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POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND ITS IMPORTANCE IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

ABSTRACT

The term positive psychology has recently entered the field of Second Language Acquisition. The article explains the meaning of the term, presents the definitions of positive psychology, its objectives and history. The key part of the article demonstrates the importance of positive psychology in the second language acquisition presenting many connections between the two fields. The author recommends that positive education is introduced in every school and every foreign language classroom.

KEYWORDS: positive psychology, positive emotion, second language acquisition, positive education, humanistic approaches

STRESZCZENIE

Psychologia pozytywna jest stosunkowo nowym pojęciem w przyswajaniu języka drugiego. Celem artykułu jest przybliżenie tego pojęcia, zaprezentowanie definicji psychologii pozytywnej, jej założeń i historii. Zasadnicza część artykułu przedstawia znaczenie psychologii pozytywnej w akwizycji języka drugiego prezentując wiele związków pomiędzy obiema dziedzinami nauki. Autorka zachęca do tego, aby wszystkie szkoły oraz klasy językowe wprowadziły pozytywne podejście do nauczania.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: pozytywna psychologia, pozytywne emocje, przyswajanie języka drugiego, edukacja pozytywna, podejście humanistyczne

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY – DEFINITIONS AND HISTORY

Positive psychology, defined as “the empirical study of how people thrive and flourish”, “the study of the human strengths and virtues that make life good” (MacIntyre/ Mercer 2014: 154), or “the scientific study of what goes right in life” (Peterson 2006), investigates and promotes human well-being (Oxford 2016a: 21) as well as the techniques that can enable living well (MacIntyre 2016).

The objective of positive psychology is to build positive emotions, greater engagement, and an appreciation of meaning in life rather than to come to terms

with negative experiences (Seligman 2006). As Peterson (2006) observed, positive psychology has a short history and a long past. The modern positive psychology movement was launched in 1998 when Seligman became the president of the American Psychological Association, nevertheless, positive psychology roots are in humanistic psychology and such scholars as Maslow, Bruner or Moskowitz. In fact, the term was first used by Maslow (1954) (MacIntyre 2016: 4). Nevertheless, MacIntyre and Mercer (2014: 157) argue after Dahlsgaard et al. (2005) that positive psychology is as old as foundational philosophies in the East and in the West. As Malczewska-Webb (2016: 194) observes, “human happiness is deeply rooted in ancient philosophy and was explored in the virtue ethics of Confucius, Mencius and Aristotle”.

What made positive psychology different from traditional psychology was that instead of focusing on the negative, i.e. mental illnesses or disorders and their treatment, positive psychology tends towards the positive. It aims at helping people to lead better lives by increasing strengths and attributes, e.g. resiliency, happiness, or optimism. Positive psychology looks at human well-being and explores how people can function to the best of their potential (Malczewska-Webb 2016: 194) and how they can ‘thrive and flourish’ (MacIntyre/ Mercer 2014: 154). The same approach was already apparent in humanistic psychology and was adopted by Maslow, who studied successful, fulfilled people he admired, unlike Freud, who concentrated on abnormalities (MacIntyre/ Mercer 2014: 157).

During Martin Seligman’s first year of presidency three main positive psychology pillars began to come into existence. The pillars have remained unchanged since then and are as follows: positive emotions and feelings, positive characteristics and traits of people associated with living well and positive institutions that make it possible for students to achieve success as well as experience positive feelings. Research in psychology has focused mainly so far on positive emotions and character strengths, however, positive institutions have not been studied sufficiently (MacIntyre 2016: 5). Recently, Budzińska (2018) has studied a foreign language institution. Her study demonstrated, three main positive institution components: positive physical structure, positive pedagogical approaches adopted and positive psychological consequences such as low anxiety, motivation or enjoyment.

Just over a decade after positive psychology was founded Seligman (2011) released a book *Flourish*, which introduced a new model for positive psychology, a well-being theory called PERMA. The acronym represents five elements of positive psychology: Positive emotion, Engagement, positive interpersonal Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment. (P) positive emotion is related to feeling of happiness such as joyfulness, contentment and cheerfulness. (E) engagement is about being engaged in activities, which involves feeling interested and absorbed. Engagement has been interpreted as flow (Csíkszentmihályi 1990, 1997, 2008; Egbert 2003). This theory supports the importance of intrinsic motivation in achieving goals. Csíkszentmihályi (1990) states that what makes experience genuinely satisfying

is a state of consciousness called flow. It is a state of concentration so focused that it leads to a total absorption in an activity and at the same time to improved performance on a task. (R) positive interpersonal relationships have been interpreted as feeling socially integrated, cared for and supported by others. (M) meaning refers to serving the cause other than self, believing in the value of life. The fifth element, (A) accomplishment is about identifying areas of achievement, progress towards objectives, and believing that your daily life brings you closer to achieving aims.

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION (SLA)

Since the main principle of positive psychology, i.e. the idea that deliberate actions can lead to improvement in wellbeing of individuals and communities, overlaps with one of the central objectives of education, it does not come as a surprise that positive psychology is also relevant in SLA (MacIntyre 2016: 5). There are many connections between the two fields, some of which still to be explored. Lake (2013) was one of the pioneers who applied positive psychology concepts in his study of Japanese students. His research results showed a correlation between positive psychology inspired actions and increased effort, self-efficacy, and exam scores. MacIntyre and Mercer (2014: 158) believe that there are many SLA concepts that are in line with the positive psychology ideology, nevertheless the most salient ones are: the humanistic approaches in second language (L2) teaching, the role of affective factors in language teaching, models of motivation involving affective factors an affective filter theory, studies of the good language learner, and the self.

THE HUMANISTIC APPROACHES IN L2 TEACHING

The recognition of the affective aspects of language learning and the assumption that affect is as important as cognition goes back to the humanistic movement in language teaching of the 1970s and 1980s, which treated the learner holistically, combining affect with cognition. Humanistic approaches such as Suggestopedia, The Silent Way, Community Language Teaching, or Total Physical Response (Asher 1969; Gattegno 1963; Curran 1976; Lozanov 1979) have been criticised for lack of scientific support and being preoccupied with student souls rather than teaching linguistic skills (Gadd 1998: 223). Even though they have consequently been considered alternative (Stevick 1990: 7) their main ideology related to the importance of enhancing individuals' experiences of language learning and its beneficial effect on L2 acquisition has remained present in SLA ever since.

THE ROLE OF AFFECTIVE FACTORS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

The theory behind humanistic methods was explained by Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), which states that emotions act as a filter that controls whether language is allowed to flow into the language-learning system in the brain. According to this hypothesis, if the degree of negative emotion, e.g. anxiety is high, a filter reducing the amount of comprehensible input is up and the information cannot get into the learner's brain processing system. If the filter is down, on the other hand, the brain can process the foreign language input. This is why the humanistic approaches stressed the significance of creating a positive, relaxed atmosphere in the foreign language classroom.

The importance of affective factors in language learning is now recognised by many scholars (e.g. Oxford 1996; Oxford et al. 2011, MacIntyre/ Gregersen 2012) and is a salient tenet of a number of SLA models of motivation. As Pekrun (2009: 575) states, emotions are omnipresent in school settings, particularly those connected with achievement such as enjoyment of learning, hope, pride, anger, shame, anxiety and boredom. Pekrun (2009: 575) points out that the social nature of academic situations contributes to emotional character of school settings and thus emotions such as admiration, contempt or envy. In addition, emotions play an important role in student motivation and cognitive performance. Adaptive emotions like enjoyment of learning have a positive effect on goal achievement, problem-solving or self-regulation. Conversely, maladaptive emotions like anxiety, hopelessness or boredom hinder academic success, make students drop out academic situations and even have a negative influence on individuals' mental and physical health.

Classroom instruction may be a source of positive emotions in students. Student-centred lessons, support for student autonomy, teachers' own enjoyment and enthusiasm have been found to result in student enjoyment (Frenzel et al. 2008). On the other hand, such aspects of social environment as high achievement expectancies from significant others, negative feedback, or negative consequences of failure, together with competition in the classroom have been found to create negative emotions.

According to The Broaden and Build Theory suggested by Fredrickson (2006), positive emotions such as joy, interest, contentment, pride or love have a beneficial effect on people as they broaden their attention and thinking. Moreover, they neutralise the effects of negative emotions. Positive emotions activate productive reactions to stressful situations, i.e. trigger feelings of happiness and interest while someone is experiencing anxiety. Positive emotions have also been found to support building personal bonds thanks to smiles. As Fredrickson (2006) also observes, positive emotions can be an element of an upward spiral. This is possible because resources created by positive emotions last long after an emotional reaction has taken place.

MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012: 207) describe beneficial effects of several specific positive emotions:

1. Joy creates the urge to play, expand boundaries, and creativity.
2. Interest generates an urge to explore, absorb new information, and develop the self.
3. Contentment allows one to savour positive events, relieve them, and integrate them into our worldview.
4. Pride is associated with an urge to share accomplishments with people who are important to us, and to imagine future achievements.
5. Love is an aggregation of positive emotions (e.g., joy, interest, contentment) that leads us to deeply meaningful relationships with others, and relationships with loved ones predict all of the specific tendencies for joy, interest, contentment and pride.

As MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) point out, the tendencies predicted by positive emotions have their place in the language classroom, rather than being simply the absence of negative emotions. Not only do they appear to facilitate learning but they have an additional benefit of building resources that help to handle future negative experiences. Resilient individuals have the advantage of using humour, creative exploration, relaxation, and optimistic thinking to decrease tension and get over difficulties. MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) emphasize that these strengths can be taught in the second language classroom. Since environmental factors have been shown to play a significant role in shaping student emotions, educators have a major impact on student emotions and can attempt to foster their development (Pekrun 2009: 596). This is of critical importance, as emotions have been demonstrated to affect learning.

STUDIES OF THE GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNER AND THE L2 SELF-SYSTEM MODEL

In addition to the role of affective factors in language teaching, studies of the good language learners and of “expertise” are also in line with positive psychology since they looked at positive examples of students and teachers as well as analysed the ways which lead to success in language learning, instead of just focusing on student proficiency levels (MacIntyre/ Mercer 2014: 159, 164). Similarly, the L2 self-system model (Dörnyei 2005) is closely related to positive emotions in terms of positive goals (ideal self) and the positive attitude to achieving them. Moreover, the power of negative emotions (feared self) is highlighted as it may offset a possible self in the same domain, and thus have positive impact on the motivational effect of the self. More current studies in L2 self-system (Mercer/ Ryan 2010) emphasise the importance of positive beliefs and optimism about improving one’s abilities. Another overlap between SLA and positive psychology is the importance of student-centred way of learning, which since the onset of the communicative approach in the 1980s has been the the most predominant way of instruction.

PERMA AND EMPATHICS

The arrival of positive psychology to SLA, as Oxford (2016: 10) argues is indicated by her modification of Seligman's PERMA and expanding it into EMPATHICS. Oxford has applied her adaptation of PERMA in three of her studies (Oxford 2014; Oxford/ Cuéllar 2014; Oxford et al. 2014). In her recent chapter (2016b), however, she admitted that Seligman's well-being theory was not completely satisfactory in her attempt to analyse the well-being of language learners. For example, Oxford (2016b: 72–73) came to the conclusion that PERMA was missing some key ingredients, such as perseverance, agency and self-esteem. Therefore, she has expanded the PERMA model to make it analytically more useful. Consequently, a new broader, nine-dimensional theoretical model called EMPATHICS (after empathy – an essential aspect of dimension 1 of language learner well-being) has emerged. The letters in the acronym stand for:

E: emotion and empathy (dimension 1).

M: meaning and motivation (dimension 2).

P: perseverance, including resilience, hope and optimism (dimension 3).

A: agency and autonomy (dimension 4).

T: time (dimension 5)

H: hardiness and habits of mind (dimension 6)

I: intelligences (dimension 7).

C: character strengths (dimension 8).

S: self-factors (self-efficacy, self-concept, self-esteem, self-verification (dimension 9)

In short, EMPATHICS comprises a group of salient psychological forces which “help learners achieve high well-being and progress rapidly, develop proficiency, and relish the language learning experience” (Oxford 2016b: 10).

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY APPLICATIONS

A number of educational institutions worldwide follow this new positive psychology pedagogical approach. Positive education, defined as “education for both traditional skills and for happiness” (Seligman et al. 2009: 293), or “applied positive psychology in education” (Green et al. 2011: 1) aims to “promote flourishing and positive mental health within the school community” (Norrish et al. 2013: 148).

In Australia, positive psychology principles have been applied to many school curricula as a reaction to overwhelming statistics concerning mental health problems in young people (particularly depression and anxiety disorder) as well as a high suicide rate (Malczewska-Webb 2016: 196–197). In 2008 Seligman designed a whole school positive education programme for Geelong Grammar School (GGS) in

Victoria, which has proved successful in combating anxiety and depression. The programme objective was to promote psychological well-being of students since the sole focus on academic excellence has been found to insufficiently prepare young people for real life (Green et al. 2011). At GGS the implicit teaching of positive education is included in every aspect of school life at each year level. Explicit teaching, on the other hand, takes place during Year 7 and Year 10 through special positive psychology programmes that teach the elements of positive psychology such as: resilience, gratitude, strengths, meaning, flow, positive relationships and positive emotion. Similar initiative is applied in Wellington College in the UK, where in years 10 and 11 pupils study skills of wellbeing. The course is based on the following elements which promote well-being: physical health, positive relationship, perspective (developing a psychological immune system), engagement, the world (living sustainably), and meaning and purpose.

When it comes to SLA, MacIntyre et al. (2019: 266) discuss combining language education with Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) to increase learner well-being. PPIs are deliberate attempts to “(...) cultivate positive feelings, behaviors, or cognitions” (Sin/ Lyubomirsky 2009: 468). Teachers can choose from a wide range of research-validated, well-being raising activities such as “Three good things” (finding three good things each day) and use them during their language class (MacIntyre et al. 2019: 266).

CONCLUSION

Since the importance of affective factors in second learning acquisition has been recognized it seems vital that every language classroom applies positive psychology principles no matter whether it is done in a structured way – following a certain positive psychology curriculum or interventions or not structured – resulting from teacher beliefs about the beneficial effect of positive experiences of language learning.

The first step to increase the growth in the number of contexts where student well-being is as important as cognition would be to make educators aware of positive psychology and its benefits, which is what the present paper is hoped to contribute to. Therefore, it is critical that teacher training institutions raise the future teachers' awareness of the humanistic principle regarding the importance of affect as well as cognition.

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