

# FAB 9 Study Sheet # 5 – Positive Psychology

From Marc Helgesen's chapter in *Innovations in Teacher Training*, Springer Press (in press)  
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## Topic: Positive Psychology

Peterson (2006, vii) famously defined “positive psychology” as “theory and research ... (into) what makes life most worth living.” While traditional psychology focuses on mental illness and difficulties such as depression and schizophrenia, positive psychology emerged as a movement within the discipline of psychology about two decades ago. Designed as a supplement to, not a replacement for traditional psychology, positive psychology focuses on mental health: What is going on, cognitively and behaviorally, with happy, mentally healthy people?

Seligman, one of the pioneers of positive psychology, makes it clear that it is not “the Power of Positive Thinking”, which he terms an “armchair exercise” (2011, p. 186) based on philosophy, rather than scientific observation and empirical, replicable research. It is also not what he sarcastically refers to as “happy-ology” (Seligman, 2004), focusing only on pleasure and ignoring negative experiences. Positive emotion, he points out, “habituates.” He explains with the example of eating French vanilla ice cream. The first bite gives great pleasure. By the sixth bite, we are used to it and the pleasure is diminished.

## Types of happiness

Seligman finds it useful to differentiate types of happiness. At the lowest level is “The Pleasant or Pleasurable life”. That is the concern “hedonics” – the study of our feelings from moment to moment” (2003). In addition to the problem of habituation, there is the “hedonic treadmill.” Happiness is a moving target. Supposed you really, really want that beautiful Gucci™ bag. So you buy it. Initially, it gives you pleasure. But now you already have it. Soon, it isn't so special, so desired any more. But, oh, that beautiful Prada™ bag you don't have sure looks attractive, doesn't it? The same is true with new cars and houses, job promotions.

Another challenge is “the set point”. About half of any individual's happiness is genetically fixed. Of course, it goes up and down based on life experiences but it returns to about the same point (Lyubomirsky, 2007). One's circumstances, usually difficult to change in a meaningful way, account for only about ten percent of one's positive emotion.

But if the “set point” and “circumstances” determine about sixty percent of one's happiness, it is the other forty percent where a person's decisions and actions can make a difference. Those lead to Seligman's other types of happiness.

“The Good life” is about engagement and flow. “Flow” is used here in the sense proposed by Csikszentmihályi, (1997), the psychological state that is a balance of challenge and skill. Athletes call it “being in the zone.” As a teacher, you've almost certainly experienced flow in the classroom when you've had a class where everyone is working and communicating and you glance at your watch. “Wow. What happened? Class time is over.” It is like the time evaporated. During flow, our sense of time is distorted. We are very focused and appropriately challenged. If something is too difficult, it is easy to give up. If it is too easy, we get bored. During flow, we are usually unaware of our happiness. We are focused on the task, not the emotion. Only later do we notice our sense of satisfaction.

The final type of happiness is “The Meaningful Life.” This Seligman defines as “belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self, and humanity creates all the

positive institutions to allow this: religion, political party, being green, the Boy Scouts, or the family” 2011, p. 12). Very often, the activities, cognitive and behavioral, related to The Meaningful Life match those of a calling.

Seligman has revised his earlier model to make it both more inclusive and complete. The ideas about happiness still hold true, but rather than looking just had happiness, the new model is about more complete “well-being” that seeks to help people flourish.

The new model is called PERMA for Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning (and Meaningfulness) and Accomplishment.

**Positive Emotion.** This includes the above aspects of what we usually think of as “happiness.” It is perhaps the easiest aspect of PERMA to work on in the classroom as it is fairly easy to develop an use tasks that connect positive emotions to traditional language class targets such as grammar, language function, vocabulary and fluency work.

**Engagement** (which includes Csíkszentmihályi’s Flow). The means “learner buy-in” – getting them to feel connected to the class and the tasks.

**Relationships.** This includes both teacher-student and student-student relationships, with student referring both to “teachers in training” and the end-user language students.

**Meaning (and meaningfulness).** Of course, this is not related to the traditional ESL/EFL “form vs. meaning” distinction. Rather, it is what Seligman refers to as “belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self.” (2011:8)

**Accomplishment or achievement.** This is also referred to as “agency” Murphey [2012, this volume]. It means setting and achieving goals. Seligman, (2011) notes that this is not about winning for it’s own sake. It is not about accumulating, for example, money. But, to continue with the money example, the philanthropy that people like Rockefeller and Carnegie and current charitable donors like Bill Gates and Warren Buffett who use their wealth to accomplish wonderful things. Few of us, of course, will ever be in a position like that, but we can all accomplish things that make us better people.

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