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IDEA SHARING:
USING POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY EXERCISES IN THE ESL
CLASSROOM TO IMPROVE STUDENT WELL-BEING

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Introduction

‘One looks back with appreciation to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feelings.’

Carl Jung

Teaching is a profession that carries with it great responsibility. Every semester or term, teachers influence hundreds, thousands, millions of people’s lives. This cycle repeats itself term after term, year after year. Teachers guide the children of the economically disadvantaged as well as the children of the wealthiest members of our community. Teachers influence young children, adults and everyone in between. The minds in our charge are impressionable, and our actions can either build confidence or destroy it. Our words can inspire and motivate, or they can discourage and disappoint. This power and influence is real in every classroom, with any subject. In primary schools, middle schools, high schools, colleges, or universities around the world, teachers influence the lives of their students.

The respect that exists for the teacher is archetypal and can be seen throughout history and across cultures.

With so much power and influence, and such complete access to the population, teachers are in the perfect position to promote the physical and mental health of entire communities. It is the author's belief that teachers are obliged to do so by the traditions of the profession. That is why the author proposes the practical application of positive psychology principles in the classroom. Positive psychology exercises have been shown to have many desirable effects in the populations studied. Research has shown increases in happiness, decreases in symptoms of depression and anxiety, and improved physical health. These findings have implications for any classroom, including the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom.

This paper argues that due to the potential benefit to the students' well-being, positive psychology concepts and exercises should be integrated into ESL courses, particularly of intermediate and advanced level students. After a brief definition and overview of the field of positive psychology, two positive psychology interventions that have received robust support will be described: the gratitude visit and using signature strengths. An example adaptation for each exercise will then be presented, and activities targeting specific language skills will be suggested for the ESL classroom.

General Overview of Positive Psychology

The field of positive psychology focuses on 'strength, building the best things in life, making the lives of normal people fulfilling' (Seligman, 2004). Its goal is the empirical study of positive institutions, positive individual traits, and positive emotions (Duckworth, Steen & Seligman, 2005; Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). This focus on what makes life worth living came as a conscious effort to restore balance to the field of

psychology, which for the past 50 years has focused primarily on mental illness and disorders (Gable & Haidt, 2005). Positive psychology seeks to apply the same rigorous methods used to develop an understanding of mental illness, to develop an understanding of mental health. It is a young field that has grown quickly over the past ten years (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Positive psychology is also a broad field that ranges from the conceptualization and refinement of theoretical frameworks, such as the organization of the elements comprising happiness (Duckworth et al., 2005), to more concrete, practical applications, such as the development of exercises to increase well-being and buffer against depression and disease (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Burton & King, 2004). Many such exercises, also called positive psychology interventions (PPIs), have been developed and tested with both clinical and non-clinical populations, with varying degrees of effectiveness (see Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009 for a review).

Empirical Support for Effectiveness of PPIs

All PPIs have as their goal the development of positive thoughts, feelings or behaviors (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Positive emotions have been shown by many researchers to predict a range of desirable short and long-term mental, physical and social outcomes (Cohn & Frederickson, 2010). Consistent with these findings, experimental research on PPIs has produced significant results, suggesting that many PPIs improve the experience of positive emotions in the populations being studied (Sin and Lyubomirsky, 2009; Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). In addition to a significant increase in positive emotions, some of the exercises have been shown to decrease symptoms of depression and anxiety in both clinical and non-clinical populations (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005; Duckworth et al., 2005). There is also evidence that certain interventions

result in improved physical health (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). There are a large number of PPIs in use, and new exercises are constantly being developed. Two interventions that have received promising results are *the gratitude visit* and *using signature strengths*.

The Gratitude Visit

One area that has received consistent significant results is known as developing a grateful attitude (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Emmons & McCullough, 2003). The gratitude visit is designed to cultivate such an attitude. In this simple yet powerful exercise, “Participants are given one week to write and then deliver a letter of gratitude in person to someone who had been especially kind to them but had never been properly thanked.” (Seligman et al., 2005, p. 416). The participants were instructed to read the letter aloud to that person (by phone if necessary). This PPI was shown to cause large positive changes, specifically increased well-being and decreased symptoms of anxiety and depression, for 1 month after completion of the activity (Seligman et al., 2005).

Using Signature Strengths

In this PPI, participants were asked to take an online survey designed to identify their top character strengths (e.g. creativity, hope, humor). After identifying their top strengths, they were asked to use one in “a new and different way” each day for a week (Seligman et al., 2005). This PPI was shown to cause increased happiness and decreased symptoms of depression for six months after the completion of the activity. While the participants in the original experiment were instructed to use the PPI for a week, follow-up interviews showed that many participants continued the exercise on their own. This is thought to be the cause of such long-term benefits (Seligman et al., 2005).

Content Based Instruction in the ESL Classroom

The goal of teachers of a second language is to teach all the skills of that new language to students. There is much disagreement, however, concerning the most effective way to do this. It is well established in the ESL literature that Content-Based Instruction (hereafter referred to as CBI) is in wide use in classrooms around the world (Duenas, 2004). Rather than using vocabulary clusters, focusing primarily on grammar rules or contextual situations as the primary instructional framework, CBI involves the integration of the target language with some meaningful content in the classroom. The effectiveness of this approach to second language acquisition has received much empirical support and it remains a flexible framework for teaching all levels and diverse content (Duenas, 2004). Even teachers who are not familiar with the principles of CBI are still choosing content that they will have their students read to teach comprehension, grammar and vocabulary; content that they will have their students write about to teach them grammar, spelling, punctuation and other composition skills; content that they will have them speak about to practice pronunciation and intonation.

The scientific literature consistently confirms that the regular practice of certain positive psychology exercises increases physical health and subjective well being, and decreases symptoms of anxiety and depression. The scientific literature also confirms the findings that CBI is an effective method of second language acquisition in a wide range of levels and educational contexts. The author therefore proposes a proactive application of relevant positive psychology exercises to the ESL classroom setting. It should be noted that while some elements of the PPIs may be adapted for use in the beginner level ESL classroom and/or with very young learners, the level of English proficiency required for use of the exercises as described makes them most suited for intermediate to advanced learners. The descriptions of

activities that follow have been developed for use with university students who use English as a Second Language in composition and public speaking courses at Mahidol University International College, in Nakhon Pathom, Thailand.

The Gratitude Visit in the ESL Classroom

The author has adapted the PPI of the gratitude visit for use as an exercise in the ESL classroom. Students are given a text similar to this, which has been adapted from an example from Schafe (2006):

Gratitude increases feelings of well-being in people because it highlights good memories about the past. We all have special people who helped us become who we are today. There are important individuals in each of our lives who were very influential, helpful and kind-parents, children, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, teachers, employers, coaches, co-workers and more. Often, we don't show our gratitude or express our thanks to these people who have influenced our lives.

Think about the people in your life that have helped you in a meaningful way. Choose one person and make a list of specific, concrete things that person has done for you. Now explain how each thing has affected your life.

What have they done for you?	How has it affected your life?
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	

Use the information to write a 'gratitude letter' to that person. In the letter, describe why you are grateful. Be sure to name the specific things that person has done for you and explain how each thing affected your life. Let them know what you are doing now and that you think of them often. Be prepared to read the letter aloud first in class, and eventually to the person as an expression of your appreciation and gratitude.

The author has found that this activity is best taught as a process, following the conventional pattern of composition: brainstorming ideas, organizing them into an outline, and writing multiple drafts leading up to the finished product.

The author has used this activity to teach and practice a variety of language skills.

- It can be used to begin teaching the use of standard organizational patterns, such as topical or chronological patterns.

Topical – I am grateful to you for three main things....

Chronological – When I first met you

- It is suitable for practicing the conventions of using transitions to show relationships between ideas.

First, I am grateful for...., Another thing I thank you for is..., Most importantly...

- It provides a framework for practicing moving from general ideas to specific support.

First, I am grateful for your kindness. For example, you helped me

- It can be used to focus on any number of particular grammar areas, for example, the use of past tense and present perfect tense.

You gave me confidence... I have used it in my daily life.

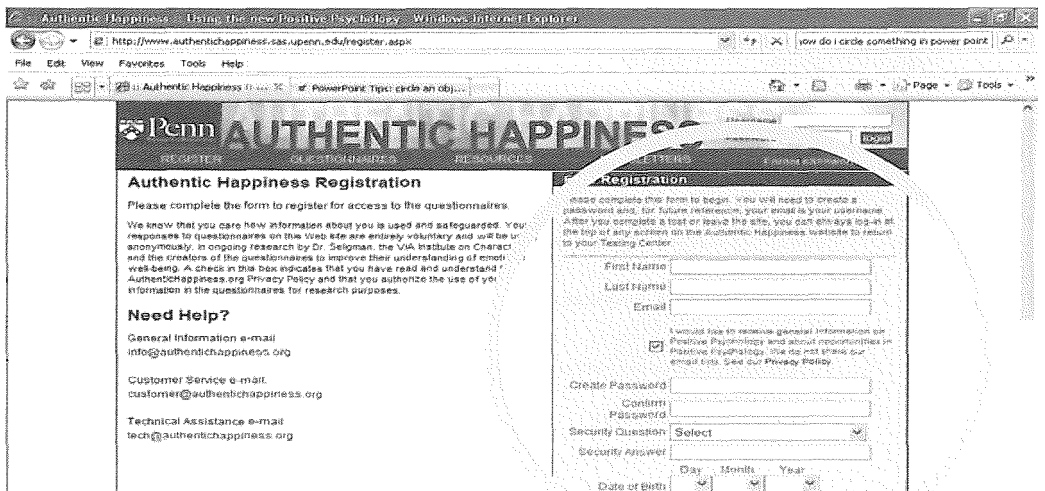
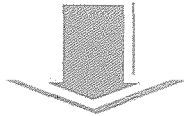
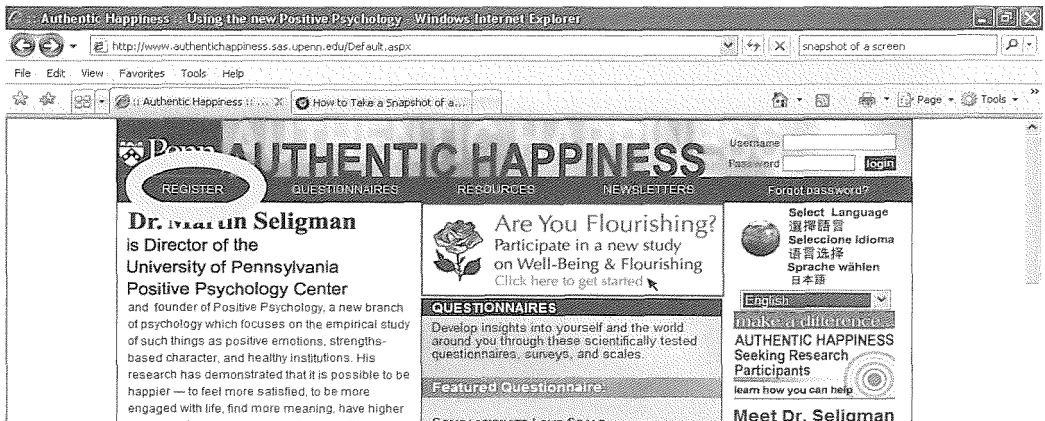
- It is a natural vehicle for teaching vocabulary for emotions.
- It can be used in pair work or small groups for pronunciation and intonation as students practice reading the letter aloud.

The length and difficulty of this exercise can be adjusted depending on the level of the group.

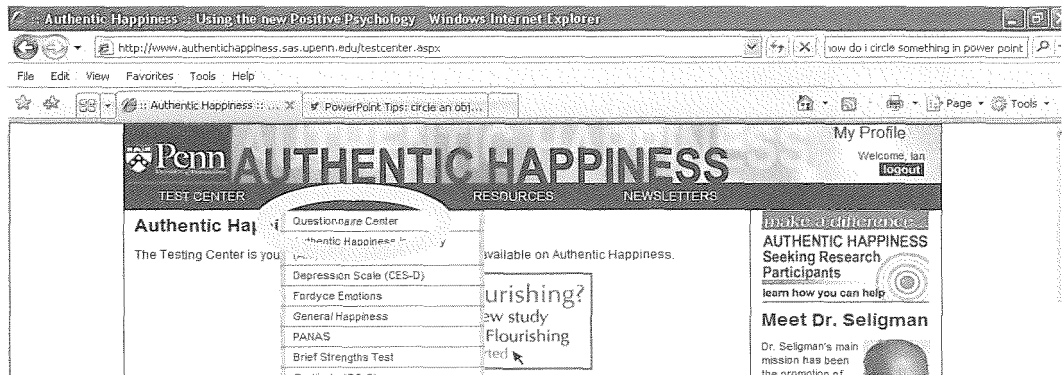
Using Signature Strengths in a New Way in the ESL Classroom

The author has adapted the PPI of using signature strengths in a new way for use as an exercise in the ESL classroom. It should be noted that internet access is necessary for the following exercise. Teachers can follow instructions similar to this:

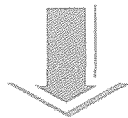
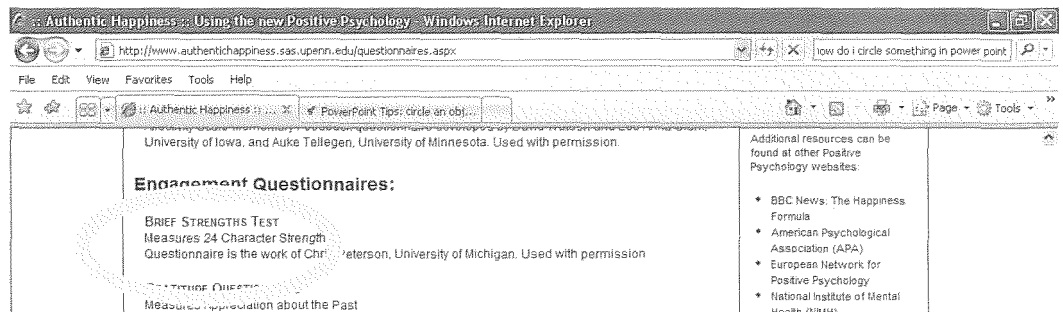
1. Students should begin by registering at
<http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/>.



2. After they register, students should go to the 'questionnaire center,' where they can see a wide variety of questionnaires on many different areas related to positive psychology.



3. Students then scroll down to the 'Brief Strengths Test.' (The test consists of 24 questions that will give them an idea of their top character strengths.)



VIA Survey

Brief Strengths Test

Think about how you have acted in the actual situations described below during the past month (four weeks). The questions ask about behaviors that most people find desirable, but we want you to answer only in terms of what you actually did. If you did not encounter a described situation, please mark the "not applicable" option. Read each one and then click on the dropdown list next to the statement and select your response.

1. Think of actual situations in which you had the opportunity to do something that was novel or innovative. How frequently did you show CREATIVITY or INGENUITY in these situations?
☐ Not applicable ☐ Never/rarely ☐ Occasionally ☐ Half the time ☐ Usually ☐ Always
2. Think of actual situations in which you had the opportunity to explore something new or to do something different. How frequently did you show CURIOSITY or INTEREST in these situations?
☐ Not applicable ☐ Never/rarely ☐ Occasionally ☐ Half the time ☐ Usually ☐ Always
3. Think of actual situations in which you had a complex and important decision to make. How frequently did you show CRITICAL THINKING, OPEN-MINDEDNESS, or GOOD JUDGMENT in these situations?
☐ Not applicable ☐ Never/rarely ☐ Occasionally ☐ Half the time ☐ Usually ☐ Always

4. After the students have completed the Brief Strengths Test, they should print out the feedback and read the descriptions of their signature strengths, making sure they understand any new vocabulary.

5. Students should then list their strengths in the table and brainstorm new and different ways to use their top strengths.

Character Strength	New way to use it
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

6. They choose one and are given one week to use their strength in the new way they have chosen.

7. Students can then be assigned to either write a narrative of their experience, or present their experience to the group.

The author has found that this activity is quite involved and is best taught over many lessons, with the total number depending on the level of the students.

It has been used by the author to teach a wide variety of language skills and practical Internet skills.

- Vocabulary related to character strengths and virtues can be pre-taught from available lists and is reinforced throughout the activity.
- The first step of this exercise is a chance to teach practical Internet skills, as well as practice with how to fill out forms.
- If teachers choose to assign a narrative essay, all elements of style and conventions of composition may be approached through this content.
- If teachers choose to focus primarily on presenting or speaking in pairs or small groups, pronunciation and intonation may be approached through this content.

Discussion

As noted above, the author has used these exercises primarily with university students in composition and speaking courses at Mahidol University International College. In the author's experience, a recurring challenge in the ESL classroom has been the selection of content that is interesting to the majority of the students in the class. In such a system, there is always a subgroup forced to learn using content that they have

no pre-existing desire to learn more about. For example, each of the themes of 'art,' 'natural disasters,' or 'money,' are naturally fascinating to some and not at all interesting to others, respectively. In response to the PPI exercises, the author has consistently received positive feedback from students, and it is not unusual for students to report finding the activities enjoyable and useful for their lives, not just their English ability. It seems that virtually all of the students find the activities intrinsically interesting and relevant to their lives, and thus, are more motivated to complete the homework and actively engage in the classroom activities. The author cannot say that after using PPIs in the classroom, students have demonstrated a higher level of learning or received higher evaluations of their abilities than with other forms of content, as no formal comparison has been made as yet. If there is a significant difference in this area, it will be a wonderful compliment to the well-supported desirable impacts on health and well-being that are the impetus for the author's position in this paper. As the exercises describe only two of many PPIs that have been developed and tested, future exploration may find that others are just as easily adapted for use in the ESL classroom. For a more thorough review of positive psychology interventions, see Seligman et al. (2005) or Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009).

Conclusion

As shown above, the field of positive psychology is concerned with the study of the good life and how to live it. The experience of positive emotions has long been known to be a predictor of many desirable short and long-term physical, psychological and social outcomes. Further research has begun to identify certain positive psychology interventions as having a causal influence increasing our experiences of happiness, while decreasing common symptoms of depression and anxiety. The

two PPIs included in this paper show powerful, desirable effects on participants who complete them. It is reasonable to believe that the adaptations of the PPIs for the ESL classroom could have similar positive results. Teachers are in an ideal place to apply these findings to the greater good of individual students and the community. Since choosing and using appropriate content is already a pre-existing necessity as a vehicle to teach learners of a second language, the question then becomes what content should be used to do so? The author strongly believes that teachers have an ethical duty to cultivate the physical and psychological health of their students beyond the knowledge or skills required by the subject matter of the course. It is hoped that the ideas and examples presented in this paper may remind educators of their powerful influence in the lives of their students as well as provide educators with more effective tools with which to enrich the quality of life of their students.

The Author

Ian McDonald teaches Psychology courses at Mahidol University International College, Thailand. He is also a trainer in cross-cultural communication, leadership, EQ, and presentation skills. He holds a master's degree in psychology and is currently pursuing a PhD in Multicultural studies. Ian's research interests include well-being, character strengths and cross cultural psychology.

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