

Original Paper

A Study on the Components of English Learning Well-being of Non-English Major College Students

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Abstract

The goal of foreign language education is not only to cultivate students' language knowledge and competence but also to make the recipients feel well-being and happiness. Taking Chinese non-English major college students as the research object, this paper thoroughly investigates the components of Chinese students' English learning well-being through one-to-one semi-structured interviews, using the PERMA theoretical model of well-being as the theoretical framework. It was found that positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment in the PERMA model of well-being all appeared in Chinese students' English learning experiences. In addition, negative emotions and multiple character strengths contributed to the enhancement of students' English learning well-being.

Keywords

PERMA Model of Well-being Theory, English Language Learning, College Students

1. Introduction

In recent years, with China's rapid economic development and technological progress, people's expectations for a better life are no longer confined to the protection of material life but are manifested in the high-level pursuit of well-being. With the concepts of well-being education and well-being curriculum, more and more schools have begun to pay attention to students' learning well-being. English, as a compulsory subject, accompanies the vast majority of students in their learning career, and its mastery is one of the graduation requirements of many universities. Therefore, foreign language education should pay more attention to students' mental health and state of well-being. Xu Jinfen and Yang Jiaqi (2023) pointed out that the goal of foreign language education should not be limited to improving the language knowledge and skills of foreign language learners as well as the teaching effectiveness of language teachers, but should also focus on the mental health of the learners, which will in turn enhance their well-being.

Seligman (2011), the father of positive psychology, proposed the theory of well-being, arguing that improving human well-being is the highest goal of positive psychology. He also proposed the PERMA theoretical model of well-being, which is widely used in psychology and even in education. Each letter of the model reflects an elemental dimension for achieving holistic and sustainable well-being. Positive emotion (P) refers to an individual's experience of pleasure, which encompasses positive psychological perceptions such as delight, joy, comfort, etc. Engagement (E) refers to the perceptual experience of an individual who is fully absorbed in an intrinsically engaging behavioral activity, with a loss of self-consciousness, as if time were suspended. Relationships (R) focuses on presenting and maintaining positive quality interactions and connections with others and the social environment; Meaning (M) is defined as a breakthrough and transcendence of the self and is associated with life direction and personal values. Accomplishment (A) represents a sense of achievement, which includes experiences such as winning, honor, and skill acquisition.

Scholars have found that second language learning helps learners experience positive emotions that can motivate them to engage in meaningful activities and ultimately achieve a sense of fulfillment. By comparing the completely different language learning journeys of two learners, Oxford (2014) found that the level of students' well-being not only plays a huge role in the development of language proficiency but also shapes the students' attitudes throughout their lives. Oxford and Bolaño-Sánchez (2016) studied the English language learning experiences and well-being experiences of two second language learners and emphasized the importance of students' intrinsic motivation, positive emotions, engagement, and perseverance in their achievement of success and satisfaction. They suggested that teachers should improve students' overall well-being by stimulating learners' positive emotional experiences and enhancing learners' training in learning strategies. Sadeghi and Khonbi (2018) analyzed the elements of well-being experienced by 74 master's degree students of English from Iran during their second language learning process. In addition, the researchers pointed out some individual factors that are effective in enhancing students' well-being in second language learning.

Allowing students to experience joy and well-being in their learning not only helps to improve academic performance but also contributes to their physical and mental health. Research in this area can reduce students' negative emotions, reduce the impact of multiple pressures on students' performance, and promote the development of well-being education. Starting from the learner's perspective, this study combines the PERMA model of well-being theory with the second language learning environment in China and records the English learning experiences of non-English major college students through interviews to explore the components of their English learning well-being.

2. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research method, collecting students' self-reports of their English learning experiences through semi-structured interviews, mining all the themes related to the well-being dimensions from students' self-reports, organizing and classifying them, and then

comparing them with the PERMA model to derive the constituent elements of well-being and the influencing factors of non-English-major college students in China.

2.1 Research Question

- (1) What components of the PERMA model appear in students' self-reports of their ELL experiences?
- (2) Are there other factors that affect Chinese students' English learning well-being apart from the components in the PERMA model ?

2.2 Research Object

This study selects 4 non-English major students from a local university in Hubei province, including 2 freshmen and 2 sophomores, half male and half female. The students are from the majors of biotechnology, electronic science and technology, and engineering management. Their years of English study are 10 to 11 years.

2.3 Research Tools

This study used one-to-one semi-structured interviews to understand learners' experiences and thoughts about learning English, and to explore their behaviors and the causes behind their behaviors. The interview outline was tried and tested and then revised repeatedly by the researcher, and the order of questions and the way of asking questions were flexibly adjusted according to the students' responses during the interviews. The main questions included students' perceptions of ELL, ELL experiences, emotional changes in the process of ELL, ELL conscientiousness, and learners' interpersonal relationships. The interviews lasted about 30 minutes and were recorded with the consent of the interviewees, and the recordings were transcribed into text.

2.4 Data Analysis

All data were derived from audio recordings of the interviews, which were transcribed to yield four interview texts. Based on the textual data, as many elements as possible were first identified, followed by making connections between the elements, condensing them into broader thematic categories, and comparing the core themes that emerged from the data with the dimensions of the PERMA model, and finally identifying several different core categories.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Analysis of the Components of Well-being

Keywords and themes related to the five well-being elements of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment emerged in all four students' English language learning experiences.

3.1.1 Positive Emotion

Student 1 became interested in English when she first came across it, "When I first started learning English in primary school I thought it was very interesting. And as I am studious, I would want to learn it well." She was overjoyed when her primary school teacher shared wedding candies with everyone when she returned to school from her honeymoon. "I would have been so young that I would have been

happy to have candy. So I would enjoy contact with my English teacher and would be more serious in class.” She was encouraged when her college teacher highlighted her praise in class. “I was very glad at that moment and determined to learn English well. My motivation to study was greatly improved.” It can be seen that every positive emotion she had drove her English learning.

Student 2 has been exposed to a lot of English films and songs since he was a child, and he was extremely interested in English when he first learned it in primary school. And his teacher’s lively class reinforced his love of English. “The teacher would draw images of the characters on the blackboard, label the dialogue phrases, and then point to the blackboard to teach, which I found very interesting.” In junior high school, he switched schools. Shortly after arriving at his new school, his teacher recommended that he participate in an English play, which helped him quickly integrate into the class and strengthened his commitment to lifelong English learning. Later, due to academic pressure and test-based learning, he developed a resistance to English. “When I went to high school, I rarely had the chance to contact English outside the classroom, and I was always writing practice questions and facing various exams in class, so I didn’t like English that much.” Then now in college, he has more time to take the initiative to understand and collect English knowledge and information, and once again falls in love with English. He still feels frustrated that he can’t use a well-known foreign connectivity software to communicate with foreigners in China, but this doesn’t reduce his motivation to learn English. “I would pin my hopes on other software and find foreigners to communicate with from other channels.”

Student 3 has a lukewarm attitude towards English and has always had a test-taking goal in mind. “I usually follow the teacher’s steps, I don’t like it and I don’t hate it, but the joy of being praised makes me more willing to learn.” Every bad mood in his learning process has inspired his motivation, which is related to his own studious and outgoing personality. “I was often asked to speak on stage in group tasks. Compared with other members, I had more tasks, and I would have some resistance to them, but I would still finish them seriously for the final results, which of course also honed my English speaking skills.” In the face of weak projects, he will rise to the challenge and turn anxiety into motivation, showing some resilience and perseverance. “For regional reasons, I didn’t take the listening test in the English college entrance exam, but I will take the university English exam, and it will be annoying to make more mistakes when doing the questions, so I will spend more time practicing.”

Student 4’s curiosity and eagerness to learn gave her an inexplicable positive inclination towards English, and she took the initiative to sign up for English tuition classes even before her school was united in learning English. “When I was in the second year of primary school, many of my classmates around me went to tuition classes early, and I went too out of curiosity.” As a child, she was rewarded with money or gifts from her parents for high test scores, and this joy would motivate her to study well in all subjects, including English. After high school, when she reached a certain level of English, she would get a sense of self-affirmation from unintentional exposure to English that she could understand. “Sometimes when I see some English instructions or expressions on the street and realize that I can understand them, I get very happy.”

All four students experienced positive, active emotions, such as interest, joy, and initiative in learning English, indicating that English learning is an activity that brings happiness. Two students also felt negative emotions, such as frustration (due to the lack of learning resources) and stress (due to the number of tasks), but they all showed absolute perseverance in transforming their negative emotions into persistence and eventually experienced progress and success.

3.1.2 Engagement

Student 1 has a strong initiative to learn English and actively signs up for a remedial class in junior high school after realizing that she could not keep up with her studies. “I spent most of my time outside of class in junior high school studying English, and the teachers at the cram school helped me a lot. I was very involved in every lesson, and it didn’t take long for me to make great progress in my English grades.” During her university years, she made time to study English every day. “Based on my teacher’s advice and feedback, I would look for learning videos on Bilibili and follow them to practice listening and speaking. I would watch American dramas during meals every day to learn their voice intonation.”

Student 2 has a keen interest in English. He listens to English songs every day and his song list is full of English songs. He also watches American dramas every day at lunchtime and finds an English film to watch every week. On weekdays he also voluntarily participates in English corner activities and signs up for English competitions. “In addition to the knowledge in the textbook, the university teacher will also intersperse the hot current events and traveling tips of English-speaking countries, which I am very interested in. And I sit in the first row every time I have an English class and listen very carefully.” He also has a detailed study plan after class to prepare for the CET-6. “Besides revision, I memorize 50 new words every day, followed by completing 2-3 shadowing exercises.” To practice speaking, he will find resources and channels to connect with foreigners online and exchange dialogues with them.

Student 3 uses morning and evening self-study to study English every day. He believes that the main thing is to follow the teacher’s steps and method of learning in class, supplemented by practice after class. He argues that only by putting in the effort can you get the rewards. “You get what you put in, and I am very committed to learning English both inside and outside the classroom.” He also makes a study plan to complete the English learning tasks at each stage and tries his best to get higher grades in the exams.

Student 4 is so serious about learning English that she may even get angry at the teacher’s lack of seriousness. “In high school, the teacher always made small talk that had nothing to do with the English class, and I got tired of it.” She likes to make schemes. In addition to the tasks assigned by her teachers, she reaches her daily vocabulary goals and takes the initiative to participate in some competitions. “I signed up for the Word Spelling Bee in middle school with the mindset of trying to learn and got a better place.”

Each student gave a high level of engagement and actively spent time and effort in learning English, both inside and outside the classroom. At the same time, they also demonstrated the use of different

strategies, such as signing up for remedial classes, making study plans, and finding and utilizing a wide range of resources. These active engagements are also a sign of well-being in themselves.

3.1.3 Relationships

Student 1 believes that the effectiveness of English learning has a lot to do with the teacher. “I have a good relationship with my primary schools, college teachers, and junior high school extracurricular teachers, their classes are more interesting, and there will be a lot of exchanges. After the exchanges, I will secretly resolve not to let my teachers down. But the teachers in high school were less responsible and made people not want to get close, and I slacked off on English.” Her friends and classmates gave her a portion of emotional support when she was stressed or feeling tired. “Sometimes when I was unhappy, I would talk to my friends, and after that, I would feel much more relaxed and then continue to study hard.” Good role models gave her great motivation and she would want to slowly move closer towards them. “There was a classmate in high school who took English as a hobby and earned some extra money through English translation after studying. Although the money was not much, it touched me and made me feel admiration.”

Student 2’s mother loves English films and songs, and he has watched and listened to them with her since he was a child. His interest and ability could not have been developed without his mother’s love of English and her support and nurturing of him. All the English teachers he came into contact with got on well with him, and each one deepened his emotional attachment to English. “My university teachers would initiatively communicate with me about my studies, ask about my intention for international exchanges, etc., and I would help my teachers to write some materials and send messages to express my best wishes during festivals.” However, he ran into a small friction once, but it worked out well. “My roommate was playing games noisily when I was doing English listening practice in my dormitory at night, and then I applied for a change to a quieter dormitory.”

Student 3 interacts more frequently with his teachers and classmates, and he has been helped by teachers in each period. “I like the junior and senior teachers because they are young, the classes are humorous and there is no generation gap in communication. This relaxed atmosphere will make my study more enjoyable. The university English teacher is also very nice, and I get good advice and feedback every time I ask for help. She usually shares hot news in the study group and recommends local excursions during holidays, and she is more willing to communicate with us than teachers of other subjects.” The company and encouragement of his classmates gave him an outlet for his bad feelings and the drive to keep going. “I have a high school classmate who will be studying abroad soon, and whenever I have difficulties with English I follow his learning style. Sometimes when I get anxious about practicing listening, I’ll just go to him and complain, and then I’ll continue studying hard.” Even though there were some rough spots at the beginning of the university’s group assignments, the students’ mutual communication and understanding worked perfectly together. “Some of the students in the group were just a bit more introverted and didn’t want to speak on stage in English class, but in other classes, they would actively give more so that I would be more balanced.”

Student 4's parents, besides using rewards to promote her study, were in favor of the student voluntarily enrolling in English tuition classes and also gave her a little reminder when she was slacking off in her studies, such support and urging cultivated her perseverance to a certain extent. She loved her junior high school English teacher, which had a definite positive impact on her English learning. Her teacher's casual remarks, wondering why the student's grade couldn't go up a few more points, turned her into a spirited person to prove herself to her teacher, and for a long time she stayed at nearly perfect scores. "Junior high school teachers are very interesting and interactive in class, unlike high school teachers who are rigid, I would be delighted to communicate with them in English." When faced with her college group members, they had a great rapport and would complete every assignment without a hitch. "Everyone is very easy-going and will face any difficulties together."

A good relationship provides a great deal of positive emotional value, and a student's motivation and learning effectiveness can only be achieved without the encouragement of teachers, the support of parents, and the companionship of classmates. In addition to intrinsic motivation such as interest and curiosity, all students' teachers, parents, and classmates stimulate their extrinsic motivation to learn, allowing them to continue to persevere and keep learning with a mindset of endeavor and progress.

3.1.4 Meaning

Student 1 sees English as a skill, and mastering this language will help her communicate better with the people she will meet in the future, and pave the way for future employment and development.

Student 2's initiative to learn English is overwhelmingly due to interest. "If I have the opportunity, I would like to go abroad, and laying a good foundation now will also make it easier for me to interact with foreigners in the future." Besides, his goal is to get a master's degree from a world-class university, and he thinks that learning English well will help him in taking exams, going to higher education, and getting a job.

Student 3 thinks that he will strengthen his English study even without the condition of graduation, which will help him to write his graduation thesis and cater to modern employment needs. In addition, understanding the culture of Western countries and comparing the cultural differences between China and the West can also increase his insight and deepen his knowledge of the world.

Student 4 realized the significance of learning English the moment she saw English that she could understand in her life. Learning English made her a better person. "I would share the meaning of these expressions with friends and family with great joy."

Different students have different perceptions of English learning, but all of them agree that English learning itself is useful and valuable. Moreover, English learning can also make their life more meaningful as well, such as improving their self-competence, broadening their job-seeking horizon, and enhancing their understanding of the world, etc. This cognitive psychology plays a leading role in their continuous learning of English.

3.1.5 Accomplishment

Student 1's English level already meets the school's graduation requirements, but she expects more

from herself. She is currently preparing for CET-6, and after that, she will try for the IELTS exam. “If I complete my English tasks at this stage, I will try to go further.”

Student 2 participated in the Little Diplomat competition in junior high school and acted in two English plays. In his freshman year, he achieved a high grade in the CET-4, as well as the second prize in the Translation and Interpreting Contest. In life, he gets a sense of achievement for being able to understand foreigners or learn new English expressions. “Sometimes when I watch American dramas, I hear some personal phrases that I find very interesting, and I think to myself that they can be expressed in this way.”

Student 3 chose to require a paper version of his transcript (usually electronic) when he initially registered for the CET-4, and the paper version gave a strong sense of reward, whether he passed the exam or not. Besides, learning English well and telling Chinese stories in English strengthened his sense of national pride, which in turn claimed to be part of his motivation to learn, and so complemented each other. “Introducing my country’s culture to foreigners in English has transformed me from a consistent input to a virtuous output, which makes me feel a sense of achievement.”

Student 4 won second prize in the school-level spelling bee in junior high school, and in the future, she also decided to actively enroll in English language competitions and get a master’s degree. This goal orientation will motivate her to progress and succeed in her English learning.

Every student is achievement-oriented and has high goals and aspirations. They also achieved some awards and progress more or less, and felt a sense of acquisition from English learning, which not only inspires learning motivation but also stimulates the experience of well-being in English learning.

As can be seen above, all four students’ English learning experiences contain all the dimensions of the PERMA model, therefore, the well-being of Chinese non-English major college students in English learning also has a five-factor structure, and the PERMA model is suitable for analyzing the well-being of English learning among Chinese students.

3.2 Analysis of Factors Influencing Well-being

P in the PERMA model only represents positive emotions, but in Student 2’s description, it was seen that his frustration was transformed into a sense of hope and that he was able to actively search for a better solution after frustration. In Student 3’s description, it was found that anxiety could also be transformed into positive motivation that prompted him to complete stages of progress, which in turn developed into positive outcomes that strengthened his English learning well-being. This suggests that negative emotions do not necessarily only lead to bad outcomes, but can instead contribute to the experience of well-being for some learners, which may be related to the resilience and perseverance exemplified by the two students above. Students with high resilience and perseverance were able to adjust themselves quickly after being obstructed over and over again, adapting positively to adversity, staying engaged in the activity, and making continuous progress towards their goals.

Moreover, every student mentioned in the interviews that an outgoing, active, and studious personality would help them learn English more smoothly, be more willing to communicate with their teachers and

classmates, and improve their own English proficiency. Meanwhile, all the students used various learning strategies in the learning process, such as making plans and consulting teachers to help them acquire relevant knowledge and make up for their shortcomings. These learning stories of high well-being experiences show that having this similar excellent character will help the effectiveness of English learning and improve the well-being of learning.

In conclusion, from the results of all the students' interviews, it is learned that the factors affecting well-being originate from individual personality differences. Therefore, teachers should respect students' differences, tailor their teaching to the students' needs, and adopt flexible means to implement teaching and learning to provide students with a high well-being learning environment.

4. Conclusion

Foreign research on learners' second language learning well-being has gained certain results, relatively speaking, the topic has not attracted enough attention from domestic scholars. Studying the constituent elements of domestic students' English learning well-being helps to further explore the methods of its enhancement, helping students learn in well-being and enhance their happiness in learning. The study concluded that the English learning well-being of Chinese non-English major college students also has a five-factor structure, which is highly compatible with the PERMA model, implying that the PERMA model is also applicable to the study of Chinese college students' English learning well-being. In addition, it was found that several character strengths (studiousness, perseverance, extroversion, etc.) help to promote students' English learning and enhance their well-being. Individual factors are one of the important variables that cannot be ignored in the study of SLA. Subsequent studies can expand the scope of the research objects and explore the effects of more different characters on students' English learning well-being. English teachers should consciously strengthen students' learning well-being in the teaching process, which can not only improve their English performance but also promote students' positive and healthy emotional experience so that every student can realize his or her positive potential and glow with well-being.

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