Fixed and Growth Mindset Language - Common Points of Confusion

Below are statements that teachers using the Language Tracking Worksheets have shared with us that are great examples of common points of confusion.

Ambiguous Statements

**This is hard** - Teachers often identify this as a fixed mindset statement, so it’s worth highlighting that this statement by itself is ambiguous and is quite different than *It’s too hard*, which could indicate a fixed mindset. Saying “this is hard” might just be a statement of fact - they're struggling and recognize that the task is pushing them beyond their current skill level. The important question is, what is the students’ subjective experience? What emotion was it said with? If they say it with excitement, this suggests they probably feel confident they can master the challenge (which suggests a growth mindset). This could be an opportunity to validate their enthusiasm for taking on the challenge. But if they sound discouraged or frustrated, then maybe they don’t feel hopeful about being successful (low agency), or understand how to proceed. This could be a great opening for a conversation about how struggling is when the brain grows most and to help them problem-solve on strategies they could use. In situations where you hear discouragement, it’s important to avoid telling the student to have a growth mindset or telling them they just aren’t trying hard enough. Both could cause them to feel criticized or misunderstood which might cause them to shut down. As much as possible, ask open-ended, probing questions and really listen to their response. The goal is to help them arrive at their own conclusions about how to proceed.

*Discussion Questions:*

- What question could you ask to get more information about how confident the speaker feels about being successful?
- If you conclude they feel hopeless about improving, how might you respond?
- Would you respond differently for different students (e.g., English language learners, students with disabilities, students from different cultural backgrounds, boys versus girls)? Why?

**I’m being dumb** - As with the above example, whether this suggests a fixed or growth mindset depends on how much agency the person feels about addressing their 'dumbness.' In other words, saying “I’m being dumb” could be said in a lighthearted way and the “dumbness” could be seen by the speaker as transient or fixable, not a statement of their belief about their innate intelligence. This is quite different than the global statement “I’m dumb.”

*Discussion Questions:*

- What cues would you look for, or what questions might you ask, to learn more about what “I’m being dumb” means to the speaker?
- If you conclude that the student does think they are dumb, how might you respond?

**You can do better** - This might be considered a growth mindset statement, but by itself it can be problematic. If a student hears this but doesn’t understand *how* to get better, it could lead
them to feel hopeless and conclude they aren’t ‘smart enough’ to improve. This might be especially true if they have put in a lot of effort already, which is one reason not to overemphasize that having a growth mindset means trying hard and having a positive attitude. Instead, help students see that making mistakes and struggling are a normal part of learning, and that seeking out support and new strategies when they get stuck is key.

Discussion Question:
- What questions could you ask this student to help them create a plan for improving?

A student could also hear this statement as criticism instead of encouragement, especially if they think you are disappointed in their performance, or if they worry that you have low expectations of them. It can be helpful to be explicit about your motivation - let them know you have high standards and that you are confident they can reach them.

Discussion Question:
- How might you reframe this statement to convey your motivation and expectations?

I have a smart brain, and I’m amazing at reading - These statements are somewhat ambiguous because it’s not clear what attribution the student has for why they are so successful. If they think their skill or ‘smartness’ is the result of lots of practice and opportunities to learn, this would suggest a growth mindset. If it is because they think they were born with this innate talent, this would suggest a fixed mindset.

Discussion Questions:
- What questions could you ask that would help you find out what they think is the cause of their success?
- If their answers suggest a belief that their skill is an innate trait, how might you respond?

NOTE: This is assuming they are successful. If their high level of confidence doesn’t match their performance, it may suggest they have a fixed mindset and are especially concerned with trying to convince you that they have innate talent. Or they may truly not recognize that they are not performing as well as they think.

Discussion Questions:
- What questions might you ask to help uncover the cause of the discrepancy?
- Imagine different possible responses. How might you further the conversation?

I don’t like school - Expressing dislike of something, including school, is not necessarily a reflection of whether the person believes they could improve if they wanted to - it may just be a statement of personal preference. This statement requires a conversation to unearth why the student doesn’t like school. It might be because they don’t feel capable of being academically successful, which might suggest a fixed mindset, but it could be something else entirely. Maybe they are not being challenged enough and feel bored. Maybe they don’t see the relevance of their coursework to the rest of their life or to what is personally meaningful to them. Or maybe they are being bullied, which is making school a very unpleasant experience for them.

Discussion Questions:
- What might you ask this student to learn more about why they don’t like school?
Imagine different possible responses. How might you further the conversation?
Are there other possible reasons you can think of for a student to say this?

This is boring - This is a statement teachers hear from many students and they often conclude it suggests a fixed mindset or that a student is “lazy.” Boredom is a statement about how a person is feeling and doesn’t tell you what they believe about the malleability of traits. For example, a person may be entirely confident that they could become good at playing the piano, but they don’t enjoy playing the piano so they lack motivation to try and may simply say “this is boring.” They may have a growth mindset but are bored because they find the activity too easy or don’t see how it relates to things that are important to them and that they care about.

Discussion Questions:
- What questions could you ask to find out why the student feels bored and what would help them feel more engaged?
- If you discover that they don’t see the point of the coursework, how would you respond?
- If you discover that they are bored because the activity isn’t that interesting to them, but is a requirement for the class, how might you respond?
- If you discover the work is too easy for them, how might you respond?

Neutral Praise

Good job - This statement often concerns teachers when they first begin paying attention to their language because they think it is fixed mindset praise. In fact, it is neither fixed nor growth mindset praise. Neutral praise is normal and shouldn’t be avoided. If we only said growth mindset praise all the time, it would sound inauthentic very quickly and could lead to the recipient of such praise mistrusting the speaker. It’s also important to recognize that all of us (well, maybe not Carol Dweck) slip up and say fixed mindset things occasionally. What is important is to develop the habit of focusing our praise and encouragement on the process, not the person.

Another point of confusion related to this statement is that teachers sometimes conclude that they shouldn’t celebrate students’ successes because this would place too much emphasis on the end product (for example, congratulating them on getting a good score on a test). However, celebrating accomplishments is extremely important for sustained motivation. The way to celebrate successes that supports a growth mindset is to direct attention towards the processes that led to the success. This kind of debriefing after a success can help us clarify and remember the strategies that were most helpful, which will serve us well when we face our next challenge.