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ELT and the “science of happiness”

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AS SOON AS I wrote that title, I knew it would be read with two very different reactions.

Some readers would automatically embrace the idea: *Great. I'm working with young adults. This is a huge issue for them. This is humanistic language teaching. How can I use it in the classroom?*

Other readers will be much more hesitant, not from cynicism as much as skepticism: *What's "happiness" got to do with English language teaching? I'm teaching speaking (or listening, reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar...whatever). Is this just something that will take my attention and energy away from what I should be doing? Why should I be responsible for teaching my students to be happy?*

First of all, I am not sure we can teach anyone to be happy. What we can do is explore some things that happy people do. Whether our learners choose to do them on their own is certainly their choice, not ours. And I don't think that dealing with happiness is or ever should be a main focus of English language teaching. It isn't something we *have* to deal with. It's not an obligation. But it may be an opportunity.

Our classes do have content. And for some, talking about the weather or favorite music and sports is enough. But many students and teachers want to go deeper. More importantly, one of the things we have learned from humanistic language teaching over the past couple of decades is that we don't just teach listening, speaking, reading, and writing. We teach people. Teaching people means we deal with how they are learning as well as what we are teaching. As teachers, we all deal with educational psychology. Traditional psychology focused on mental illness. It has looked at people with problems and tried to find ways to help them.

More recently, the field of *positive psychology*

(Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) has emerged, energized by researchers such as former American Psychological Association President Martin Seligman, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and others. Rather than looking at people with mental difficulties, this discipline looks at the behavior of happy, mentally healthy people.

Time magazine (Wallis, 2005) has dubbed this positive psychology *the science of happiness*. That title is probably useful since it can differentiate positive psychology from *the power of positive thinking*. Seligman (2002) points out “positive thinking is an armchair activity. Positive psychology, on the other hand, is tied to a program of empirical and replicable scientific activity” (p. 288). He goes on to point out that positive psychology understands that, at times, negative expectations and negative psychology are essential. Using the example of an airplane pilot who has to decide whether to de-ice the wings of an airplane, Seligman says there are times when people need to be pessimists.

Contrastively, using positive psychology, researchers are able to identify common behaviors of happy people. University of California—River-side psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky has identified eight things that happy people do. To read her list, see *Eight Steps toward a more Satisfying Life* (from *Time* magazine; see Minnesota State University, 2005). The following is my summary, simplified to make the ideas easier to access for ELT students (Helgesen, 2005).

Eight things happy people do

1. **Notice good things in your life.** Write down 3-5 of them every week.
2. **Practice kindness:** Do nice things for people. It makes you happier.
3. **Notice life's joys.** When something good happens, stop.
 - Make a picture in your mind. OR
 - Tell yourself what happened. OR
 - Remember the feeling.
 This way, you can save the moment.
4. **Thank someone who has helped you.** Who has been important in your life? A teacher, a *sempai*, a parent. Write them a letter or tell them. Explain what they did for you. Say *thank you*.



5. **Learn to forgive.** When someone does something bad to you, don't hold the anger inside. Let go of the anger. Writing a letter to forgive someone is a good way.
6. **Take time with your friends and family.** They love you. You love them. Spend time with them. Let them know you appreciate them.
7. **Take care of your body.** Get enough sleep and exercise. Do stretching, smiling, and laughing.
8. **Learn ways to deal with problems.** Remember, we all face problems. Learn to move past them.

When I first read Lyubomirsky's list, it occurred to me that most of these are related to topics and language functions that we already use in the ELT classroom. Perhaps the ideas behind the list could have a role in the classroom.

Initially, I simply introduced the topic and gave my students the basic list (the words in bold). I happened to present it as a peer-dictation. Learners read their sentences to another student who wrote them. Then, in small groups, they brainstormed specific things they could do to try some of these things. I then began thinking of ways to work on some of the specific ideas.

The happiness journal

Journal writing is a common, out-of-class ELT activity. We ask learners to keep an English diary, both to give them extra writing practice and as a way to get to know individual students better. This seemed a natural way to get students to try the first item on the list—notice good things in your life. I made a simple journal form and handed it out (you can get a copy at the URL for Helgesen, 2005. About halfway down the page, there is a link to click for the PDF). I explained the task and the reason. If they wanted to participate, they needed to choose a time, about once a week, to record good things that were happening in their lives. It wasn't required, but students were told they would get extra credit if they kept the journal (in these classes, students can often earn extra credit for doing various out-of-class English activities.). Although it wasn't required, many students responded, some even needing extra copies of the form because they ran out of room.

The following is an extract from the journal of a 3rd-year, non-English major named Mayu. As you read, notice her use of adjectives. They seem

to reflect a pleasant, positive view. Her personality seems to come through as well.

Entries from Mayu's journal:

- I played with my pretty dog.
- It was a sunny day with beautiful blue sky.
- I got a *Charlie & the chocolate factory* book in English that I had long wanted.
- I got up early, so I walked with my dog. It was so pleasant and enjoyable for me.
- I dreamed a happy story when I slept.
- I saw a rainbow today.
- When I cooked dinner, my family was pleased.

Can just noticing positive experiences make a difference? Lyubomirsky (1994, as cited in Niven, 2000) points out that:

Happy and unhappy people tend to have had very similar life experiences. The difference is that the average unhappy person spends more than twice as much time thinking about unpleasant events in their lives, while happy people tend to seek and rely on information that brightens their personal outlook. (p. 4)

Practicing kindness.

Murphey (in press) talks about practicing *random acts of kindness*, that is, doing unexpected nice things. In class, we start with a small group complimenting activity (*That's a pretty sweater; You have such a nice smile; etc.*). The recipients just smile and say *Thank you*. Simple enough, but actually useful language practice since our students come from a culture where the appropriate response to a compliment is often to deny it. Then they do a bit of mental review, (*Mika said I have a pretty sweater; Emi said I have a nice smile*) usually accompanied by a smile as well. This is followed by a brainstorm of *little things* we could do, especially for those people who help us everyday but we rarely think about—when is the last time anyone brought flowers to the department secretaries or a candy bar for the guy who cleans the classroom? Small things, to be certain. Why do them? And especially why do them in the ELT classroom? Well, the students are certainly dealing with the ideas in English. They are using language in new, creative ways. Also, in a materialistic age like ours, noticing that "life satisfaction ... [improves]... with the level of altruistic activity" (Williams, Haber, Weaver, & Freeman, 1998, p. 31) seems like a very important idea for teachers to share.

Space here doesn't permit me to share some of the other ideas my students are working and playing with: A thank you letter to a family member, smile writing, zen stories about forgiveness, even eating blueberries as a way to notice life's joys. We'll explore more at the JALT post-conference session.

I share these ideas not as a quick fix or a distraction to what we do in the classroom, but as an interesting path in humanistic language learning—one that is a joy to explore.

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Dynamic strategies: Empowering the classroom community

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AFTER YEARS of being in foreign language classrooms as both an instructor and a learner, I have come to believe that one of the greatest gifts we can give our students is a

command of dynamic strategies—the tools to manage their conversations in another language. Dynamic strategies can be applied in a variety of contexts including, in the classroom community between students, between students and the teacher, and ultimately in the real world. As the ability to apply strategies in order to communicate in the target language increases, the individual is empowered and genuine learner independence is nurtured and eventually realized.

But how does an EFL instructor in Japan develop awareness and use of dynamic strategies in class? To begin, a working definition is crucial. Given the number of *strategy* terms and their interpretations in the literature (for an