

Think Tank: 2020 Vision

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Adapting Positive Psychology in ELT to On-line Teaching

One big change for me is that I've started using Positive Psychology on-line. Last July, the *Think Tank* did a [special issue on Positive Psychology](#), particularly on using the "Science of Happiness" in language teaching. In that issue, we led with [a video of Seligman explaining his model, PERMA](#). PERMA represents the elements of happiness or, to be precise, well-being. As you can see from this chart, the elements of the model are **P**ositive Emotions, **E**ngagement, **R**elationships, and **A**chievement (some people call it Agency). [Click HERE](#) for a handout on ideas for using PERMA in language classes.



I've been working with Positive Psychology in ELT for about 15 years. I usually start off with **Positive Emotions** (OK, that just means "happiness" but most psychologists avoid the term "happiness" because it doesn't sound scientific or quantifiable. I use the word because students know what

it means and why it is important.)

But last spring, when it became clear we were all going on-line, I thought I needed to rearrange things. I decided I needed to focus on **Relationships**. That, I thought, was the key to building the human connections that allow a positive class culture of trust and rapport to flourish. This was especially important in first-year classes where the students don't know each other. So, the first assignment I gave was to record a video self-introduction on [Flipgrid](#), a free service for student videos from Microsoft. I told them, "introduce yourself, but DON'T say, 'My name is X. I'm 18 years old. I'm from (city). I love K-pop' (or J-pop or whatever). That is true for just about everyone. Tell us something about yourself that isn't true for most other students." Fortunately, the first one I got was brilliant. A student recorded a video saying:

“Hi everyone. My name is Rikako. Nice to meet you. I’d like to introduce myself. I’m from Sendai. My hobby is dying my hair. The colors that I have dyed are green, orange, yellow, blue, pink, and more. Next color, I’ve not decided yet. So, if you know a good color, please tell me.”



You can see the video [HERE](#).

Increase variety & novelty. Our brains are wired to notice things that are different.

I thought Rikako’s self-intro was great, because it is unique. I was pretty sure no one else in the class made a hobby of dying her hair. Fortunately, Rikako gave me permission to show her video to students in other classes [and to Think Tank readers], so they could see one of their peers doing something memorable. (“Increase variety/novelty. Our

brains are wired to notice things that are different” ([Helgesen & Kelly, 2015](#), p. 34).

The next letter in PERMA stands for “**Meaning**” or “Meaningfulness.”

Personalization is a good way to do that. As a follow-up to the self-introduction video, I asked my students to listen to at least three classmates’ introductions and record a response. I wasn’t counting on goodwill. These were required assignments that counted towards their grades. But they started to build interest and cohesion in a way that “Read the assignment and take a quiz” never will.

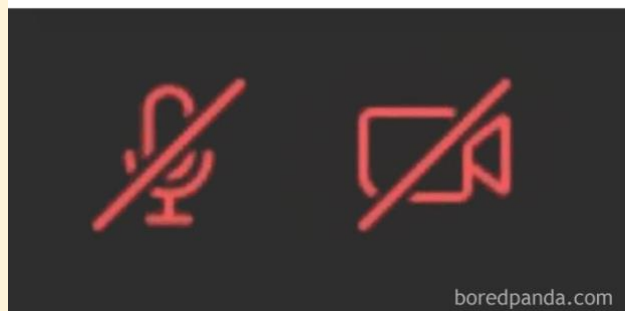


I should mention that, while Flipgrid is asynchronous, so the students were doing those videos on their own time, regular classes were on Zoom. In those, I encouraged students to turn on their video cameras. I wanted them to see each other and feel like they were part of a group. Of course, I understand if they don't have the bandwidth, but found, as long as students were comfortable with what we were doing, most were happy to be seen on screen. They wanted to get to know their classmates. I asked [Dr. Tracey Tokuhamma-Espinosa](#) who teaches “The Neuroscience of Learning” at Harvard University Extension School what she thought about camera use. Her call: “Definitely get them to use their cameras! Social contagion is made more efficient through emotional cues, primarily delivered through facial expressions and tones of voice” (personal communication, Sept. 12, 2020).

Skipping school in 2019:



Skipping school in 2020:



Next, we moved on to “**Achievement/Agency.**” We did this initially by doing a group project. We were studying a unit on fashion/clothing descriptions in the textbook. I asked the students to wear some clothing they liked for the next Zoom class. It didn't have to be fancy, just something they liked. In class, we did a fluency activity where they described their outfit to a series of partners. After class, they recorded their part of the fashion show on Flipgrid, then recorded responses to other classmates' videos. This helped contribute to the feeling that we were really a group, working together toward a common goal.

This was so successful that it inspired me to write similar tasks for use with a textbook series I co-authored. Those lesson plans are available [HERE](#).

Back to **Positive Emotions.** To help set the mood for each class, I took a page from Curtis Kelly's playbook (see his article on using touching/emotional videos in the [Online Learning Think Tank](#)) and created a web-page of interesting music videos. I quit using the Zoom waiting room—a rather boring place to wait alone before the teacher lets you into class. Instead, I arrived at least five minutes early and started playing a music video. There is music playing when the students arrive. I turn the sound down enough so they can talk to each other over the music. Not only does it start the class off on a good note, but most students started arriving early to see the video. You can find more Positive Emotion ideas [here](#) or music on [this page](#).

Engagement. One activity I've found useful for helping students achieve a FLOW experience is 4-3-2. It is also known as "Carousel" or "Fluency Workshop" ([Nation, 1989](#)). "Flow" really IS engagement. For more on Flow and how it relates to language teaching, see [Tardy and Snyder \(2004\)](#). In the 4-3-2 task, learners work in pairs, so breakout rooms are perfect for this. Each student speaks on a given topic for four minutes. Then they switch partners/breakout rooms and speak to their new partner for three minutes. They are saying essentially what they said before, just a little more fluently. Finally, they change partners/breakout rooms again and do their "mini-speech" a third time, this time for two minutes. By the third time, some have quit mentally translating and are thinking less about language and more about meaning; they are starting to think in English. Note that the times (4-3-2 minutes) can be adjusted depending on the students' language levels. It is the ratio that is important.

These are some small ways I've learned to teach on-line, using PERMA, to help learners build both relationships and their English. My school is back to face-to-face now, but I am still using many of these lesson ideas.

PERMA graphic courtesy:

<https://positivepsychologyofprophet.wordpress.com/2019/01/24/perma-model-and-the-positive-psychology/>

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Do y'all remember, before the internet, that people thought the cause of stupidity was the lack of access to information?
Yeah. It wasn't that.

