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Schools as Positive Institutions in the Context of Language Learning: Students' Perspectives

Abstract: Positive psychology focuses its research on the conditions of people's well-being and happiness, contrary to mainstream psychological studies on human disorders. The three most important areas to focus on while studying reasons for people's effective lives are positive emotions, positive features of character and positive institutions. Positive attitudes seem to be especially essential in education, because that is where the features of character are formed. In second language acquisition studies, these three areas appear to be exceptionally important because of the essentially social character of the language learning process. This paper focuses on students' opinions about the role of school in their language development. These comments were collected in retrospective semi-structured interviews. Students offered both positive and negative opinions on schools and their role in language education. It appears that even though some schools care for students' well-being, quite a few of them still cannot be considered as positive institutions.

Keywords: positive psychology, positive institutions, schools, language learning, positive emotions, students' well-being

Introduction

Positive psychology, the underlying theoretical foundation of this paper, is one of the most recent trends in contemporary research in the social sciences. Initially, however, it was not enthusiastically accepted by mainstream psychology and was considered to be just another instance of pop-science similar to, for example, neurolinguistic programming (Norman). It gained great popularity in second/foreign language acquisition studies in the second decade of this millennium because it offered an alternative approach to studies on human behaviour and proposed a set of conditions for people's well-being which appear to be crucial for effective education in general and for language education in particular.

The principles of positive psychology were formulated by Martin Seligman and Mihályi Csikszentmihályi. They claimed that psychology, so far, had focused its research on people with mental disorders who need help to function in social communities. Research on people without disorders was systematically neglected because they do not create any problems for society. Meanwhile, the great majority of community members are healthy individuals who lead happy and satisfying lives; however, they are not represented in empirical scientific research. Positive psychology thus aims to observe what makes these people happy and find ways to reinforce this feeling in others. Seligman himself had long experience in treating patients with learned helplessness and clinical depression, and thus he felt inclined to research completely opposite cases. He specified four conditions necessary to lead a good and happy life: cherishing positive emotions, engaging in challenging and useful tasks, developing positive human relations and working for social welfare.

This paper has three aims: first, to explain why positive psychology appears to be important in language education; second, to present an empirical study on students' opinions concerning school, which may show to what extent these institutions have a positive impact on the language learning process; and third, to make student teachers (former school learners) aware of the way in which they may contribute to transforming schools into positive institutions promoting students' genuine development and success. The article consists of four main parts and a conclusion. The first two are devoted to presenting the leading assumptions of positive psychology and its impact on education as reflected in selected research studies. Part Three describes the research method, the research procedure, research group and instrument; Part Four offers a presentation of results and discussion. The conclusion closes the paper.

1. The main assumptions of positive psychology

The subject matter of positive psychology is to present a different perspective for studies on human behaviour: what should we do to develop people's strong features of character such as resilience, happiness and optimism and how to spread them among the human population. This attitude has its roots in humanistic psychology, especially in Abraham Maslow's approach to value admired and self-actualising individuals. These strong features of character were presented as a questionnaire (Peterson and Seligman), which allows for individual self-assessment of own strong points. This source and another by Willibald Ruch, Marco Weber, Nansook Park and Christopher Petersen directed Peter MacIntyre and Sarah Mercer to propose six main positive features of character: (1) knowledge and wisdom; (2) courage; (3) humanity; (4) justice; (5) temperance; (6) transcendence (MacIntyre and Mercer 156). Each has a number of subcomponents. Wisdom and knowledge include creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, interest in learning and sense of perspective,

i.e. "being able to provide wise counsel to others" (156). Courage involves bravery (taking up challenges), perseverance, honesty, excitement and energy; humanity refers to love, kindness and social intelligence; justice includes the ability to work in a team, being fair and being able to lead other people; temperance involves forgiveness, modesty, prudence and self-regulation. Finally, transcendence is connected with being able to appreciate beauty and excellence, expressing gratitude, hoping for the best, showing humour and religiousness (156–157). Possessing such features of character would result in having a happy and good life. Education, including second/foreign language learning, would also benefit from teachers and learners demonstrating these character features.

In his 2011 publication, Seligman used the acronym PERMA (Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment) to indicate the multidimensional character of positive life and general well-being. In the acronym, P stands for positive emotions; E for engagement; R for positive interpersonal relationships; M for meaningful activities which would concentrate on other people, not only on oneself; and A stands for achievement and accomplishment.

Still another acronym was introduced by Rebecca Oxford, who expanded Seligman's model and changed its name into EMPATHICS, where the respective letters stand for Emotion and empathy, Meaning and motivation, Perseverance, Agency, Time, Hardiness, Intelligences, Character strengths, and Self factors (i.e. self-esteem, self-concept, self-efficacy). In the author's opinion, all of these factors deserve to be addressed in research studies devoted to second/foreign language learning process.

One of the most contemporary references concerning positive psychology and its variables essential for second language acquisition studies is that of Yongliang Wang, Ali Derakhshan and Lawrence Jun Zhang. The authors, following numerous other resources, collected and explained seven factors which need special attention in language learning and teaching research: enjoyment, well-being, resilience, emotion regulation, academic engagement, grit, and loving pedagogy.

2. Positive psychology in education—review of selected research studies

Second language learning and acquisition research (SLA) has, for a long time, been interested in the characteristic features of good language learners. Studies on learning strategies (e.g, Rubin 1975; Stern 1975) had significantly contributed to understanding why some language students appear to be more successful than others. Another important publication at that time was the seminal work *The Good Language Learner* (Naiman et al.). All of these publications concentrated on how knowledge about successful learners and their characteristic features can stimulate

specialists and teachers to transfer positive language learning experience into helping those less successful. The authors studied and described positive examples of successful learners to encourage others to imitate their behaviour during the language learning process. Fascination with good language learners continued in the new millennium (Griffiths). In fact, all the research on language learning strategies was focused on developing successful communication in the foreign language. In the Polish teaching and learning contexts, two publications were essential in investigating learning strategies: Michońska-Stadnik (*Strategie*) and Droździał-Szelest.

Another important theory which stimulated a change of focus in the research methodology used in SLA studies was the idea of complex dynamic systems (Larsen-Freeman; Larsen-Freeman and Cameron). These specialists and many others have argued that language development "involves complex, dynamic, emergent, open, self-organising and adaptive systems" (MacIntyre and Mercer 165). Practically all aspects of language acquisition and learning possess a dynamic character, including motivation, willingness to communicate, use of learning strategies, language learning anxiety and individual character features. In order to grasp the essence of dynamicity, it was not enough to interpret statistical measurements like correlation between variables or differences between mean values (T-test), as these would rather inform about general tendencies within a group of individuals. The dynamic character of the language learning process would rather manifest itself in observing the behaviour of individual students and, therefore, the qualitative research methodology came into focus with such data-gathering tools as interviews, diary studies, narratives and focused observations. Many studies used a mixed approach (e.g. MacIntyre and Serroul), which combined statistical quantitative data analysis with idiodynamic methodology that blends interpreting cognitive and affective individual conditions during a communicative activity. The study reported in the present paper makes use of guided interviews as a data-collecting procedure, which is an example of qualitative research. Its more detailed description is provided in Section 3.

According to MacIntyre and Mercer, the SLA research has recently turned to follow the social determinants of the language learning process, which appears to be an extremely delicate matter. The three most important research areas within positive psychology are "positive emotions, positive character traits and positive institutions" (165). Studies in the first two areas in SLA have become quite popular, as has already been pointed out in this section. However, there is still considerably little research on the learning environments, i.e. schools and classrooms, in the context of viewing those as positive institutions stimulating teachers' and learners' well-being and success.

The topic of the learning environment, as related to success and well-being, was taken up by Sarah Mercer and her colleagues from the University of Graz in Austria. In a paper from 2018 (Mercer et al.), the four most prominent proponents of contemporary research in positive psychology focus on the notion of positive

language education. They claim that well-being should be both the aim and the result of education, especially language education, as the latter favours communication in the target language. Communication cannot function properly without a mutually-positive attitude between the interlocutors. The authors of that paper claim that well-being "is a key 21st-century life skill that should be promoted to help people of all ages manage contemporary life" (Mercer et al. 13) and they optimistically assume that education in general should be a positive experience. In an earlier study, Sin and Lyubomirsky argue that positive psychology interventions (i.e. activities enhancing positive feelings and behaviours) influence the level of well-being and diminish symptoms of depression.

Depression and other instances of mental health problems among young people were reported by education specialists in Australian schools. Professor Seligman was requested in 2008 to design a special positive education programme for one institution, the Geelong Grammar School. The programme, which promoted a different attitude to success based not only on academic achievement, but also on developing positive emotions, appeared to be successful in supporting students' well-being (Green et al.).

The Eurydice Report of 2015, which is another example of describing social determinants of the learning and teaching process, has had a great impact on interest in the situation of teachers, including language teachers, in the whole European Union, then still consisting of 28 countries. Due to many positive modifications in the schooling system, the learners' position has significantly improved since then; however, the teachers' claims were consistently ignored until the publication of the abovementioned report. The report, which in its printed version consisted of more than 100 pages, focused on demographic determinants of the profession, working conditions, initial teacher education, continuing professional development, teacher mobility and attractiveness of the teaching profession. It is beyond the scope of this text to discuss the document in detail, fascinating as it is. Still, its last part reveals the varying levels of job satisfaction in relation to teachers' view of teacher–student rapport and in relation to how the teaching profession is valued in society. While on average about 70% of teachers accept that their job satisfaction depends directly on their relations with students, still about 20% claim that it is related to the social prestige of teaching (European Commission, EACEA and Eurydice 115). It can be concluded that the official EU document signals a rather low level of teacher job satisfaction as related to the social context of their jobs. Since then, more interest in teachers' well-being appeared in SLA research studies. For example, in her most recent research, Mercer concentrates on English language teachers' well-being and the dynamic character of this state as related to the interplay of different factors such as experience, personality and the teaching context. The study compares teachers from the United Kingdom and Austria.

In the Polish context, Katarzyna Budzińska focused on the teaching context, i.e. on the school as a specific example of a positive institution which enables

people to flourish. She argues that well-being is one of the most essential twenty-first century life skills, and as such, should receive more attention in educating future generations. A society's success cannot only be "measured in economic terms" (Mercer et al. 15), but also in terms of its level of well-being. For that purpose, the idea of positive education was introduced (Norrish and Seligman) to bring together positive psychology and teaching practice. Budzińska's research study focused on a language school with highly qualified teachers and administrative staff. The results were based on students' diaries and teacher narratives and their analysis was carried out in three categories: "physical aspect of the institution, pedagogical approach and psychological consequences" (Budzińska 41). All subjects agreed that this particular school is a positive workplace.

This paper looks into the mainstream school context in Poland to detect the positive elements of these institutions as observed by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students from a two or three years' perspective.

3. Description of the study

3.1. Research purpose and questions

This research study, in its initial version, was not related to positive psychology or positive education. Its purpose was to investigate opinions and beliefs about the influence of the classroom learning environment on students' progress in English as a foreign language. The elements of the environment taken into consideration were: the teacher, the learner group, the school, the course book and the classroom layout. The influence, both positive and negative, of the teacher and the group had been discussed in an earlier article (Michońska-Stadnik, "The Classroom"). On the other hand, the influence of the Polish school as an institution on students' well-being in the context of language education appears to be worth investigating as a separate issue from the perspective of positive psychology and positive education. Thus, the purpose of this study is to depict students' perception of school as an establishment evoking positive or negative emotions, especially in the context of foreign language learning. Questions to be answered in the analysis are:

1. Did school as an institution influence students' language development at all? In what ways?

2. Which opinions prevailed in students' evaluations, positive or negative?

3. To what extent can school be a positive institution in taking care of students' well-being?

3.2. Research methodology

The study adopted qualitative methodology; therefore, hypotheses were not formulated in advance in order to avoid unnecessary targeting of data analysis (Flick,

von Kardoff and Steinke 168). The study can be classified as a tight research design because it attempts to answer a narrowly-formulated set of questions. The setting can be referred to as natural, because it was not created for the purpose of that particular investigation; the groups of students were naturally-occurring groups. The authenticity of respondents' comments was also secured because the researcher was not aware of which particular schools the participants attended before entering the respective universities, and students knew this fact. What is more, participants were aware that the researcher had no connection with their previous educational institutions and did not intend to share survey results with them. Securing maximal variation of the sample is not always possible, but this time, trainee language teachers from two different universities took part in the research. The Karkonosze University of Applied Sciences is situated in a smaller town in a more rural area, which may suggest that comments of different quality and with different focus should be expected. As it appeared, the responses were similar.

As it was a convenience sample of participants, random selection could not be secured. Still, this was also a volunteer selection because not all students commented on school as an institution and its influence on their progress in English. Eleven of them chose not to offer any comments. Credibility was secured as well: at the moment of survey completion, the participants did not have relationships with their school as learners any more. Some had their block teaching practice in their former schools, but this time their role was different; they were trainee teachers. The researcher could not use member checking because one of the groups graduated and left the university. In data analysis, data-driven (open) coding was used, which is an inductive process. No prior categorisation was suggested. In the analysis, two main categories of comments were classified—positive and negative—which then were subdivided into more specific groups according to the dominant context and situation referred to. Specific categories appear in Section 4.1.

3.3. Group description, research procedure and instrument

The study makes use of a retrospective qualitative semi-structured interview design (MacIntyre et al.) as a data gathering tool. The participants were second- and third-year undergraduate students at two tertiary educational institutions, the University of Wrocław and Karkonosze University of Applied Sciences in Jelenia Góra (N = 56). All followed the English language teaching specialisation and their level of English approached B2+ (year two) and C1 (year three). They had completed secondary education two or three years prior to taking part in the study. They were asked to answer the following question:

> Try to remember your formal language education in English in the school environment. In what way did school, as an institution organising your language education, influence your language development? Please offer both positive and negative opinions.

Students were asked to supply their answers in writing. All answers were anonymous. It was assumed that students could still remember their school experience quite vividly and would be able to offer elaborate and honest opinions.

4. Students' comments and their analysis

4.1. Students' opinions

Out of 56 participants, only 45 answered the question concerning school by providing comments and opinions. The remaining 11 more willingly commented on the role of the teacher, the group or the course book, ignoring the school. This could suggest that students remember little about the role of school as an institution in their English language development. What is even worse, out of 45 comments, 21 were positive and as many as 24 were negative.

An attempt was made to divide both positive and negative opinions into categories, which could be helpful in delineating procedures to be followed in potential didactic implications of the study.

The most frequent category of positive opinions about school influence on students' language development can be labelled "Organising events and contests". Students' comments remain in their original form:

(1) There were many language contests at school and the prizes were quite good; it also encouraged us to learn languages.

(2) There were speaking contests; they encouraged me to learn more new things which were not included in the curriculum.

(3) There were "open days"; students prepared classrooms to make them represent some countries, their cultures and communities.

(4) In school, there were many conferences, meetings, workshops, competitions promoting learning foreign languages.

(5) Once school organised a contest about geography and culture of the target language country—that was the moment I became more interested in it.

(6) The school influenced me positively due to various events organised during "the day of foreign languages"; we prepared national dishes and wore clothes typical for these countries.

(7) There were many events and performances connected with English culture.

Another category can be called "Meetings with native speakers". Students said:

(8) I had a few meetings with guests from the USA and China. They talked about their lives and experiences; it had a positive influence on my attitude to English.

(9) We had organised meetings with native speakers from the UK and the USA. They answered questions, brought sweets from their home countries and gave presentations. It was an enriching experience.

(10) The most positive fact was that there were native teachers in our school.

(11) Classes with native English speakers were always very useful because they showed the real language.

(12) There were some meetings with native Americans at my school; they talked about their culture, customs, etc. and that made me curious. I wanted to learn more on my own.

There were also a few comments on "Classroom layout", for example:

(13) The classroom was full of different maps, pictures, photos, English books; it had a positive effect.

(14) The classrooms were cosy and tidy, it helped to focus.

(15) The classroom layout in my high school was similar to that at the university—facing other students—it was good.

(16) The classroom was organised in such a way that you felt comfortable there.

Two single positive opinions concerned developing acceptance and tolerance:

(17) In the school, teachers told us that we should not be racists, and we should respect other nations; and the positive influence of streaming.

(18) In high school, it was really good to be divided into groups based on our level of language knowledge.

Students' comments on the negative influence of school on their language development were, as mentioned before, more numerous, but they can be divided into fewer categories. The first, a quite large category, can be called "Neglect and lack of encouragement":

(19) The school paid no attention to students' learning about the target language culture.

(20) I think schools don't do the best job to spread interest in languages and cultures.

(21) In both primary and secondary school, English lessons weren't treated as important subjects.

(22) My elementary school didn't want to allow us to learn English early; therefore, I started learning in fourth grade. We could have started much earlier.

(23) English lessons were often cancelled and there was no replacement.

(24) The school neglected the importance of learning other languages; besides scheduled lessons, we didn't have many opportunities to have contact with other languages, only the native one.

(25) At school we haven't learned much about target culture; there was usually no time to discuss anything apart from the technical side of the language.

(26) The programme at school was quite boring; students have been learning the same things for many years.

Other comments could be labelled "Miscellaneous" and they concerned the following issues:

(27) classroom layout ("The classroom was so overloaded with materials that it was often difficult for me to focus during lessons").

(28) problems with streaming and division into groups ("The idea was to divide students based on their knowledge of language. In the end, I spent three years in a group where there were 4–5 people speaking more or less fluently and 15 without basic knowledge about the simplest tenses and vocabulary… I am aware I could have learned much more if the division had been done better").

(29) obligatory course books ("The course book chosen in my school definitely influenced my development negatively").

(30) and a general negative attitude without specific explanation ("The school played a negative role in my language development. All in all, the school environment did not help me as much as the private lessons did").

4.2. Discussion

It is worth noting that even though students supplied fewer positive opinions about the role of the school in their language development, these were more varied. The largest set of comments focused on school activity in organising extra-curricular events, contests and meetings (Examples 1–7). Contests evoked interest in learning the language and in getting to know more about the countries where it is spoken, even if that information remained outside the school curriculum (Examples 2, 5 and 12). Meetings with native speakers seem to be significantly appreciated. Students realised how important it is to be able to have direct contact with somebody from the target language country, to get acquainted not only with authentic language, but also with elements of different cultural environments (Examples 8–12). That open approach could be helpful in developing tolerance and acceptance (Example 17).

Surprisingly, students also commented on the classroom layout (Examples 13–16). Teachers and school authorities frequently neglect this aspect of the learning environment, focussing mainly on the subject matter. However, overloaded classrooms earned a critical comment from another student, who found it difficult to concentrate in a room full of distractions (Example 27).

Another Example of a two-directional opinion concerns streaming students into groups according to the level of their language skill. Students generally appreciated that procedure (Example 17); however, if the division into streams had not been done with enough caution, a student could have been stuck in a lower-level group for as long as attendance at the school lasted (Example 28).

The students' negative comments appear to be rather disturbing. Not all of them have been quoted in this paper because quite a few expressed the same idea: "School played a negative role in my language development", and the student's interest in English resulted from private tutoring (Example 30). Regrettably, schools seem not to care about getting students interested in foreign language development and in

foreign cultures (Examples 19, 20, 24, 25). What is more, languages appear to be treated as unimportant (Examples 21, 22, 23) in comparison to other school subjects.

Another comment concerned the arrangement of the curriculum. It appeared that students were learning the same things every year and there was no indication of progress (Example 26). That could have been caused either by frequent changing of teachers or by inappropriate choice of course books. There was also a separate complaint about the school imposing a course book on teachers, and consequently on students, which possibly resulted in boredom and lack of motivation (Example 29). The student clearly stated that the obligatory course book chosen by the school influenced their language development negatively.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper was to collect and discuss students' opinions on the role of school as an institution in their foreign language development, and to what extent schools could be regarded as positive institutions. Even though the participants of the study attended universities in the same area of Poland, they graduated from secondary high schools all over the country. They attended mainstream public institutions which followed the same national curriculum for language education. It is believed, then, that they formed a fairly representative cross-section of secondary school graduates in Poland.

The first two research questions posed before conducting the study related to the school's influence on students' foreign language development and the character of that influence. The third question referred to whether the school could be perceived as a positive institution catering for students' well-being, which is a factor contributing to effective education. After analysing students' opinions, it can be observed that the school's role is clearly noticeable; however, there appeared more negative than positive comments. Some schools offered additional activities aimed at arousing students' deeper interest in languages and cultures, such as organised meetings with native speakers, contests and special events. Classroom arrangement appeared to be essential as well. Students cared for comfortable, cosy, tidy and colourful classrooms, where they could be immersed in the atmosphere of the foreign language and culture. School authorities approved of arrangements which could help learners focus on various aspects of language education. These schools may be regarded as positive institutions.

At the same time, schools were criticised for neglecting the importance of foreign language learning, for reducing language education to merely following the syllabus and the course book, and for the faulty process of assigning students to different level groups. Boredom seems to be the most discouraging aspect, especially when learners repeat the same material every year and the course books

are imposed without consulting teachers or students themselves. Opinions from different sources confirm that many schools are mostly concerned about exam results because their position in the community depends on the percentage of students who pass final exams successfully. Students' well-being appears to be much less important than success measured by statistics.

Students' opinions hardly ever referred to factors established by, for example Oxford—EMPATHICS—which deserve to be considered while researching the second/foreign language learning process. Perhaps the research questions should have been formulated in a different way and, consequently, the survey could have had a different focus.

The Eurydice Report (see Section 2) investigated job satisfaction of teachers and it appeared to be of rather low level. One of the reasons is the social context of their jobs, including the environmental conditions. The present study reveals an equally low level of satisfaction with schools, but from the students' point of view. Both groups of stakeholders seem to share doubts about schools as institutions which are supposed to promote the state of well-being. Also, contrary to Budzińska's study results, it appears that public mainstream schools are not always positive institutions in students' opinions.

In conclusion, it may be stated that there are schools which may be regarded as positive institutions; however, there is still a lot to be done in Poland to improve students' well-being in the primary and secondary educational institutions in which they spend 12 years of their young lives. This should be kept in mind while preparing teacher training programmes in tertiary education. Those future language teachers who offered opinions on the role of schools in which they used to be learners will be more likely to introduce some positive changes into their own ways of teaching.

The study, however, is not without limitations. In line with Complex Dynamic Systems Theory, factors influencing such a complex process as foreign language learning should not be considered separately. There is always an interplay of elements that impact one another, and a more ecological perspective could have been more valid and reliable. Schools cannot run without teachers, students and parents, and only their effective cooperation may result in creating positive educational institutions.

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