't."**
- "I'm not smart at this."
- "I'm no good."
- "I'm no good at anything I do."

This is fixed mindset language.

Nonverbal demonstration of fixed mindset

- Pacing
- Groaning
- Body drooping

English learners may be more likely to have a fixed mindset than native English speakers.

- I observed more fixed mindset language from the newcomers classroom than the mainstream classroom.
  - 2 English learners in mainstream classroom
  - 8 English learners in newcomers classroom



# Teachers' Use of Growth Mindset Language



- ESL Teacher and Newcomers Teacher used growth mindset language
  - "You can do it. Keep trying."
  - "You can do this. Your brain's big."
  - "You can do it. Try your best, or your brain's not gonna grow."
  - "One more, and then you can say, 'Thank you' to your brain."
- The focus is on effort, practice, and hard work rather than innate ability. It praises the child's ability to keep trying.
  - Positive impacts on self-esteem
  - Positive effects on academic ability

# Teacher's Use of Fixed Mindset Language



- The mainstream classroom teacher did not use growth mindset language and did use fixed mindset language.
- Enriquez, Clark, and Della Calce (2017) state, "seemingly positive remarks such as 'You are so smart' were actually shown to promote a fixed [mindset]... and lead to decreased learning, risk-taking, and even sense of self" (p. 712).

## Examples

- "Raise your hand if you're good at subtraction."
  - Implies people are "bad at subtraction"
- "Who put 4:30, 3:30, 5:30 [as the answers to questions 3, 4, and 5, respectively]? If you got it right, pat yourself on the back, and say, 'Good job, me.'"
  - Implies you can do a "bad job"

(Feedback only for those who are correct)



# Suggestion: Explicitly Teach Growth Mindset



- Summer Clark asserts explicit teaching of growth mindset concepts is most important for English learners, as they may have trouble inferring in their nonnative language.
- “Teach students recent brain research on how you can grow your brain, [on] brain plasticity.” – Summer Clark
  - Tangible evidence
  - Growth mindset sees mistakes as a chance to learn

# Ish by Peter H. Reynolds

- Doesn't have to be perfect, just do it "ishly"
- "How does doing things 'ishly' help our brains grow?"
- "What do you want to try doing 'ishly' at school?"



# Explicitly Teach Growth Mindset Through Literature

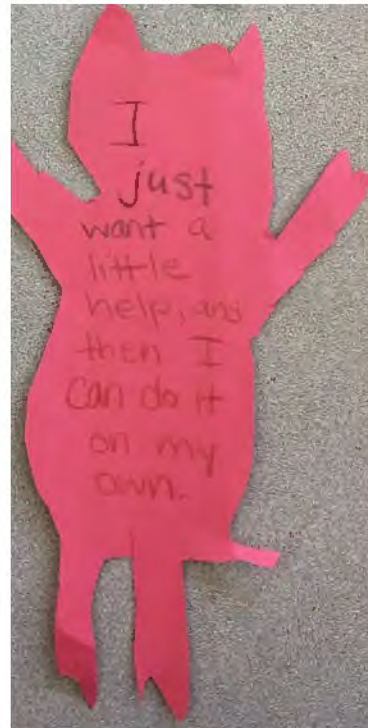
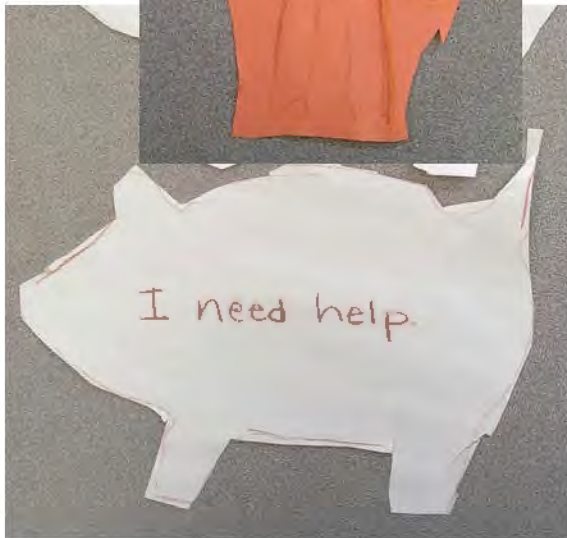
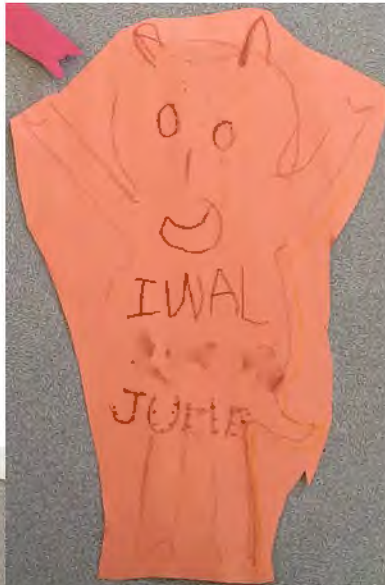
- Gerald the Elephant – fixed mindset
  - “Gerald Language”
- Piggie – growth mindset
  - “Piggie Language”



# Piggie Language

"I will jump rope."

"I will try to go under water  
and I will do it."

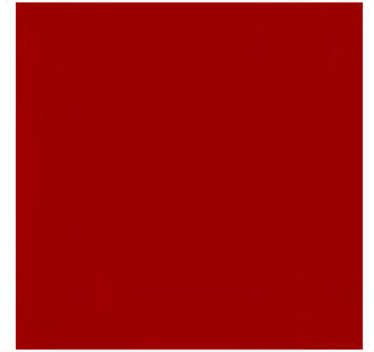




# Piggie Language Story Acting



# Teaching Growth Mindsets Using Brain Scans



# Utilization Outside of the Lesson



- “Are you thinking like Elephant or Piggie right now?”
- “Let’s all take this math test ishly.”

Combat children’s fixed mindset language with growth mindset language usage, modeling, and explicit teaching.

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Fixed and Growth Mindset Language in Second Grade English Learners and Their Teachers

Alexandra Lituchy

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## **Fixed and Growth Mindset Language in Second Grade English Learners and Their Teachers**

### **Introduction**

I aimed to discover if the second grade English learners at my nearby school primarily use fixed or growth mindset language and how this compares to native English speakers. I was then able to connect this to existing research on the positive impacts of use of growth mindset language and negative impacts of the use of fixed mindset language on the general population. I also aimed to discover if the teachers primarily use fixed or growth mindset language and connected my findings to existing research on mainstream teachers. Through the study I conducted and the research I read, I aimed to discover how teachers elicit growth mindsets in children and, most importantly, if English learners are more likely to use fixed mindset language than native English speaking children.

### **Definitions**

#### **English Learners**

For the purposes of this paper, English learning students are those whose native language is not English or those who primarily hear a language other than English at home. All students categorized as English learners in this research were categorized as such through ACCESS exams administered through Jamesfield Elementary School.

#### **Growth and Fixed Mindset**

Growth mindset is a way of thinking that anyone can learn a concept or skill through practice, whereas fixed mindset is a way of thinking that people can be innately good or bad at a task (Schroeder et al., 2017). In the workshop *Using Children's Literature With a Growth Mindset*, Summer Clark (2017) claims having a fixed mindset often leaves students

“demotivated to learn” (Clark, Della Calce, & Enriquez, 2017), because of a “belief that intelligence is a stable entity” (Schroeder et al., 2017). Dissimilarly, Lai (2015) explains that growth mindset “can [help] motivate ourselves, as well as others, to embrace challenges, struggles, criticism and setbacks as opportunities for learning and growth, rather than indications of failure” (p. 102). Haimovitz and Dweck (2017) assert that “children with more of a growth mindset instead believe that they can develop their abilities through hard work, good strategies, and instruction from others” (p. 1849). I have observed many English learners using fixed mindset language and two of the three teachers using language to illicit growth mindset (as I will demonstrate through later examples). It is important to note that I do not claim to definitively know if students or teachers have growth or fixed mindsets. I can only speak to whether or not they use growth mindset language or fixed mindset language, which may indicate the mindset they hold.

### **ACCESS and WIDA**

The ACCESS exam is an “English language proficiency assessment administered to Kindergarten through 12th grade students who have been identified as English language learners” which is conducted annually to determine student’s linguistic proficiency levels in the four language domains: speaking, listening, reading, and writing (WIDA, 2014, p. 1). The ACCESS exam identifies student’s English proficiency by placing students in WIDA Level. For example, in the domain of writing, a Level 1 English learner is expected to be able to “[I]abel... images that illustrate the steps for different processes... [and] [c]reat[e]... visual representations of ideas or stories.” A Level 2 student is expected to be able to “[I]ist... ideas using graphic organizers [and] [d]escrib[e]... visual information” (WIDA, 2016, p. 5). Meanwhile, WIDA Level 3 and 4 students are expected to be able to “[r]etell... past

experiences [and] [e]xpress... ideas in various genres,” and “[d]escrib[e]... a series of events or procedures [and] [c]reat[e]... stories with details about characters and events,” respectively (WIDA, 2016, p. 5). These WIDA Levels will later be used to describe children in the classrooms I observed.

### **Methods**

I chose to engage in observations as my primary method of research. I reached out to early childhood teachers, assistant principals, and principals at multiple schools in Jamesfield, as there are many English learners in the school district. It made sense to take advantage of my surroundings when researching how teachers support English learners by observing how different teachers approach teaching English learners. This would enable me to compare the research and the word of experts to what teachers are actually doing in action. In this way, I am able to talk about teachers in practice rather than just in theory.

All observations I engaged in were of second grade teachers. I first found Ms. Murphy by approaching the Jamesfield Elementary School’s assistant principal, explaining my intention to research teachers of English learners. During the course of my research, I spent seven hours a week with Ms. Murphy’s second grade classroom, totally a little over 100 hours from September to December 2017. I observed in her classroom, which has two English learners who are at WIDA Level 3. These two English learners work for half an hour each day with the English as a Second Language Teacher, Ms. Ferreira, who I also observed. She refers to this group as the Speaking-Writing Group, because this is what she says they need to work most on. I observed her work in her room with this group on ten occasions for five hours total.

It is through witnessing that she pulled out the English learners that I took an interest in observing her work as well. I also observed her work with the Reading Group for half an

hour each on two separate Fridays. In addition, I observed Ms. Ferreira work in her room with a Reading-Writing Group from another second grade classroom for half an hour one day. I also observed her work with the English learners in Ms. Gary's classroom (whose English learners are WIDA Level 2, 3, and 4), working with a group of eight children for a half hour in the morning and a half hour in the afternoon one day, which she does every day. During the first half hour, she implements a language program called Foundations, and during the later half, she works on reading and writing. In total, I observed Ms. Ferreira in her own room or in Ms. Gary's classroom work with the English learners who are not in Ms. Murphy's classroom for two and half hours in October.

Meanwhile, I observed in Ms. Sweeney's second grade classroom, which is made up of five native Spanish speakers and three native Portuguese speakers. Ms. Sweeney's classroom is across the hall from Ms. Murphy's classroom, and the assistant principal originally told me about the schools newcomer classrooms when I first met with her. After reaching out to the assistant principal again, saying I was additionally looking for a newcomer classroom, hopefully in second grade, she agreed Ms. Sweeney's classroom would be a good fit. I wanted to focus on the second grade, because, given that I was already observing a second grade teacher, this would provide consistent variables across the teachers and classrooms.

Ms. Sweeney's class consists exclusively of eight students who are newcomers to the United States and the English language within the last year – except for one student who was born in Jamesfield, Massachusetts but moved back to Brazil for approximately a year before returning. Regardless, all eight children were tested as WIDA Level 1 on the ACCESS exam last spring. Although, Ms. Sweeney asserts that two of them, if retested now, would be re-



categorized as WIDA Level 2. I spent a total of twenty hours in her classroom over the course of three weeks in October 2017.

In addition to observations of these three teachers (classroom teacher Ms. Murphy, English as a Second Language Teacher Ms. Ferreira, and WIDA Level 1 Teacher DG), I also conducted face-to-face, formal and informal interviews with all three teachers to learn about their experiences, strategies, and pedagogical philosophies around working with English learners. All three teachers work at the same (renamed) school, Jamesfield Elementary School, in the (renamed) Greater Boston area town of Jamesfield. All three teachers work exclusively with second graders. Ms. Sweeney works exclusively with WIDA Level 1 English learners. Ms. Ferreira works nearly-exclusively with English learners of WIDA Level 2 and higher; she does also work with two SPED students in a larger group when she pushes into a classroom. However, English learners are her focus. By comparison, classroom teacher Ms. Murphy does not primarily work with English learners.

In addition to these interviews, I also interviewed Summer Clark. I contacted Clark about an interview after reading her article in *The Reading Teacher*. Clark is an assistant professor of Literacy Education at Lesley University. Through the Peace Corps, she spent two years teaching children in Morocco who spoke French, Arabic, and Berber. Consequently, she learned French and Arabic herself. Because of her combined experience teaching English learners, being a language learner herself, and publishing research on using literature to develop growth mindsets in children, I asked her to provide solutions to students' use of fixed mindset statements and comment on teachers' use of fixed and growth mindset. The interview was conducted for an hour and a half, at the end of which Clark invited me to a workshop she and her colleagues were running on explicitly teaching growth mindset in early childhood

through literature. I also used the suggestions from the workshop to inform my recommendations.

### **English Learners' and Teachers' Use of Fixed and Growth Mindset Language**

#### **Fixed Mindset Language in English Learners**

English learners, and especially those who are newcomers and WIDA Level 1 speakers, may be more likely to have a fixed mindset. The only two peer-reviewed articles to inquire about the growth and fixed mindset of English learners are both written by Snipes and Tran (2016; 2017) and both based in Clark County School District in Nevada – where the percentage of English learners is much higher than most school districts. In fact, in the 2014-2015 school year, 17 percent of the students were English learners (Snipes & Tran, 2017). Their study found that “growth mindset scores... were lower for students in... schools with higher percentages of English learner students” (Snipes & Tran, 2017, p. i). When eighth and ninth graders were asked to self-report their growth mindset levels, English learners' levels of growth mindset were notably lower than native English speaking students (Snipes & Tran, 2016). While Snipes and Tran (2016; 2017) prove that English learners in their district are less likely to have growth mindsets, I aim to prove that English learners are more likely to have fixed mindsets than their native English-speaking peers.

Summer Clark discussed the intersection of fixed mindset and learning a language on her experiences learning French and Arabic and teaching English learners in Morocco. She said, “Having to demonstrate your language knowledge to other people... it's tough.” While learning, WIDA Level 1 English learners are “also worrying what others think of them” as they speak in their new language. This self-consciousness may manifest itself in the form of a fixed mindset, and so, English learners may be more likely to use fixed mindset language. It

wasn't until she learned about Carol Dweck's concept of growth mindset that she became "less judgmental of mine and other people's learning and behavior." Now she thinks of herself and others, "'She can change, and she can grow.'"

In Jamesfield Elementary School's second grade, English learners had higher instances of fixed mindset language than native English speakers, and therefore, it may be more likely that these English learners have a fixed mindset than their native-English-speaking peers.

I observed English learners' fixed mindset language on numerous occasions. For instance, in December, I heard the following fixed mindset statements (in the following order) sitting next to an English learner in Ms. Murphy's class for twenty minutes: "I'm stupid," "I can't," "I'm not smart at this," "I'm no good," and, finally, "I'm no good at anything I do." Carol Dweck (2010) explains this, stating that when children with a fixed mindset feel "they have to work hard, they feel dumb" (p.1). Another student in Ms. Murphy's class said one day, "I can't do it. I don't know how." A child with a growth mindset would be excited by not knowing, viewing this as a chance to learn, but this child distressed at not knowing, an indication of fixed mindset (Dweck, 2010). Children with fixed mindsets view that if a task does not "come naturally," they are inherently less capable or intelligent (Dweck, 2010). Similarly to the child in Ms. Murphy's class, a child in Ms. Sweeney's class said, "I don't know," and his body drooped. This indicates that he may view knowledge in a fixed way, where one either innately knows the answer or does not (Schroeder et al., 2017) without having to try (Dweck, 2010). When a child in this class asked, "Can you help me?" and Ms. Sweeney walked over, saying, "You can do it," he responded, "No, I can't." Similarly, when Ms. Sweeney told a groaning child, "You can read this book," he responded, "No, I can't." These statements indicate a fixed mindset understanding of learning (that someone innately

either can or cannot) as opposed to holding the growth mindset view (that learning requires practice and continuous effort) (Dweck, 2010).

In addition, teachers of WIDA Level 1 students need to be aware that the students' fixed mindset may be demonstrated nonverbally through emotional outbursts or groans. Similarly, in my first full day in Ms. Sweeney's classroom, I observed a child nonverbally demonstrate his fixed mindset. During an activity in which half the class looked through picture dictionaries to find words that start with /d/ and /t/. The children were then expected to copy the word from the book and categorize them on their personal whiteboards under either D or T. Walking around to the different students as they worked, Ms. Sweeney corrected a WIDA Level 1 student who copied the word "dolphin" under the T category. In response, the child let out a loud groan that sounded like yelling, clenched his fists, and squeezed his eyes tight. Muttering in his native Spanish, he paced to and from the other side of the room several times while the teacher repeatedly told him, "Es no problema [It's not a problem]." He certainly was not reacting with the belief that making mistakes enable him to learn. Instead, learning he made a mistake caused him extreme distress, making it likely that he has a fixed mindset.

Ms. Sweeney showed she recognized that WIDA Level 1 students may be less likely to verbally show their fixed mindset when she used growth mindset language with child who groaned with an open book in his hand. "You can read this book," Ms. Sweeney encouraged. "Can you try to read it?" Ms. Sweeney's use of the word "try" hints at the growth mindset stance that learning comes from effort and practice. By saying "You can" she is directly contradicting the statement she assumes he is saying in his head: "I can't." Ms. Sweeney use

of growth mindset language shows she likely recognized his nonverbal cues of a fixed mindset.

I, notably, did not hear native English speakers in Ms. Murphy's class use fixed mindset language. I also heard notably more fixed mindset language in Ms. Sweeney's classroom of eight English learners than Ms. Murphy's classroom with two English learners. In an interview with Ms. Sweeney, she acknowledges the presence of fixed mindset in her classroom through her discussion of a child in her class, saying he "is quick to give up and say 'I can't do it' whenever things feel too hard – even though he's quote-unquote more advanced with reading and writing. He requires a lot of encouragement, so I'll say, 'We're all learning. That's why we're here. We're all here to learn.'"

According to Schroeder (2017), children with fixed mindsets are more likely to "report negative self-cognitions such as blaming their deficient memory or intelligence for their failure" (p. 43) This certainly seems true for one of Ms. Murphy's WIDA Level 3 English learners, who I observed on more than one occasion following up her "I can't" statements with the statement "I'm not smart." In one particular instance, while completing a math worksheet, she came to the final problem, which read, "Complete the pattern: \_\_\_ 60 \_\_\_ 80 90 100," and said, "I can't do it. I'm stupid." She uses growth mindset language and also appears to believe she is not intelligent.

### **Teachers' Use of Growth Mindset Language**

Growth mindset – the viewpoint of those who "believe that their intelligence can be developed" – has quantitatively proven to improve students' attitude and performance (Dweck, 2015, p. 243). Rattan, Savani, Chugh, and Dweck (2015) establish that those who are taught growth mindset go on to have higher grades in math in seventh grade and go on to

maintain higher grade point averages (GPAs) in college. According to Haimovitz and Dweck (2017), “[h]olding more of a growth mindset predicts better academic performance, particularly for students facing challenges,” such as English learners (p. 1849). In fact, a 2017 neurocognitive study proved that children with growth mindsets had a larger range of positive responses to errors than children with fixed mindsets and that children with growth mindsets were more likely to be accurate when trying again after making their mistakes (Schroeder et al., 2017).

Almost all compliments that Ms. Ferreira gave used growth mindset language. One morning, during a lesson in her classroom, Ms. Ferreira described her lesson to me as a “writing dictation [activity] with the spelling patterns of the week,” which were “ee,” “ea,” and “ey.” She had prepared sentences such as “Bee and sheep got in the jeep.” When Ms. Ferreira called on one child to find an “ee” word he groaned. “You can do this,” she told him, “Your brain’s big.” Similarly, she told another child, “Use your brain. You have a big brain.” These compliments reference a growth mindset theory about brain growth where “students learn that the brain is like a muscle that grows stronger with rigorous exercise and that every time they take on challenges and persist, the neurons in their brain grow new, stronger connections” (Rattan et al., 2015, p. 722). Ms. Ferreira referenced this slightly more explicitly than before when she told a child, “You can do it. Try your best, or your brain’s not gonna grow.” Here, Ms. Ferreira demonstrates to the child that the objective is not for her to get the right answers or be smart; the objective is to put in effort, which will lead to learning. When the lesson was almost finished, she told the children, “One more, and then you can then you can say, ‘Thank you’ to your brain.” Asking the children to thank their brains not only uses growth mindset language but also shows that Ms. Ferreira is acknowledging that the children

are working hard. She is not only validating their effort but wants the children to validate their effort as well.

Kindergarten teacher Jessica Della Calce (2017), who presented at a growth mindset workshop, also refers to brain growth; Grace Enriquez (2017), the researcher who observed her and also spoke at the workshop alongside her and Summer Clark (2017), said she observed that “Jessica [Della Calce] uses hand motions to show [the phrase] ‘grow your brain’” (Clark, Della Calce, & Enriquez, 2017). They demonstrated that she holds her fists together to represent a brain and then opens her fists to show the brain growing and expanding outwards. Della Calce is engaging her children in total physical response when she does this. Total physical response is the use of “gestural reinforcement” for vocabulary (Gooden, 2017) and is a helpful strategy in engaging English learners specifically, because it is “a stress-free approach that... use[s]... techniques found in first language learning experiences” (Smith-Walters, Mangione, & Bass, 2016, p. 67). Its “focus... on meaning by the use of movement” makes it more likely that English learners will understand and remember terms or concepts – such as growth mindset or “grow your brain” – in English (p. 67). Thus, Della Calce makes her facilitation of growth mindset as accessible as possible for English learners. Therefore, Ms. Ferreira could improve her facilitation of growth mindset through use of growth mindset language in tandem with total physical response.

In addition to discussing brain growth, Ms. Ferreira also used growth mindset language in other ways. For instance, Ms. Ferreira promoted growth mindset by responding to a child who said, “I lost” at the end of an activity in her room by saying, “You’re racing yourself.” This is a common sentence I observed her express to the children with which she worked – both when children say they won, they lost, or say another child won or lost. The

encouraging concept of racing yourself as opposed to racing your peers promotes growth mindset in children, because it teaches children to focus to how they grow, learn, and improve over time – on their actions – rather than pay attention to comparing their perceived internal abilities to others' perceived internal capabilities. "Racing yourself" promotes a growth mindset, because it "rewards effort," as Carol Dweck (2015) advocates educational games should (p. 244).

Enriquez, Clark, and Della Calce (2017) state that growth mindset "remarks that promote a view of the world in which our actions, not internal characteristics, are what facilitate success" and "led... to increased learning, risk-taking, and agency" (p. 712). One interaction I observed between Ms. Ferreira and a student illustrates this perfectly. During an activity in Ms. Ferreira's room, English learners read the words off of cards that Ms. Ferreira showed them one at a time; if the child was able to read the word, they could keep the card. Addressing each child at a time, if the child does not know, the card is passed on to the next person, with the point of the game to read and collect as many cards as possible. One child guessed the word "think" when the card read "dance." He engaged in risk-taking through making a guess. Through her regular use of growth mindset language, Ms. Ferreira has built an environment where the child knows he will not be judged for it even if he judged himself for it.

"Think?" he said, "I can't do it." "You can do it," Ms. Ferreira encouraged, "Keep trying." Saying, "Keep trying" encouraged the boy to continue risk taking. "I can't," he insisted, "I can't. I always forget everything." This statement shows he focuses on his internal characteristics and uses a fixed mindset. Ms. Ferreira changes the focus to the child's actions to prove his success by saying, "You don't forget everything. Look how many cards you have



already.” She emphasizes that he has been working hard, using the fact that he accumulated cards as evidence. At this point, Ms. Ferreira could have engaged the child by asking what strategies he could have used, pointing out that maybe he feels he has often gotten things in the past, but in the future he can use strategies to remember.

It is worth noting that Ms. Murphy demonstrated one growth mindset statement in the 100 hours I spent in her classroom. While drawing a picture on the board to demonstrate a concept, she said, “I’m not good at drawing, but at least I tried.” While saying “I’m not good at drawing” is using fixed mindset language, because it plays into the idea that people are inherently good or bad in a certain area, at the same time, saying “at least I tried” hints at growth mindset concept that effort and practice is more important than believed intrinsic skill. In this instance, Ms. Murphy was modeling growth mindset language to a degree and was not directing it at a child in the form of feedback and encouragement and Ms. Ferreira and Ms. Sweeney were often observed doing. This one use of growth mindset is not enough to positively impact her children’s growth mindset language.

### **Teachers’ Use of Fixed Mindset Language**

During my observations, Ms. Murphy repeatedly used fixed mindset language while talking to her students. For example, at the beginning of a math lesson on subtraction, Ms. Murphy instructed her class to “Raise your hand if you’re good at subtraction.” Despite the fact that not every student raised their hand, Ms. Murphy did not address this by encouraging those who did not believe themselves to be “good at subtraction,” as this would have been an appropriate time to encourage those students. Notably, both the English learners in her classroom were among the students who did not raise their hands. Ms. Murphy’s invitation to raise hands draws confident students into the classroom community while failing to address

the self-confidence of those who did not raise their hands. This could result in those who did not raise their hands feeling less confident than they previously did – or confirming their possible negative self-belief (Clark, Della Calce, & Enriquez, 2017). The teacher's actions could also cause those who did not raise their hand to take fewer risks and to learn less from the subtraction lesson (Enriquez, Clark, & Della Calce, 2017). Summer Clark claims that an alternative to Ms. Murphy's statement would be to say to the class, "How do you feel about subtraction?" instead. Children could demonstrate this by putting their thumbs up, down, or in the middle. This would allow a teacher to know which students require even more growth mindset language and encouragement, as Ms. Sweeney has identified in her classroom.

Enriquez, Clark, and Della Calce (2017) state, "seemingly positive remarks such as 'You are so smart' were actually shown to promote a fixed performance framework and lead to decreased learning, risk-taking, and even sense of self" (p. 712). Ms. Murphy demonstrates such seemingly complimentary language that actually promotes a fixed mindset. While correcting a just-completed worksheet about telling time, Ms. Murphy said to the class as a whole, "Who put 4:30, 3:30, 5:30 [as the answers to questions 3, 4, and 5, respectively]? If you got it right, pat yourself on the back, and say, 'Good job, me.'" To someone unaccustomed to the growth mindset, this may look like the same kind of compliment Ms. Ferreira used when telling her children to thank their brains. However, this uses the phrase "good job" rather than acknowledging the work of the children's brains. In addition, it only acknowledges the students who got all three answers correct and does not address the experience of those who did not. Asking children to thank their brains acknowledges the effort of all children and likely aims to improve their self-esteem, whereas Ms. Murphy's

compliment likely aims to improve only the self-esteem of those who got the three answers correct.

Stating that children can do a “good job” at telling time implies that they can also do a “bad job,” and so children who did not get all three correct may interpret their teacher’s feedback as meaning that they did a “bad job.” Notably, one of the two English learners in her class did not get any of those three questions correct. If Ms. Murphy was using growth mindset language she might have said, “Everyone worked really hard, so pat yourself on the back if you worked really hard.” This statement would likely have built up the confidence of all students as opposed to just those who wrote the correct answers, and it would have veered away from the language of “right” and “wrong” (Dweck, 2010). This is because it is “praising students for the process they have engaged in—the effort they applied, the strategies they used, the choices they made, the persistence they displayed, and so on—[which] yields more long-term benefits than telling them they are ‘smart’ [or did a ‘good job’] when they succeed” (Dweck, 2010, p. 2).

It is worth noting that Ms. Murphy was not the only teacher who used the phrase “good job;” this phrase was used amongst all three teachers. Ms. Sweeney did say “good job” after to each child during daily implementation of the language program Foundations after they repeated her pronunciation individually. However, this was the only time I heard the phrase used. Similarly, I only observed Ms. Ferreira saying the phrase, when she told a child “you are doing a great job.” Notably, she had already used growth mindset language five times over the course of the lesson, so it is probable that one use of fixed mindset language will have less of a negative lasting impact than Ms. Murphy’s daily use and Ms. Sweeney’s concentrated use of “good job” during the language program Foundations.

### **Teachers' Use of the Words "Easy" and "Hard"**

I often observed Ms. Murphy using the word "easy" whereas I often observed Ms. Sweeney and Ms. Ferreira using the word "easy." Enriquez, Clark, and Della Calce (2017) assert, "the language teachers use can instill in students a sense of agency, pushing them to learn more and tackle challenges" (p. 711) When Ms. Murphy says "easy," it does not enable children to tackle challenges, which is likely why Ms. Ferreira bans the word in her room. When Ms. Sweeney says, "hard," she acknowledges her class' frustration. However, some of the times she expands on this as an opportunity to facilitate her children's growth mindset and during the times she does not, Summer Clark worries it fosters a fixed mindset.

Each day that I observed in Ms. Murphy's class, she called at least one task – but often multiple tasks – "easy." For instance, during a math lesson, she said, "Here comes another easy one. Super easy.  $5 + 3$ ," " $9 + 1$ , easy," and " $2 + 3$ , easy, anyone could do it." On one day in October, Ms. Murphy called four math problems easy in 30 minutes.

"She probably believes it will keep them" from disengaging to say, "This is so easy," Summer Clark explained in her interview. "But she needs to practice different forms of feedback... Instead of saying 'This is so easy,' say, 'You can do this' or 'How can I help you do this?' or 'What strategies do you need to do this?'" These examples of questions would foster growth mindset thinking in the children. Clark explains how teachers' use of the word "easy" can cause children to engage in fixed mindset thinking, because it "makes the... [children] feel like they must not be smart. [They will think,] 'If it's easy for you, why isn't it easy for me? What does that mean about me?'" and conclude they do not find the task easy because of an intrinsic quality they possess. Ms. Ferreira explains this in a way that the children can understand. When one child said, "Oh, that's easy" during an activity in Ms.

Ferreira's room, Ms. Ferreira made her anti-“easy” stance clear, saying in a direct tone, “If I hear the words, ‘Oh, that’s easy,’ you are out of the game.” Ms. Ferreira said to the remainder of children, “Does that [hearing ‘Oh, that’s easy’] make you feel good or bad?” All children said “bad” in unison. “Exactly,” Ms. Ferreira said, “That makes it hard for people to learn.”

I observed Ms. Sweeney’s use the word “hard” comparatively less than Ms. Murphy used “easy,” but the difference in word choice between Ms. Sweeney and Ms. Murphy seemed significant. For instance, one day, Ms. Sweeney – who always speaks in both Spanish and English (and sometimes Portuguese) to her class – said, “This is a little bit trickier, un poco difícil.” While demonstrating how to draw a trapezoidal prism to her students and just before asking them to do so, Ms. Sweeney said it was “muy difícil [very difficult].”

Summer Clark stressed that she would not use the word “hard” with English learners in this way. She worries that children may read these statements as “almost looking down upon them,” as it may “imply judgment about someone’s [a students’] ability,” thus, promoting a fixed mindset in children. Furthermore, she states that saying “hard” implies “drudgery, so children may not want to tackle” the task if they hear this. Clark, instead, asserts that saying, “This is going to take a lot of hard work, but you can do it, because that’s how we learn” might better communicate teachers’ point while still maintaining use of growth mindset language.

There were times, however, that Ms. Sweeney used the word “hard” in order to facilitate a growth mindset in children. In one instance, two English learners in her class used fixed mindset language, calling out, “I can’t do it, you have to show me” and “I can’t” during an activity in which they drew two-dimensional and three-dimensional shapes. Ms. Sweeney responded to both of them at once, “We’re working hard on this. This is really hard, because

it's making our brains think in a different way." She likely said, "This is really hard" because she interpreted that this was their sentiment, but she also took the opportunity to explain why it felt this way through a growth mindset lens. Teachers who use the word "hard" could be viewed as acknowledging their children's experience in a way that meets children where they are rather than belittling children's effort through use of the word "easy."

In another instance, during the language program Foundations, Ms. Sweeney said to her class, "Now I'm going to give you one word... I'll give you the word, then you tap it out, and then you try to write it [using word tiles]." The word was "sun." When one child spelled "san" with her word tiles, Ms. Sweeney pointed to the A tile and said, "A apple /a/. Does that sound like /uh/?" After some back and forth, said, "It's okay. This is tricky. This is a tricky one." The child switched the A tile for an E and then an I. "It's okay," Ms. Sweeney encouraged, "the middle sound is the hardest part. We're working on that." The implication behind the phrase "working on that" is that, with practice and implementation of strategies, the children will improve. Therefore, although, Ms. Sweeney used the words "hardest" and "tricky," she used this language as a way to meet the child where she presumed she was feeling and use that as a jumping off point to motivate and encourage the child through a growth mindset lens.

### **Explicitly Teaching Growth Mindset**

"Teach growth mindset explicitly," Summer Clark declared when I asked her what the one thing teachers should know about fostering growth mindset in children. Researchers such as Dweck (2010) and Paunesku et al. (2015) prove that it is important to explicitly teach growth mindset to all children.

Paunesku et al.'s (2015) study on the benefits of growth mindset addresses "students at risk of dropping out of high school." Sheng, Sheng, & Anderson (2011) claim English

learners are at risk of dropping out of high school, stating that they may even be at the highest dropout risk. Each growth mindset module taught by Paunesku et al. (2015) raised the semester GPAs of at-risk students in their “core academic courses and increased the rate at which students performed satisfactorily in core courses by 6.4 percentage points” (p. 721). Therefore, English learners would likely obtain higher GPAs if teachers explicitly taught them growth mindset in high school. Thus, it is also possible that second grade English learners who are explicitly taught growth mindset would go on to obtain higher GPAs in high school than they otherwise would have.

Dweck (2010) further asserts that groups who most often underachieve in the American school system, which may include English learners, are most likely to benefit from explicit growth mindset education. Summer Clark expects that this is especially true for English learners, because they may have trouble inferring teacher’s implicit use of growth mindset their nonnative language. Therefore, my final recommendation to the three teachers I observed would be to explicitly teach the growth mindset they may already be hinting at with language.

Summer Clark described one way to explicitly teach growth mindset to children, when she said, “Teach students recent brain research on how you can grow your brain, [on] brain plasticity.” She suggested, “showing children [comparisons of] pictures of children’s brains with fixed vs. growth mindset.” Pulling up her slides with brain scans, she looked at the scan of a child’s brain that was proven to have a fixed mindset. Pointing to the large amount of black spaces, she said, “There’s nothing going on here.” While showing me the brain scan of the children with a growth mindset, she described, “That’s all red. That brain is being activated in more ways.” Showing children physical, tangible evidence of the benefits of

developing a growth mindset will help children develop a growth mindset and understand why its important, Clark asserts.

Enriquez, Clark, and Della Calce (2017) recommend using literature to teach growth mindset explicitly. In their article, Clark and Enriquez observe Della Calce (2017) as she reads to her kindergarten class, showing how select books encourage growth mindset in children (Enriquez, Clark, & Della Calce, 2017). They show how Mo Willem's *Elephant and Piggie* book series can be used to teach young children about growth and fixed mindset, as Gerald the Elephant typically uses fixed mindset whereas Piggie typically uses growth mindset. Thus, this book series can be an effective jumping off point for explicitly teaching growth mindset in children. From here, teachers can catch children's fixed mindset statements by asking the child if that is something Gerald or Piggie would say in order to guide children towards catching their own fixed mindset language.

Because many of the English learners observed responded with "I can't do it" and similar statements, they would benefit from being explicitly taught that they do not have to be able to do something perfectly in order to try. Reading *Ish* by Peter H. Reynolds (2004), as Clark and Enriquez observe Della Calce (2017) doing with her kindergarten class, is an effective way to teach this to children (Enriquez, Clark, & Della Calce, 2017). The book *Ish* is about working to improve but embracing thinking and doing things "ishly" (Reynolds, 2004, p. 17). During Della Calce's (2017) lesson, she asked the class, "How does doing things 'ishly' help our brains grow?" (Enriquez, Clark, & Della Calce, 2017, p. 716). She explained that just because something is hard for them now does not mean they should not approach it but should instead try doing it "ishly" and engaged them in a conversation about what they might what to try doing "ishly" at school (Enriquez, Clark & Della Calce, 2017). "Ishly" is



age-appropriate language that teachers can then continue to use in the classroom after explicitly teaching it in the lesson.

### **Limitations**

It is important to note that when I began researching in Jamesfield Elementary School, I only aimed to research English learners and their teachers generally. The fact that the children's fixed mindset was observed organically rather than intentionally shows my lack of bias, as I did not begin observing by looking for a specific answer and therefore did not subconsciously manipulate the data to fix a preconceived notion about English learners and growth and fixed mindset.

Although I made sure to observe every English learner in Jamesfield's second grade at least once, I spent the most time observing Ms. Murphy and her two English learners, as well as those two students with Ms. Ferreira. I spent the second most time with the children in Ms. Sweeney's classroom. If I had more time and resources, I would focus equal time to all English learners in second grade and to all teachers of English learners in second grade, as it is possible it would yield more detailed and generalizable results.

Despite having observed each English learner, I did not observe each second grade teacher of English learners. If I had more time and resources, I would observe all six teachers of English learners in second grade – Ms. Murphy and the three other mainstream classroom teachers, English as a Second Language teacher Ms. Ferreira, and Newcomer English Learner teacher Ms. Sweeney. Researching six teachers would provide a more robust sample size, and therefore the results may vary slightly but would also be more accurate and generalizable.

If I had more time and resources, I would conduct a longitudinal study that determined if the English learner students of the teachers who use growth mindset have better grades and

high self-esteem overtime. I could also intervene by teaching some children growth mindset explicitly to determine in a longitudinal study if explicit teaching of growth mindset benefits English learners in the same way it does the general population.

### **Conclusion**

Although the qualitative data collected for this study proves that second grade English learners at Jamesfield Elementary School all use growth mindset language, this is not necessarily generalizable to all second grade English learners in Jamesfield, in Massachusetts, or in the country – nor is it generalizable to Jamesfield Elementary School English learners of other grade levels. Nonetheless, the fact that all English learners studied used fixed mindset language while most native English speakers in Ms. Murphy’s classroom did not use fixed mindset language, points to a larger trend that requires more research.

Much research has been done on growth and fixed mindset, and a sizable amount of research has been done on English learners. However, only a few peer-reviewed articles have ever examined growth and fixed mindset in English learners. Therefore, there is a gap in the research, and more research needs to be done on the growth and fixed mindset of English learners and their teachers specifically.

More research needs to be done on children and growth and fixed mindset on a broad scale, with other age groups and in other parts of the country. More research needs to be done on why English learners may be more likely to have a fixed mindset. Longitudinal research should be conducted on how teacher’s growth or fixed mindset language impacts children over time – for instance, if English learners who have teachers who use fixed mindset language for years maintain a fixed mindset if not met with intervention. A longitudinal study could also aim to discover if English learners with teachers who use growth mindset language

begin developing or increasing their growth mindset language over time. These longitudinal studies could also determine if English learners who use primarily growth mindset language have higher academic performances and higher confidence than English learners who use primarily fixed mindset language.

The following lesson plan is adaptable for pre-kindergarten to second grade in order to use books to directly teach growth mindset to classrooms with English learners.

| <i>Lesson Background Information</i>   |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Name: Alex Lituchy</b>  | <b>Date: February 7, 2018</b>  |
| <b>District: Cambridge</b>   | <b>Lesson Length: 45-50 min</b><br>This lesson will repeat 4 times within the day, as it is conducted with “color groups” of 4-5 children at a time.   |
| <p><b>Content Area:</b><br/><b>English/Language Arts</b><br/>RL.PK.1. With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about a story or poem read aloud.<br/>RL.PK.9. With prompting and support, make connections between a story or poem and their own experiences.<br/>W.PK.2. Use a combination of dictating and drawing to supply information about a topic.</p> <p><b>ELD Standard:</b><br/>ELD 2: The Language of English Language Arts</p>   | <p><b>Lesson Topic: Growth and Fixed Mindset</b></p> <p>Children will learn about growth and fixed mindset through the age-appropriate terms “Piggie language” and “Gerald language.” They will do this by engaging in questions about the “Elephant and Piggie” book <i>Today I Will Fly</i> by Mo Willems, including ones that support them in connecting the book to their own experience. Children will analyze and compare the way Piggie speaks in the book to the way Gerald speaks in the book. They will brainstorm examples of Piggie language as a group before choosing one independently and writing it on a pink Piggie that they trace and cut out.</p> |
| <p><b>Focus Language Domain(s) (R, W, L, S): Reading, Writing, and Speaking</b></p> <p>Children will engage in the book being read. The list of “Piggie language” examples that Piggie says in the book will be read to them. The brainstormed list of their description of how Piggie talks will be read to them.</p> <p>The children will write by dictating the brainstormed list of “Piggie language” and “Gerald language” as well as by writing their sentence in “Piggie language” individually.</p> <p>The children will speak when they answer questions about the book and in order to share their examples and connect the book to their personal experience.</p> |  |

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| <p><b>Content Objective:</b><br/> <i>All students will be able to...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Talk about growth and fixed mindset in age-appropriate terms (Piggie language vs. Gerald language) and think of examples</li> <li>■ Connect concepts from the book to their own experience</li> <li>■ Synthesize the information of the book and develop their own examples</li> <li>■ Practicing fine motor skills of cutting</li> </ul> | <p><b>Language Objective for students at WIDA ELD levels 1-3 (choose one level):</b><br/> <i>ELD Level 3 students at will be able to...in English</i></p> <p>Children will be able to answer questions about the book.<br/>         Children will be able to dictate their sentence to the teacher.</p> <p>All children in the class will be able to use the following sentence frames:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can...</li> <li>• I am good at...</li> <li>• I will try...</li> <li>• I will ask for help with/to...</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Key Content Vocabulary:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Growth mindset: “Piggie language”</li> <li>• Fixed mindset: “Gerald language”</li> </ul>   | <p><b>Language Objective for students at WIDA ELD levels 4 or 5 (choose one level):</b><br/> <i>ELD Level 4 students at will be able to...in English</i></p> <p>Children will be able to trace the written sentence that they dictate to the teacher.</p> <p><i>ELD Level 5 students at will be able to...in English</i></p> <p>Children will be able to tap out the sounds in the words of their sentences with support and guidance from teachers.</p>   |
| <p><b>Materials/Equipment:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Scissors</li> <li>- 5 pencils</li> <li>- Black markers</li> <li>- 5 Piggie cut outs of different varieties</li> <li>- 20 pieces of colored construction paper</li> <li>- <i>Today I Will Fly</i> by Mo Willems</li> </ul>   | <p><b>Prerequisite Knowledge:</b></p> <p>The children will have read <i>Today I Will Fly</i> by Mo Willems the day prior.</p>  |

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|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sentence frames</li> <li>- Small poster with Piggie’s sentences from the book</li> <li>- Piece of paper to make T chart (with “Piggie language” on one side and “Gerald language” on the other side)</li> </ul> |   |
| <p><b><i>Instructional Procedure</i></b><br/> <i>The activities below should reflect the targeted language and content objectives for this lesson.</i></p>   |   |
| <b><i>Duration</i></b>   | <b><i>Description</i></b>   |
| <p>5-7 min</p>   | <p><b>Connection to prior learning or background building activity:</b></p> <p>Reread book read the day before.<br/>                 Key questions for students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does Piggie feel here? (page 35)</li> <li>• How does Gerald feel here? (page 34)</li> <li>• How does Piggie feel that he is getting help? (page 51)</li> <li>• What kind of language does Gerald use at the end? (page 55)</li> </ul> |
| <p>5-7 min</p>   | <p><b>Activities to present new content area knowledge or skill:</b></p> <p>Children will connect the book to their own experience through prompting questions, such as “Can you think of a time that you used Gerald language? How did you feel?”</p>  |

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| <p>10 min</p>  | <p><b>Activities to present new language knowledge or skill:</b><br/>                 Introduce and define “Piggie language” and “Gerald language.” Show example lines from the book of Piggie talking (Piggie language) and Gerald talking (Gerald language). Ask the following, while writing down their responses in a T list with “Piggie language” on one side and “Gerald language” on the other:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you notice about the way Piggie talks?</li> <li>• What do you notice about the way Gerald talks?</li> </ul> <p>Examples from the book:<br/>                 Piggie language</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Today I will fly.</li> <li>• I will try.</li> <li>• I will get help.<br/>I will try again.</li> <li>• I need help.</li> <li>• Will you help me?</li> </ul> <p>Gerald Language</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You will not fly today... tomorrow... next week.</li> <li>• You will never fly.</li> </ul> <p>This discussion will connect to the key questions referenced earlier.</p> |
| <p>Tracing and cutting: 10 min<br/>                 Writing “Piggie language”<br/>                 Sentences: 15 min</p> | <p><b>Activities to assess or review learning of new language, content, and/or skill:</b><br/>                 Group assessment: The children will make a list of examples of “Piggie language” and “Gerald language” – some of which are connected to their own personal experiences.</p> <p>Individual assessment: Each child (after tracing and cutting out Piggie on pink construction paper) writes a sentence in “Piggie language” with assistance.</p> <p>Through the group assessment, children will demonstrate their knowledge orally. While, in the individual assessment, children will demonstrate their knowledge through writing.</p>   |

**Homework/Extension Activities**

From now on in the classroom, when a child uses fixed mindset language, the teacher will ask them, “Are you using ‘Gerald language’ or ‘Piggie language’ right now? What would Piggie say instead?”

Reread *Elephant and Piggie* book and ask children to look happy and give a thumbs up when Piggie uses “Piggie language” and to look sad and give a thumbs down when Gerald the Elephant uses “Gerald language.” When asked, children will make suggestions of how Gerald could rephrase his statement to sound more like Piggie (use growth mindset).

Children cut and trace Gerald the elephant and write a sentence in “Gerald language.”

Discussion of “Piggie language” and “Gerald language” can continue in a growth mindset unit aided by the following books:

- *Ish* by Peter H. Reynolds
- *The dot* by Peter H. Reynolds
- *After The Fall* by Dan Santat
- *The OK Book* by Amy Krouse Rosenthal and Tom Lichtenheld
- *What Would You Do With A Problem?* by Kobi Yamada
- *Hana Hashimoto, Sixth Violin* by Chieri Uegaki
- *Salt In His Shoes: Michael Jordan in Pursuit of a Dream* by Deloris Jordan
- *The Girl Who Never Made Mistakes* by Mark Pett and Gary Rubinstein



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