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ELT and the Science of Happiness -- An Intro

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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 Eng

lish 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 idea

s 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 fa

ctors that allow individuals and communities to thrive." (Sheldon, et al., 2000). TIME magazine calls it "The Sci

ence 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 t

raditional psychology. It's a supplement and an extension. He also maintains it is not "the power of positive thinki

ng," 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 satisfy

ing 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 a nd 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 emoti on.

In addition to the natural interest of the topic – everyone wants to be happy – there are other benefits for st udents "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 h igher 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 student shad 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

hawn Achor points out that positive emotion makes people better learners, "primed" for learning. Explaining the n euroscience behind this, he says, "positive emotions flood our brains with dopamine and serotonin, chemicals that not only make us feel good, but dial up the learning centers of our brains to higher levels. They help us organize n ew information, keep that information in the brain longer, and retrieve it faster later on" (2010, p. 44).

If positive emotion can be such a plus for learning, how can we translate the ideas into specific language t asks for English learners? One way to start is to let learners know about Lyubomirsky's "eight steps." I do that th rough a standard listening activity: peer dictation. I copy the eight items. As an example, I dictate the first one, "R emember good things in your life." The other seven are copied onto strips of paper. Each student gets one. Student s stand and circulate, dictating and writing the sentences until they collect all eight. This can either be a full sente nce dictation or a cloze dictation where they have a handout with key words deleted. Once they have written all o f them, we talk about what they might mean in day-to-day life.

Later in the course, we revisit the list with a *Happiness Haiku* in which students work in pairs. Each group is assigned an item from this list. They write a haiku (5/7/5 syllable poem) on their topic, make a poster with the ir haiku and share it with the class. This not only helps with awareness of English syllabication, it also gets studen to thinking more deeply about the meaning than is possible with the previous, sentence-level dictation.

Activity example.

Activities with clear grammar or functional points are possible for all the items of the list. Here is a simple activit y which goes with Lybomirsky's third item: Say "thank you" to people who help you.

Thank You to the World. On the board write,

I want to say _		to	_for/because _		<u>.</u>
	(thank you)	(country/culture	·)	(reason)	

In pairs or small groups, students think about how many languages they know how to say "thank you" in.

They write or say a sentence, using the pattern, for each one. Examples:

I want to say grazie to Italy because they gave the world some great art (and pizza!)

I want to say shukran to Egypt for math. I don't like math but it's important.

After a few minutes, several pairs work together to compare answers.

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, se e 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.europe.com. ELTandHappiness.com.

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

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