

## **A Rationale for a Positive Psychology-Informed Approach to Content and Language Integrated Learning**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article provides a brief introduction to the relatively new field of positive psychology and discusses its potential compatibility with a number of content topics common to language courses. The relevance of Seligman's (2010) PERMA framework to content topics commonly found in EFL classrooms illustrates that a positive psychology-informed approach need not disrupt existing curricula and can be achieved non-controversially. Lyubomirsky's (2005) "happiness inventory," abridged by Helgesen (2016), provides classes of all levels a shared vocabulary to discuss behaviors shown to support well-being. The article also presents the results of successful studies examining the association between learner well-being and factors essential to academic success. Teachers are invited to experiment with the concepts of positive psychology in their classes by considering familiar content topics from the perspective of happiness research.

## INTRODUCTION

Foreign language teachers in higher education agree that their most significant challenges— inappropriate class sizes, ineffective resources, and insufficient classroom time— often come as a result of institutional policies and logistical realities far removed from the individual educator’s sphere of influence (Chen & Goh, 2011; Fareh, 2010; Khong & Saito, 2014). Notwithstanding the difficulties they identify, given their choice of what factors would most improve their teaching, EFL teachers most readily express a desire for additional training in methods shown to increase motivation and engagement in oral production activities (Chen & Goh, 2011). As motivation and engagement make a critical difference in regard to in-class performance, learner autonomy, confidence, and ultimately, language acquisition, teachers may benefit from a positive psychology-informed approach to language courses. A variety of classroom interventions based on a model of human flourishing developed by Seligman have proven successful in increasing learners’ reported motivation, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging among their peers, and have assisted teachers in developing feelings of greater achievement and professional satisfaction without the need for extensive specialized training.

## WHAT IS POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY?

An approach to systematically examining human happiness began to take shape in the late 1990s in response to what was deemed an inordinate focus in the psychiatric field on pathology and the treatment of disorders rather than identifying indicators of good mental health in effectively functioning individuals (Sheldon & King, 2001). Created to some degree as a discipline in opposition to the existing mental health care paradigm and coming into prominence contemporaneously with a number of pseudoscientific “new-age” movements, positive psychology is often described in terms of *what it is not*. Positive psychology is not neo-religious advocacy for the metaphysical power of a positive outlook, nor

is it a new and exciting trend in self-help (Peterson & Park, 2014). It is certainly not “happy-ology” (Seligman, 2004), promoting ignorant optimism in an attempt to disregard adversity and pain. In truth, positive psychology is an empirical, data-driven exploration of mental health as opposed to mental illness.

In broad terms, positive psychology explores the emotional strengths and habitual behaviors that permit individuals, organizations, and communities to flourish. This relatively new field seeks to constructively influence the human experience of well-being, life satisfaction, and achievement by identifying and promoting beneficial conditions common to individuals reporting frequent experiences of positive emotion (Linley et al., 2009). More concisely, positive psychology is a research-based approach to understanding “what goes right in life,” (Peterson, 2006, p. 4). Furthermore, as technological advances and modern tools blur the lines between psychology and neuroscience, we are better equipped than at any time in history to view positive emotion and human flourishing from an empirical, data-driven perspective (Helgesen, 2019).

Martin Seligman, often credited as the “father of positive psychology” (Suissa, 2008), grants that traditional psychology has enabled a better understanding of the nature of mental illness and has been instrumental in the reduction of human suffering (2010), though he argues that it is at least equally important to ensure that otherwise healthy individuals feel fulfilled and empowered.

*Most of you, when you go to bed at night, are not thinking of how to go from -8 to -3 in life. By and large, you are thinking about how to go from +3 to + 6. This suggests that in addition to understanding suffering, we need to understand how to go from +3 to + 6. (Seligman, 2010)*

In service of this goal, Seligman and others have put forward a variety of theoretical models attempting to identify and categorize a number of fundamentals linked with human happiness.

## The PERMA Model

As a shorthand for the holistic benefits of psychological well-being, encompassing a state of fulfillment, purpose, self-efficacy, resilience, and contentment, Seligman chooses the term “flourish,” and his PERMA model specifies five acronymic elements as essential to human flourishing.

**Positive emotion.** Perhaps the most readily identifiable component of well-being, what many may call *happiness*, is the habitual cultivation of experiences of positive emotion. In this context, emotions are distinct from moods or affective personality traits in that they are experienced as a consequence of some meaningful event or stimulus (Fredrickson, 2001). Because of this, an individual’s ability to identify phenomena or activities that result in positive emotion can enable them to seek out and purposely induce these feelings as a matter of routine. This feature of emotion also allows for the development of experimental interventions designed to examine the effects of positive emotion on physiology and overall psychology (Fredrickson, 2000).

**Engagement.** Seligman identifies engagement by drawing on the concept of *flow* proposed by Csikszentmihalyi to describe the “subjective state people report when they are completely involved in something to the point of forgetting time, fatigue and everything else but the activity itself” (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1990, p. 230). Colloquially referred to as being “in the zone,” engagement allows individuals to participate in activities they truly enjoy, uninterrupted by distractions and anxieties, and the ability to achieve flow can be intentionally developed in a systematic way, positively impacting overall feelings of well-being (Kist, 2002).

**Relationships.** Studies conducted by Seligman and others indicate that individuals who appear to flourish do so with a foundation of positive relationships with family members, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, and that this profound need for human connection holds true cross-culturally (Khaw & Kern, 2014; Seligman, 2004). Maintenance of strong relationships appears not only to benefit mental health, but physical health as well, as the existence of fulfilling

relationships is correlated with a positive experience of aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1997), greater success in managing addiction (Graham & Bitten, 2015), and higher levels of post-surgery recovery (Cardoso-Moreno & Tomás-Aragones, 2017).

**Meaning.** To live meaningfully, according to Seligman, is to believe in the value of one's own life (Seligman, 2012, cited in Kern et al., 2015). Though this may in some individuals be associated with a belief in a higher power, meaning is not necessarily defined by a spiritual belief system. Rather, meaning is a person's sense that there is a larger purpose to one's work and effort and that their actions are constructive as opposed to fruitless, or worse, destructive.

**Achievement.** Feelings of success in accomplishing personal goals are strongly correlated with subjective well-being (Coffey et al., 2014, cited in Ayse, 2018, p. 130). Individuals who report feelings of high self-efficacy and the ability to complete professional and academic tasks also report reduced anxiety in daily life (Seligman, 2012). Achievement is closely tied to meaning, as individuals reporting success in creating, managing, and attaining goals display greater feelings of purpose and belonging (Doyle et al., 2016).

### **Suitability for the Classroom**

Seligman (2009, 2012) describes surveying parents across cultural lines and discovering that these parents typically hold consistent hopes for their children's experience in school. They describe these hopes using words like *discipline*, *job skills*, *work ethic*, and *academic success*. When asked, however, about their hopes for their children's experiences in life, parents are more likely to respond with words such as *confidence*, *contentment*, *happiness*, *fulfillment*, *love*, and the like. Seligman and other supporters of transforming our schools into centers for *positive education* believe that not only is it possible for schools to successfully teach achievement skills while giving due attention to the many dimensions of happiness and well-being, but that schools are uniquely and ideally positioned

to do so.

Prior to and following Seligman's work on PERMA, other models for happiness have been suggested. Diener et al. present three indicators in their exploration of subjective well-being: 1) frequent experiences of pleasant affect, 2) infrequent experiences of negative affect, and 3) life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1999). This uncomplicated approach can be contrasted with more elaborate systems of classification identifying anywhere from 99 to 196 dimensions of well-being (Linton et al., 2016; Seligman, 2018).

No attempt will be made here to compare its substance or value with that of competing models, though it is worth noting that PERMA remains the most familiar model both within the field and in popular discourse. PERMA is selected here as a framework not as the final word on happiness, but because of the practical considerations unique to a classroom environment. The elements needed for human flourishing described in PERMA are:

- 1) *accessible*—they can be easily understood by non-specialist teachers as well as language learners, allowing ease of introduction in simple classroom activities while avoiding esoteric concepts
- 2) *non-controversial*—the elements of PERMA overlap with descriptions of happiness among diverse peoples and can be introduced without ethnocentrism, politics, or religion (D'raven & Pasha-Zaidi, 2016; Khaw & Kern, 2014)
- 3) *relevant*—PERMA concepts are directly associated with content topics already in use among language learning programs, enabling positive psychology-informed activities that support existing curricula (Helgesen, 2016)
- 4) *vetted*—extant literature describes classroom interventions drawing on PERMA succeeding in a number of educational contexts, providing a significant body of research upon which to base future practice

For teachers seeking new ways to promote learner satisfaction, autonomy,

motivation, PERMA provides an accessible, agreeable, and extensively researched theoretical model for discussing happiness in the classroom and modifying activities suited to the shifting needs of diverse groups of learners. Waters (2011) contends that PERMA “establishes a framework that embraces the promotion of one’s own wellbeing and achievement whilst simultaneously fostering a concern for others and the capacity to participate in civic responsibilities” (p. 86). It may be argued that as the scope of positive education efforts expand from individuals classroom to schools, and from there to entire communities, a measurably more productive, engaged, and sustainable society is an increasingly realizable goal.

### **Content and Language Integrated Learning**

Communicative language teaching (CLT) promotes authentic interactions as essential to the language learner’s task of attending to *meaning* alongside *form* (Spada, 2007). Although ideally these interactions would be extensive, spontaneous, and learner-initiated (Thornbury, 1996), the reality in foreign language classrooms is that most interactions are prompted by activities associated with prearranged content topics. Though a number of immersion instruction programs report success attending to content exclusively, most content-based approaches increasingly take place within a dual-focused learning environment incorporating a language focus within content courses and topics.

Though there have been a number of attempts to define the parameters of content and language integrated learning (CLIL), these approaches continue to exist on a spectrum. Whereas some may heavily favor traditional CLT but make use of textbooks featuring cultural or lifestyle topics, others may more closely resemble English-medium instruction (EMI) apart from secondary activities meant to highlight relevant target language. Some institutions distribute the balance between content and language in cross-curricular programs wherein CLT classes are content-coordinated with themes and subjects visited in separate

literature, science, or social studies courses (Mehisto et al., 2008).

Though efforts to definitively codify CLIL continue, some commonalities persist across the spectrum. Fundamental elements of CLIL appear to include: 1) the goal of enhancing learners' knowledge of the content topic, 2) a fixed language syllabus and means of assessment, and 3) the development of topics beyond the role of "conversation starters." The Core English Programme at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies (NUFS), described by Bradley (2019) as a "mix of content based language teaching and CLT" could certainly be considered a CLIL approach (p. 4). He goes on to discuss the role of content in CE:

*Though many, if not all, language courses have a subject of discussion that provides a context for language use, this is not the same as a focus on content ... content offers the possibility of authentic and meaningful language use through the development of knowledge and awareness of different subject matter.* (Bradley, 2019, p. 4–5)

Structuring curricula and lessons that facilitate retention of content knowledge while at the same time targeting language structures and communication strategies has been shown in numerous studies to promote learner autonomy and motivation (Dalton-Puffer, 2011; Wolff, 2003). Banegas (2012) observes that recursive practice allows these successes to feed back into classroom activities, resulting in heightened feelings of achievement, motivation, and autonomy for teachers as well.

As class and preparation time is limited, the CLIL teacher's task of balancing content development with language learning is significant. While the suggestion to incorporate positive psychology into an already complex system may appear overly ambitious, PERMA and related frameworks provide a systematic means by which teachers can integrate happiness into classroom routines by presenting concepts in simple terms, establishing a shared vocabulary that learners can use to generate their own ideas and describe their own experiences discovering "what goes right" in life.



## PERMA and Language Learning Content Topics

Content topics for CLIL instruction are customarily selected according to the contents of commercial textbooks and are often considered jointly with other courses sharing coordinated programs. It is widely understood that the thoughtful selection of these topics is fundamental to the development of learner interest and engagement and can have a significant impact on specific facets of development—e.g., writing fluency, interactional competence, test performance, and the like (Abdollahzadeh, 2014; Cohen, 2013; Kang, 2005).

Several studies have categorized and evaluated the content topics presented in international language learning programs; a comparison of findings by Arikan (2008), Siegel (2014), and Wolf (2013) indicates that with few exceptions, content topics remain largely consistent regardless of context.

Cheng (2015) notes that discussion topics generated independently by learners often mirror these prevalent themes; among these self-selected topics are *school life, entertainment, travel, cultural events, nature and climate, hobbies*, and the like.

Table 1  
*Content topics consistently represented in in EFL textbooks*

<b>Arikan (2008)</b>	<b>Siegel (2014)</b>	<b>Wolf (2013)</b>
food / health	food / cooking / fitness	food / health
nature / animals / ecology	nature / animals	animals / environment
business / work life	career / business / money	Employment
leisure activities	hobbies / free time	communication / tech
media / entertainment	media / entertainment	
crime / laws	social issues / crime / wars	punishment
education	academic life / school	
languages	language /communication	language
customs / traditions	culture / holidays / beliefs	
family / housing	relationships / marriage / family	love / relationships
	travel / vacation	

These content topics comprise a variety of common, everyday themes and lend themselves not only to high-frequency vocabulary and relatable experiences, but also to discussion of happiness. Potential connections between these themes and the PERMA framework can be seen in Figure 1.

In considering potential activities for a unit on environmental issues, for example, there is an opportunity to generate discussion around the individual’s responsibility to his or her community; learners are thereby encouraged to attend to feelings of *meaning*. Encouraging appreciation of *relationships* may take the form of a student presentations in which learners are asked to interview elderly relatives about their lives, or to discuss family trees by conducting genealogical research. A number of recent resources, including Helgesen’s (2019) *English Teaching and the Science of Happiness*, can provide teachers with a number of suggestions for adapting specific activities to PERMA.

With language learners, and younger learners in particular, it may be more valuable to discuss the ideas embedded with PERMA in terms of behaviors rather than abstract concepts; it may be simpler to present “what happy people do” than to discuss what it is to possess a sense of meaning or engagement. Lyubomirsky (2005) created an inventory of these behaviors that can be directly tied to the

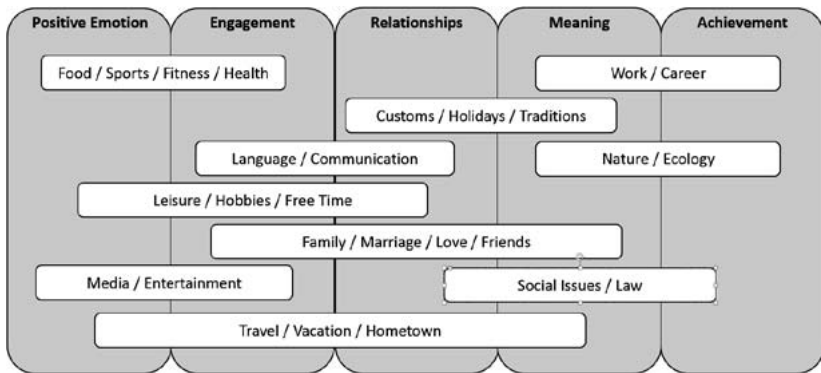


Figure 1. PERMA and prevalent content topics in language learning textbooks.

five dimensions of PERMA (Walters, 2016) and that was later paraphrased by Helgesen (2016) to increase its accessibility to language learners. In my own classes, I have drawn heavily on Helgesen’s abridgement not only because it is readily understandable, but because it avoids controversial topics (i.e., spirituality) present in other versions.

According to Helgesen (2016), Lyubomirsky identifies “eight types of cognitive and personal behavior that lead to a more satisfying life.”

- 1) *Remember good things in your life.*
- 2) *Do kind things.*
- 3) *Say ‘thank you’ to people who help you.*
- 4) *Take time for friends and family.*
- 5) *Forgive people who hurt you.*
- 6) *Take care of your health and body.*
- 7) *Notice good things when they happen.*
- 8) *Learn to work with your problems and stress. (p. 2).*

Whereas Helgesen (2019) observes that discussions of each of these behaviors lend themselves to specific target language, I examined them, as well as the elements of PERMA, from the perspective of CLIL, associating them with

Table 2

*Student-generated associations between “what happy people do” and Core English content topics*

<b>Behavior (Lyubomirsky, 2005)</b>	<b>Course Textbook Unit Topics</b>
Remember good things	University Life, Living Overseas, Advertising
Do kind things	Japanese Culture, The Environment
Say ‘thank you’	Japanese Culture
Time for friends / family	Marriage & Relationships, University Life
Forgive those who hurt you	Marriage & Relationships, Living Overseas
Take care of health and body	Food and Health, The Environment
Notice good things	University Life, Advertising
Deal with problems and stress	Natural Disasters, University Life

the unit topics my own learners would explore in the previously described Core English Programme. As my students explored their textbook on the first day of classes, I displayed Lyubomirsky's inventory and asked that they work in pairs to try to imagine associations between the course's content topics and the behaviors that create happiness. Some of the associations they described can be seen on the previous page in Table 2.

It was rewarding to observe that although not all students saw these connections in the same way, they were able to articulate their reasoning to one another in L2 conversation centered entirely on well-being, and were able to begin the school year associating each unit with happiness. Without direction, some pairs even noted Lyubomirsky's habits on the corresponding unit title pages so that they could be reminded later in the semester.

Bringing positive psychology into language learning need not disrupt a teacher's preparation routine, nor should it feel superfluously affixed to otherwise complete lesson plans; rather, reports of interventions in schools worldwide describe how positive psychology is "woven into the school curriculum," "integrated," or used to "enhance" existing activities (Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2014, p. 1292). By setting the tone early in the semester, allowing learners freedom to apply concepts as they see fit, modifying activities to promote experiences of positive emotion, and embodying behaviors shown to increase happiness, teachers can promote positive emotions, build trust between learners, and include a specific, stated focus on happiness. In doing so, Seligman (2009) argues that we can teach "both the skills of wellbeing and the skills of achievement" without compromising either (Department of Education and Training, 2002; cited in Waters, 2011).

### **Impact: Positive Psychology and Academic Outcomes**

Although the field of positive psychology is gaining attention as a data-driven, research-based view of well-being, and although to its practitioners, the potential

applications of its findings to education may appear obvious, before teachers are expected to adopt these approaches, they must first be persuaded by evidence that increased well-being in learners is a predictor of positive learning outcomes. Extant research supports the hypothesis that learner well-being is strongly correlated with improved classroom performance and reduced anxiety; additionally, a number of positive psychology interventions carried out in schools worldwide point to strong associations between happiness, academic success, learner self-efficacy, autonomy, and motivation.

Perhaps the most well-known intervention was conducted by Seligman et al. (2009) at Geelong Boarding School in Australia. One hundred faculty members at this private boarding school received ten days of instruction on principles of positive psychology and encouraged to integrate these concepts with existing curricula; following this brief intervention, data analysis found that Geelong students displayed significantly less anxiety and higher levels of engagement over a period of two years. This specific type of intervention is reported to have been replicated at least nineteen times (Seligman et al. 2009).

Several notable studies have examined gratitude interventions in public schools. Lyubomirsky's (2005) inventory of behaviors highlights gratitude as an indicator of well-being; gratitude is linked to PERMA as well by way of relationships, and had been shown to enhance feelings of connectedness (Froh, Bono, & Emmons, 2010). A two-pronged positive psychology intervention focusing on gratitude expression through journaling and the explicit teaching of stress management techniques (another behavior highlighted by Lyubomirsky) was conducted by Flinchbaugh et al. in 2012; after practicing behaviors associated with well-being, these learners were observed to exhibit higher levels of engagement with classroom activities and reported feelings of confidence and increased focus.

Falout (2013) describes success in using principles of positive psychology to encourage learners to investigate their learning trajectory. With particular atten-

tion on *positive emotion* and *engagement*, learners conceptualized their past and possible future selves in reflective activities, and displayed increased awareness of their own character strengths.

Tying PERMA to the concept of character strengths, another intervention exposed incoming UK university students to Seligman's principles of positive psychology as part of a school orientation program; researchers later examined these students' beliefs and behaviors and identified significant correlations between expressions of positive emotion and engagement with study tasks, leading to an increase of self-regulation and autonomous learning behavior (Macaskill & Denovan, 2013).

These studies as well as others (Gрегersen et al., 2016, Guz & Tetiurka, 2016, MacIntyre et al., 2009) describe encouraging results, providing an empirical foundation for language teachers inclined to approach positive psychology with skepticism. However, extant research does not yet describe the potential ways positive psychology can be utilized to support CLIL instruction; a meaningful opportunity awaits teachers and researchers willing to explore the similarities between classroom content topics and the dimensions of human well-being.

## CONCLUSION

In ensuring our language classrooms are safe, encouraging spaces for our students to build community and share in the learning experience with one another, we already approach our work with an eye to PERMA. We seek to create moments of *positive emotion* with careful praise or novel activities. The setup of activities is considered carefully to ensure groups will fully *engage*, working together to complete a task while forgetting the clock. If we are doing our job well, dynamic *relationships* emerge between our students as they develop friendships, discover new social roles, and develop into role models for one another. In language classrooms in particular, we hope that learners will come to believe in themselves in a larger way than they once did, discovering a greater sense of

*meaning* as they begin to understand their place in the international community. By teaching metacognitive skills, we assist our increasingly independent learners in taking responsibility for their own learning process, allowing them to define *achievement* in their own ways.

Few language classes, if any, are entirely language-focused. For many of us, a foundation of content topics is used to support communicative language teaching techniques, and these topics are selected precisely because of their universality; they are meaningful to diverse groups of learners and well-suited for discussions and activities that cultivate positive emotion.

This article discusses positive psychology broadly, and does not provide detailed procedures for possible activities. In much the same way, approaching your curriculum from the perspective of positive psychology is not necessarily a set of procedures, but rather a shared vocabulary and awareness, created through intentional and explicit focus on developing greater life satisfaction. As you attempt to elevate your course content with a focus on happiness, a final thought—research indicates that teacher well-being impacts learners’ academic and emotional outcomes (Zee & Koomen, 2016). By maintaining a healthy balance between your work and pursuing that which enables you to flourish, you can feel confident that you are setting your students up for success as well.

### **Bio Data**

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