

## **Advocating a pedagogy of happiness in TESOL: Antecedents and potentialities**

TESOL'da mutluluk pedagojisinin savunulması: Öncüller ve olanaklar

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### **Abstract**

Among the many topics discussed in positive psychology and life skills education, happiness enjoys a distinctive stature. In practical terms, an essential hallmark of the positive psychology movement would reasonably be to develop intervention programs that enhance individuals' happiness and sustain such improvement over time. Having reviewed the antecedents of positive psychology and life skills education as to the importance of improving well-being in education, as well as the topic of happiness and the extent to which it is teachable, in this paper we shall argue that the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) can be a unique venue for adopting a pedagogy of happiness, offering distinctive potentials for conducting happiness intervention programs.

**Keywords:** Positive psychology, life skills education, happiness, well-being, TESOL, applied ELT, life syllabus

### **Özet**

Pozitif psikoloji ve yaşam becerileri eğitiminde tartışılan pek çok konu arasından mutluluk farklı bir öneme sahiptir. Pratik anlamda, pozitif psikoloji hareketinin önemli bir ayırıcı özelliği, makul şekilde bireyin mutluluğunu zenginleştiren müdahale programları geliştirmek ve söz konusu ilerlemeyi sürdürmek olabilir. Eğitimde iyi oluşu geliştirmenin önemine yönelik olarak pozitif psikoloji ve yaşam becerileri eğitiminin öncüllerini, mutluluk konusunu ve öğretilebilir olma kapsamını inceleyerek bu araştırmada, Anadili İngilizce Olmayanlara İngilizce Öğretimi (TESOL) alanının, mutluluğa yönelik bir pedagoji benimsenmesi ve mutluluk müdahale programları geliştirmek için ayırt edici potansiyeller sunulması için eşsiz bir ortam olup olmayacağı tartışılmıştır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Pozitif psikoloji, yaşam becerileri eğitimi, mutluluk, iyi oluş, TESOL, uygulamalı ELT, yaşam müfredatı

### **Introduction**

Individuals with a variety of mental disorders often seek help from expert counselors who can soothe the pain and open new horizons in the life of their clients. Under this account, the idea of 'educational therapy' (Caspari, 1976) came into being as a specialized educational and therapeutic form of instruction which is tailored to meet the specific needs of students. Put another way, in educational therapy the teacher plays the role of a therapist, while the problematic learner plays the role of a client.

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Among a variety of topics typically discussed in educational therapy which can put at risk the mental health of individuals are communication problems, learning difficulties, depression, and deficiency in building interpersonal ties in society (Jarvis, 2005).

Such a ‘disease psychology’ undertaking which has begun since the start of World War II was overthrown by a rather new movement in the field of psychology known as ‘positive psychology’ (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This enterprise highlights the importance of enhancing people’s strengths, virtues and competencies, rather than trying to alleviate their disease symptoms. In much the same way, the idea of ‘life skills education’, backed up with several educational philosophers (Dewey, 1897; Freire, 1998; Krishnamurti, 1981; Walters, 1997) as well as many researchers (e.g., Hare, 1999; Matthews, 2006; Noddings, 2003; Winch, 1999), has come to the scene for the purpose of improving people’s well-being in educational settings.

Among the many issues discussed in positive psychology and life skills education, happiness enjoys a distinctive stature (Diener, 1984; Seligman et al., 2005). For one thing, when it comes to practice, an essential hallmark of the positive psychology movement would reasonably be to develop intervention programs that enhance individuals’ happiness and sustain such improvement over time (Seligman et al., 2005). To date, a number of happiness intervention programs have been developed (e.g., Fordyce, 1983; Licher, Haye, & Kammann, 1980; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006; Stones, & Kozma, 1986).

In parallel to such interest, given the key role of language classrooms in the enhancement of life skills in learners (Pishghadam, 2011), in this paper we argue that English language teaching (ELT) classes can be unique sites that offer distinctive potentials for conducting happiness intervention programs. In what follows, the readers are provided with a review on four forerunners of positive psychology and life skills education as to the importance of improving well-being in education. We continue our discussion by reviewing the topic of happiness and the need to incorporate happiness intervention programs in educational settings. Finally, we will consider the potentialities of the field of TESOL, as one particular case in point, in the incorporation of a pedagogy of happiness.

### **Teaching Well-being in Education: Four Antecedents**

It is now well accepted that in order to promote people’s well-being one should take care of several vital elements such as their mental health, social relationships, safety, happiness, human rights, freedom, marriage success, emotional competencies and job satisfaction. In this connection, many people have consensually pointed to the fact that the improvement of these elements should be seriously taken into consideration in educational contexts. Literature abounds with studies that, following the lines of the positive psychology movement, depict the importance of enhancing people’s well-being and quality of life in educational settings (e.g., Francis, 2007; Goody, 2001; Matthews, 2006; Radja, Hoffmann, & Bakhshi, 2008; Spence, 2003). Overall, four antecedents of positive psychology and life skills education, i.e. World Health Organization (WHO), the Targeting Life Skills (TLS) Model, the UNESCO Institute for Education, and Life Skills-Based Education (LSBE), are discussed below in order to throw some light on the importance of improving individuals’ well-being in education.

#### *World Health Organization (WHO)*

The first forerunner of life skills education is World Health Organization (WHO) which has primarily been established with the aim of enhancing children’s mental and social well-being. In this view, life skills are defined as “the abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal

effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life" (WHO). The pivotal life skills emphasized by WHO include psychosocial and interpersonal competencies such as, decision making, problem solving, creative thinking, critical thinking, effective communication, interpersonal relationship skills, self-awareness, empathy and understanding, coping with emotions, and coping with stress.

Learning life skills is a fruitful practice (Murthy & Wig, 2003) that helps individuals to deal effectively with everyday challenges of life (Orley, 1997); accordingly, life skills training can enable students to act in pro-social ways (Birell, Weisen, & Orley, 1996) and may help them take more responsibility for their behaviors and actions (Orley, 1997). In effect, as Matheson and Grosvenor (1999) have pointed out, school can be an appropriate place for introducing life skills programs alongside other academic subjects. Therefore, given the fact that schools enjoy a high credibility with students' parents and community members (WHO, 1997), they can be sites for a 'life skills intervention' (Behura, 2012).

#### *The Targeting Life Skills (TLS) Model*

The second antecedent which brings us closer to an understanding of the importance of life skills education pertains to the Targeting Life Skills (TLS) Model proposed by Patricia Hendricks in 1995. Since then, the TLS Model has been used as a guide for the development of 4-H (head, heart, hands and health) programs at Iowa State University with the purpose of helping youth gain knowledge, life skills and attitudes that promote their lives, building upon planning developmentally appropriate tasks and activities to enhance age-appropriate life skills which are of particular interest to both 4-H professionals and volunteers.

In this model, life skills are characterized as "skills that help an individual be successful in living a productive and satisfying life" (Hendricks, 1996, p. 4). The TLS Model encompasses 35 life skills that have recurrently emerged as being essential for individuals to reach their full potential and lead a successful life (Hendricks, 1996). Most prominent among these skills are decision making, self-esteem, critical thinking, empathy, stress management, self-discipline, wise use of resources, effective communication, problem solving, accepting differences, healthy lifestyle choices, self-responsibility, concern for others, trustworthiness and respect.

#### *The UNESCO Institute for Education*

In a similar vein, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) has also defined life skills as "a behavior change or behavior development approach designed to address a balance of three areas: knowledge, attitude and skills" ([www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)). In this respect, the Delors Report (Delors et al., 1996), whose mission is to give education the role of providing humanity with the capacity to control its own development, was put forward with four educational pillars, namely *learning to be, learning to know, learning to live together, and learning to do*.

These advances have led to the preparation of a proposal entitled Education for Human Development which is based on the idea that any education has the responsibility to generate learning as well as to help students develop their other potentials and capabilities. Attempts have accordingly been made by some organizations such as UNESCO and the Ayrton Senna Institute to apply the four fundamental areas of learning proposed by Delors et al. (1996) with the aim of catering for and nourishing different aspects of individuals' lives such as, *inter alia*, their multiple competencies, abilities, innate potentials, as well as their emotions and attitudes.

### *Life Skills-Based Education (LSBE)*

Life Skills-Based Education (LSBE) has for long been concerned with child development and health advancement through its recognition in 1986 of the importance of life skills for optimizing health choices. In 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) backed the integration of life skills into the educational contexts by pointing to the fact that education should be geared towards the development of children's whole-person growth. One year later, the Jomtien Declaration on Education for All expanded this outlook by including life skills among fundamental learning tools for survival, capacity enhancement and life quality. Moreover, in the year 2000, the Dakar World Education Conference was held with the aim of granting all young people and adults the human right to take advantage of the four educational pillars, i.e. learning to know, to do, to live together and to be, in the context of education.

### **Teaching Well-Being in TESOL: Happiness in Focus**

Given the multi-faceted nature of well-being (Huebner, 1991; Wilkinson & Walford, 1998), one should not consider the absence of distress as the sole component of well-being; rather one should equally take into consideration the presence of positive affective states, such as happiness. Among the many topics discussed in positive psychology and life skills education, happiness enjoys a distinctive stature (Diener, 1984).

In this paper we would like to take the field of English Language Teaching—specifically Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)—and will argue that it has unique potentialities to incorporate a pedagogy of happiness. In order to get to grips with the possibility of adopting a pedagogy of happiness in TESOL, we shall divide this section into three subsections through which we will (a) discuss the concept of happiness and the extent to which it is teachable, (b) provide a review of different types of syllabus in the field of English language teaching, and (c) put forth arguments as to the possibility of adopting a pedagogy of happiness in TESOL, pointing to the fact that the professionals in the field have not taken much of such a life-wise approach to language teaching.

#### *On the concept of happiness: Is it teachable?*

Attempts have extensively been made to define the construct of happiness (Dogan & Totan, 2013; Myers & Diener, 1995; Seligman, 2002). Within the literature, happiness has been conceptualized in diverse ways. For instance, the World Health Organization (WHO) associates happiness with health and quality of life. The WHO defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 1946-1992). Although such a definition seems to be too idealistic (Seedhouse, 2001), it tends to move away from disease and towards more positive aspects of health and well-being. Another widely used approach put forth by Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999) highlights the global measurement of whether one is a happy or unhappy person—subjective happiness. Happiness has also been alternatively used for positive subjective experiences (Diener, 2000). Pavot and Diener (1993) and Diener (2000) have defined happiness in terms of three components, i.e. ‘cognitive appraisal of life’, ‘positive affect’ and ‘negative affect’. A more recent definition of happiness pertains to Seligman’s (2002) three-component model which blends (a) experience of positive emotions, (b) engagement in life activities, and (c) achievement of a sense of purpose or meaning.

Further, many studies have also been carried out with the aim of measuring happiness (Argyle, Martin, & Crossland, 1989; Diener et al., 1985; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999; McGreal & Joseph, 1993; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Nonetheless, in practical terms, an essential hallmark of the positive psychology movement would reasonably be to develop intervention programs that enhance individuals' happiness and sustain such improvement over time (Seligman et al., 2005). Accordingly, a number of intervention programs have been developed to improve individuals' level of happiness (e.g., Fordyce, 1977, 1983; Licher, Haye, & Kammann, 1980; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006; Stones & Kozma, 1986).

Yet the question that needs to be answered is "can we teach happiness?" Fortunately, based on the *set point theory of happiness* proposed by Lyubomirsky, Sheldon and Schkade (2005), despite the fact that the major portion of the happiness construct is determined by genetic and demographic factors, a considerable part of happiness also involves intentional activities to promote happiness. In much the same way, other scholars (e.g., Morris, 2009; Noddings, 2003; Scoffham & Barnes, 2011) have considered the notion of happiness to be teachable and have recommended that happiness should be incorporated into different types of curriculum.

#### *Types of syllabus in English language teaching*

In the following paragraphs, the readers are provided with a brief overview of different types of syllabus in ELT and the purposes for which each type had been devised. Nunan's (1988) classification of syllabus comprises *product-oriented syllabuses* (grammatical syllabus, lexical syllabus, functional-notional syllabus) and *process-oriented syllabuses* (procedural syllabus, task-based syllabus, and content syllabus). A product-oriented syllabus, also known as the synthetic approach, is merely concerned with the outcomes of the learning process. Not surprisingly, product-oriented courses failed to measure up to the learners' communicative needs. Grammatical, lexical, and functional-notional syllabuses are considered product-oriented.

The use of grammatical syllabuses in language classes has a long pedigree. In designing such syllabuses, grammatical structures of a language are selected and graded on two scales of simplicity and complexity (Nunan, 1988). These product-oriented syllabuses are merely concerned with learners' unit-by-unit learning and conscious practice of grammar rules in an additive fashion. As a case in point, a grammatical syllabus may begin with the simple present tense, then the present continuous, then the simple past tense, and so on. The grammatical syllabuses were severely criticized because they were merely structurally-graded syllabuses failing to enhance learners' communicative skills. They also oversimplified the form-function relation, ignoring the fact that certain forms can represent more than one function and, at the same time, a particular function may be expressed by more than one form (Nunan, 1988). In a recent attempt to modify the traditional syllabuses, Baleghizadeh (2008) correctly asserts that grammatical syllabuses misrepresent the language learning to be a linear process.

As another traditional approach to syllabus design, lexical syllabus requires that learners respectively master the leveled, say, 500, 1000, 1500, 2000 words of a target vocabulary (Richards, 2001). As Willis (1990, p. 129) points out, "taking lexis as a starting point enabled us to identify the commonest meanings and patterns in English, and to offer students a picture which is typical of the way English is used." Many scholars have been concerned with stipulating the criteria for the selection of lexical items including, the frequency of words, patterns of usage, the combinations they typically form, etc., and accordingly, have provided a variety of word lists (Coxhead, 2000; Hindmarsh, 1980; Hofland & Johansson, 1982; Thorndike & Lorge, 1944; West, 1953).

The first large-scale attempt to incorporate the situational and functional aspects of language use into the language syllabus was made by ELT practitioners who were inspired by philosophers of

language and sociolinguists during the 1970s (Nunan, 1988). As its name implies, in a functional-notional syllabus (Wilkins, 1976), instruction is organized around *notions*, or particular contexts of communication such as duration, color, size, time, etc., and *functions*, or the purposes of communication such as warning, commanding, complimenting, apologizing, etc., of a language, rather than merely in terms of grammatical structures. An important point concerning functional-notional syllabuses is that for the purpose of specifying the functions to be included in a course, it is often mandatory to conduct some form of needs analysis. Moreover, White (1988) proposes some criteria such as need, utility, coverage or generalizability, interest, relevance, complex of form, and frequency, for the selection and gradation of notions and functions that should be included in any particular functional-notional syllabus.

Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) provide a list of advantages of employing functional-notional syllabuses among which are the following: These syllabuses motivate learners to communicate in the target language by offering learners basic communicative functions; they remind learners that there must be a real purpose for speaking; and they allow teachers to develop flexible and modular courses. Regardless of the fact that functional-notional orientation in syllabus design was in some respects an advantage over the grammatical and lexical syllabuses, many scholars and researchers of the field like Widdowson (1979), Nunan (1988), Dubin and Olshtain (1986), and Richards (2001), have expressed their strong concern regarding the design and application of such a syllabus.

In recent years, there has been a shift of focus in syllabus design from the product of instruction, or the skills and knowledge the learners are supposed to acquire, to the process of learning a language through which such knowledge and skills might be gained. Language learning is no longer considered to be additive, i.e. only when one form is acquired by a person can one move on to the next form. Rather, language learning is a complicated process of forming and testing hypotheses through which learners will realize whether they should abandon or keep their former hypotheses (Willis & Willis, 2007). Accordingly, a process-oriented syllabus, or the analytical approach, which focuses on both the learning process and the learner, rather than merely on the outcome of learning, was proposed. Prabhu (1980) also proposed procedural syllabus as a new type of syllabus with the underlying assumption that "form is best learned when the learner's attention is on meaning" (Beretta, 1989, p. 233) with more emphasis on the learner and the learning process. The procedural syllabus is structured around tasks and activities including, information-, reasoning-, and opinion-gap activities, rather than in terms of grammar or vocabulary items (Nunan, 1988).

One of the alternative syllabus models that have been proposed in the last twenty years is the task-based syllabus. The starting point in a task-based approach to language teaching and learning is focus on meaning. Rather than preparing lists of grammatical and vocabulary items, notions, functions, etc. which is typical of traditional syllabuses, the task-based syllabus designer begins the design process with conducting a needs analysis coming up with a list of the target tasks that learners are required to perform outside the language class (Nunan, 2001). Irrespective of their numerous merits, however, task-based syllabuses have been criticized on a number of grounds such as the difficulty of their evaluation, their incompatibility with different educational settings (Ellis, 2003), their incapability to tap individual differences and learning styles (Skehan, 1998), and their heavy reliance on theoretical arguments, rather than on empirical evidence (Sheen, 1994).

The primary purpose of a content-based or topical syllabus as another type of syllabus is the concurrent teaching of some well-defined content area pertaining to particular fields of study such as chemistry, engineering, biology, medicine, etc. and language use skills. Therefore, content area and language should not be considered separate operations (Mohan, 1986). The underlying assumption in content syllabuses is that "unlike science, history, or mathematics, language is not a subject in its own

right, but merely a vehicle for communicating about something else" (Xiaotang, 2004).

### *Advocating a pedagogy of happiness in TESOL*

In recent years, some current trends in ELT syllabus design have emerged, including the co-existence of the traditional and the new types of syllabus, the focus on the process of language learning, the inclusion of non-linguistics objectives, and the advent of the integrated syllabus (Xiaotang, 2004). Therefore, although traditional orientations in syllabus design were criticized in many respects, they have not been abandoned from A to Z. Instead, some aspects of the traditional syllabuses are being used in combination with newer ones like the task-based syllabus. Besides, unlike the traditional orientations to syllabus design such as grammatical and lexical syllabuses, the newer models like procedural and task-based syllabuses have put more emphasis on the *process* of language learning.

Another trend in today's English teaching syllabus design is the inclusion of non-linguistic objectives in the syllabus with the core belief that in addition to fulfilling its obligation in enhancing learners' language skills and knowledge, ELT has another duty to learners which is to help learners develop their whole-person, i.e. head and heart, including confidence, learning strategies, motivation, interest, and so on. Lastly, the advent of integrated, or multi-, syllabuses was a response to ELT practitioners' adherence to only one type of syllabus in language courses. However, an integrated syllabus is not merely a haphazard combination of the various elements such as functions and notions, structures, topics and situations from different types of syllabus, but it is a matter of choice of priority.

In effect, the theory of *Applied ELT* (Pishghadam, 2011) states that the field of English language teaching is now a scientific, independent, and interdisciplinary field of study whose unique character can provide great opportunities for improving several life skills. Here, it seems that having passed through different types of syllabi, ELT still needs a conglomerate kind of syllabus whose application can best characterize the idea of 'ELT for life'. It means that language learning classes must primarily be sites where specific life skills are prearranged to be improved. This is perhaps best summarized in Pishghadam's (2011, p. 13) statement that "language should be epiphenomenal to life." In line with the theme of the 18<sup>th</sup> Annual TESOL Arabia Conference held at the American University in Dubai (AUD), the idea of Applied ELT was expanded by Pishghadam and Zabihi's (2012) notion of *Life Syllabus* based on which language teachers were recommended to give more precedence to the promotion of life issues in English teaching classes.

Thus, we will argue that, due to some reasons, English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) classes can be proper sites where happiness is pre-scheduled to be enhanced. In order to get to grips with the need to integrate a pedagogy of happiness into the TESOL curriculum, it is required that the unique character of ESL/EFL classes be clearly delineated. Four major arguments are cited here:

(1) Language learners from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds are free to discuss many topics—scientific, cultural, social, political, and personal—in ESL/EFL classes with little or no socio-political restrictions; such freedom of expression can hardly be seen in any other class or school.

(2) Language learners may find more freedom to express themselves and show their own real self through communicating in an L2 wherein they can disclose their own true identity, taking enough freedom to say something they might not express in their mother tongue due to social, religious, or political reasons.

Given the first two arguments, it seems to be a cogent argument that these discussions may, based on Seligman's (2002) model of happiness, provide learners with the opportunity to assess their experiences of positive emotions, engagement in life activities, and achievement of a sense of purpose or meaning in learning.

(3) English teaching classes mostly enjoy a funny and friendly atmosphere for learning. For instance, discussing a cornucopia of topics, listening to various songs, watching different movies, using computers, the Internet, cell phones, and different kinds of tasks make the English language class be a fun.

(4) The fourth argument which adds to the unique nature of ESL/EFL classes is that these classes mostly comprise pair/group work activities. In effect, knowledge is co-constructed once learners engage in joint activities mediated by a variety of cultural artifacts, tools and signs (Rogoff, Turkanski, & Bartlett, 2001). The socially constructed knowledge enhances the dialogic and dynamic nature of these classes, giving learners a sense of accomplishment when they reach a joint objective.

Our fourth argument seems to match well with Lazarus' (1991) contention that happiness takes place when "we think we are making reasonable progress toward the realization of our goals" (p. 267). Looking through this lens, learners' learning difficulties are not regarded as disadvantages but rather as an initiation.

### **Concluding remarks**

It is on these grounds that we argue ESL/EFL classes are proper sites for the implementation of happiness interventions. Given the positive shift of attitude in psychology from its traditional emphasis on pathology to positive emotions, competencies and strengths (Huebner & Gilman, 2003), this study has gone some way towards understanding the possibility of teaching happiness in the field of TESOL, making reference to the unique character of ESL/EFL classes for adopting a pedagogy of happiness. Accordingly, such pedagogy requires that life syllabus designers center all the tasks and exercises in the language syllabus on happiness. Under this account, if a language course is aimed at improving learners' happiness, the relevant life syllabus should be designed based on the axioms and techniques that are typically followed and utilized in happiness studies for the promotion of happiness.

The relevant life syllabus might also be benefited from the similar methods and techniques that are being utilized to improve students' life skills in life skills training. Among these are class discussions, role plays, audio and visual activities, brainstorming, demonstration and guided practice, case studies, emotional games and simulations, debates, storytelling, and decision mapping or problem trees (Behura, 2012). Whereas we thoroughly acknowledge the importance of improving language learning among ESL/EFL learners, we reckon that through the incorporation of a life syllabus which is primarily concerned with the improvement of happiness among learners, both aims can be achieved. To this end, the TESOL professionals in language policy and planning, materials development, syllabus design and language teaching can make good investments in the promotion of language learners' happiness.

The question remains, however, as to what extent the TESOL professionals would be ready for this big change of attitude. When it comes to practice, it would not be wrong to assume that, at present, achieving the goal of increasing happiness through life syllabus in TESOL seems remote, if not unreachable. It would thus be unwise at present to expect any rapid or radical change in the structure of TESOL curriculum. Nonetheless, we surmise there is hope and cause that the ideas presented in this paper might awaken an interest in language policy makers, materials developers and syllabus designers, teacher trainers, teaching practitioners as well as researchers to take a fresh look at the principles of ESL/EFL instruction. In view of this, the challenge for future research will be to first of all prove if TESOL can be used for effective pedagogy of happiness and based on research findings to propose possible ways through which TESOL can adopt happiness intervention program. Under this account, it seems that, inevitably, educational policies need to be redefined; upon doing so, the new

approach to ESL/EFL instruction would hopefully offer the biggest pay-off in tackling the issues which are of prime importance in enhancing learners' well-being.

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