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The compatibility of positive psychology and the Ludic strategy in foreign language education

ABSTRACT. The Ludic strategy, an approach to foreign language teaching (FLT), popularised by the present author since the 1990's which acknowledges the value of a humanistic approach, yet also emphasises an emergence of positive feelings, while engaging in the ludic tasks for FLT purposes, is in line with the claims of positive psychology. For the analysis the most popular model of the well-being theory, Seligman's PERMA model will be used. Referring to research in FLT on language competence, I will analyse the benefits of applying LS in the FL classroom, and by using the PERMA model I will show that LS can be treated as a useful tool for FLT congruent with the claims of positive psychology, and that the model can be used in planning FLT research.

KEYWORDS: positive psychology; the PERMA model; ludic strategy; foreign language research.

1. INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of the new millennium a new subfield of enquiry within psychology emerged, i.e. positive psychology (PP). It is a rapidly expanding area and many researchers see the value of it for second language acquisition. As MacIntyre and Mercer (2014: 153) inform in the opening article to a special issue of *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, PP seeks explanation how and why people "thrive and flourish", and also aims at developing tools which will build positive emotions and engagement in one's life activities. As the authors explain, PP can be considered as a rebirth of humanistic psychology of the 1970's (e.g. Maslow 1970, 1979)

which was then criticised for not being grounded in research, and for concentration mainly on negative emotions, while disregarding the impact of positive ones. The negative and positive emotions seemed also to be treated as two ends of the same continuum (see e.g. Krashen's concept of affective filter, 1985). Emerging emotion research, however, has revealed that emotions can be better conceptualised as being dimensional (Fredrickson 2001; MacIntyre 2007). It appears that both positive and negative emotions can co-occur in an action to a varied degree and one can benefit from both types (Oxford / Cuéllar 2014).

After presenting Seligman's (2011) PERMA model I will analyse research concerning the effectiveness of the ludic strategy (LS) applied in the foreign language context to show that it can offer support to the PERMA model of the well-being theory.

2. THE PERMA MODEL OF THE WELL-BEING THEORY

Psychological theories of learning have always motivated foreign language teaching (FLT) as is evident from the analysis of various FLT methods where an approach to learning, along with the approach to language, form the basis of any method (see e.g. the analysis of methods by Richards and Rogers, 1986). For example, contributions of humanistic psychology by such researchers as Rogers (1969) or Maslow (1979) had an impact on the development of the so called designer methods in the second half of the twentieth century, as Total Physical Response (TPR) (Asher 1969), Suggestopedia (Lozanow 1978), The Silent Way (Gattegno 1963), and Community Language Learning (Curran 1976). Their designers emphasised a need to eliminate the detrimental impact of negative emotions on the process of language learning and took a holistic view of the learner. However, the methods have never been widely accepted in main stream teaching, and like humanistic psychology itself, "came under considerable criticism for their lack of scientific support and validity" (MacIntrye / Mercer 2014: 158).

What differentiates positive psychology from its predecessor humanistic psychology is a distinction between positive and negative emotions. Emotion research focuses on identifying pleasant and unpleasant emotions and their impact on human functioning (Fredrickson 2001, 2003 in MacIntrye / Mercer 2014: 162). Emotions are considered to be "the primary human motive" (MacIntyre 2002: 61) and as such provide energetic intensity to all human actions.

Seligman, after a period of studying the syndrome of learnt helplessness and clinical depression, turned to an on-going research which explores what

we can do to strengthen such attributes as happiness, optimism, resilience etc. (Peterson / Seligman 2004 in MacIntrye / Mercer 2014: 155). It led him to define the well-being theory (Seligman 2011) which offers a scheme for the analysis of factors which increase self-development (flourishing). His concept is known as the PERMA model. PERMA is an acronym which comes from the first letters of the factors crucial for well-being: positive emotion (P), engagement with activities which are employing one's strengths (E), developing a positive relationship with others (R), finding meaning beyond the self (M), and the feeling of accomplishment or achievement (Seligman 2011). Oxford and Cuéllar (2014: 174-179) have reviewed literature which shows that the components of the model are important for learning in general and language learning in particular and are of the opinion that the PERMA model has the potential for second language research. They themselves have used it with success to analyse the narratives of five Mexican students who studied the Chinese language in Mexico, and two of them also in China, and conclude "that language learning can be a major journey in self-discovery, rich in positive emotions tied to experiences of engagement, relationship, meaning, and accomplishment" (Oxford / Cuéllar 2014: 173).

I am of the opinion that the PERMA model can be a useful tool to evaluate the effectiveness of the ludic strategy (LS), an approach to foreign language pedagogy, defined by me in the mid 1990's and based on the reflection of my own teaching practice of English as a foreign language (EFL) and confirmed by research done by my students (prospective) EFL teachers. The two sections below are an *a posteriori* analysis and aim at showing that LS is compatible with the claims of positive psychology.

3. RESEARCH ON LS IN THE EFL CONTEXT

The Ludic strategy (LS) is an approach to learning and teaching foreign languages originally rooted in humanistic psychology which was practiced and explored by me and my co-workers and students of EFL (prospective EFL teachers). It is not a method in itself but a strategy, meaning that it can be used to solve some language or pedagogic problems in the foreign language (FL) classroom. LS advocates learning and teaching foreign languages by means of leisure activities such as games, simulations, drama techniques, music, and literature etc.

What, in my view, makes it attractive and helps in overcoming the problems in question, is the fact that the learner may get engaged in the tasks motivated by different goals than the ones specified by the language teacher. Whereas the teaching goals are typically related to practicing aspects of lan-

guage, and developing language skills, and/or raising intercultural aware-
ness, the learners may aim at accomplishing the goal of the ludic activity as
such, i.e. to experience the feelings of enjoyment, to get satisfaction from
winning or solving a problem, to establish a good relationship with co-
players etc., while at the same time achieving the teacher's goals (Siek-Pis-
kozub 1994, 1995, 2001, 2002, 2013a, 2013b; Siek-Piskozub / Wach 2006).

Naturally, the foreign language researchers concentrated on the impact
of LS on language acquisition (i.e. achievement), however, the tools used in
their research (e.g. interviews, questionnaires, direct observation of the
teaching-learning process, audio-recordings, learner diaries) shed some light
on the emotions involved in taking part in the activities, as well as on the
relationship between the participants.

Since language teachers are more concerned with the effectiveness of
their teaching than with the climate of the classroom, I will first provide data
to show that positive emotions and good relationships emerge not at the
expense of language development. Different kinds of ludic activities were
evaluated by (prospective) teachers doing their MA or PhD research under
my guidance and I will comment on some of the many that support my
claims.

For example, it was shown that language games are useful for enhancing
vocabulary acquisition. To acquire a word takes time and demands a lot of
effort, both on the part of the teacher and the learner. It is not enough to do
the activities from the selected course-book. It is because of the memory con-
straints and the nature of vocabulary that it needs many rehearsals. Games
help in bringing variety to vocabulary learning and learners usually do not
refuse to play a game which is based on the vocabulary that was a target
some time before. Golankiewicz found them useful in stimulating motiva-
tion for language learning both by young and adult language learners.
Whereas the mere promise of playing a game during the class was motivat-
ing young learners to concentrate on the language learning tasks, adult
learners needed justification of the usefulness of the words involved in the
task – they had to come from their daily experiences (Golankiewicz 1993).

Vocabulary acquisition is also enhanced by pop-songs, either used to an-
alyse their lyrics (Kręgielczak 2000; Wach 2003), or as background music
used during individual work on some language related activities (Mamys
1997; Bieszczanin 2010). Experiments confirmed that whereas in the focused-
use of pop-songs learners showed more interest in doing the tasks than the
groups working on the same vocabulary from the course-book tasks, and
later achieved higher scores on the follow-up test; the background-listening
groups acquired much of the vocabulary which appeared as a result of the
repeated exposure to a collection of songs in the background, despite the fact

that they were not encouraged to pay attention to the songs as the purpose of playing them in class was to create a pleasant atmosphere. However, the acquisition of words does not occur if the learners are involved in cognitively demanding tasks other than language related (Bieszczanin 2010). The positive impact of regular listening to pop-songs in the target language outside the class is reported by many adolescent learners who spend many hours listening to English pop-songs in their free time, however, it is less often acknowledged by their teachers (Siekierzyńska 1996: 47).

Songs have also a positive impact on acquiring grammar structures, which was reported by different studies which focussed on different English structures (e.g. Hurysz 1998; Przyjemska 2000). An interesting pattern was observed. Whereas the control groups (working on course-book activities devoted to the structure in question) outperformed the song groups (working on the lyrics of the song and grammar related activities based on it) on an after-activity test, a follow-up test (2-3 weeks after the treatment) revealed better gains in the song groups. The results of the control groups sometimes even dropped to the level of the pre-test, and the song groups' improvement was at, or above, the after-activity test scores of the control groups. But what is important is that the songs used for the experiment were popular among the learners and often heard voluntarily or involuntarily outside the class environment.

Songs can have a positive impact on developing speaking skills. Mrozek (1999: 43-44) reported an improvement in the fluency among the learners working with songs. Also the length of utterance increased in this group when the results of pre-treatment and post-treatment evaluations were compared. Songs may help to establish a positive rapport between teacher and students, and make the latter motivated to learn the target language. Wawrowska (1998), after initial problems in working with a group of vocational learners (prospective car mechanics), designed a syllabus based entirely on pop-songs popular among her students to improve the rapport and make them eager to learn English, which turned out to be a successful undertaking. The learners not only showed interest in song related activities and obtained positive scores on their tests, but they also asked the teacher if she would be the one to teach them in the following year, and if they would still work on songs, showing in this way their appreciation of her approach to EFL teaching.

Various kinds of drama techniques prove to have a positive impact on language acquisition and in-group/class relationships. I found planning and carrying out an Easter Peace happening with students of applied linguistics an effective project to stimulate team work, establish good relationships among members of the class while at the same time developing EFL compe-

tence. Unlike in other types of activities, they showed creativity (e.g. by designing their own lyrics to a well-known song or preparing a topic-related sketch) and willingness to communicate in the target language during the preparation work. Their cultural awareness increased as a result of searching for ideas (e.g. reading texts on Easter Peace Marches, using an ancient horn of luck or exploiting the possibility of adapting the idea of Chinese cookies with good wishes to wrap up candies for their horns of luck) and reflecting on the event after the performance. And all the time positive emotions could be observed by me as their teacher and reported in the post-activity discussion, as well as caught in the pictures made by the observers of the happening (Siek-Piskozub 1997).

Creating and staging drama based on textbook content by primary school learners enhanced vocabulary acquisition. The survey carried out among the learners and their parents revealed that it was enjoyed by the learners. The parents confirmed their children's excitement and motivation to prepare for the performance. However, the event also evoked some negative emotions, as for example stress or feelings of unfair treatment in the role distribution (Forystek 2005).

Stories in the target language are appreciated by EFL learners and can enhance vocabulary acquisition by learners from a primary school (Goliat 2003) and also from junior high school (Rączkowska 2005). Jamróz (2005) observed that storytelling can stimulate the speaking skills of young learners. In general, literature is a rich source for activities in the target language as found by Cirocki (2009). He involved his secondary school learners in an extensive reading programme. They were expected to read selected books for 45 minutes a day and make some notes afterwards (learners' diaries). During their class they were involved in different interactions based on the books from their selection. Post-tests, teacher-observations, learners' surveys all confirmed the positive results both in terms of the language achievements (high scores measured by a Cambridge Advance Test, willingness to communicate, level of accuracy, receptive and productive skills' development, improved fluency, and length of utterances in the after-reading notes) and cultural awareness, but the learners also reported positive feelings related to the involvement in the extensive reading project, as well as documented a growing awareness that their language competence is increasing.

Although LS can be used and is also effective with different age groups, provided that the content of activity is appropriate for the learners' interests and language level, it is particularly useful in teaching young learners (before puberty). For example, multisensory activities based on child poems involved learners in carrying the tasks and as a result enhanced vocabulary acquisition by EFL learners in primary school (Iwaniec 2002). TPR storytell-

ing by pre-schoolers developed in them positive emotions, awareness of others, self-confidence and an enhanced acquisition of words which were considered by them to be 'attractive' (Polak 2004).

One of the concerns of FL education is the need to develop intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Byram 1997, *Common European Framework of Reference*). Simulation games and role-plays can make FL learners willing to get into interactions in the target language in culturally challenging situations making them more aware of the cultural differences, helping in developing their skills and a more open attitude to the so called 'others', as reported in my study carried out among EFL prospective teachers (Siek-Piskozub 2015).

4. APPLYING THE PERMA MODEL TO RE-EVALUATE LS

I will now compile the findings on LS in the FLT context with the use of the PERMA model concentrating on its five principles.

All the studies discussed above document or mention positive *emotions* such as observed or reported 'joy' during involvement in the activities as songs, stories, simulations and games. Successful interaction in the interactive tasks, solving a simulated problem, as well as winning the game resulted in the feeling of 'satisfaction'. Increase in 'motivation' to learn the target language or the content used in the LS was reported and problems which were encountered were treated as a 'challenge' to seek different solutions with 'hope' to find more effective ones and thus contributed to 'resilience'.

Referring to the principle of *engagement*, all the studies reported increased involvement of the learners in the tasks noted as 'willingness to communicate in L2 with co-players', 'perseverance' in doing the activity or expressing an idea, and 'motivation' to continue L2 learning.

Relationships: LS has an impact on the development of what may be called 'social intelligence' observed in the improved relationship with the teacher and among learners, as ludic techniques are based on interaction with or competition among the players. Games help to understand the concept of 'fairness' and the need to apply it in the ludic activity, whereas in more traditional tasks, due to evaluation by the teacher, it may not be so obvious. Learners also have a chance to practice 'leadership', and while working in teams learn 'interpersonal openness' to the ideas of other members of the group or of the role-played characters.

LS helps in attaching *meaning* to the activity which goes beyond mere play. Learners become more aware of the language learning process and learn different strategies stimulating the process of language competence

development which they can use in learning other languages or as an individual effort. They also become more aware of their own language limitations by identifying gaps in their competence which they can work upon later.

The feeling of *achievement / accomplishment* is a natural consequence of the successful completion of the ludic activity, be it 'singing or comprehending a pop-song' 'finishing the game', 'solving a simulated problem' or 'caring on meaningful interaction' with peers. Learners also become more aware of their 'language abilities' and as a result can define their own targets for the future. They also learn to manage their emotions (self-regulation).

5. CONCLUSION

Although positive psychology is a new field of enquiry, we can observe that foreign language acquisition researchers can lend support to its claims, as I have tried to show with the example of the LS research which was done prior to the emergence of the psychological subfield. The presented above analysis is a *post-factum* one as the main target of the researchers was language competence development. I am of the opinion that the PERMA model may be successfully used to evaluate an approach to language teaching as at least two of its components are directly related to learning and teaching foreign languages, namely engagement on language related tasks and achievement. The other components refer to the climate of the learning/teaching processes which enhances language learning and/or stimulate interaction in the target language. The PERMA model may also serve as a theoretical scheme for research in foreign language education applied *a priori* to observe the impact of particular factors on FL learning and / or teaching in a more systematic way.

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