

Positive Psychology

A quick introduction for Language Educators

What is Positive Psychology?

“Positive psychology is a relatively new branch of psychology that shifts the focus from what is clinically wrong, to the promotion of wellbeing and the creation of a satisfying life filled with meaning, pleasure, engagement, positive relationships and accomplishment. Gable and Haidt (2005) defined positive psychology as ‘the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions’.

Positive psychology is not about putting on a happy face all the time. Life can be hard and disappointments and challenges are inevitable. However, scientific research has shown that there are some strategies and skills that allow people to navigate the challenges of life more effectively and enjoy life despite the upsets.”¹

Some of these strategies include: Engaging in activities that give us pleasure, being mindful of and grateful for the positive emotions we experience; identify and use our strength, so that we can engage in activities that facilitate the experience of “Flow”²; establish and cultivate positive relationships; and finding meaning and purpose in our lives.

¹<http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/docs/Positivepsychology.pdf>

² Csikzentmihalyi M (1991). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Harper Perennial

³ Gable, S. L., & Haidt, J. (2005). What (and why) is positive psychology?. *Review of general psychology*, 9(2), 103.



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How can I apply Positive Psychology to my teaching?

A popular model based on Positive Psychology principles, and widely applied to general Education, is the PERMA model initially developed by Martin Seligman⁴, and further expanded during Seligman's collaboration with the South Australian Health & Medical Research Institute⁵. The resulting PERMA+ model comprises the following key components of wellbeing⁵:

Positive Emotion	includes happiness, joy, hope, love, compassion, gratitude, pride, awe and optimism. "By exploring, savouring, integrating or visualizing future success, positive emotions can broaden our habitual ways of thinking or acting to deliver a better result or feelings about life" (6)
Engagement	is associated with the experience of "Flow" ² , described as a loss of consciousness and sense of time when fully involved in an activity. The state of Flow is facilitated by activities that provide a match between our perceived abilities and the challenge posed by the task at hand.
Relationships	refers to humans' need to be loved, appreciated, and supported, and to have positive interactions with the people around us.
Meaning	is achieved when we feel that we are serving a purpose that is greater than ourselves, when we do something that we perceive as valuable and worthwhile, and that is consistent with our personal values. This "helps us to focus on what is really important when we are faced with a significant challenge or adversity in our life" (9)
Accomplishment	is related to being able to achieve one's goals, and to develop competence is something that is important to us. This involves perseverance and resilience, and not giving up when faced with challenges.
+	refers to physical wellbeing, which contributes greatly to emotional, psychological and social wellbeing.

By designing learning experiences that support the PERMA+ components, we can contribute to learners' emotional, social and psychological wellbeing, also referred to as *Flourishing*³⁴.

If you would like to know more about Positive Psychology for L2 learning, further resources are available on the FL2 website. The FL2 activities developed as part of this project, and also available from the FL2 website, provides some examples of how small changes can facilitate the inclusion of these principles in L2 teaching and learning programs. We encourage all interested educators to participate actively in the development of further resources, by engaging with the FL2 Community of Practice, which can be joined through the FL2 website.

⁴Seligman, M. E. (2012). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. Simon and Schuster.

⁵Descriptions of the PERMA principles are taken from the brochure published as: South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute: The Wellbeing and Resilience Centre. *PERMA+*. Available from: <http://www.wellbeingandresilience.com/perma-plus-1/>. When text is directly quoted, numbers in brackets refer to page numbers in the PERMA+ brochure.