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Positive Institutions: A Case Study

Abstract

Positive psychology was founded on three main pillars: positive emotions, positive character traits associated with good living and positive institutions that create conditions for students to flourish (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Nevertheless, the research in psychology so far has been concentrating on positive emotions and character strengths. Enabling institutions have been the least well studied of the three pillars. A salient additional perspective, as MacIntyre and Mercer (2014) propound, would be to concentrate on the context in which students can experience enjoyment and flourish in foreign language learning. I try to fill the niche by analyzing a language school in the further education context in Poland which seems to be a positive institution. I base my study around the two criteria: enabling success and promoting positive language learning environments or student wellbeing. The language school is analyzed from three different angles: physical, pedagogical and psychological by means of an ethnographical research method and participant observation. The study is carried out in order to answer the research question: Can the school be labeled as a positive institution? The results demonstrate that the institution enables success as well as provides a positive learning environment and thus could be regarded as positive. The study is hoped to have contributed to positive psychology research by demonstrating what it means to be a positive institution in practice.

Keywords: SLA; positive psychology; wellbeing; positive institutions; further education

Introduction

Positive institutions have been defined as “enabling institutions,” “organizational structures that enable success and promote positive language learning environments,” as well as “institutions that enable people to flourish” (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014, pp. 154, 165). Investigating positive institutions reflects the current interest of second language acquisition (SLA) researchers

in positive psychology (PP). As MacIntyre and Mercer (2014, p. 154) state, PP is “the empirical study of how people thrive and flourish; it is the study of the ordinary human strengths and virtues that make life good.” In short, positive psychology aims to improve the quality of people’s lives by helping them to experience positive emotions, become more engaged, and appreciate the value of life and its moments. In addition, the goal of PP is to increase virtues such as resilience, happiness or optimism.

Positive institutions are one of the three main pillars of positive psychology together with positive emotions and positive individual characteristics. Compared with the other two pillars there has been little research carried out in this field so far. The present study of an institution is hoped to have filled this gap. The author investigates a language school in the further education context in Poland from the physical, pedagogical, and psychological angle. The study aims at answering the following research question: Can the institution studied be labelled as a positive one?

Literature Review

Positive psychology is relevant to second language acquisition owing to the practical, human, and social aspects of language learning. Recently, Lake (2013) applied PP concepts in his study of Japanese students. His research results showed a correlation between positive psychology inspired actions and increased effort, self-efficacy, and exam scores. Nevertheless, the recognition of the affective aspects of language learning and the assumption that affect is as important as cognition goes back to the humanistic movement in language teaching of the 1970s and 1980s. The importance of enhancing individual students experiences of language learning and its beneficial effect on second language (L2) acquisition has been highlighted, for example, by Stevick (1990) before modern positive psychology originated, or more recently by MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012). This has been primarily achieved by helping learners develop and sustain their motivation, perseverance, resilience, and most of all positive emotions, which are essential in the long process of attainment of a foreign language. Researchers have also been emphasizing the significance of positive classroom atmosphere and the rapport between the teacher and the learners as well as among the learners (Gabryś-Barker, 2016; Budzińska, 2015; Arnold, 2011; Turula, 2006; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). The studies of classroom climate (Byrne, Hattie, & Fraser, 1986; Gillen, Wright, & Spink, 2011; Gabryś-Barker, 2016) have demonstrated that the physical aspect of school en-

vironment contributes to learning and achievement as well as peer or instructor/student relationship.

Nevertheless, it seems that the most prominent contribution from positive psychology to SLA has been Fredrickson's (2001, 2013) broaden-and-build theory looking at the nature and function of positive and negative emotions (MacIntyre, 2016). Fredrickson (2001) notices that action tendencies triggered by negative emotions are strikingly different from those produced by positive emotions such as joy, interest, contentment, pride or love. While negative emotions tend to narrow an individual's field of attention and predispose specific actions (e.g., anxiety often leads to avoidance behavior), the function of positive emotions is to broaden and build. Broadening is related to a wider field of vision, being able to absorb more information or notice more things. Building means that the role of positive emotions is to create personal or intellectual resources that can help people cope with negative events or emotions which an individual may encounter in the future.

The broaden and build theory also suggests that positive emotions can contribute to an upward spiral toward improved subsequent, emotional wellbeing or a virtuous cycle in other words (Mercer, 2015). As Fredrickson (2013, p. 3) recently stated, "feeling good does not simply sit side by side with optimal functioning as an indicator of flourishing; feeling good drives optimal function by building the enduring personal resources upon which people draw to navigate life's journey with greater success."

Positive psychology was founded on three main pillars: (1) positive emotions, (2) positive character traits associated with good living and (3) positive institutions that create conditions for students to flourish (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Nonetheless, the research in psychology so far has been concentrating on positive emotions and character strengths. Enabling institutions have been the least well studied of the three pillars. A salient additional perspective, as MacIntyre and Mercer (2014) propound, would be to concentrate on the context in which students can experience enjoyment and flourish in foreign language learning. The social turn in SLA means that the field is taking seriously the contexts in which language learning takes place. MacIntyre and Mercer (2014) observe that conducting studies of positive institutions has been the weakest link for PP. In a similar vein, Gabryś-Barker (2015, p. 156) emphasizes that "studying school as an enabling institution becomes one of important dimensions of present-day research, especially with the advent of positive psychology in a language learning and teaching context."

Even though positive institutions as such have not been sufficiently studied so far, there is some literature regarding *positive education* based on positive psychology (Green, Oades, & Robinson, 2011). What is more, a number of educational institutions worldwide follow this new pedagogical approach. Positive education, defined as "education for both traditional skills and for happiness"

(Seligman, Gillham, Reivich, Linkins, & Ernst 2009, p. 293), or “applied positive psychology in education” (Green et al., 2011, p. 1) aims to “promote flourishing and positive mental health within the school community” (Norrish, Williams, O’Connor, & Robinson, 2013, p. 148).

In Australia, positive psychology principles have been applied to many schools curricula as a reaction to overwhelming statistics concerning mental health problems in young people as well as a high suicide rate (Malczewska-Webb, 2016, pp. 196–197). In 2008, Professor Martin Seligman designed a whole school positive education program for Geelong Grammar School (GGS) in Victoria, which has proved successful in combating anxiety and depression. The program objective was to promote psychological wellbeing of students since the sole focus on academic excellence has been found to insufficiently prepare young people for real life (Green et al., 2011).

The present article can be seen as contributing to the existing research in conducting a pioneer study in the positive institutions area where the research is scarce. Not only does the present work explore the unexplored pillar of positive psychology but it also looks into its realisation in the field of SLA. The author of this paper investigates a language school, and assesses whether it can be labeled as positive.

Further Education Context versus State Schools

In Poland languages are generally taught in two types of context: state schools and further education. The present study looks at a private language school, which represents a further education context, which plays a very important role in Polish foreign language education. Owing to the general belief that state school tuition is not at a satisfactory level, further education typically serves as complementation of state schools.

A salient difference between the two contexts is the estimated student progress. According to the core curriculum students achieve level B1 (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) after 12 years of state school foreign language (FL) education, whereas in the further education context, they can achieve the same level in three or four years. Mixed level classes seem to be another significant weakness. What is more, state school pedagogical approaches tend to be less effective mainly due to the lack of teacher development program. Consequently, further education instructors are usually more professional, that is, enhancing the quality of service (Evans, 2008; Hoyle, 1974, 2001).

In addition, studying in state schools is obligatory, while in further education it is voluntary, which is likely to increase student motivation. As Deci

and Ryan (1980) observe, evaluations, competition, deadlines, social pressure, surveillance and other motivators popular at schools diminish intrinsic motivation, whereas when people experience choice about acting and no external pressure, they can maintain it. In a similar vein, Chaffee, Noels, and Mceown (2014, p. 356) point out:

Factors that cause students to feel controlled have been shown to negatively affect motivation (e.g., Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994). In light of this finding, the fact that language study is often compulsory at North American and European schools, as is the study of English as a foreign language (EFL) in many Asian countries, is potentially problematic.

What is more, students in the further education context may find their learning experience more enjoyable thanks to customer treatment caused by tuition fees. Additionally, lack of examinations in this context results in a more relaxed attitude to grades.

The Institution Studied

The institution is one of 23 language schools accredited by PASE which is the main accreditation body in Poland. Schools accredited by PASE have to meet high standards in such facets as teacher qualifications, quality of teaching, teacher training, professionalism of management, studying conditions, teaching resources and the credibility of advertising materials. The institution offers courses at ten levels of advancement from beginner to post-proficiency. Learners are placed on the basis of a written and oral test in order to tailor the tuition to the student proficiency level.

The school has a professional development program: yearly lesson observations conducted by professional teacher trainers, regular peer observations as well as teacher-training sessions. Moreover, teachers are supposed to attend at least one conference or external teacher training event every year. Consequently, the instructors are up to date with the current methodology and are able to use a variety of appealing teaching techniques, many of which include interactive exercises involving technology. Furthermore, the members of staff are highly qualified and either hold an MA degree in English or a certificate or a diploma in English language teaching to adults (Cambridge CELTA or DELTA). In addition, among the instructors there are teacher trainers, Cambridge English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) examiners and course book writers.

As far as the physical aspect is concerned, the building is relatively new, well kept, with all necessary facilities, a library and a self-study area in the lobby. The classrooms are attractive, spacious without being too big, equipped with comfortable furniture, computers, smart boards and overhead projectors. What is of particular importance is that a circular seating arrangement is used in every classroom. As Falout (2014, p. 287) states, this kind of seating arrangement helps to create a sense of belonging within the classroom community, which in turn facilitates learning, has a positive effect on student emotions and wellbeing. Small student number per class seems to be another characteristic of the institution. According to the school policy the number must not exceed 12 learners. In practice, many classes consist of five to seven students, which is likely to lead to greater learner engagement as well as to create a friendlier, homely atmosphere, which may also have an impact on student feeling of contentment.

The Current Research

Since I was an instructor in the institution I was analysing I used an ethnographical research method and participant observation. In this type of method “a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture” (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2001, p. 1).

The study was of qualitative nature, looking at both teachers and students. An analysis of an educational institution cannot be complete without the instructors’ voice. As Mercer, Oberdorfer, and Saleem (2016, p. 224) have observed, “the well-being of both teachers and learners are intricately connected.” Similarly, Day and Gu (2010, p. 36) propound that teacher professional well-being is essential in their ability to teach. As teachers’ positive feelings about an institution they are working for seem to have a positive effect on student contentment, it is absolutely vital that a study of an educational institution includes both learner and instructor insight.

Participants

The participants were studying English at an Intermediate level. The total number was forty-one: eighteen males and twenty-three females. Most of the students were Polish, however, three of them were foreigners: from Ukraine, Moldova, and China. The average age was twenty-three. Fifteen participants

were teenagers under eighteen. Nevertheless, middle school students were not mixed with adults since the school divides students into groups according to age as well as levels. There were four groups altogether. The class size ranged from eight to twelve learners. In addition to the students, all the fifteen teachers took part in the study.

Instruments

In order to obtain the data two main research instruments were utilized: student journals and teacher narratives. On top of that I used naturalistic observation of the students and teachers and my own judgment to verify the data.

Student journals, also referred to as diaries or learner autobiographies (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 176) were the instrument for obtaining data from the learners. According to Mackey and Gass, since carefully tailored questions can elicit learners' reports about their internal processes and thoughts, journals are often used to gather data for qualitative studies. The journals, which examined various issues related to the institution where the participants were studying English, were the key instrument used in the study. Apart from expressing their opinions on the context where the language tuition took place, the students compared this institution to state schools, where the respondents have also studied English or other foreign languages. Moreover, the participants were asked whether they considered themselves anxious FL learners and if so whether their anxiety level decreased as the course progressed.

Journal writing was divided into five entries. Each time the respondents received two or three open questions and were asked to write a narrative of up to one paragraph in answer to each question. The questions were both in Polish and English and the students had the choice of using either Polish or English to answer them. This way the participants were able to practise their English while they were providing data for the research. This also proved useful for the informants who were not native speakers of Polish. When presenting excerpts from student narratives in the results section, those written in English and containing errors are marked with an asterisk (*).

The following questions were included in the journals:

1. Why did you decide to study at this school?
2. Do you find studying at this school any different from studying at a state school? If so, what is the difference?
3. Which school do you prefer? Why?
4. Where do you think you can achieve better results? Why?
5. Do you feel less anxious now than you did at the beginning of the course? Why?/Why not?

6. Are there any aspects of the class that make you feel anxious (e.g., classroom atmosphere, your relationship with the teacher or other students, the pace of the lesson)?
7. Is studying at this school less stressful than at a state school? Why?
8. Do you think there are differences between this school and state schools as far as the following aspects are concerned? Can you describe them?
 - a) The premises, classrooms, furniture, equipment, technology,
 - b) The teachers and teaching (professionalism, attitude to students, requirements, stress level, severity, helpfulness, preparation, lesson quality, etc.),
 - c) School policy (grades, tests, promotion to a higher level, evaluation for public speaking),
 - d) Lesson/course enjoyment/satisfaction.
10. Are you satisfied with the course?

Teacher narratives had a similar form to student journals with the difference that the teachers only wrote them once in response to the following questions:

1. Do you think the school is a positive place for teachers to work for? Why?
2. When you teach do you try to reduce student language anxiety? How?
3. Do you use positive evaluation?
4. Do you attempt to create a friendly atmosphere in the classroom? If yes, how?
5. What do you think of the physical aspect of the institution? Is it positive? Why?
6. Do teachers at this institution ensure studying results in learning and if so how?

Analysis

After the data had been gathered, the content analysis was carried out. To analyse the data, a grounded theory approach was taken (Charmaz, 2006). As Charmaz (2006, p. 181) explains, the approach allows systematic but flexible data analysis to formulate theories “grounded in the data themselves.” According to grounded theory, data collected is analysed for repeated ideas that are tagged with codes. Codes are subsequently grouped into categories that may give rise to new theories. I read the narratives looking for themes or categories (Norton, 2009, p. 124), which in this study were the positive features of the institution. Once all of the categories were identified, I went over the journals again, assigning units of analysis to categories, that is, coding. Norton (2009, p. 124) defines a unit as “a single discrete concept, thought or idea, which might be expressed in a single word, a phrase, sentence or even a paragraph or two.” In the present study units of analysis were students’ answers to the questions I prepared for the journal. While coding I transferred participant names together

with units of analysis, which subsequently I changed into numbers to protect informant confidentiality.

Results

The data analysis has enabled me to identify three main themes: physical aspect of the institution, pedagogical approaches, and psychological consequences. Under the physical aspect theme, there are three categories: the premises, the classrooms, and the equipment. Pedagogical approaches include numerous categories such as: perceived progress, teaching techniques, lesson content, clarity, activation of a new language, revision, opportunities to speak, language of instruction, evaluation, atmosphere nurturing and an individual approach to learners. The psychological consequences theme comprises enjoyment and language anxiety level.

The results are presented in accordance with the themes and categories that have emerged. Extracts from student narratives are included to illustrate each theme. The examples of what the learners said are selected samples of reoccurring opinions. Despite giving a wide range of illustrations of their feeling, the overall impression seems to be shared by all of the informants. There does not appear to be a difference of opinions resulting from student age. There have not been any negative journal entries, however, three participants are equally satisfied with state schools and this institution and feel they benefit from attending their English classes in both contexts.

Physical Structure of the Institution

Most of the participants consider the physical aspect of the institution superior to state schools and highlight the fact that it looks more attractive, is cleaner and more modern. The students also point out that classrooms are smaller and cozier, the furniture is more comfortable, the technology is more advanced and better applied. They particularly praise interactive smart boards and the fact that they are utilized in various, appealing ways. In addition, the participants believe they benefit greatly from the educational platform where they can find each lesson materials, information about homework or vocabulary items. Thanks to this facility they can also easily contact the instructor. The student impressions of the physical aspect of the institution are reflected in the following quotations:

The main difference between the physical structure of this school and state schools is that this one is better equipped and the technology is better utilized. (s. 12)

At this school, the classrooms are way nicer than in state schools. They are cleaner and more modern. What's more, the equipment and technology is much better. (s. 10)

The classrooms at this school are smaller and cosier than in state schools. The furniture is more comfortable. Another difference is technology – interactive boards and the overhead projectors are used very often, a lot more than at state schools. Besides, Moodle platform is used – the educational platform with all lesson materials. It is very helpful. (s. 8)

Positive Pedagogical Approaches

The participants reflect extremely approvingly on the institution pedagogical approaches. They value the fact that the institution enables successful language learning and cares about student wellbeing at the same time, which would suggest that the school meets positive institution criteria.

Pedagogical approaches that facilitate learning. All of the participants feel they are making progress in their English studies, which indicates that pedagogical approaches employed by its instructors are conducive to learning. The following responses were given in answer to the question: Where do you think you can achieve better results? Why?

Definitely at this school. I have learnt more here than I did in my previous years at state school. (s. 11)

I prefer this school. As I remember my English lessons at a state school were quite boring and rather participating in private lessons/ courses help me in learning English. (s. 9)*

The participants give numerous examples of pedagogical approaches adopted by the institution that may be conducive to FL acquisition. Firstly, the students believe that activating new language and regular revision contribute greatly to learning. Secondly, they find the lessons appealing thanks to a wide range of activities, techniques and materials as well as relevant topics. The students also praise the institution for the clarity of instruction and explanations, which are a much better standard than at state schools. The respondents frequently point out that the teachers are professional and better prepared than at state schools.

We learn vocabulary through revision. At state schools we memorized lists of words. I can achieve better results here because I practise the new language. Grammar rules are explained in a clear way. (s. 25)

This school is different because at state school lessons were boring and mostly only grammar, and here we have conversations, also grammar but not so often, short video films, so the lessons are interesting. (s. 15)*

At this school there are different methods of learning, more practice, more possibilities to use language. I prefer it. (s. 9)

Studying at this school is better than at state schools because the lessons are clear and the topics are more interesting. (s. 4)

A considerable amount of speaking practice and employing L2 as the language of instruction also seem to be highly appreciated. The participants recurrently highlight that the classes allow them to develop fluency thanks to numerous games and other speaking activities.

I definitely prefer studying a foreign language in the further education context because I have more opportunities to talk. (s. 13)

I prefer further education context. One can achieve better results here owing to the fact that the classes are conducted in English. (s. 2)

Pedagogical approaches promoting student wellbeing. Apart from enabling success, a positive institution should promote student happiness. Participant narratives demonstrate that the teachers at this institution use pedagogical approaches that contribute to student wellbeing. The respondents point out that they feel more relaxed here than at state schools because of positive evaluation. Primarily, there seems to be very little anxiety related to passing a year, since it is based on coursework as well as the final test and all tests including the final one can be retaken. The participants also feel more relaxed because the grades are given less importance. Another difference between the two contexts is that the learners are not evaluated for speaking in front of others. The following excerpts from the student narratives illustrate the participant favourable views of the evaluation approaches used by the institution.

We have regular tests, but without major consequences in the event of an unsatisfactory result. (s. 8)

Studying in the further education context is less stressful than studying at a state school. If I don't pass the final test, nothing will happen, I will not have to repeat a year. I will just have to roll up my sleeves and revise material. (s. 1)

Studying in the further education context I don't feel the constant pressure of grades. (s. 32)

What is more, student narratives indicate that the pedagogical approaches aim at reducing test anxiety. The most important one is thorough test preparation realized through regular revision, familiarizing learners with test types and informing them precisely what material will be tested. What is more, unlike in state schools, all of the tests are announced.

Tests reflect what we have done in class. (s. 12)

Tests at this school are less stressful than in state schools. (s. 1)

At this school there is a friendly approach to all methods of testing, which improves their quality. (s. 13)

Positive classroom atmosphere is an essential facet contributing to student wellbeing. The participants emphasize the stress-free atmosphere of the institution, which they feel is conducive to learning. They also say that the instructors put more weight on creating a positive learning environment than state school teachers. One of the informants described the atmosphere at the institution as "family." She highlighted the fact that during lessons it is possible to talk about personal matters, student life, etc. The respondents also value the opportunity to express their thoughts. Moreover, humor was indicated as an aspect leading to student contentment. In addition, the sample point out that unlike in many state schools, the learning environment is supportive, there is no criticism, ridicule or competition among learners.

The atmosphere is really cool! Everybody can express their opinions. (s. 32)

I prefer the further education context, where the atmosphere is pleasant. I don't mean that at state schools there's some kind of terror – NO! The point is that here we don't just stick to the lesson topic but we also talk about how we feel and our 'problems.' I think one can achieve better results studying in a language school where there's 'family' atmosphere. We talk about different stories from our life and we laugh at them. (s. 14)

At this institution – more friendly atmosphere. A good atmosphere is important, because it makes our learning easier. (s. 9)*

Positive teacher-student relations have been brought up as another aspect constituting a positive atmosphere at the institution. The instructors are perceived as partners or facilitators, while in state schools they appear to be less approachable.

At this institution there aren't teacher-student relations (as with school). (s. 17)*

At this school the attitude towards students is more positive and friendly. (s. 14)

Additionally, the participants seem contented because they feel they are treated as individuals rather than a mass and their needs are addressed. The sample highlights the fact that the content of the course is tailored to their expectations and that teachers are always willing to explain points not understood by students, which is not always the case in state schools. The respondents also point out that the instructors are interested in them as individuals and remember facts about their personal lives.

Studying here differs greatly from studying in state schools. One of the main differences is that the course reflects student interests (for example more listening and less grammar). (s. 11)

Studying here is different in many aspects from state schools, but mostly adapting form of lesson with personal needs of students and (if there is something that is not clear) not rushing the material. At this school there is no pressure to understand everything right away – there is always a revision and more time on lessons to explain everything. (s. 39)*

The difference between this school and state schools is that the instructor is very involved in the classes and pays a lot of attention to each individual student. One can definitely achieve better results in the further education context because of the instructor's individual approach to learners. (s. 35)

Positive Psychological Consequences

The fact that the institution promotes student wellbeing has been manifested by the participant positive psychological consequences of studying in this context such as low level language anxiety and enjoyment.

Low level language anxiety. Low level language anxiety seems to be a common feature of the participants, which is a salient factor contributing to their wellbeing. Most of the sample reveal that they feel at ease, are not afraid to speak and willingly come to classes. What is more, they believe that lack of stress helps them to benefit more from the instruction.

I can't act under stress. I believe that thanks to a lack of anxiety I can learn more. This school is far less stress-provoking than state ones. (s. 32)

Here the stress level is low. We can laugh and joke. (s. 19)

Studying at this school is far less stressful than at state schools. At state schools, there are students who try to draw everybody's attention by commenting on other people's mistakes aloud. (s. 14)

The learners are not usually very anxious when they come to study at this school largely because it is their own decision. It is vitally important, however, that the instruction does not seem to increase their apprehension. In contrast, the institution appears to put students at ease.

I feel much better than at the beginning. The classroom atmosphere is great and I think it is because the teacher is friendly and helpful. (s. 17)*

Now I know the teacher and the colleges from the group, and I feel more relax than at the beginning. I know that I can talk everything even when I'm telling wrong ☺ (s. 15)*

I feel better than I began of the course, because I am better student. I like learning English and I feel really good at the lessons. (s. 14)*

Enjoyment. Enjoyment seems to be another psychological consequence of studying at the institution. In order to assess it the participants were requested to answer the question: *Are you satisfied with the course?* In answer to the question they either said they were highly satisfied or satisfied with their English instruction. Some of their comments are presented below:

I'm very satisfied with all the courses I've been attending at this institution. (s. 9)

10/10. (s. 28)

My level of satisfaction is high due to the enhanced quality of instruction, in particular the interactive and friendly approach of teachers. (s. 13)

I'm pleased with the course. The level is high and the lessons are not boring. (s. 2)

Apart from answering this specific question about the course satisfaction, enjoyment is generally apparent in all of the student narratives.

Teacher Narratives Results

All of the teachers seem to be satisfied with working for the institution regardless of their nationality. Their narratives clearly reflect what the students think of the school's pedagogical approaches. The instructors believe that the fact that teaching results in learning is not a coincidence, but their conscious effort. When planning their lessons, they include ample target language activation and revision in order to ensure that learning takes place in the classroom.

To ensure that my teaching results in learning we all do peer testing and other forms of informal testing to find out what students really know. We also do a lot of recycling and revision, formative assessment—at least some aspects—to get students reflect on their progress and aspects that need improving). (t. 5)

I always want to make sure that my teaching results in learning. I believe that a lot of learning happens in the classroom. I use a lot of activation and revision. (t. 1)

Not only do the instructors focus on student language acquisition but also on creating a positive learning environment. The teachers aim at reducing student language anxiety through encouragement, praise, using learners' first names, smiling, including small talk, humor, treating learners as individuals, demonstrating genuine interest in student comments and referring to them in the future. What is more, they avoid nominating students to speak in front of the whole class without preparation. The instructors also make sure that the learners work with different partners all the time, which enables them to get to

know one another and consequently facilitates community building and creating a positive learning environment.

I create positive learning environment by humour and smiles. I encourage students as much as possible and put failure in a nice way. (t. 9)

I try to work on the rapport between the students right from the beginning of the course. I make sure that students get to know one another by using ice-breaking, mingling activities. It is important that everybody gets the chance to speak to everybody. (t. 12)

I try to make the atmosphere relaxed and fun. I chat with my students before and after classes. I offer help as much as I can. (t. 5)

I use pairwork activities for students to practise what they are going to say in public, I try to show them that they know more than they think they do. I praise my students a lot. I use a lot of scaffolding to help them succeed. (t. 6)

Low-stress evaluation seems to be another positive feature of the institution. The teachers believe that their evaluation is done in a student-friendly manner. Firstly, in their opinion results given as a percentage, not as grades, always appear more positive. Moreover, peer testing is commonly used at the institution, which is far less stressful than conventional testing. Additionally, the instructors think that the fact that students can retake every element of coursework makes the evaluation more positive. Another method is treating errors as a developmental tool rather than failure. What is more, some teachers reveal that they pay a lot of attention to reducing test anxiety:

I try to make testing conditions as stress-free as possible by behaving in a reassuring manner, monitoring and helping with task understanding, speaking with a soft voice and even playing some background music. I also allow students as much time as they need to complete their test in order to minimise pressure. Moreover, in order to reduce test anxiety, the learners are familiarised with the test format and contents and provided with ample opportunities for revision. I also make sure that my tests find out what students know and not what they don't know. (t. 3)

I reduce my student test anxiety by explaining precisely the contents of the test, so everybody knows what to expect. I also give my student extra time, if necessary. Besides, I give my students lots of advice on self-study

methods, which I believe has a positive effect on reducing their language anxiety. (t. 15)

I think my evaluation is positive: I praise my students a lot, I think I am enthusiastic about their language achievements, I get my students to set individual goals they want to achieve. (t. 5)

I often repeat that mistakes are important/milestones in learning, that mistakes are inevitable, that we learn when we make mistakes. (t. 6)

In addition, the teachers unanimously state that the school is a positive workplace. Several respondents say that this institution is the best in their experience so far. They highly praise the atmosphere, which is both supportive and conducive to self-development. A good relationship with the director of studies has also been brought up in the teacher narratives. What is more, the instructors say they benefit greatly from working with experienced, motivated colleagues as well as high quality teacher-training sessions and regular teacher and peer-observations. Moreover, they find it pleasurable to work with small groups of motivated students, since small class size makes it easier for the instructors to put innovative techniques into practice. In addition, the teachers speak highly of the constantly updated resources and seem satisfied with their salaries. The instructors generally say that the physical aspect of the institution is adequate. They praise the fact that the school is a small, professional looking building equipped with up-to-date technology.

For me, this is the best working environment I've ever worked in – my personal space is respected and my preferences as for selecting the level of teaching considered prior to giving me classes before each academic year begins. The building is by and large OK. Other teachers are competent, friendly and helpful when there's an emergency. (t. 2)

The school is definitely a positive place for teachers to work for. You can develop yourself thanks to contact with experienced teachers, workshops, training. We have a wide range of supplementary materials available. Besides, there's peer-motivation here. Everybody makes an effort, takes the job very seriously. (t. 13)

The institution is certainly a positive place for teachers to work for. The atmosphere is very friendly. The place is promoting self-development. I really like peer-motivation and training. I benefit a lot from it. I am very impressed with our constantly updated resource library and the fact that

everything is bought when requested. I enjoy working with small groups of highly motivated students. (t. 10)

Yes, this is a positive workplace thanks to a friendly atmosphere, a good rapport between the management and teachers. There is a lot of scope for professional development, well equipped classrooms and adequate salaries. It's the best place I've worked in. (t. 5)

Discussion

The present study looks into the under-researched positive psychology pillar, that is, positive institutions, which makes it pioneer research in the field. As MacIntyre and Mercer (2014) propose, after exploring positive emotions and individual characteristics, the next step is to focus on the institutions in which students can experience enjoyment and flourish in foreign language learning. The aim of the research was to explore the understudied field and investigate a language school in a further education context in order to assess whether its students experience enjoyment and are given opportunities for success and thus, the institution could be labeled as positive (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014).

Looking at the institution from three different angles: physical, pedagogical and psychological as well as from both the students' and the instructors' point of view has presented us with a comprehensive picture which demonstrates that the institution could be referred to as positive.

The study results reveal positive psychological consequences of being educated in the institution, which, as Stevick (1990) and other representatives of the humanistic movement in language teaching propound, is likely to be conducive to L2 acquisition. Additionally, the participants positive emotions contribute to language learning owing to broadening the students' perspective and "opening" them "to absorb the language" (MacIntyre & Gregersen (2012, p. 193). What is more, their positive emotions will be invaluable in the long process of L2 attainment.

In addition, a positive classroom climate seems to be a salient feature of the institution, which, as Gabryś-Barker (2016, p. 156) states, "plays a role not only in fostering foreign language learning, but also in personal development and the well-being of teachers and learners." The classroom atmosphere and the rapport between the teacher and the learners as well as the learners are perceived by the participants as positive, which enhances their educational experiences and facilitates flourishing in language learning.

What is more, the most prominent contribution from positive psychology to SLA, that is, broaden-and-build theory is realized at the institution. Even though the physical aspect of the institution is just adequate, the school is extraordinary thanks to contented, professional, dedicated teachers who obviously care about students success as language learners as well as their emotional wellbeing. Consequently, the institution generates an upward spiral. The learners coming to study at the school tend to be motivated and do not normally suffer from anxiety. Thus, the institution does not reduce negativity, but focuses on expanding positivity. Learners entering the school with a positive attitude enter a positive virtuous cycle (Fredrickson, 2013, p. 3; Mercer, 2015), which in turn, may help them build intellectual resources.

Although the findings are insightful, the study is not free from limitations. First of all, the results could have been slightly affected by the fact that the diaries were not anonymous. There is a possibility that the learners might have wanted to please their instructor by providing answers they thought were expected of them. Another potential consequence of the journals' not being anonymous was fear of losing face and therefore not revealing the details the learners regarded as embarrassing. Some of the informants may not have wanted to admit being anxious, which they could have considered a weakness.

In addition, the fact that the participants reported on themselves could be considered a limitation due to a possible lack of objectivity. Moreover, some of the respondents were very young, 13 years old. At this age, with relatively little life experience, people may not be accurate judges of themselves. In addition, some of the answers may not have been reliable due to the fact that some informants might have reported what they believed should have been reported (McKay, 2006, p. 36). Nevertheless, as a participant observer I verified this possible lack of objectivity by looking at the student classroom performance on a regular basis.

The value of the selected type of research, however, greatly outweighs this limitation. Thanks to adopting an ethnographical approach and participant observation, the process of teaching remained almost uninterrupted, the study was conducted in natural classroom conditions, without the intrusion of using extra stressors, for example, video cameras, special equipment such as halter heart monitors, or visitors handing out questionnaires. Therefore, the learners did not go through unpleasant or abnormal experiences for the sake of data collection.

What is more, the participant comments helped me to understand which of my pedagogical approaches are perceived as positive by students. Consequently, I was able to tailor my way of teaching to my students' needs. In other words, students' thoughts, feelings and impressions showed me how to improve their wellbeing, which, as Oxford (2016, p. 21) states is what the positive psychology is all about.

Conclusion

The present study has demonstrated what it means in practice to be a positive institution in the SLA field and how the criterion of enabling success in foreign language acquisition while promoting student wellbeing can be realized. It is hoped that other foreign language teaching contexts that lack some of the positive aspects incorporate the positive institution features described in the present article, which would contribute to the growth in number of contexts where foreign languages can be acquired in line with positive psychology.

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Katarzyna Budzińska

Positive Institutionen – Fallstudie

Zusammenfassung

Positive Psychologie stützt sich auf drei Hauptelementen: positiven Emotionen, positiven Charakterzügen und positiven Institutionen. Untersuchungen auf dem Gebiet waren bisher auf positive Emotionen und positive Charakterzüge fokussiert. Institutionen, in denen die Schüler Freude und zudem Erfolge haben waren kaum erforscht. Um diese Lücke zu erfüllen untersucht die Verfasserin die Tätigkeit der im außerschulischen System fungierenden Sprachschule in Polen. Bei der Untersuchung wurden zwei Kriterien angewandt: den Schülern einen Erfolg beim Fremdsprachenunterricht zu ermöglichen und positive, das Wohlbefinden der Schüler begünstigende Atmosphäre zu schaffen. Die Sprachschule wurde unter physischem, methodischem und psychologischem Blickwinkel mittels ethnografischer Methode und teilnehmender Beobachtung untersucht. Die Untersuchung sollte die Frage beantworten, ob diese Schule den Bedingungen einer positiven Institution entspricht. Den Forschungsergebnissen zufolge ermöglicht die zu untersuchte Einrichtung den Schülern Erfolg im Fremdsprachenunterricht und schafft bildungsfreundliches Umfeld, so dass sie als eine positive Institution betrachtet werden kann. Hoffentlich wird diese Studie dazu beitragen, die genannte Lücke auf dem Gebiet der positiven Psychologie zu erfüllen und praktische Bedeutung positiver Institution aufzuzeigen.

Schlüsselwörter: Zweitspracherwerb, positive Psychologie, Wohlbefinden, positive Institutionen, außerschulischer Unterricht