PERMANENT LANGUAGE LEARNING IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a brief overview of Seligman's PERMA framework (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment) and provides suggestions for its implementation for teaching English as a second language. Practical strategies for each of the five components of the PERMA model are presented, including gratitude exercises, activities for building rapport, goal-setting practices, and creating content that is meaningful to learners.

KEYWORDS: EFL, language learning, PERMA, mental wellbeing, flourishing, positive education

1. INTRODUCTION

Once people's most basic needs have been met, they usually seek happiness as well. Happiness, however, is quite subjective with varying interpretations. Thus, in order to create a more usable standard, Seligman (2011) suggested the alternative concept of *flourishing*, which includes **positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning**, and **accomplishment**, otherwise referred to as PERMA. This framework is meant to go beyond merely the absence of mental illness or the presence of happiness, which may be fleeting.

In the PERMA model, the component of **positive emotions** refers to having feelings like joy, hope, and contentment. **Engagement** is related to being fully immersed in activities and enjoying them completely. **Relationships** in PERMA is the aspect involving meaningful connections with others, while **meaning** indicates having a purpose in life beyond one's egotistical wants or needs. Finally, **accomplishment** entails having reasonable goals to work toward and achieve. In the following sections, suggestions will be given for how to incorporate strategies in the English language learning classroom that align with PERMA principles.

2. Positive emotions in the language learning classroom
2.1 Expressing gratitude

Perhaps the most obvious way to express positive emotions is to express gratitude for something or someone. This can be done in the classroom in a matter of a few seconds, such as orally thanking a classmate for their help, or by having students write for an extended amount of time about that for which they are thankful. Such a practice can be part of a normal classroom routine that has mental

benefits for students – both in terms of increasing wellbeing and also in terms of improving and exercising linguistic skills.

To scaffold students in the process, the teacher can first model by using targeted expressions that students can easily understand, internalize, and then produce in concert with their own ideas. For example, if teaching young learners with limited linguistic resources, the teacher, when interacting with students, can model expressions such as *Thank you for your help* or simply *Thank you very much.* If teaching more advanced learners, appropriately more challenging expressions could be explicitly taught, such as structures like *I appreciate that you helped me* or *I'm really grateful that you lent me your pencil.*

For writing practice, it is commonly recommended for language learners to keep a daily diary or journal. This is helpful in that it provides meaningful practice that is personalized and thus motivating to the student. Additional, gratitude journaling has the potential to improve mental health and make students more resilient (Bono, et al., 2022). A focus on gratitude can naturally be implemented into diary writing, and this can be done either in the classroom as a regular part of instruction or as a task given for homework. To successfully introduce the idea of a gratitude journal, the teacher should give specific instructions to students, such as having them write a list of five things they are grateful for each day. More advanced students might instead be given the task to write a few paragraphs each day about what brought them gratitude in the past 24 hours. Not only does this help students practice writing in English, but it simultaneous has the effect of causing students to focus on positive aspects throughout their daily routine so that they will have some topics about which they can write in their assigned diary.

Finally, another strategy that can be done with little time interruption to class is to have students express one sentence of gratitude at the end of class. This can be done orally or in writing. For example, the teacher may ask each student to say one sentence expressing gratitude for a classmate (e.g., *I appreciated Kim helping me understand the reading*.). Another possibility is for students to write one or two sentences – or even just a short list – about something that occurred to them during the class as a result of the lesson that they are thankful for. For instance, if the topic is animals, students might say *I'm grateful for my cat because he is so funny*, or *I'm thankful for my dad because he cooks for me* in a lesson about family. While at first students might need extensive support, in a short amount of time students will become accustomed to the practice and will grow to think in a positive way at least during the lesson, knowing what will be happening at the end of the day's class.

2.2 Using positive self-talk

Language learning can often be exasperating for learners, as improvements occur gradually (Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978), and mistakes are unavoidable along the way (Carter, 2015). While teachers know this, it can be difficult to convince learners not to be concerned about their many linguistic foibles and slow progress; however, one way to help students is to teach expressions focusing on

positive self-talk, which can also have a desirable effect on students' attitude – both in terms of how they view themselves and learning.

Many teachers like to adorn their classroom walls with educational posters, and for language teachers, it is common to use posters that include helpful expressions. Thus, a language teacher can find or create their own posters that depict expressions students can use to think in a more positive way, such as:

I can do hard things.

I can figure this out.

I have done hard things before.

I can choose to stay calm and work hard.

Mistakes are a normal part of learning.

I'm proud of myself.

I'm getting better every day.

I believe in myself.

I am kind to others.

I am good at many things.

I am unique.

What I think matters.

I am an important member of my class.

I can be successful if I set my mind to something.

I deserve kindness from my classmates.

I've got this.

It's okay to make mistakes.

I just need to take the next step.

Little by little, I am improving.

While having posters with English expressions around the room can be a great strategy, not all teachers have the luxury of teaching in their own classroom. For teachers in such situations, they can choose one expression per day on which to focus. For example, the teacher could start the lesson with an expression embodying positive self-talk written on the board, such as *When I _____, I feel good about myself*. Then the teacher can give her own examples for how she would complete the sentence, such as *When I get 10,000 steps, I feel good about myself* or *When I read 30 minutes before bedtime, I feel good about myself*. Thereafter, students can be given a minute or two to think about their own answers, after which students can share their own answers one by one for the whole class to hear. Alternately, students can share their positive self-talk in pairs or groups.

2.3 Focusing on the positives

In addition to learning how to engage in positive self-talk, students can also be taught to extend positivity when giving peer feedback on assignments or in-class work. To help guide this process at the beginning stages, the teacher can provide sentence starters, which is particularly helpful to

successful implementation so that the feedback will be specific and meaningful. Examples are as follows:

I really like…

You excelled at…

It was great when you…

It was good that you…

You should be proud of yourself for…

3. ENGAGEMENT

3.1 Needs analysis

In order to engage students successfully, teachers need to know what makes their students tick. Thus, if a teacher knows little to nothing about his students, he is unlikely to teacher content in a way that is interesting and engaging to his learners. Accordingly, teachers should begin with a needs analysis of learners. This entails finding out what students know, what they do not know, what they are interested in, and what their background is (Nation & Macalister, 2019). The teacher can interview students orally or provide a written questionnaire to gather this information, employing questions such as the following:

Rank the four skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) in terms of your strength.

What do you most want to improve on in this class?

What types of class activities do you most enjoy?

What are you most worried about in this class?

What are 5 topics you are really interested in?

Who are 3 of your favorite musical artists?

Who is your favorite actor?

How often do you study English alone at home?

Write one paragraph to introduce yourself to me.

3.2 Fun and games

After conducting an analysis of students' needs, the teacher should be well armed with ideas of interesting topics as a starting point for making class engaging. Expanding from this, the teacher can make use of games to help learners enjoy the learning process. If students are engaged in a state of flow, they will not be focusing on the difficulty of the task of practicing a second language but will be propelled through the task because of enjoyment (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009), and thus the learning will feel less onerous to students. When this happens, a teacher may have the pleasant surprise of hearing from students, "Oh, is it already time?" when it is the end of class and students are still eagerly engaged in a well-designed task that is interesting in terms of content and that matches the motivations of the students. Moreover, this type of engagement has the added benefit of building self esteem (Nakamura & Csikszentmihaly, 2014).

3.3 Clear goals and immediate feedback

Careful planning of enticing activities is not sufficient for a lesson. In order for a lesson or activity to have success and benefit mental wellbeing, students need to know the purpose of it *and* to know whether or not they are performing as they should. Thus, it is helpful for teachers to begin a lesson by communicating the objective of the lesson to students. This does not necessarily mean that a teacher needs to read her formal lesson plan objectives aloud to students, but it does mean that students need to have a clear expectation of what they are going to do in the lesson and why. This helps keep students on task and increases motivation. For example, if teaching young learners, the teacher might tell students *Today we are going to learn the names of animals at the zoo*; if teaching more advanced students, the instructor could communicate *Today we will compare differences in Korean and British poetry*.

In addition to letting students know the lesson's purpose and what they will be expected to do, throughout the lesson students need feedback on their progress. As previously suggested, a great way to engage learners is through games, but for a game to be both engaging and useful for learning, students need feedback on their performance. While it is helpful for a teacher to monitor all students in the class in order to provide personalized feedback, this can be particularly challenging in large classes. Thus, this is another reason to utilize peer feedback, giving useful sentence strategies for success. Another helpful tactic is to provide learners with a simple checklist of items to focus on in their peers' work or output so that the task of providing feedback is not so overly demanding as to remove the element of fun from the task.

4. RELATIONSHIPS
4.1 Creating rapport
No matter what course or content is being taught, it is vital to create a positive rapport with students (Nguyen, 2007). If the teacher has conducted a thorough needs analysis, this is much easier to do, but creating and maintaining a positive rapport should be part of an ongoing practice for classroom teachers, particularly at the beginning and end of class. It can be as simple as walking into the classroom with a smile and greeting students in a friendly way. Additionally, if one or two students arrive to the class before the other students and the teacher is there as well, she can engage in simple, friendly conversation with the student(s) just to get them relaxed and to feel that the teacher has taken a personal interest in them. Small efforts such as these can go a long way in yielding returns in the classroom, and students who feel a connection to their teacher will be more cooperative and engaged.

Ending class on a positive note can be just as important as starting strong. If a teacher finishes class abruptly because the time is up, students may get the message that the teacher is only there to do the job and does not have a personal or emotional stake in the learners' lives or concerns. Thus, it can be useful for the teacher to communicate either in words or by actions, at the end of class, that he is invested in the students and has time for their concerns. Some strategies to accomplish this at the end of class are as follows:

- Recognize 1-2 students who were particularly helpful or tried really hard.

- Stand at the door and give an encouraging comment as each student leaves.
- Have students do exit tickets, in which they list one question or concern they have.
- Tell the class some good behaviors you noticed during class.
- Tell the class 3 things that you, as the teacher, are thankful for from today's class.

4.2 Generosity with time

Teachers have demanding jobs where they often feel underappreciated, and thus, most may feel that they should not have to give extra time outside the classroom. However, to have a good relationship with students, a little extra time can show students that the teacher cares, and that could mean the difference in a student engaging or completely giving up on trying in class. One way to give of your time without sacrificing too much is to have set times where pairs or groups of students can talk with you. For example, a classroom teacher who teaches students Monday through Friday could offer one day a week where some students can eat with the teacher – either in the cafeteria or in the teacher's classroom. For university teachers, this could translate to having "tea time," where, at a set time, the teacher can offer to let small groups of students meet to have tea with the teacher in an informal setting. This can go a long way to creating a bond with students, and it clearly communicates a desire on the teacher's part to help learners on their educational journey.

For teachers who literally do not have any free time outside of the classroom to devote to establishing rapport, coming to class just a few minutes early or staying an extra minute or two can be a good starting point. Rather than running out the door the minute class time is up, if the teacher stays and lets students know they can come and ask questions they have, even if only a few students take advantage of the opportunity, it will still communicate to the whole class that the teacher cares, thus creating better rapport with students. If it occurs that a multitude of students continually seek this time to get the teacher's counsel, then the teacher may consider ending class a few minutes early each day to feasibly allow more time for these important interactions.

4.3 Empathy

Teachers are often focused on their own objectives such that when students get off task or come to class unprepared, they may feel frustrated and tend to be unforgiving to students; however, teachers can choose to have a more empathetic mindset to get at the root of the issue rather than rushing to immediately judge or scold students. One way to do this is to ask questions or to offer support. For example, the teacher could ask a student who is falling asleep in class if they had to work late the night before, or if a student has not answered questions on a reading assignment, rather than assuming the student was just being lazy, he could ask the student if there was a part of the text that they needed help understanding. Additionally, the teacher could set a policy at the beginning of the school term and clearly communicate to students that they will be given a certain number of "free passes" in the school year, recognizing that students have lives and problems outside the classroom that may sometimes infringe on learning in the classroom. Specifically, for example, if the teacher plans to

assign 15 homework assignments in a semester, the teacher can tell students they have to complete 13 of them and will be forgiven for missing two of them.

5. MEANING
5.1 Carefully crafted content
If learners are to feel that a course has meaning for them, it needs to be relatable. This connects back to the initial recommendation to conduct a needs analysis at the beginning (or even prior to) a course. If a teacher attempts to cover material that students are not interested in or that they feel is not relevant to them, it will be very difficult to engage students.

5.2 Help others
Learners have varying motivations when taking a course, but whatever their reasons – whether to get a promotion at work or just to move on to the next grade in school – most learners are inclined to focus on *their own* learning needs. However, in order to flourish, they need to have a more other-centered mindset. Because this does not come naturally to most, the teacher is crucial in facilitating a change in students so their focus shifts beyond their own needs and desires. One way to help students in this regard is to use the lesson's topic to get students to think beyond themselves. Below are sample topics along with questions the teacher could pose to students to help them think about others:

- Pets: What can you do to help take care of your pet?
- Family: How can you help your mom at home?
- School: What can you do to keep our school clean?
- Friends: What is one nice thing you can do today for your friend?
- Society: Who are three people in our city you can thank?
- Neighborhood: What is one helpful thing you can do for your neighbor? Which neighbor?

To extend the practice, the teacher can give students missions depending on their answers to help them put into practice the act of helping others. For example, if students mention they can help their mom by taking out the trash or setting the table for dinner, then the teacher could give the class a challenge to see who can remember to do the challenge every day for a week. After the week, students can have a class discussion on how they helped their mom and how it felt. Further, to combine this with increasing positive emotions and strengthening relationships, teachers can have students give positive feedback to each other (e.g., *It's great that you took out the trash three times*.) after each student shares how they helped others.

5.3 Creative pursuits
While learning a language typically focuses on the left side of the brain, for wellbeing, engaging the right side of the brain is also key. There are obvious techniques to do this if teaching young learners, as it is common to incorporate creative activities such as drawing, painting, or creating art when teaching kids in their early formative years. For students who are older, however, the solution may be

more opaque since classroom time often feels very valuable, as teachers are often pressured to cover a large amount of content in the allotted class time. In those cases, though, it is still possible to encourage students to get their creative juices flowing.

Consider the previous suggestion of having students help others as a way to increase meaning. In assigning students, a mission to help others, the teacher could specify to *make* something for someone else. For example, to help their mom, students could be tasked with making a snack or meal for their family and reporting on it in the next class. Also, if students are older and have discovered their own personal talents, the teacher could task students with creating something for others using their unique creative gift to show kindness and then writing about it in their journal.

6. ACCOMPLISHMENT

Small victories

As previously mentioned, one reason learners become disenchanted with language learning is because progress seems quite slow at times and errors are frustratingly common. Thus, it is important to celebrate small victories. For example, when a student exhibits even a small step in the right direction of improvement, it is helpful to recognize that accomplishment. Additionally, if the teacher is in the habit of doing this on a regular basis, it can provide a good model of positive talk for students. Accordingly, it can later be extended into a practice whereby students applaud each other in the same way the teacher has demonstrated. This is again a time where it can be helpful to give students some linguistic strategies through the use of sentence starters, such as the following:

- Congratulations to _____ for _____!
- I'm so proud of _____ for _____!
- I noticed you _____. Way to go!
- Kudos to _____ for _____!
- You remembered to _____. Keep up the good work!
- Kim remembered to _____. Three cheers for Kim!
- Kim worked really hard today and helped others. Let's all clap for Kim!

6.2 Awards

In addition to celebrating small steps in the right direction, it is likewise helpful to recognize when students have made noticeable gains or realized vast changes – either linguistically or in terms of attitude or character. One way to do this is to create personalized award certificates that can be presented to members of the class. This can be done, for example, on a monthly basis or at the end of a term – or any time an achievement is worth mentioning and will be meaningful to recognize.

6.3 Personalized goals

Language teachers have their own goals and objectives when teaching, and while those should be clearly explicated to students at the beginning of a course and in individual lessons, learners require

more for positive education. To flourish, learners need to also have their own goals so that when they are achieved, they can feel a sense of accomplishment. Unlike external rewards, as in the two examples above, having students set their own goals is more related to intrinsic motivation. This can be implemented on a regular basis by having students write out what they want to accomplish, whether linked to the specific class content or related to something outside of the course. As long as students are doing it in English, it will help them improve linguistically and move them closer to flourishing. For students without experience making their own goals, teachers should provide examples to get students started so they can see how to set goals that are reasonable, achievable, and measurable. Some examples are as follows:

- Read in English 10 minutes a day.
- Do my homework every day this month.
- Say one nice thing to my sister every day for a week.
- Write one handwritten letter per week for the next month.
- Learn 20 new words this week.
- Get 10,000 steps every day for a week.
- Only drink 2 cups of coffee per day.
- Watch one YouTube clip in English every day and write a comment in English.
- Only use my phone for 2 hours per day.

7. CONCLUSION

People who are flourishing by PERMA measures are not only better off in terms of mental well-being but are also physically healthier, have greater productivity, and have more peaceful dispositions (Seligman, 2018). Several of the concepts of PERMA naturally align with ideas of language learning, such as decreasing the affective filter (Krashen, 1978) and increasing flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Consequently, language learning can combine seamlessly with an education inspired by PERMA with some focused strategies. While at first the undertaking of adding one more component to a language learning lesson may seem daunting to teachers, a holistic examination of the suggested strategies in this paper reveal underlying themes and motifs that work together; a learners' needs analysis is necessary for discovering what will engage learners, helping teachers create meaningful classes for them, and for knowing how best to establish rapport for better relationships with students; exercising positive emotions – to self and others – and helping others aids in increasing meaning and having better relationships. Thus, by implementing a few new strategies into one's teaching repertoire, a teacher can begin teaching not only language but imparting lifelong strategies to help students flourish both in and outside of the classroom.

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