

Positive Psychology: From the Classroom to the World

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This paper offers an education-focused introduction to positive psychology and four learning activities demonstrating how the concepts of positive psychology can be adapted to the EFL classroom. Seligman (2012) discussed the synergy between positive emotion and learning and suggested that teaching the skills for happiness in schools can increase learner resilience and engagement. In the more specialized world of EFL, Helgesen (2006a, 2016) has shown that EFL learning activities informed by positive psychology can generate stronger student engagement than many traditional approaches. In this paper, a model of positive psychology called PERMA is introduced (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement), and the four learning activities are connected directly to each element of the model.

本論文では、ポジティブ心理学を紹介して、それを利用する4つの英語学習のアクティビティを提供する。Seligman (2016)は、ポジティブ感情と学習の相乗効果について議論し、学校で幸福のためのスキルを教えることは、学習者の柔軟さと関わりを高めることができると提案している。英語教育の分野でも、Helgesen (2006a, 2016)は、ポジティブ心理学の理論を利用した英語学習アクティビティが伝統的なアプローチよりも強力な学生モチベーションを生み出すことを示している。本論文では、PERMAと呼ばれるポジティブ心理学のモデル(ポジティブ感情、関与、人間関係、意味、達成感)を紹介して、4つの学習活動がモデルの各要素に直接結びついていることを明らかにする。

Since the official launch of positive psychology as a research field in 2000, awareness of positive psychology has grown among teachers and educational researchers. The founder of positive psychology, Martin Seligman (2012), has discussed the value of positive education and highlighted the synergy that can occur between learning and positive emotion. He has also suggested that skills for happiness should be taught in schools and that they can lead to an increase in learner resilience and engagement.

More specifically, in the field of EFL, Helgesen (2006a, 2016) and MacIntyre, Gregersen, and Mercer (2016) have discussed how positive psychology can be integrated into the foreign language classroom and suggested that learning activities informed by positive psychology can lead to much stronger student engagement than many traditional approaches. The learning activities in this paper take a similar approach to Helgesen and are designed to help students to develop English skills in the context of real-world, personalized situations. They simultaneously help students to gain practical cognitive tools, such as goal setting and reframing, and intra/interpersonal communication tools including *l-messages* and positive journaling.

Our own personal interest in positive psychology has come from a recognition of its strong positive effect in various areas of our own lives including learning new skills, and we believe that it has much to offer to students' learning in the EFL classroom and their behaviour beyond the classroom. In this paper, we provide an introduction to positive psychology and then share four practical techniques that teachers can adapt and utilize to bring the benefits of positive psychology into their own classroom contexts.

The Development of Positive Psychology

Although positive psychology has only recently begun to impact education, its roots are much older. Aristotle put forward the idea of *eudaimonia*, which can be defined as achieving happiness through activities that are in accordance with our virtues and having a noble purpose in those activities (Waterman, 1990). In the 19th century, William James

(1890) contrasted the views of *morbid-minded persons* with the *healthy minded*. In the 20th century, Carl Jung (1933) presaged positive psychology's focus on the importance of meaning to mental health saying, "a psycho-neurosis must be understood as the suffering of a human being who has not discovered what life means for him" (p. 225). Later, other important figures who contributed to the development of positive psychology include Maslow (1943) with his hierarchy of human needs that encouraged people to achieve their potential and eventually reach self-actualization, the Human Potential Movement in the 1960s that focused on development of the whole person (described in Stone, 1978), Carl Rogers's (1957) work on humanizing psychotherapy, and Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) research into flow and the psychology of optimal experience.

Although positive psychology is not a new concept, it did not become a serious area of research within psychology until Seligman, then the president of the American Psychology Association, called for a move away from a negative view of human nature and the human condition, and an investigation of how psychology can help people and society by looking at the positive: "The exclusive focus on pathology that has dominated so much of our discipline results in a model of the human being lacking the positive features that make life worth living" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). Years before, Maslow (1943) had said it more simply: "It is as if psychology had voluntarily restricted itself to only half its rightful jurisdiction, and that the darker, meaner half" (p. 354).

When positive psychology was initially put forward as a research perspective, it focused primarily on therapy. Later, the value of positive psychology was recognized in the workplace, and considerable research has demonstrated that positivity is associated with workplace success. For example, Avey, Hughes, Norman, and Luthans (2008) demonstrated that for the workplace, "positive psychological capital hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism are significantly related to feelings of empowerment" (p. 110) and pointed out that "optimism is an expectation of future success . . . [which] . . . is a motivational source that leads to the application of effort because individuals continue to expect success" (p. 113).

In education, although the influential educational psychologist, John Dewey (1929) believed that students should be able to realize their ultimate potential and use their knowledge to impact society in a useful way, positive psychology has more deliberately opened the door to making formal education a better and more life-enhancing experience, while simultaneously improving education. For example, a study by Saklofske, Austin, Mastoras, Beaton, and Osborne (2012) showed how "academic performance was predicted by conscientiousness, agreeableness, [and] positive affect" (p. 251), and Denham, Bassett, Sirotkin, and Zinsner (2013) demonstrated that "positive

emotional expressivity and engagement, as well as emotion regulation, are related to important aspects of preschool and kindergarten success" (p. 13). Positivity improved the ability to form learning relationships with others and also helped moderate negative emotions, facilitating recovery from setbacks.

The aim of positive psychology is to "catalyze a change in psychology from a preoccupation only with repairing the worse things in life to also building the best qualities in life" (Seligman, 2012, p. 3). Fredrickson, one of the primary researchers in the field of positive psychology, suggested that traditional psychology was designed to take people from minus ten to zero. Positive psychology aims to take people from zero to plus ten (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). To give an analogy from language teaching, a teacher's goal is not simply to correct student errors but rather to set up a learning environment that facilitates fluent and accurate communication. The research cited above has shown that the techniques of positive psychology are useful in every area of life, and it is useful to consider how the field of positive psychology can also inform our work in education. To frame this more specifically, the next section offers a simple guide to positive psychology.

A Simple Guide to Positive Psychology: PERMA

Much of the thinking in the field of positive psychology can be summarized by the mnemonic PERMA, which is based on Seligman's theory of well-being as presented in his book, *Flourish* (Seligman, 2012). These elements are explained briefly below. For a fuller description and more supporting research, the reader is encouraged to look to the references listed at the end of this paper.

Positive Emotions

Positive emotions have been shown to be synergistic with better learning and to produce increases in learning (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). Positive emotions include joy, pride, amusement, serenity, gratitude, hope, interest, awe, inspiration, and love. To a large extent, teachers already intuitively recognize that these kinds of emotions are useful in the classroom and the activities in this paper will hopefully encourage more teachers to deliberately utilize them with students.

Humans have a negative bias, which is a natural result of evolution (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). In a prehistoric setting, wild animals were a serious threat to human safety and people had a far better chance of survival if they assumed the worse. Negative emotions still help us survive by narrowing our focus and urging us away from danger

through a physiological response, especially within the respiratory system, the brain, hormones, and digestive tract. Although this response is useful in some situations, it is less useful in the EFL classroom where students' fear of failure can lead them to avoid speaking or engaging with the target language.

In contrast, positive emotions have a cumulative long-term effect that can facilitate better learning by enhancing the effectiveness of neurological learning processes through the release of chemicals such as dopamine and serotonin (Burns et al., 2008). To overcome our inherited negative bias, Fredrickson and Joiner (2002) suggested that a critical positive ratio of 3:1 is suitable. In other words, we need to have three positive emotions for each negative one in order to be psychologically balanced. For EFL teachers who tend to correct every single student error, this is a useful thing to keep in mind.

Engagement

Engagement is the experience of being fully focused on living in the moment. Engagement does not necessarily mean you are feeling happy. In fact, there may be no clear emotions connected to engagement, and it simply means you are not thinking about the past, you are not thinking about the future, and your attention is focused in the here and now. A sports person knows engagement from being fully focused during their¹ sporting event, a musician knows engagement from being wrapped up in the present moment as they play a piece of music, and students can experience engagement as they work intensely with the learning materials and fellow students in lessons. As EFL teachers, we instinctively know engagement is important for our students' success because if they are not engaged they will not learn. Being engaged in a positive activity can help students to enjoy it more. Enjoyment is the

good feeling people experience when they break through the limits of homeostasis—when they do something that stretches them beyond what they were—in an athletic event, an artistic performance, a good deed, a stimulating conversation. Engagement and enjoyment, rather than pleasure, is what leads to personal growth and long-term happiness. (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p. 291)

When we set up activities to allow students to engage more fully in language learning, we are helping them in both their learning and their personal happiness.

Relationships

In the field of positive psychology, the quality of one's relationships has been postulated to be the number one influence on the quality of their life (Waldinger, Vaillant, & Orav,

2007). How we connect with others has historically been our key to survival and thriving. In the distant past, we hunted mammoths in groups and collaborated in caves taking care of infants and the elderly, and today the greatest things we achieve in life are still almost always in coordination with other people. The area of *relationships* has two important parts: relationships with others and relationship with self. In the context of the EFL classroom, the *relationships* element of the PERMA model can be considered as a) how to build strong relationships with others in the classroom and learning community and b) how to build self-confidence and self-esteem to take challenges and worthwhile risks that will facilitate learning both inside and beyond the classroom.

Meaning

Unlike our emotions, which change from day to day and even second to second, *meaning* is deeper, longer, and more solid. The Japanese word *ikigai* is probably clearer than the English word meaning. *Ikigai* means having a purpose in life, for example, helping friends or family or working towards a goal. Meaning may not always be fun or have positive emotions directly connected, and sometimes the things we do with the deepest meaning are tough, for example, climbing a high mountain or taking care of a crying infant. Meaningful activities can be stressful and other people may not fully understand our behavior, but we do these activities because there is deep personal meaning. Ironically, meaning is often not about ourselves but rather connected to serving others. The psychologist and holocaust survivor Victor Frank (1984) said, "In order for us to truly be alive and be human one must forget himself and give himself to a cause or another human being. The more he gives of himself the more human he is" (p. 4). Meaning means making a larger contribution to the world and supporting others. For EFL teachers, this implies that as much as possible, EFL learning activities should connect and support the meanings in students' lives.

Achievement

Happiness and success are not the same thing, yet achievement and working towards success are important parts of positive psychology (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The key question to be considered is: What do you want to achieve? And how will you do that? Helping students to make clearer, realistic, and exciting goals is a skill that is often ignored in education and beyond. These are many simple teachable skills that we can utilize in the EFL classroom to help students to achieve more and to enjoy the process of achievement. Students can use these skills to achieve more in language learning and other areas of their lives.

The opposite of achievement is failure, and positive psychology also acknowledges the importance of learning from failure, taking something positive from that experience whenever possible and moving forward. Positive psychology suggests that ESL teachers should try to help students to regard their mistakes and failures in useful ways that can ultimately support their learning and future achievements.

Some Activities to Take Positive Psychology From the Classroom to the World

As explained above, positive psychology has much to offer for the EFL classroom. Four activities to introduce positive psychology in the language classroom are summarized below. The appendix offers fuller examples to consider how they can be adapted for specific teaching contexts.

Three Good Things

We first came across this activity in a presentation by Helgesen (2006b). For homework, every evening for one week, students briefly write down three good things that happened to them during the day. These things could be big (e.g., my sister got married today) or small (today was sunny). In Part 2, the students briefly explain why this was a good thing (e.g., My sister got married → This was a good thing because we had a nice party, her husband is a nice guy, and I think they will have a happy life together). The Three Good Things activity helps students to focus on the positive things in life (the P in PERMA) by savoring rather than taking for granted the good things in their lives, and it also helps them to find greater meaning in daily experiences (the M in PERMA). In the classroom, students are curious to hear what their friends have included in the diary and the exercise provides useful practice in both writing and conversation.

Magic Moments

We created this activity to focus on engagement, the E of PERMA. Magic Moments is similar to Three Good Things in that students identify positive things that happened, but in this case, they identify moments from any time in their past when they felt a little magic. We give them several examples of possible magic moments:

- a. . . a special time when you felt really alive,
- b. . . a time when something really changed in your life,
- c. . . a moment when you were in “flow,” or

- d. . . a moment when you had a new understanding.

Students try to re-experience their own magic moment and remember what it was that they saw, heard, and felt that made up their subjective experience and that created the magic. After exploring and writing about their magic moments, students share these with other students and try to get them to experience a little of the same kind of magic. This activity can be further employed as a review of the past tense. From our experience, grammatical mistakes in the use of past tense are often made during this activity, and therefore a review and gentle reminder to focus on correct conjugation helps reduce a lot of student mistakes.

Goal-Stepping

We created the goal-stepping activity to focus on achievement, the A of PERMA. In Part 1, students state their goal and then make it much clearer by imagining what they will see, hear, and feel when they have achieved their goal. Eliciting evidence in this way ensures that students’ goals are not vague. They also set a date for achieving their goal. Then in Part 2, one student guides another. The student with the goal throws a pen to a location a few meters away that represents the position of their goal. He or she then walks to the goal and take steps back from there stating the action that is necessary at each step. The other student writes down the action. Because the space in the classroom is limited, students from different groups may cross or bump into each other. This pandemonium is great fun and also acts as a metaphor that people sometimes have to navigate around obstacles to achieve goals. As teachers we should not only desire students to succeed in our lessons but also throughout life, and this activity helps students break down self-determined goals into achievable steps. As this exercise is focused on future actions, it supports practice of the future tense, and if necessary this tense can be reviewed before the activity begins or even afterwards as students read their goal steps to the class. It is also a useful dictation exercise for the student who is taking notes.

I-Messages

I-Messages are a communication tool devised by Gordon (1970) for helping parent-child communication, but they are now more widely taught in many communication courses. This activity focuses on relationships, the R of PERMA. It involves students learning a communication tool for solving problems in relationships. Students learn how to communicate their feelings and their perspective on the problem in a way that does not

disrespect or harm the other person, and yet they clearly express what their problem is. An *I-Message* has a three-part structure: (a) describe the other person's behavior, (b) describe the concrete effects of that behavior on you, and (c) describe how that makes you feel. Appendix 4 provides more details and examples.

In this learning activity, first the students hear an argument between two people; then they learn how to solve arguments using *I-messages*; and finally they write and present a skit between the two arguing people using *I-messages* to resolve the conflict. The activity is designed to allow student creativity. In particular we encourage the use of props such as wigs and business attire when students act their skits in front of the class. This helps create an imaginary world and introduces an element of levity in this serious work. The *I-Messages* exercise provides good language practice in describing behaviors and feelings precisely.

Conclusion

In this paper we have examined the background of positive psychology and offered four learning activities to show how its findings can be brought into the EFL classroom in fun and useful ways. Using this kind of activity with students offers not only personalized and motivating language learning opportunities, but also the opportunity to learn real skills that they can take out into the world and that can have a strong positive effect on their lives and the lives of people with whom they interact. Having used these techniques for several years, we have seen and hope other teachers will also discover how the use of positive psychology techniques in the classroom can improve student engagement, language skills, and creativity and also foster strategies for personal growth and long-term happiness.

Note

1. In this paper, we have chosen to use the pronouns *they* and *their* as singular pronouns of indeterminate gender.

Bio Data

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Why?

Good Thing 2

Why?

Good Thing 3

Why?

Activity 2: Magic Moments

Everyone has “magic moments” in their life. List at least one example for each type of magic moment.

... a special time when you felt really alive	
... a time when something really changed in your life	
... a moment when you were in “flow”	
... a “light-bulb” moment when you had a new understanding about something	

Appendix

Activity 1: Three Good Things (Gratitude Diary)

One good way to develop an attitude of gratitude is to keep a diary of good things that happen. Look at the example. Each day, list three good things that happen to you. Write the reason why each was good.

Good Thing 1. Dinner was delicious tonight. My mother made grilled chicken.
 Why? This was good because ... grilled chicken is one of my favourite foods.

Day 1: ____ day

Good Thing 1

Work with a partner

Use the chart below to interview your classmates about their magic moments.

		Try to experience the moment again.		
Partner Name	What was one of your magic moments?	What do you see?	What do you hear?	How do you feel?

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1. Based on your interviews, which of their magic moments would you like to experience?
2. What is one thing you can do to have more magic in your life?

Extension

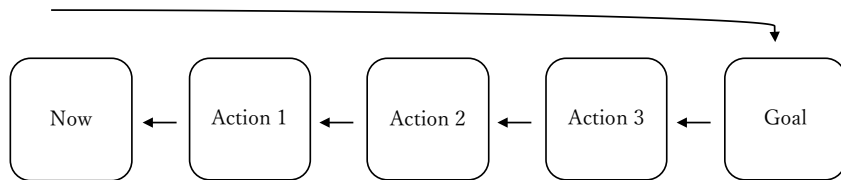
1. Choose one of your magical moments.
2. Prepare a presentation of your magical moment. Try to get the audience to experience it.

Activity 3: Goal-Stepping

Setting a Goal

What is your goal?	
When do you want to achieve it?	
<i>Now imagine you have achieved your goal. . .</i>	
What do you see?	
What do you hear?	
What do you feel?	
What do you say to yourself?	

Jump straight to your goal . . .



. . . then step back identifying the actions at each step

Goal-Stepping

Goal-Stepping Process

1. Imagine your goal is located in the room, at least two meters away. Throw a pen to mark your goal.
2. Walk to your goal with your partner. Step into your goal. Visualize achieving your goal.
3. Take a step back. What action needs to happen at this step? Tell your partner and he/she will write it down.
4. Repeat Step 3 at least three times or until you arrive back at your original position
5. Get your list of goals from your partner. Add any missing steps.

Activity 4: I-Messages

Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. This activity helps us improve relationships.

Lesson 1

Setting the Scene

Tom = Lazy, loves TV, eating snack food!

Sally = Hard working, always wants to do a good job, comes home late every day.

Tell students you recorded Tom and Sally's argument last week and today we're going to listen to it.

Listening Script for Tom and Sally's Argument

Narrator: Tom doesn't work on Fridays and he spent the whole day watching TV at home. His wife, Sally, on the other hand has worked all day. It's 8 p.m. and Sally has just come home. She is tired, hungry, and thirsty.

- S. Hey Tom. What did you do today?
 T. I watched TV.
 S. The whole day! Your eyes will get sore. You cleaned the bathroom didn't you?
 T. Sorry, I forgot.
 S. Did you cut vegetables for dinner?

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- T. Sorry, I was watching TV.
 S. Did you repair the car tire?
 T. No, it's too difficult. But, I did watch a good car program on TV.
 S. But you can repair a car tire, can't you?
 T. Yeah, but today I had to watch four movies, watch some cartoons, and make lots of coffee!
 S. Did you polish your shoes?
 T. No. I was tired from changing TV channels.
 S. Did you take out the trash?
 T. No.
 S. That's easy isn't it?
 T. Yes, but as I've tried to tell you, I was watching TV.
 S. That's it. That's your last chance. You never do anything. I'm very angry. Goodbye Tom, I'm going to live the life of an independent woman!!
 T. Nooooo, Sally come baaaaaaack!!

1st Listening: Write 3 things Sally asked Tom to do.

2nd Listening: Write these questions on the board. Have students listen a second time and answer.

1. What are Tom and Sally arguing about?
2. What are 3 things Tom did on Friday?
3. At the end of the argument what does Sally decide to do?

Role-Play

- Tell students to role-play the dialogue with a partner.
- Listen to the dialogue again (3rd listening) and have students shadow Tom and Sally's argument.
- Have students role-play the dialogue again with more emotion.

Tell students that they are going to study a conflict resolution skill called *I-messages*.

Give them the following handout.

I-Messages and You-Messages

- In a *You-message*, you blame the situation on the other person, e.g., "You never do anything."
- *I-messages* are the opposite of *You-messages* and solve problems better than *You messages*. They can be used to explain your perspective to someone when you have a problem. An *I-message* is a good way of communicating with someone when you are arguing.

An I-message. . .

. . . describes your partner's **behavior**: What actually happened?

. . . describes the **effects** of that behavior on ME.

. . . describes how I **feel** about that behavior.

1. It has a good chance of reducing or stopping an irritating behavior of another person.
2. Respects the other person.
3. Protects the relationship between you and the other person.
4. Helps the other person understand what is happening between the two of you.

How to write an I-message

	Tom's Example
DESCRIBE THE BEHAVIOUR you would like to change. Make sure the behavior you describe is a fact. Be specific i.e. what you could see, hear or touch.	Sally stands in front of the TV. She tells me to do housework.
DESCRIBE THE CONCRETE EFFECTS that this behavior has on you.	I cannot concentrate on the TV.
DESCRIBE HOW YOU FEEL about the behavior.	Irritated and sad.

I-Message:

When you stand in front of me and tell me to do housework I cannot concentrate on the TV program. It makes me irritated and sad.

Note: After the other person has spoken and you listened, you might need to repeat your *I-message*.

Homework—Preparing the Role-Play Conversation

With your partner, write a better conversation between Tom and Sally using *I-messages*. This conversation takes place one week after Tom and Sally’s argument.

1. Both Tom and Sally should use an *I-message*.
2. When you do your role-play, both Tom and Sally should actively listen to the other’s words (shadowing).
3. At the end of the conversation, decide if Tom and Sally will try to live together again.
4. Use two props (cups, drinks, spoons, chairs, tables).

Lesson 2

1. Give students 10 minutes to prepare, their conversations, in particular the *I-messages*.
2. Performers: Choose pairs to give performances.
Other students: Have the other students listen and write the *I-messages* they hear in each conversation.
3. Check the *I-messages* with the performing students.
4. In groups of four, discuss how you can use *I-messages* with real people in your life.