Original Paper

Promoting Goal Setting: An Experimental Study of Positive Psychology in an EFL Context

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Abstract

The present quasi-experimental study addresses the impact of a Character Strength Based Positive Psychology Intervention (CSBPPI) on Goal Setting (GS) of TEFL university students in Iran. In so doing, the study utilized an experimental design with 18 participants in the control group and 18 participants in the experimental group which totalled 7 male and 29 female students. The pretest showed that the participants of the two groups were homogenous with regard to their proficiency level as well as their goal setting. Data was collected over five months using Erickson et al. (2015) goal setting questionnaire before and after an MA course. The results of the post-test revealed that PP has a positive and significant impact on learners' goal setting. The findings from this research suggest positive paths from positive psychology to understanding, managing and successfully setting the goals.

Keywords

EFL context, goal setting, positive psychology

1. Introduction

We are not thinking creatures that feel, but we are feeling creatures that think (Damasio, 1994). A variety of studies have acknowledged that positive emotions lead to the sort of thinking that expands individual's awareness and builds the personal and social resources for the future life (Gregersen, MacIntyre, & Meza, 2016). Coupled with, positive emotional experiences make resiliency, resourcefulness, social connections, and optimal functioning through broadminded coping efforts (Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels, & Conway, 2009; Fredrickson, 2013a). This change leads to an interactive, upward spiral connecting positive affections to positive outcomes, a

process that contributes directly to the personal and professional growth and success.

Equally important, positive psychology brings about a noticeable shift in educational psychology by creating positive emotions promoting students' strengths, satisfaction, and character development (Seligman et al., 2009; Seligman, 2013). Character education's goal is to insure that student's academic abilities are developed in union with his/her character (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004) which is in line with the positive education movement (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). Additionally, Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, and Smith (2006) argue that what happens at schools or universities builds students' character. In other words, the mission of positive psychology is measuring, understanding, and building human strengths and characters (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Character strength serves as a path toward a life of greater virtue, happiness, and well-being to have better relationships, improve health, growth happiness, and promote performance. Thus, using learners' strengths is considered to be accordant with their intrinsic interests, values and goals specifically in educational settings. One way that strengths may work to enhance profitable outcomes is through setting attainable personal and educational goals. Such individuals have the confidence in their own ability to achieve a goal, would believe that reaching the goal is probable with sufficient effort, would overcome challenges and restructure strategies to reach the goal, and would bounce back from adversity to reach even higher levels of goal attainment. Luthans et al. (2015) have asserted that up to 40% of our future can be changed with intentional development.

As mentioned by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), positive psychology sees individuals as decision makers who have choices and preferences (p. 8). It tries to help them focus on their strengths and capacities that can be measured, promote, and effectively managed for performance improvement in their daily life (Luthans, 2002, p. 59). In other words, positive psychology makes the feeling of having a purpose and meaning in life or serving a cause greater than one's self (Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008). This sense of understanding and meaning has been shown to be associated with life satisfaction, self-realization, and feelings of fulfillment and joy in different domains (Steger et al., 2008). Furthermore, passion for long-term goals has predicted educational attainment and success beyond that of IQ (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). This skill to put forth effort toward challenges while preserving interest over time, despite failure and adversity, has been positively related to individuals' life satisfaction (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Peterson et al., 2007). However, to set an attainable goal, one should first have a full understanding and accepting what his qualities, skills and abilities are (Jernigan, 2012).

Considering the strong role of learners' goal setting ability in general and academic success and its association with factors which are conducive to learning, it seems vital to find the strategies, recourses, and approaches which may cause its development. Positive psychology makes a great shift in educational psychology by stimulating positive emotions promoting students' strengths and wellbeing. To empirically investigate this assumption, the present study sought to examine the

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impact of introducing and integrating PP on the GS of TEFL university students in Iran. Keeping in view the mentioned overall purpose of the present study, the following research question guided our study:

1) Does positive psychology have any significant impact on EFL learners' gaol setting?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Positive Psychology and Second/Foreign Language Acquisition

The humanistic trend in the 1970s and 1980s took a holistic view of the learner combining cognition and affect in language teaching and learning. Its main aim was to emphasize the consideration that the affective aspects of second language learning are as vital as the cognitive aspects, and the learner should be treated in some sense as a whole person (Stevick, 1990). As a matter of fact, merging affect and cognition is a key tenet of many modern SLA models. However, affects have been ignored in most educational studies (Garret & Young, 2009), especially in second/foreign language teaching and learning (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). Different studies have shown that language learning process is fundamentally an emotionally driven task (Maclntyre, 2002; Dörnyei, 2005; Garret & Young, 2009; Bown & White, 2010; Imai, 2010). In Accordance with Schumann (1997), since emotions involve changes which in turn affect cognitive processing and performance. Therefore, to a large extent, the interaction of emotional experiences with other external factors can determine the quantity and quality of performance and success in language acquisition. In Bolitho et al. (2003), it is acknowledged that one of the most significant principles of language learning is that "learners learn best when efficiently engaged, and voluntarily invest time, energy and interest in the learning process" (p. 252). In the same vein, MacIntyre (2002) mentions that the degree of students' engagement is because of the affections they experience during the process of language learning. These affections can be triggered owing to a number of issues including the interplay with peers and teachers, learning inputs and students' own feelings in the context of language classroom climate (Sansone & Thoman, 2005; Scherer, 2005; Hascher, 2008).

In like manner, Scherer (2005) asserts that affections stimulate, monitor, and guide specific motivational behaviours from students, empowering them to start and complete a particular learning task. As a result, the experiences language learners are exposed to and their consequences demonstrate the learning activities (Mendez Lopez, 2011). In other words, the positive emotions that learners experience inside the classroom and the degree of the class engagement they show during language learning process go hand in hand. Accordingly, language teachers should guide "learners especially foreign language learners decrease the negative influence of emotional experiences on their learning process, and increase positive emotions which motivate learning and attainment" (Mendez Lopez, 2011, p. I). As brought up above, regrettably little attention has been given to the changes positive emotions can make to second language learning, and most researchers have broadly focused on negative emotions, specifically language anxiety, with the aim of examining

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their adverse impacts on language learning process (Ely, 1986; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012).

The main finding of most studies is that positive emotions provide individuals' joyful involvement and association with their environment as well as maximize social interactions (e.g., Cacioppo, Priester, & Berntson, 1993; Carver & Scheier 1990; Clore, 1994; Davidson, 1993; Frijda, 1994). In comparison to negative emotions that filter individuals' performance, positive emotions extend enjoyable performances (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005) which form personal resources including physical, intellectual, and social ones. likewise, Diener, Sandvik, and Pavot (1991) proved that the amount of time people experience positive emotions and their happiness or well-being go hand in hand, that is "the events which result in intense but approximately seldom positive experiences are unlikely to boost long-term happiness to a considerable degree" (p. 137). This is further argued by Watson (2002) that positive environments and experiences can increase the individuals' level of satisfaction, enthusiasm, and confidence. In accordance with Fredrickson (2001), positive emotions are an indicator of thriving, and need cultivating due to cultivate well-being and psychological advancement over time. In doing so, the emphasis should be on interest, happiness, absorption, contentment, and love rather than on tension, sadness, anger, and depression. In their studies, Isen and colleagues (as cited in Fredrickson, 2004) claimed that people experiencing positive emotions are more creative (Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987), exhibiting flexibility (Isen & Daubman, 1984), and integrity (Isen, Rosenzweig, & Young, 1991). They further declared that individuals experiencing positive emotions are open to information and show stronger preferences for a range of behavioural options or experiments (Kahn & Isen, 1993). Widely, Isen emphasized that positive emotions build a "broad, flexible cognitive organization and ability to merged various materials" (Isen, 1990, p. 89).

In like manner, self determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) provides a clear framework to strengths use, antecedents, and consequences. SDT emphasizes that individuals strive to perform an activity because they find it interesting and pleasurable and thus have autonomous (vs. controlled) motivation to (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Grant, 2008). In turn, autonomous motivation is the consequence of positive attitude, well-being, and happiness (see Gagné & Deci, 2005 for a review). It means that when individuals feel good about themselves using their strengths (Linley & Harrington, 2006), they become intrinsically motivated to try (Linley, Nielsen, Wood, Gillett, & Biswas-Diener, 2010). Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, and Smith (2006) argue that the experiences that learners have at schools or universities can build their character. Character strength, a protective factor, helps to decrease negative feelings and enables individuals flourishing (Park & Peterson, 2008). This includes positive starts, which means to identify, understand, and put strengths in action plan. Peterson (2006) believes that "learners should recognize, develop, and use as many strengths of character as possible" (p. 157) and he also claims that educational settings are great places to teach character. Character education tries to insure that a student's academic

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abilities are developed in union with his/her character strength (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Lickona, 1993) which is in line with the positive education movement (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009).

As a result, the fundamental consideration of positive psychology is a thorough attention to the pleasant experiences that educational settings can build. It means the learners are happy in the environment in which they obtain instructions they will learn easily and more permanently (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2009). The study of positive emotion in SLA in particular, is a potentially rich and powerful direction for future investigations (Gabryś-Barker & Gałajda, 2016; MacIntyre et al., 2016). Accordingly, enhancing EFL learners' positive emotions needs to be at the focus of research attention, serving as a tool to foster human being's wellbeing specifically in field of second language acquisition.

2.2 Positive Psychology and Goal Setting

Our goals are what we try to attain, the object or purpose of an action (Lock, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981). In its academic sense, the students set some goals as achieving skills and knowledge, accomplishing work, and getting good scores in a course. In other word, they understand, monitor, and follow their goal progress (Bandura, 1988; Locke & Latham, 1990). Accordingly, goals are motivating forces to make individual invest much time and energy and show persistence to focus their attention on related task features and the strategies which facilitate their task accomplishment (Locke & Latham, 1990).

Setting goals for our life can increase our motivation to go on. In fact, strong integration of goals and motivation is the reason why most definitions of motivation incorporate goals. As an example, Mitchell (1982) defines motivation as "the psychological processes that bring consciousness, direction, and persistence of willful actions that are goal centered" (p. 81). However, the influence of goals on motivation and behavior depend on goals strength and quality. For instance, it has long been known that giving people particular designed goals to accomplish rather than telling them to do without defining their goals boosts their motivation (see Locke & Brian, 1966; Brian & Locke, 1967; Locke & Latham, 2002). By the same token, setting goals enhances achievement. A variety of studies provide evidence that setting goals develops success rate in different environments specifically educational settings (Latham & Locke, 2007, Locke & Latham, 1990). In academic contexts, when students have clear goals, they are more likely to try to close the gap between their present stand or ability and the desired objectives (Hattie & Timperly, 2007). Several studies have shown that setting attainable goals increases individuals' likelihood of achieving, pursuing, and fulfilling their wants. When teachers set certain educational goals, learners have an explicit and exact image of course expectations which helps them to concentrate their attempt effectively toward the attainment of their goals (Hattie & Timperly, 2007).

In addition, goals motivate learners to invest much time, energy, and effort to accomplish the task features and the strategies which guarantee their success in the task (Bandura, 1986, 1988, cited in

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Schunk, 1990). Goals do not basically enhance learning and motivation, but their properties, proximity, and difficulty are of most significance (Bandura, 1977; Latham & Yukl, 1975; Locke, 1968; Locke et al., 1981; Schunk, 1984). The relationship between goal setting and learner's wellbeing has been well documented in the literature. Different studies have acknowledged that setting goals and following them is related to issues of wellbeing (e.g., Brunstein, 1993; Cantor & Sanderson, 2003; Emmons, 1986). In effect, the learners who follow personally designed goals experience higher levels of satisfaction than persons who have no clear goal in mind (e.g., Freund & Baltes, 2002). Furthermore, not only setting goals influences wellbeing but also the perception of making progress or even accomplishing these goals have some positive outcomes (e.g., Brunstein, 1993; Wiese, 2007). While Some researchers claim that ''setting goals'' is adequate for boosting happiness (e.g., Freund & Baltes, 2002; Klinger, 1977), other researchers have illustrated that the goal content (e.g., Emmons, 1991; Kasser & Ryan, 1993) and appraisal (e.g., opportunity for goal comprehension: Emmons, 1986; perceived support: McGregor & Little, 1998; motive congruence: Brunstein et al., 1998) is relevant to wellbeing.

Despite the importance of PP and its capability to make a change in students' GS, to the best of our knowledge, very few studies have examined how pp can boost GS especially in EFL contexts. Consequently, this article is the first—though not an exhaustive—attempt to identify this hidden effect.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Participants of the present quasi-experimental study were 36 (29 female and 7 male) MA students of the University of Kerman, Iran, majoring in TEFL. They were selected by administering TOFEL to a group of 45 students from whom thirty six students were chosen. During the instruction, attempts were made to provide the two groups with equal opportunities in terms of class time, the number of sessions, and materials used. The participants were between the ages of 22 and 35, and they had learned English only through classroom instruction. All participants of the current study were L1 speakers of Persian and confirmed their interest to take part in the present study by signing a consent form after receiving information about the aims and the main scope of the research, the data to be collected and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. To meet the main requirement of experimental research and to ensure that the learners were homogenous with respect to their English proficiency level and their GS interest, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), along with the Erickson et al. (2015) Goal Setting Questionnaire were administered as pretests.

3.2 Instrument

To assess the participants' level of goal setting, the Goal Setting Questionnaire (GSQ) by Erickson et al. (2015) was used. The eighteen closed—ended items of the questionnaire on the measure were rated on a 5-point scale with related labels (not very like me to very like me). Additionally, the Cronbach Alpha reliability of the measure with the present sample was calculated to be .86. Hence, the questionnaire was deemed to be a reliable instrument for eliciting the intended data.

3.3 Procedure

The present quantitative study was conducted over thirteen sessions between September and December 2017. The following four steps made the smooth sequence of the current study: 1) proficiency pretest with the control and experimental groups, 2) goal setting pretest with the control and experimental groups, 3) integration of PP into classroom activities and raising students' awareness to their strengths in the experimental group, and 4) goal setting posttest with both groups. In this study, the independent variable (positive psychology) is considered to have a direct effect on the dependent variable (goal setting). The two classes were conducted by the same teacher who was one of the researchers in the present study. The course book, and the instructional materials, as well as the procedure were identical for the participants of the two groups. In both groups, about 60 mints of the class time was devoted to working with the course book, and the rest (30 mints) to watching CSBPP clips. By adopting a character strength-based approach, we assisted the students to set attainable goals. To this aim, at first the learners tried to have a good understanding and feeling of what their qualities, skills and abilities were focusing on their strengths and psychological capacities that could be measured, developed, and effectively managed. And then based on their personal and professional strengths they started to set their future goals. During this period, the learners in control group were given some instructional tasks based on the course book topics.

4. Results

As stated above, the present study was conducted with the main goal of exploring the effect of positive psychology on EFL learners' goal setting. Consequently, a basic quantitative research design was adopted to collect and analyse the data in the present study. To identify whether a significant change occurred in the goal setting of each group between the beginning and the end of the study, paired samples T-Test and independent samples T-Tests were used, with the alpha level set at .05. The result of paired sample t-test analysis showed a moderate difference in the mean scores for the pre test (M1=38.61, SD1=4.37) and posttest (M2=46.22, SD2=4.37) of control group, t=-5.06,df=17, p<0.01, and the effect size was ES=1.63 and r=.0.63 .But the results strongly confirmed a significant difference in the mean scores for experimental group in pre- test (M1=37.28, SD1=3.59) and post-test (M2=72.22, SD2=4.25), t=-26.38, df=17, p<0.01), and the effect size was ES=8.91 and r=0.976.

The result of the independent t-test analysis did not show a significant difference in the mean scores

for control and experimental group in pre-test (M2=37.28, SD2=18) and post-test (M1=38.61, SD1=4.94), t= .93, df=34. P<0.01. But the results strongly confirmed a significant difference in the mean scores for control and experimental group in pre- test (M1=46.22, SD1=4.37) and post-test (M2=72.22, SD2=4.25), t=-18.09, df=34, p<0.01, and the effect size was ES=6.03 and r=0.949.

Table 1. Paired T-Test of Goal Setting

Time	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T-Test	df	P-Value
Post test	**25**	**38.61**	**4.94**	**.93**	**34**	**0.36**
Control						
experimental	**25**	**37.28**	**3.59**			

Table 2. Independent T-Test of Goal Setting

Time	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T-Test	df	P-Value
Post test Control	18	46.22	4.37	-18.09	34	0.000
experimental	18	72.22	4.25			

5. Discussion

Given the growing interest in PP and strengths use in the academic and professional environments, the present study sought to examine the effectiveness of implementing a strength-based positive psychology intervention for the first time in an EFL setting. Regarding the research question—1) Does positive psychology have any significant impact on EFL learners' gaol setting–the results of this study presented in Tables 1 & 2 demonstrated that the positive psychology was successful and helped EFL learners understand, value and build their goals. According to the data analysis, the current study provides a practical recommendation on how to help learners set their goals based on a self-determination theory of character strength. In other words, the emphasis in this study is on EFL learners' individual strengths and personal motivation as a drive to set their goals. Peterson and Park (2009) assert that character strengths and capacities exist within all of us. From this perspective, the mission of PP is not to enforce or impose, but rather to care, trigger, and nurture existing strengths. In this study characters are not considered as fixed and narrowly defined constructs. Accordingly, PP views characters as multifaceted, dynamic, idiosyncratic, and specific to the individual. Within the context of this study, a new direction of positive character is to help the students understand and effectively use their unique character strengths to set their future goals.

Moreover, the results supported the Bandura's (1982) self-efficacy theory, that self-respect is the basic motivating force of goal-setting. The findings of the current study concur with other studies that show goal setting is a significant construct relevant to a variety of positive psychology

upshots, including overall psychological adjustment, positive emotion, social confidence, prosaically behavior, and life satisfaction (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Leary & MacDonald, 2003).

The findings confirm a supportive role for positive affections, a topic not completely studied in SLA but which might provide productive paths of enquiry for future research (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014). These results contribute to the flourishing interest in applications of positive psychology in SLA (Gabryś-Barker & Gałajda, 2016; MacIntyre et al., 2016), and in particular related to strengths theory (Clifton & Nelson, 1992) which reflects understanding, accepting, and building on human strengths and capacities (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

6. Conclusion

As indicated earlier, the present study set out to investigate the impact of implementing PP in EFL classes on students' GS ability. The results indicated the positive and significant impact of PP on GS. In other words, the integration of PP in EFL classes tends to foster TEFL university students' GS. It can be plausibly argued that positive emotions considered as the outcome of character strength expand learners' strength awareness to build future goals. This leads positive emotions to positive outcomes, a process that contributes directly to the personal and professional goal growth. Thus, using their strengths, the learners have the confidence in their own ability to achieve a goal, would believe that reaching the goal is probable with sufficient effort, would overcome obstacles and redirect strategies to reach the goal, and would bounce back from adversity to reach even higher levels of goal attainment. In other words, positive psychology brings the feeling of having a purpose in a meaningful life (Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008). Possessing such sense of meaning in life has been shown to be associated with satisfaction, self realization, and feelings of fulfillment (Steger et al., 2008). We realized that because the learners felt good about themselves when using their strengths, they became intrinsically motivated to set their own personal and professional goals. Moreover, they had the confidence in their own ability to achieve their goals, and believed that reaching the goals was probable with sufficient effort.

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