Growth mindset, CALL, and students as partners – does it work in a primary school context?

Monica Ward[1]

Abstract. This paper explores the use of a Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), growth mindset infused, student partnership approach to language learning in a primary school context. Early success is important in language learning. Students may doubt their ability to learn a language, especially if they have had a non-positive experience of learning a language. This research study looks at a research intervention for learning Spanish in an Irish primary school. A combination of in-class and CALL resources were used to teach Spanish in six sessions to 120 students from six different classes (10-12 years of age), all of whom were beginners. Most had learnt Irish since four or five years of age and had no previous exposure to CALL, growth mindset, or a student partnership. There were several logistical hiccups along the way, including a low response rate to the end of intervention survey (via questionnaire). However, the overall indications are that the students enjoyed the approach and that it could be used in other contexts.

Keywords: CALL, growth mindset, student partnership, primary school.

1.   Introduction

A growth mindset is helpful for learning (Dweck, 2017). CALL, learner autonomy (Little, Dam, & Legenhausen, 2017) and a student partnership approach (Cook-Sather, 2014) are also helpful approaches to the language learning process. In Ireland, Irish is a compulsory subject for most students and is generally not a popular subject (Darmody & Daly, 2015) and this can impact negatively on future language activities. The motivation behind this research was to see if learning Spanish with CALL resources and a student partnership and growth mindset approach would

1. Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland; monica.ward@dcu.ie; https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7327-1395

be logistically feasible in an Irish primary school. A growth mindset approach might have the potential to mitigate some of the negative experiences of learning Irish. This paper reports on a six-week CALL-infused Spanish language course for primary school students (n=120, 10-12 years of age) in an English-medium primary school in Ireland. There were several logistical hiccups along the way, but the feedback from students and teachers (via questionnaires) was positive. This multi-pronged approach provides a template for enjoyable language teaching and learning in a primary school context. This approach could also be used for other languages, particularly less commonly taught languages including Irish (Ward, 2015).

Growth mindset is a belief that abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work (Dweck, 2017). It contrasts with a fixed mindset which is a belief that intelligence and talent are innate and unchangeable. If a learner has had a non-positive experience of learning one (L2) language, this could negatively impact on their learning of another language. Learners could start to think that they are not good at learning languages.

Successful language learning components include engagement, motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013), early success, learner autonomy, and an active learning approach. Early success (Guskey, 2021) is sometimes overlooked, but it can be a key element in ensuring that learners continue to persevere when things get difficult. A student partnership approach, particularly giving students choice and autonomy in their learning, is becoming an area of focus at higher education but less so at primary and post-primary levels to date.

In Ireland, students do not learn a Modern Foreign Language (MFL, e.g. French, German, or Spanish) until post-primary school but they learn Irish for 13 years. Their experience is often not very positive but previous research has shown that students like to use CALL resources for Irish (e.g. Purgina, Mozgovoy, & Ward, 2017; Ward, 2007). The motivation behind this research was to see if a growth mindset could help to foster a positive disposition towards language learning.

> RQ1. Would it be logistically feasible to deliver a short CALL-infused language course in an Irish primary school?
>
> RQ2. Would the students have a growth mindset after doing the course?
>
> RQ3. Would the students enjoy/not enjoy the approach, including an element of choice on a learning topic)?

RQ4. Could the positive experience with this approach overcome the negative experience of learning Irish?

2.   Method

In order to test the viability and possible effectiveness of a CALL-infused, growth mindset approach with primary school learners, a tailored Spanish language course was developed. The course was a six-week course (30 minutes each week) and was delivered to six different classes (10-12 years of age, with approximately 20 students in each class). There was a mix of in-class sessions, slides, videos, and quizzes. The students were encouraged to share their own linguistic knowledge from other (home) languages (e.g. Polish or Romanian). The information was conveyed to the students in age-appropriate language. The students were told that 'everyone can learn a language', 'it's OK to make mistakes', and 'Learning a language is fun' at the start of the six-week sessions. The motivation behind this is that some students think they are not good at languages and 'cannot' learn one. They are afraid of making mistakes as their errors (in Irish) are usually highlighted and corrected. They do not consider learning a language (Irish) as a fun activity. They would not have been told these growth mindset messages directly before. The students were encouraged to guess what new words meant and to ask as many questions as they liked.

3.   Results and discussion

There were several logistical challenges during this research intervention (e.g. teacher illness and other school events). Due to related logistical reasons, the paper-based feedback questionnaire for the students was replaced by a shortened online survey (with only four closed questions and one open question) and the response rate was low (n=32) (much lower than an in-class paper-based questionnaire). Note that the questionnaire used age-appropriate questions. The in-class feedback and enthusiasm from the students and teachers were very positive, but several factors need to be considered. These include the Hawthorne effect and the novelty effect (a new subject, a new 'teacher', and a break from normal classroom activities). The results presented here (Table 1) should be viewed with this in mind. The majority of the students enjoyed learning Spanish (87.5%) and they enjoyed the approach (83.9%). Just over half thought they learnt some Spanish (56.3%) and would like to use the same approach to learning Irish (56.2%). The quiz was the most liked

CALL resource. The vast majority agreed that 'anyone can learn a language' (94%) and 'it is OK to make mistakes' (97%). A majority (63%) agreed that 'learning a language is fun'. Five of the six teachers responded and they agreed that the students enjoyed the approach and that it would be good for teaching Irish.

Table 1. Summary of student feedback

Question	No	A little	Yes
Did you enjoy learning Spanish?	0%	12.5%	87.5%
Did you learn any Spanish?	0%	43.7%	56.3%
Did you enjoy the approach to learning Spanish in class?	0%	16.1%	83.9%
Would you like the same approach to learning Irish?	21.9%	21.9%	56.2%

Although this was a relatively short intervention, there are several valuable insights to be gleaned. It was logically logistically feasible to deliver a short CALL-infused Spanish course in an Irish primary school (RQ1), although flexibility and adaptability are required. One defect of this intervention is that there was no pre-survey administered to the students in relation to their attitudes towards a growth mindset in the context of language learning. However, the responses from the students indicate that they have taken on board the three main aspects of the growth mindset as outlined to them (it was not explicitly named for them) and they reported a positive attitude towards language learning (RQ2). Even taking all the caveats mentioned above, it was obvious that the students enjoyed the approach (RQ3). They were very engaged during the sessions and the positive experience appears to have offset some of the negative attitudes towards learning Irish (RQ4).

Even though all six classes were in the same school, each class was different (different questions, engagement levels, teacher interaction). There is often an emphasis in some CALL and second-language acquisition research on the use of pre- and post-evaluations of students after a particular intervention. While in some educational contexts this is possible, due to the individual differences in school classes, it can be more difficult in a primary school setting as there are too many different variables.

In terms of limitations, it should also be noted that the students have a generally positive attitude towards Spanish, even before starting to learn the language as it is seen as useful and 'cool'. The intervention was short and the positive effects may not be sustained over a longer period of time. There would be a need to enhance the suite of resources for teachers and scaffold them to deliver the materials themselves in the future.

4.   Conclusions

This paper provided an overview of a CALL-infused intervention for teaching Spanish in an Irish primary school context. It aimed to give students a growth mindset to the process so that they would enjoy it and learn more. It allowed them an element of choice as part of the learning process. Overall, the results were positive and could be used as a model for other similar interventions in future.

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