

## ELT and the Science of Happiness -- An Intro

Marc Helgesen  
(Miyagi Gakuin Women's University, Sendai, Japan)

### ABSTRACT

Abstract: Positive psychology studies what makes life good. This article identifies eight things people can do that are correlated to increasing life satisfaction (happiness). The author shows how these can be similar to things English teachers already do. By focusing on positive emotion, we can encourage and engage learners. Empirical data demonstrates improved learning among happy students. The author then gives examples of ways to use these ideas in English classes.

**Key words:** Positive psychology, positive emotion, ELT, English Language Teaching.

Positive psychology is “the scientific study of optimal human functioning. It aims to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive.” (Sheldon, et al., 2000). TIME magazine calls it “The Science of Happiness.” (Wallis, 2005).

Positive psychology is a movement within psychology. Traditional psychology focuses on mental illness. Positive psychology focuses on mental health. Seligman (2003) explains that positive psychology is not a replacement for traditional psychology. It’s a supplement and an extension. He also maintains it is not “the power of positive thinking,” which he calls an “armchair exercise” (p.186) based on a philosophy rather than science. Positive psychology involves empirical and replicable research.

In the same TIME magazine referred to earlier, Lyubomirsky identified “Eight steps toward a more satisfying life” (2005, p. 32-33). They are as follows:

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

When I saw Lyubomirsky’s list, which I paraphrased to make it more accessible for learners, what struck me is that most of the things on it are similar to things we are already doing in many ESL/EFL classes. “Friends and family” and “health” are standard topics in many elementary-level classes. “Remember good things in your life” – that’s grammar. It demands some sort of past tense. “Notice good things as they happen” requires the present. “Thanking” and “Forgiving” are language functions, often carried out with language routines.

So, I thought, if we are doing similar things anyway, why not do them in a way that focuses on and elicits positive emotion? We can consciously look at these ideas in our classes. Positive psychology looks for – and tests – specific interventions (as an English teacher, think “activities” or “tasks”) that result in increased positive emotion.

In addition to the natural interest of the topic – everyone wants to be happy – there are other benefits for students “working on happiness.” Christopher Peterson of the University of Michigan noted that “positive attitudes and motives about school translate themselves into good academic performance” (2006, p. 285). Oishi, Diener & Lucas (2007) echo this when they present a survey of over 118,000 people around the world in which those with higher levels of satisfaction in their lives – though not necessarily the highest levels possible – are more likely to continue on with their education. The same paper reported on another survey that found happy US university students had higher grade point averages, missed fewer classes and reported higher levels of conscientiousness. Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins (2009) cite data indicating useful educational attributes connected to positive mood including broader attention and enhanced creative, holistic, analytic as well as critical thinking. Harvard’s S



My own students in Japan often add Korea to their lists: *I want to say kamsahamnida*

*to Korea for K-Pop!*

Space here doesn't permit further examples or a discussion of the complexity of positive psychology. For more, see Helgesen (in print) or the author's website (see below).

Positive emotion can be useful for our students educationally and personally. Positive psychology is potentially a useful toolkit for English Teachers.

#### **Notes:**

The author maintains a website that offers free downloads of over 50 positive psychology/ELT activities at [www.ELTandHappiness.com](http://www.ELTandHappiness.com).

This article is based on Helgesen, M. (in press). It should be available before TESOL 2014, next March in Portland, OR, USA.

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## **BIODATA**

Marc Helgesen is Professor in the Department of Intercultural Studies at Miyagi Gakuin Women's University, Sendai, Japan. He also teaches in the MA TESOL programs at Teachers College Columbia University – Japan Program, Tokyo and at the Nagoya University of Foreign Studies where he teaches a graduate level course on Positive Psychology in English Language Teaching. He is the author of over 150 professional articles, books and textbooks and has been an invited speaker at conferences on five continents. His professional interests include multi-sensory teaching, Positive psychology in ELT and Extensive Reading. He is chair of the Extensive Reading Foundation ([www.erfoundation.org](http://www.erfoundation.org)).

### **Contact information:**

Marc Helgesen

[march@mgu.ac.jp](mailto:march@mgu.ac.jp)

[www.HelgesenHandouts.weebly.com](http://www.HelgesenHandouts.weebly.com)