

Happy Students are Motivated Students:
Psychology for Language Teachers

Kathleen Fukuhara

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Abstract

Students face many problems in the second language classroom. Some of these may be personal but many are caused by cultural differences between the teacher and students or students and students in the multicultural classroom. Cultural issues will always be with us but this paper considers how we can help students, through the use of positive psychology, to achieve their best. First, we consider the concepts of positive psychology and well-being. We then look at how positive psychology can affect students' sense of well-being, creating a better learning situation. Finally, we consider some practical applications which can be put into practice in the classroom.

Keywords: positive psychology, motivation, well-being,
cultural issues

Introduction

It can take a student of a foreign language five to seven years to reach academic proficiency in a second language (Miller and Endo, 2004). This may seem like a lot but even students immersed in the target language, having immigrated to a new country and going to school at an elementary grade age, still require almost four years to achieve proficiency (Greenberg, 2015). Given the advantages of immersion, it is not so surprising then, that students in a regular English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom, who revert to their first language for interactions outside the classroom, will take at least five years to achieve the same level. Becoming proficient in a second language therefore requires considerable and sustained effort on the part of the student. In addition to this time factor, we also must consider the cultural pitfalls we may fall into such as the educational style that students are accustomed to compared with the native teachers own cultural norm. There are very different cultural norms and expectations

for student-teacher interaction and expected level of student participation across cultures. Open lines of communication and availability are necessary. Human interaction can have a bearing on students' well-being and motivation and will be looked at in more depth in the next section of this paper. In addition to these points, tertiary education classrooms in particular are becoming more international and multicultural. As Bruner (1996) said, "nothing is culture free" and educators need to be aware of this. The author has investigated these and other points in a previous paper (Fukuhara, 2014). How then, when we think of all the cultural pit-falls we may fall into, can we make the learning experience more enjoyable, and therefore more productive, for our students? With all the stresses and problems students have, what can we, as teachers, do to help tip the balance in the students' favour? One promising, and relatively new to the field of EFL, technique is the use of positive psychology in the classroom. The following are some suggestions on how we may help students, through the use of positive psychology, to have a greater sense of well-being and to enjoy the learning process more.

First, let us consider what exactly are well-being and the concept of positive psychology. Positive psychology is very new as, up until recently, psychology looked only at how to get people with a mental illness from minus back to 0 - the basic state (Seligman, 2000; Wallis, 2004). Seligman began to consider how psychology could be used for the ordinary person. Was there something that could be done to take people from the base 0 into the positive side and actually promote well-being? In Seligman's own words "Help individuals not just to endure and survive but to flourish." Wouldn't it be wonderful if students actually enjoyed and looked forward to their classes, rather than enduring them? Promoting mental health is very admirable you might say, but what does it have to do with language teaching? The title of this paper '*Happy Students are Motivated Students*' is the key. Students with a strong sense of well-being and positive attitude are more motivated than those with a negative attitude (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Therefore, whatever we can do to increase a student's well-being will have a positive effect in the language classroom, especially when the positive experiences are in the language classroom, or directly related to the target language.

Well-being, which is a feeling of satisfaction with life (Wallis, 2004), is not entirely in our control. In a study by Tallegen (1998) on identical twins, he found that about 50% of someone's feeling of well-being and satisfaction

with life comes from their genes. The remaining 50% however, is influenced by external factors. It is this remainder that we will be considering in this paper. This is not an insignificant amount and if it can be tapped into by educators, could alter the experience, and ultimately the learning outcome, for many students. The psychologist Martin Seligman (2013), also agrees that 50% of our happiness is within our control to influence.

Investigation

As most ESL and EFL teachers know motivation is closely tied to engagement in a task and its meaning or relevance to the students and their lives outside of the classroom (Dörnyei, 2001). Motivation is also influenced by students' pleasure or enjoyment in the study/learning process. The same connection is true in well-being. Happiness, according to Seligman (quoted in Wallis, 2004), is made up of 3 parts. First, though Seligman claims it is the least important, is the 'Smiley face' part, which involves pleasure such as how one might feel when enjoying a good meal or relaxing. Second is engagement, the depth of involvement an individual has with family, work, romance, and hobbies. I would like to add here that this would also be true of a class as a group that one invests in. Therefore, in the authors view, involvement in the class and depth of commitment to the group could also be added to the list of engagement. The third, and last part, is meaning. This, as mentioned above, has a connection to the bigger picture, taking the language learning out of its isolated classroom environment to serve some greater end in the real world.

How do these three aspects relate to language learning? Let us first consider pleasure. Students who are interested in the topic being studied in itself, and not for any gains, for example a promotion, that its acquisition might bring, can gain pleasure just from the act of learning, and enjoy study just for what they can learn. This is, in other words, intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation, motivation that comes from within the student with no external influence (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), is the most important and enduring kind of motivation (Dörnyei, 2001). Anything we can do to facilitate our students finding and maintaining intrinsic motivation would be of great value and have a positive influence on their learning. Engagement in a task in the language classroom means how involved the students become in a task. I would like to speculate that a

student's engagement in the class as a unit – that is their commitment to the group and how strongly they feel obligation to the group and want the unit as a whole to succeed – could have a great effect on not only how much effort they are willing to invest but also how willing they are to risk failure. This then can affect willingness to communicate (McIntyre, 1996). I'm sure all language teachers, and even educators in general, would agree that very little can be achieved without the willingness of students to actually communicate with each other at a specific time and with a particular person, and cooperate in tasks. The key here is that the speaker themselves initiates and continues the interaction, rather than just responding to a question, but not following up and continuing the interaction (Bukhari et al, 2015). The interest needs to be there within the student so making tasks personal can help make students willing to communicate. One way to do this is by letting students choose their topics, or asking students to talk about their own life and experience.

Next, we will look at engagement in a task in the language classroom, which means how involved the students become in a task. When the content of a task is interesting and difficulty is such that it meets the student's ability, pushing them, but not so difficult that it is beyond them, students can become so engrossed they lose track of time and forget everything around them, except for the task at hand. Have you ever had that moment when you suddenly realise a considerable amount of time has gone by without noticing while you were doing an activity you enjoy? For example, you might be surprised to discover that several hours have passed since you picked up your novel. This is called flow (Black, 2008), a heightened state of awareness when one gets totally absorbed in an activity. You will not be able to reach this state if you do not have well-being as you cannot completely lose yourself in an activity if you are constantly worried or thinking about something else. You may even have encountered this when you tried to distract yourself from a problem with an activity you normally enjoy and lose yourself in, but somehow could not concentrate. Depth of involvement in a task and commitment to it can promote a sense of well-being.

Finally, what students do in class should also be meaningful to them beyond the attainment of a grade. An abstract exercise in which they can see no connection to their everyday lives outside the classroom will not encourage motivation or well-being. If students can see an application for what they are studying in their lives not only will this improve well-being

but it will also increase motivation (Dörnyei, 2001; Walsh, 2006). In the short term, while students are still in school, they may have the opportunity to travel. In that situation they will need to perform daily tasks, ask questions, and shop. An exercise to understand menus and ask and answer questions of a server would be something that students would find useful.

Diener (2000) has shown that people who have been through major trauma, such as the loss of limbs, do exhibit happiness when we would imagine them to be more than justified in wallowing in feelings of depression and anger. Why do so many have a positive attitude? Diener puts it down to a matter of attention. As he says, a paraplegic, for example, does not spend all of their time thinking about the lost limbs. Instead, the person gets on with life, reading the news, spending time with friends and going to movies. It is a matter of “allocation of attention” Diener (2000). If we can focus our students’ attention on positive events in the classroom our students will be happier and more motivated in their studies. One simple way to direct students’ attention on positive rather than negative experiences is, instead of just saying ‘tell your partner/group about what you did during vacation, which inevitably brings forth stories of woe about hours spent at part-time jobs, or accidents or mishaps that occurred, instead try telling your students to ‘think about the vacation. Tell your group 2 or 3 really good things you did’ (Helgesen, 2008). Diener (2000) echoed Parducci, (1995) when he said that unhappy people focus on the negative and positive, happy people focus on the good things. Also giving the students a target to reach (tell your group **3** things) allows them to feel satisfaction at having reached the goal and helps them to know when they have finished. A general talk about a vacation or writing about a vacation is very vague and doesn’t give the students something to aim for and they will never know if they have finished. Most educators know about goal setting and encourage students to utilise goal setting to keep motivation for their studies. Long term goals, such as reaching fluency or getting their ideal job are fine, but they are hard to maintain motivation for as the final goal is so far away. In this case setting smaller short-term goals can help maintain motivation as it gives students a feeling of achievement as they meet each goal on the road to their ultimate large, long term, goal. Using these short-term goals can have a positive effect on students (Leithwood & Sun, 2018). Nordengren (2019) stated, “working with their teachers to set reasonable but aspirational goals for improvement, and continuing to drive their learning with frequent reference to those goals. When implemented

well, these goal-setting practices have a significant positive influence on student outcomes and school cultures”.

Previous and remembered experiences play a role in well-being and motivation too. As mentioned earlier in this paper Miller and Endo (2004), point to the need for educators to provide an environment that reduces stress and anxiety and also increases students’ motivation. This should be done, they say, by teachers paying attention to how they run their classes in relation to students’ past experiences. It would be prudent for teachers to think about the experiences they are giving their students now which will be the students past experiences of the future. Both Kahneman (1999) and Seligman (2000) agree that endings are important as it is endings that people remember. “Any vacation may have its low points – the long wait in the restaurant for the slow waiter to take your order – but at the end of the vacation the average person only remembers the peak moments and how they felt at the end”. Kahnemen (1999) carried out a study of patients undergoing a colonoscopy. A control group had the standard procedure but a second group had an extra minute of the procedure in which the scope was held motionless before being removed. Those who endured the longer procedure, but had the benign ending reported it to be less unpleasant than the control group and were also more willing to undergo the procedure again in the future. Teachers then should plan the ending of their lessons carefully, for example timing the class well so that there is no rush at the end, giving time for the teacher to round off the class. Not only timing, but the end of lesson content, for example a simple and easily completed review or summary of the class, should be considered and would leave students with a feeling of achievement and with a positive attitude towards the next class. Both timing and content should be planned to leave students with a good memory, making them look forward to the next learning experience whether it be next weeks class, or their willingness to take the plunge into learning something new. It is what students take away from the class that is important. It is the author’s opinion that not only the ending of a lesson should be of great importance but the beginning too. The beginning of a class should be devoted to a short, easily manageable warm up task to set students up for the rest of the class with a positive, can-do, attitude and motivation for the rest of the class. A feeling of ‘I’ve got this’ would go a long way to making students face the challenges of the class with a more positive outlook.

Applications

What is the use of having this great technique, positive psychology, if we do not have practical applications to put it into use, and reap the benefits? In addition to those applications mentioned in the discussion above we shall look in more detail at practical applications of positive psychology in the classroom situation. When the author considered Lyubomirsky's (2008) eight steps toward a more satisfying life they identified several that could be easily adapted for classroom application and incorporated into lessons in a practical way. Lyubomirsky's eight steps are 1) count your blessings, 2) practice acts of kindness, 3) savour life's joys, 4) thank a mentor, 5) learn to forgive, 6) invest time and energy in friends, 7) take care of your body, and 8) develop strategies for coping with stress and hardships. We shall look at practical applications for steps 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8.

In step 1, count your blessings, Lyubomirsky (2008) suggests keeping a 'gratitude journal'. Teachers may already have students keeping a journal and it would be a small step from there to ask students to add 1, or 2 things for which they are grateful. These need not be big, life changing things but could be along the lines of being thankful for your peonies flowering, suggests Lyubomirsky. Of course, they could be more momentous occasions such as getting a job or seeing a child's first steps. It is just that these big occasions are not a daily occurrence and we might have to wait a long time for a major event to happen and the feeling of gratitude that accompanies it. These small additions to already established homework would not be too burdensome for students, but could reap large benefits. By having students remember and think about happy events in English means that the feelings of well-being that come with this, will be associated with English. Students will probably not be aware of these connections, but they will be there. Gratitude could also be recognised in oral activities by, for example, starting each class with a warm-up activity of sharing with partners what small (or large) thing (s) they are grateful for this week. This will also raise students' awareness of the positive things happening in their day-to-day lives, that they might not, under normal circumstances, notice or be aware of. In addition, as mentioned in the investigation section of this paper, the association of the good feelings that come from remembering the good events will bring along with it a positive association to studying in general, and the study of language in particular, (Helgesen, 2008).

Step 3 instructs us to savour life's joys. This can be incorporated into the class in the vacation discussion activity mentioned above. Again, remembering good experiences, taking time to recognise and consciously notice them, will mean that the pleasurable feelings will be associated with the class helping the students' positive attitude towards L2 learning. Also giving the students a target to reach allows them to feel satisfaction at having reached the goal and helps them to know when they have finished, reducing anxiety about whether they have done enough. A general 'talk about a vacation' or 'write about a vacation' prompt is very vague and doesn't give the students something to aim for and they will never know if they have done enough to satisfy the teacher.

Step 4 asks you to think of a mentor and to thank them in detail for what they have done for you. This could be utilised either in an oral class, or a writing class. In the oral class it could be incorporated into a lesson on "thanking". Students could tell their partner about the mentor and how the person helped to guide them and then proceed to role-play a situation where the partner plays the mentor and the student thanks the mentor. An alternative, suitable for a writing class, would be where students again think of a mentor and what the person has done, then write a letter to the mentor, explaining exactly how the person helped and then expressing thanks to them. Depending on the situation the letters need never be sent, instead being exchanged with a partner or read aloud, but an alternative task ending would be for the students to actually mail their letters to the mentors. Literature in the EFL field is always encouraging us to connect students' in-class activities to the real world, outside the classroom, for example Ozverir and Herrington (2011). This exercise does just that using a real, not imagined, situation. It also gives students control as they themselves choose who they will thank. This sense of control is motivating to the students as they are much more likely to become involved in a task if they chose to do it rather than being told this is what they have to do (Dörnyei, 2001).

Step 6 tells us to invest time in friends and family. The biggest factor in whether or not you have a satisfying life is strong personal relationships (Lyubomirsky, 2008). Students who feel they don't know anyone in the class will feel on the outside and be less willing to risk mistakes and will feel no obligation or sense of belonging. This being said then we should promote a sense of group and community in the class. This can be done by having group projects where everyone is responsible for some part.

Csikszentmihalyi and McCormack (1986) also state that teacher involvement in the form of interpersonal relationships with the students is important for students' communication. Small group projects in a speaking class could be a group presentation or skit. For a writing class students could produce a magazine or book of essays on a topic of the students' choice. Group interaction need not only take place inside the classroom. Activities carried out as a group outside of the classroom can also help cement relationships and help students become more strongly and personally involved in their classroom/study relationships. Students will be willing to risk more in the L2 classroom if they feel a connection to the teacher (Csikszentmihalyi and McCormack 1986). In countries where group culture and homogeneity are highly valued, like in Japan for example where the author is based, students spend a lot of time with their classmates, in class, between classes and at lunch. The class is seen as a unit and there is little friendship between classes or grades. In such a case engagement could be a valuable tool to help with the positive image of learning.

A similar concept is put forward by Wen and Clement (2005) when they talk about immediacy. Teachers involve students in the class by using 'we' and 'our', first names and humour in the class. Connell and Wellborn (1990), also agree that relationships in the class, especially in the case of the teacher, are important. If teachers take the time to invest in students emotionally, getting to know them and care for them, then students feel less watched and have greater emotional security. This in turn makes them more willing to communicate and this increased communication and practice in turn improves their learning. Teachers should be a part of the class, not a separate entity.

The seventh step towards a more satisfying life encourages us to take care of our bodies. This includes, among other things, laughing. Our classes, of course, cannot, and should not, be one continual comedy from beginning to end, but we should incorporate fun, enjoyable tasks. Laughter is an asset in the classroom - study should have its lighter moments. According to Brezin and Liss (2020) "laughter has demonstrable health benefits." which include the replacing of cortisol "with highly sought after chemicals in the brain: dopamine, oxytocin and endorphins. Dopamine can enhance learning, motivation, and attention. Oxytocin is considered the "empathy hormone" and the "bonding chemical," and "when it enters the bloodstream it creates feelings of relatedness. Endorphins trigger feelings of pleasure;". Edwards

(2021) actually believes that laughter is necessary in the classroom. Laughter, as can be seen above, is a very powerful force, not only improving learning and motivation, but also promoting a feeling of belonging and pleasure. It seems that educators could help their students perform better and have a more positive experience just by the addition of a little humor. It certainly seems worth it and perhaps even necessary, as Hooks (2010) asserts.

The eighth and final of Lyubomirsky's steps toward a more satisfying life is to develop strategies for coping with stress and hardships. This may seem rather like a counselling issue rather than something for the language classroom, but in reality, we should be teaching such skills. It is not uncommon for students to panic and crumple under the pressure of real time oral communication. We should routinely include strategies for dealing with stressful language situations. Examples of such strategies could be repeating what they heard back to the speaker to check their understanding, and asking for repetition when they didn't catch what was said and the use of fillers such as 'Um' and 'Eh', to give themselves more time to think. Many of the techniques mentioned here are what dedicated members of our profession are already doing, but we need to spread the word. The positive effects these techniques can have, come at almost no cost to the teacher or student.

Conclusion

Following these steps will not only give students good language skills but the experience will also give them a positive attitude towards language learning and learning in general which will therefore lead them to be willing to continue to study or embark on a new course of study in the future. If future learning is conducted along the same principles, then this could form a circle - positive psychology aiding study which in turn affects the attitude toward future study. Of course, teachers cannot control the mental state of their students and students bring much to the classroom with them. Events that happen outside the classroom that affect the students' lives and moods are naturally going to affect their attitude on any given day. It is precisely because of all the emotions and cultural attitudes that are brought into the classroom that we need to do all that we can to help the students have a positive experience. All teachers want the best for their students and to help them be successful. When originally considering

the idea of using positive psychology in the classroom, the author was rather reticent about using it. It felt sneaky, like they were trying to pull one over the students or manipulate them without their knowing; trick them into positive feelings and increased motivation about language learning. Should the students not know and understand what was being done to them? As time has gone on, however, the author has decided that it is just another tool in a teacher's arsenal and part of good teaching practice to give students the best learning experience they can. Positive psychology in the language classroom may be relatively new but that does not mean it is of less value than other more established techniques. After all, why shouldn't we teachers use any and all resources available to us to the advantage of our students?

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