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DOCTORAL (PHD) DISSERTATION

Thesis booklet

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USING POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY-BASED TASKS IN THE SECONDARY ENGLISH AS A
FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) CLASSROOM:

THE POTENTIAL OF MINDFULNESS-BASED ACTIVITIES

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Introduction.....	3
Background	3
The “cargo”: the content of the tasks used in the research	3
The “vehicle”: tasks	4
The “destination”: the classroom	4
Research niche and rationale	6
Research design	8
Study 1: main findings.....	11
Study 2: main findings.....	12
Conclusions and implications	13
Related publications.....	16
References.....	17

Introduction

Positive Psychology is a relatively new field in psychology, and it is already having an impact on education: more and more international associations form and work toward promoting Positive Education, which aims at shifting the focus from what can go wrong and how it can be corrected in education towards what is working and how it can be fostered (Bott, 2017). This way, ultimately, education might be a way of maintaining students' wellbeing and providing them with strategies to do so throughout life.

The aim of this dissertation is to explore how Hungarian secondary school students and Hungarian English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers view classroom activities that were designed to be used in English classes and enhance students' wellbeing. In addition, this research also aims at scrutinizing what teachers think about the integration of Positive Psychology into teacher training.

Background

The background of this research is described in detail in the dissertation. To provide a logical overview of only the key points here, without any regard to the historical underpinnings or development of each concept, the figure below will be used as a tool.

The “cargo”: the content of the tasks used in the research

First, as for the content of the activities that are the backbone of this research, Humanistic Language Teaching needs defining. In humanistic education, the main aim is “the development of the self or, more simply, what it means to be human” (Harron, 1983, p. 535.). This, applied in language teaching, is Humanistic Language Teaching. According to Kemp (1994), a humanistic language teacher is oriented towards compassion and sensitivity in their practice and is aware of students' emotional and spiritual needs that arise because language teaching and learning involves the whole person.

A movement oftentimes competing and in opposition with the humanistic, Positive Psychology was first defined by Seligman and Csíkszentmihályi as the “science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions” (Seligman and Csíkszentmihályi, 2000, p.5.). However, the term *positive psychology* was, in fact, coined much earlier by one of the key figures of the *humanistic movement* in psychology, Abraham Maslow (1970, first published in 1954). He used the term in contrast to psychologists' traditional preoccupation with mental dysfunction. Therefore, PosPsy is nowadays said to have grown out of the humanistic movement, with very different philosophical underpinnings (Waterman, 2013), the former specializing in mass data and testing hypotheses and the latter dealing with specific individuals' difficulties, in-depth, having a micro-perspective.

As for the history of PosPsy in language education, though it may be relatively new, this current has already gained a lot of research interest. In their work summarizing PosPsy in language education, namely, Positive Language Education (PLE), Mercer and her colleagues (2018) quote Cook with the reminder that

learning an L2 has several internal side effects (Cook, 2013, p.51.). As Mercer et al. (2018) claim, language teachers are already using strategies borrowed from PosPsy, which, to the authors, means teaching wellbeing in its *weak form*: integrated into a subject matter and taught through some primary material. As opposed to this, teaching wellbeing in its *strong form* means that it becomes a separate subject.

Yet Positive Psychology is a vast area with a lot of techniques that can be used to enhance one's wellbeing. That is why the scope of the research – and thus that of the content of the tasks used in the research – was narrowed down to mindfulness as such a way (see Ivtzan, 2016). According to Kabat-Zinn, “mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, pp. 3-4.).

The “vehicle”: tasks

After establishing what the content is, one needs to establish what kind of vehicle will take this cargo to the classroom. For this project, tasks as defined by Skehan (2009) were chosen as such a vehicle. According to him, a task is “an activity in which meaning is primary, there is some sort of relationship to the real world, task completion has some priority, and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome” (Skehan, 2009, p.38.).

The “destination”: the classroom

The place where the tasks were to be used is, primarily, the EFL classroom where teacher(s) and students work together towards a shared goal and use English as a tool. Also, the aim of this research is to find out how a set of tasks might be related to maintaining or even enhancing student wellbeing. This means that wellbeing needs to be defined, and then both students and teachers should be described in terms of their relations to student wellbeing.

Even if the **definition of wellbeing** is often just a thorough description of it, Dodge and her colleagues attempt to use the metaphor of a see-saw for wellbeing and thus define it: “we would like to propose a new definition of wellbeing as the balance point between an individual's resource pool and the challenges faced” (Dodge et al., 2012, p.230). As for **strengthening** one's wellbeing Seligman (2011) proposed a model that was later adapted for education, as well. His classification, the so-called PERMA **model** names five areas in which improvements can enhance one's wellbeing: positive emotion, engagement, (positive) relationships, meaning, and accomplishments (Seligman 2011). The model was subsequently used as the basis for a more refined conceptualization of wellbeing in education, which also considered the individual as a complex dynamic system (Oxford, 2018). Therefore, this **adaptation**, called the EMPATHICS **model** by Oxford (2016) had more than five elements and focused on how a language learner can flourish in the classroom. The model included originally 18, then, in its final version, 21 dimensions, among which are emotions, meaning and motivation, agency and autonomy, time, hardiness and habits of mind, intelligences, identity, investment, imagination, character strengths, and self-components such as self-efficacy, self-concept, self-esteem, and

self-regulation (see also Oxford 2018). Later, Alrabai and Dewaele (2023) **criticized the EMPATHICS model**, saying it was “acronym-driven” (p.8.), and narrowed it down, establishing only 3 dimensions: (1) empathy, emotions, emotional intelligence, engagement, (2) motivation, and (3) character strengths, which they called the **E4MC model of student emotions**.

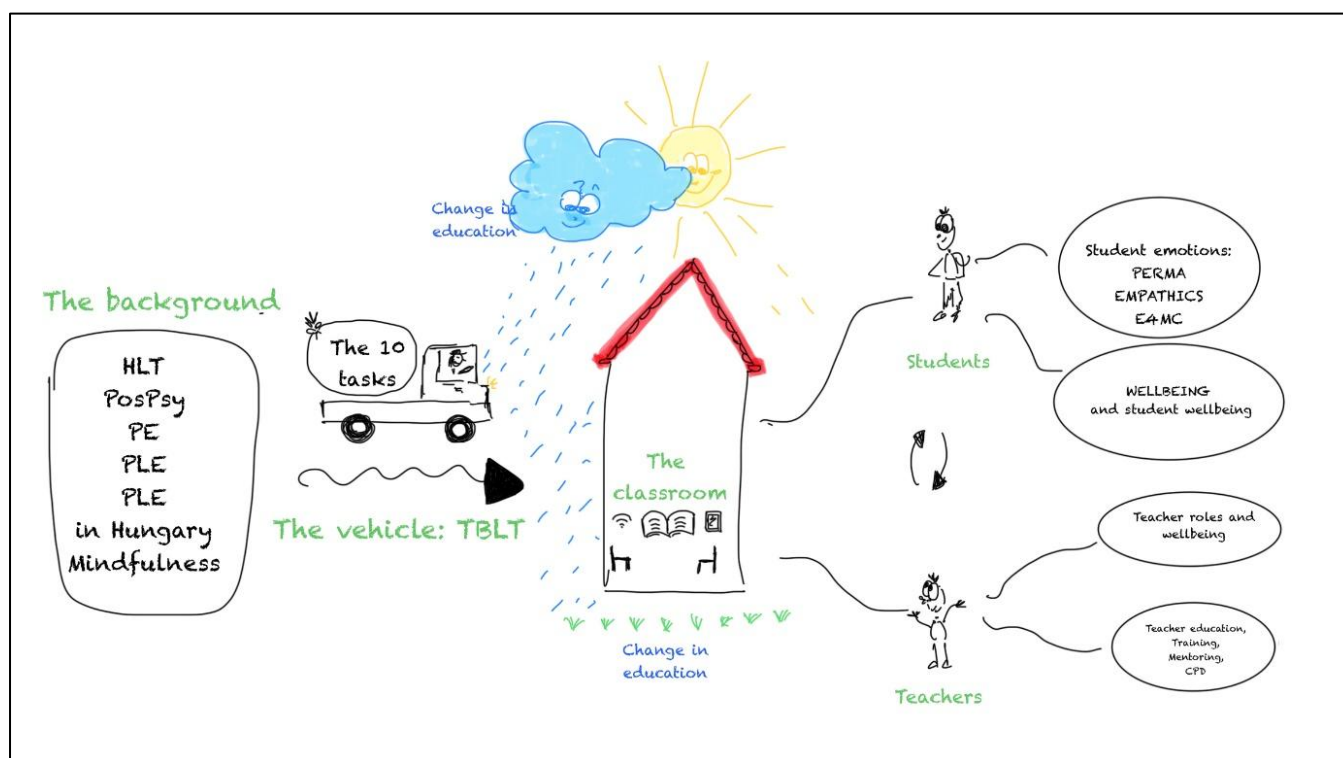
Moving on to teachers, the following areas need describing: the relationship between teacher roles and student wellbeing, and the way in which it might appear in teacher education. As for the **connection between the job** of an EFL teacher and their students’ **wellbeing**, teacher roles might need scrutiny. Underhill (1999) distinguishes between three approaches to teaching. In his terminology, a *Lecturer*’s area of expertise is the subject matter – in the case of EFL, this would mean a thorough knowledge of the language, its grammatical structures, vocabulary, etc. In addition to that, a *Teacher* is not only an expert of the subject, but also has the necessary knowledge of teaching methodology that can help them convey their message and help their students understand the subject matter. Finally, a *Facilitator*, besides having these qualities, by careful observation of participants in a learning situation and monitoring, is also an expert of creating an atmosphere that can help students develop and exploit the learning situation to its full potential. This last approach seems to be closest to what Positive Education sets as its goals. However, these only broadly relate to the definition of PE applied in the dissertation, that is, “encouraging and supporting individuals and communities to flourish” (Bott, 2017, p.16.).

But how is the teacher to help their students flourish? An important issue here is whether teachers are aware of the above-mentioned concepts as a starting point. This may mean that information about wellbeing, student emotions, and positive psychology might need to be integrated into teacher education. Therefore, it is important to have a brief overview of the current structure of teacher education in Hungary.

In Hungary, currently teachers are trained not only at university, but also in schools (cf. e.g. Halász, 2023), which, supplemented with their own introspective work, means that there are different areas in which they can open their horizons to new trends and approaches. Such a new trend is positive education, which is a whole-school approach using PosPsy towards the wellbeing of the school community and the individual members of it. Even though grassroots initiatives of implementing PE can be found in Hungary (e.g. Ladnai, 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Fodor et al., 2018; for complex programs, also see Füz and Hegedűs, 2020), the educational system and teacher training have not adopted this approach on a systemic level. From the job descriptions of teachers at different educational levels and in the list of competences a public education teacher must have, however, it turns out that maintaining wellbeing of students is the job of an EFL teacher in Hungary (Symeonidis, 2019, p.407., based on 8/2013. (I. 30.) EMMI rendelet, 2013 and 326/2013. (VIII. 30.) Kormányrendelet, 2023). That is why the CPD courses teachers take might be of relevance in developing these competences and that is why teacher participants of this dissertation were asked how they think training in PosPsy and PE should happen.

Research niche and rationale

One might ask why EFL classes were chosen to study how PosPsy might be introduced in schools in this research. Mercer and her colleagues (2018) distinguish between weak and *strong forms* of teaching wellbeing in schools: the latter, since it entails introducing a whole new subject to the curriculum, might mean extra work and more burden for students in schools where they already spend too much time (see Gyarmathy, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2019). What is more, language teachers are already using strategies borrowed from positive psychology (Mercer et al., 2018). There might be books integrating life skills into language learning (for this, see Mercer et al., 2018, p.23.), but the research background with sound hypotheses built and then tested is

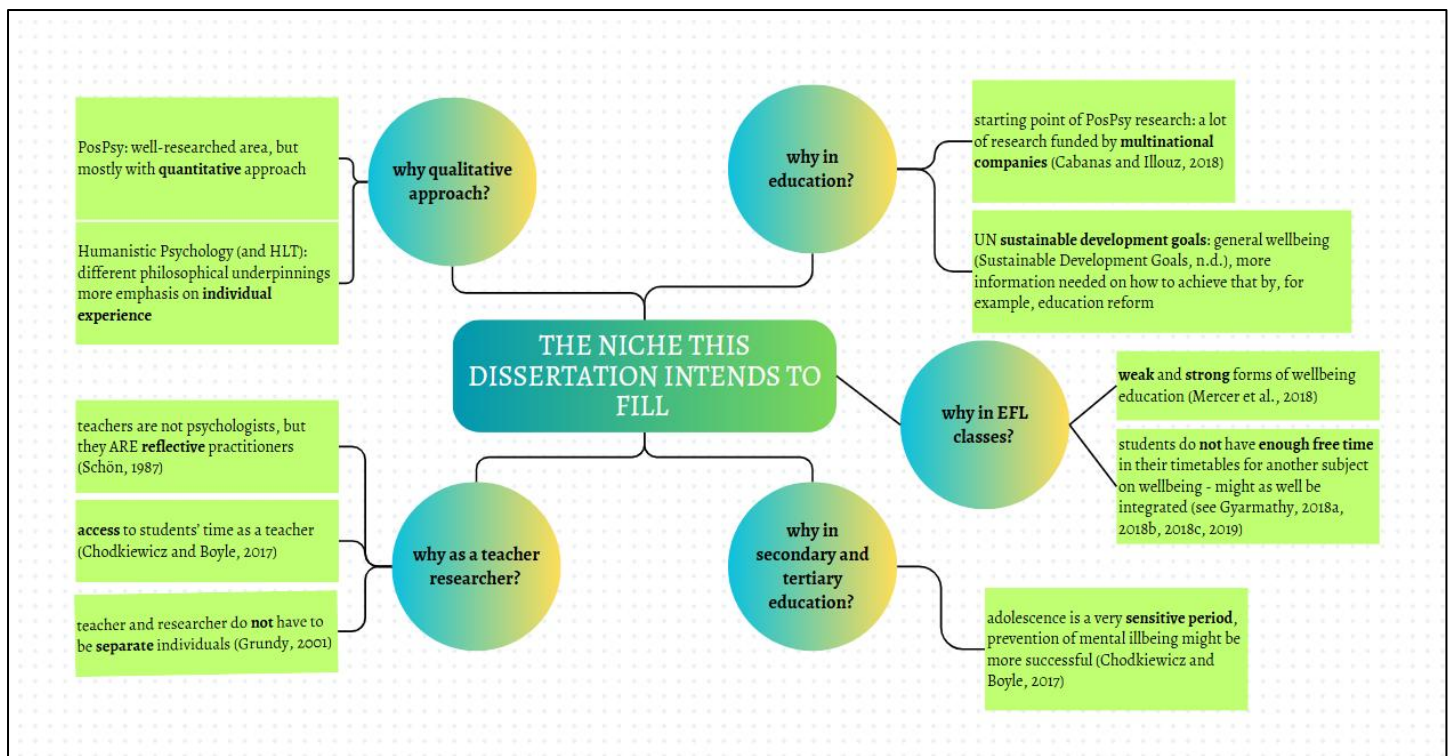


lacking. That is why doing a qualitative study into the use of practicable PosPsy tasks in the EFL classroom could broaden our knowledge and provide a more solid foundation for such practices.

A choice which made this research difficult was the age group of the participants: in Study 1, the participants are the teacher researcher and her under-age students. The reason for choosing minors as participants was that they are considered learners in a very sensitive period of their lives (Chodkiewicz and Boyle, 2017), which makes their perspective unique. According to Chodkiewicz and Boyle (2017) PosPsy-based interventions should be made by teachers as "they have a monopoly over a student's time" (Chodkiewicz and Boyle, 2017, p. 75.), meaning that teachers have easy access to the adolescent population.

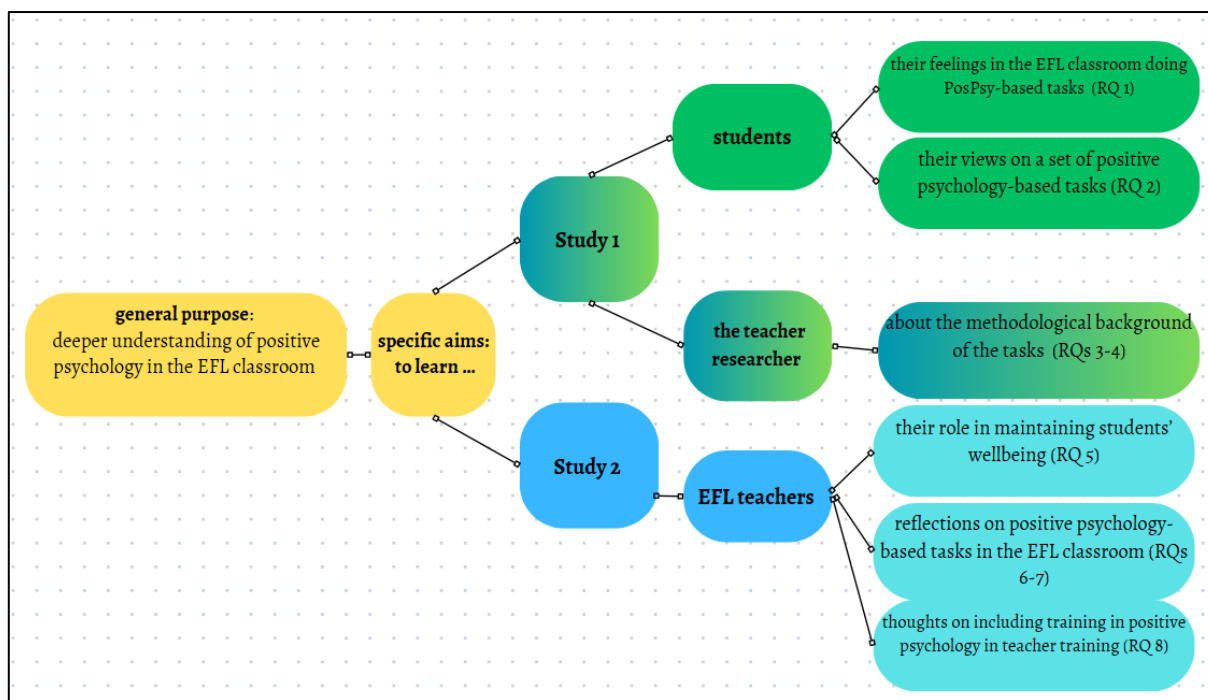
If teachers are to try out PosPsy-based tasks with more teenagers, though, they should receive training in positive psychology, especially because classroom practitioners often do not have access to the latest findings in the field. What is more, by reaching out to adolescents, it would be possible to prevent mental illnesses as well as to enhance academic achievement (Chodkiewicz and Boyle, 2017). This is also confirmed by Layard and Clark (2015), who state that being mentally ill creates a considerable financial burden for society and, therefore, early interventions should be promoted in schools to help students thrive and do better schoolwork, as well.

Finally, even though teachers are not necessarily trained researchers, as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1987), they hypothesize implicitly every day about their own classrooms based on the information (the data) they receive from their classes and analyze such data quantitatively and qualitatively in a variety of ways. What is more, they also try to make sense of what happens to their students as individuals. That is why, as Grundy (2001) claims, teachers and researchers could either become collaborators or the teacher-as-researcher could do both types of work to gain an even deeper understanding of their own classroom. The latter is the intention of this dissertation.



Research design

Exploring the topic from an emic perspective, this dissertation brings together findings from two studies, which, alongside the specific aims of each study, is demonstrated in the figure below. Study 1 focuses on one setting, a secondary EFL classroom, where ten Positive Psychology-based tasks were introduced. Data gathered in this context consists of the reflective notes of the teacher researcher and post-hoc written feedback by her students as well as individual interviews with them. Study 2 brings other EFL teachers into the center of attention. In this part of the research, participating teachers with working at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of education were asked to try the same set of tasks used in Study 1 and document their experiences via post-hoc written feedback and individual interviews. Data underwent thematic content analysis, and hypotheses were generated regarding the research topic.



Study 1 was carried out at a Budapest-based secondary school where I was teaching at the time - making me a teacher and a participant of my own study as well. From the different perspectives, the following research questions were investigated:

SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' VIEWPOINT

- RQ1 How do **students** say they feel
doing language tasks based on positive psychology
in the secondary EFL classroom?
- RQ2 How do **students** view
language tasks based on positive psychology
in the secondary EFL classroom?

THE TEACHER RESEARCHER'S VIEWPOINT

- RQ3 What **methodological challenges** does a **secondary teacher of English** encounter
in using positive psychology-based activities
in the English as a foreign language classroom?
- RQ4 What **short- and long-term effects** does a **secondary teacher of English** notice
in their group when using positive psychology-based activities?

In Study 2, EFL teachers with different backgrounds were recruited through first criterion, and then snowball sampling (Dörnyei, 2007). The general purpose was to gain insight into the opinions of experienced teachers who might also be involved in teacher education. In this study, these four research questions were explored:

EFL TEACHERS' VIEWPOINT

- RQ5 What do **teachers of English** think about

the role of the EFL teacher

in maintaining students' well-being?

RQ6 What do **teachers of English** think about
integrating positive psychology-based tasks
into EFL classes?

RQ7 What are the **reflections** of **teachers of English**
on a specific set of tasks developed for the integration of
language and positive psychology in the language classroom?

RQ8 What do **teachers of English** think about
including positive psychology in the **continuing professional development** of EFL teachers?

Study 1: main findings

Study 1 comprised two phases. The research was conducted by me as the researcher teacher with 19 secondary school students in a Budapest based secondary school. First, the specific set of positive psychology-based tasks was done in 3 consecutive classes in October 2023. At the end of each class, students were asked to provide written feedback via three Google Forms (one for each class so as not to confuse the data). Then, 6 of the students agreed to have online, semi-structured interviews in closed Microsoft Teams meetings after school to gain specific information about students' impressions.

To provide another perspective, as the leader of the activities, I was also keeping a reflections journal about the positive-psychology-based classes; I wrote entries after each class, and also after a longer time to reflect on the long-term effects I was able to witness. Thematic content analysis was performed on all the data (see Dörnyei, 2007; Friedman, 2012)

The main findings of Study 1 are enumerated under each research question below.

*RQ1: How do students **say they feel** doing language tasks based on positive psychology in the secondary EFL classroom?*

Before doing the tasks, students had mostly negative feelings, which they reported to have changed while they were doing the tasks and after having finished them. In addition, *tiredness* was often reported by students, which might confirm what Németh (2022) stated about the general physical state of teenagers in Hungary.

*RQ2 How do students **view** language tasks based on positive psychology in the secondary EFL classroom?*

Students found PosPsy-based tasks useful for non-L2-related purposes such as *relaxation*, a better classroom *atmosphere*, and developing *group dynamics*. Yet, according to students and the teacher researcher alike, having done PosPsy-based tasks did not sufficiently contribute to L2 development. Furthermore, students even added that more topic-related vocabulary would have been necessary for them to be able to perform the tasks well. Finally, student interviewees agreed that participation in these tasks should be voluntary.

RQ3 What methodological challenges does a secondary teacher of English encounter in using positive psychology-based activities in the English as a foreign language classroom?

According to teacher researcher notes, discipline problems occurred due to the lack of familiarity with such activities. What is more, it seemed difficult for the teacher researcher to decide when and how a task is completed and thus monitoring task performance posed further difficulties, which may mean that task completion as well as the role of the teacher in guiding students through an activity should be redefined.

*RQ4 What **short- and long-term effects** does a secondary teacher of English **notice** in their group when using positive psychology-based activities?*

PosPsy-based tasks can pose difficulties and thus can tire the EFL teacher more than routine-like activities, while student-teacher rapport might be improved by the fact that PosPsy-based tasks can be considered special

and thus may give students the feeling of uniqueness. Moreover, as one occasion mentioned in the teacher notes attests, doing PosPsy and mindfulness-based activities in one classroom might affect others by the fact that students may spread the word of it among their peers who belong to other study groups.

Study 2: main findings

Similarly to Study 1, this study also had two phases. In the first one, teachers from various academic and working contexts were asked to do 2 or 3 of the tasks described in the booklet used in Study 1 and then to provide feedback via a Google Form (see in Appendices P and Q). This resulted in Google Form entries by altogether 12 different participants (some of them filled out the form more than once, also).

In phase 2 of the study, those participants were contacted who had signaled their willingness to be interviewed via the Google Form. With them, semi-structured interviews were held and recorded in closed Microsoft Teams meetings.

Also following the pattern set by Study 1, after interviews were transcribed using Alrite, data underwent thematic content analysis.

*RQ5 What do teachers of English **think about** their role in maintaining students' well-being?*

Teachers do not observe the very same definition of wellbeing in their practice. The case of PosPsy is similar, especially because the adjective *positive* is understood by different people differently – to some it is somewhat the synonym for optimistic, thus reflecting a certain value judgement. The wide variety of understandings of the key concepts of this dissertation indicates that a certain unanimity or common ground should be reached amongst practicing teachers regarding them before undertaking activities that involve wider communities and seek educational change.

RQ6 What do teachers of English think about integrating positive psychology-based tasks into EFL classes?

While the interviews show no consensus on the exact details, the teachers all agreed that it *is* possible to integrate PosPsy into their EFL classes. The way it can be integrated, however, depends on both individual and group factors. Therefore, at this point, there is no conclusive description of a class that is suitable for the integration of PosPsy, and, thus, for PLE. As was mentioned above, in the traditional sense, the tasks in which mindfulness is in focus do not have an end-product that students must arrive at. Thus, it is possible to integrate these tasks into regular class work quite flexibly as they can work across age groups and levels, provided there is the necessary amount of nonverbal support, as the interviewed teachers pointed out.

*RQ7 What are the **reflections** of teachers of English on a specific set of tasks developed for the integration of language and positive psychology in the language classroom?*

According to the interviewed teachers, doing PosPsy-based tasks and practicing mindfulness comes with benefits but also creates challenges. Among the *benefits*, one can find that students can feel less anxious, less homesick, or even less stressed out, especially before a test, but are more engaged and might enjoy class work

more. In addition, teachers may benefit from the situation by broadening their methodological repertoire and establish a better relationship with their students because of the introspective element of the tasks that ultimately helps the teacher get to know and understand the students better.

On the other hand, several things can be *challenging* when one decides to practice mindfulness through EFL tasks with students. For one, monitoring and modelling these tasks is not only more difficult, but also requires more lesson preparation. The more so as the teacher must match the tasks with the regular course material: teachers have to follow a curriculum, and the integration of PosPsy is something *additional* to their usual job.

*RQ8 What do teachers of English **think about** including positive psychology in the **continuing professional development** of EFL teachers?*

As regards the potential role of PosPsy in state education, three main areas need to be addressed. Firstly, according to practicing teachers across all three education levels (primary, secondary, tertiary), curriculum reform is necessary, which should entail, among many things, paying special attention to the explicit integration of maintaining wellbeing into education. This reform can happen alongside designing university courses and CPD events available for teachers that deal with topics related to wellbeing, mindfulness, PosPsy, PE, and PLE.

Secondly, the idea of a project week focusing on mental health is welcome in schools, but there was no consensus between the participants of Study 2 on how long such a project week should be and what topics it should cover.

Finally, according to the interview data, for EFL teachers to be able to bear the responsibility of dealing with their students' and their own wellbeing, they should be given the opportunity to work together with different healthcare professionals.

Conclusions and implications

The dissertation research comes with considerable research and pedagogical implications which are listed below in a table. All in all, this dissertation set about to benefit the research and teaching communities as well as the participants. As part of the two studies followed the structure of action research, it should be noted here, that the cycle from *issue statement* through *taking action* to *result evaluation* (see Cirocki, 2013) is still incomplete. With the pilot of an Erasmus training that took place in July 2024 in a Budapest-based language school with Spanish, Latvian, and French participants, the aim was to get closer to the end of the cycle, but there is still need for more opportunities like that in the Hungarian context, tailored more to the previous knowledge and the needs of practicing teachers.

Along this quasi-complete cycle, the dissertation may have benefited the research community by generating hypotheses and providing a deeper insight into the practicalities concerning the use of PosPsy-based tasks in the EFL classroom to maintain students' wellbeing. It may have also contributed to our

pedagogical knowledge by providing information to teachers on another trend in foreign language education, PLE, which, at the time of the research carried out, might be like the plant in Figure 21 below: a new organism starting its life under conditions that were originally not created to foster its existence. Finally, the dissertation research, it is hoped, has been useful to the participants: students, as their post-hoc reflections show, experienced enhanced mood and enjoyment in the classroom, while teachers may have been given tools to use in their EFL classroom in the future in the form of the activity bank and through the reflective interviews. In addition, this research endeavor benefited the teacher self in the teacher researcher greatly: I have gained immense knowledge about my former students, my own practice, and the rapport between us, which helped me regain focus and become more reflective as an EFL teacher.

hypotheses generated with the dissertation research	pedagogical implications	research implications
1. Students are often tired and need in-class activities for reinvigoration.	Students should be given regular breaks, not just between language lessons, but also during class.	research into the refreshing effects of EFL classes (1) that use warmers, breakers, or coolers, but are not based on PosPsy, (2) that base certain in-class activities and tasks on PosPsy
2. Students experience all sorts of emotions while doing PosPsy tasks but cannot necessarily differentiate between emotional states and physical sensations.	It is important for students to work on emotional vocabulary in school, especially because it might be difficult for them to distinguish between emotional and <i>physical</i> states in their mother tongue, as well.	an exploration of how well students can differentiate between emotional and physical states and what it depends on
3. Students' having the appropriate vocabulary for expressing themselves while doing PosPsy-based tasks is more important than their level in EFL or their age.	Teachers should experiment with tasks based on PosPsy in language classes across ages and levels and see what fits them best and what suits their classes with special attention to and feel for individual student differences.	should be tested via researching a large sample, also: an exploration of what vocabulary exactly would be useful for carrying out PosPsy-based tasks and correlation and regression analysis of age and the L2 level of the students and how well they can participate in PosPsy-based tasks
4. Students prefer it when they can do PosPsy-based tasks on a voluntary basis.	Establishing a form of partnership with students and enhancing their self-awareness is key in doing (not only) PosPsybased tasks.	ways in which students can be motivated towards participation should be explored
5. In the case of PosPsy-based tasks, progress and success should be redefined from the point of view of task-based language teaching.	EFL teachers, when integrating PosPsy-based tasks, might need to find new ways to define the aims of their classes along non-traditional lines.	in-depth interviews carried out with EFL teachers who regularly use the TBLT approach and have also tried using PosPsy-based tasks in their classrooms to see what these practitioners consider to be a completed PosPsy-based task and, how these can be best monitored
6. Doing PosPsy-based tasks during their lessons is more tiring for the EFL teacher than performing usual classroom routines and duties.	EFL teachers should be given assistance with the integration of PosPsy before and while implementing such an approach in the form of training and also special interest groups.	what skillset is necessary for a teacher exactly to be able to lead PosPsy-based activities in the classroom and what kind of training is best to acquire it; re-examination of teacher roles - special attention to their responsibilities towards student wellbeing
7. Teachers should be provided with knowledge about wellbeing-related concepts such as mental health, positive psychology, positive education or even wellbeing itself to enable them to embrace positive education.	CPD should be offered to give teachers the opportunity to structure or re-structure their pre-existing knowledge and integrate new understandings of these concepts. Also, new ways should be found to educate students for wellbeing with the use of PosPsy while the workload of teachers is reduced to allow room for this new element in their job.	what teachers think and already know about wellbeing and PosPsy is crucial
8. It is possible to integrate PosPsy into EFL, with both benefits and challenges.	EFL teachers, taking their students' needs and individual differences into consideration, should decide whether having more non-L2 than L2 benefits is a problem for them or not.	more research on the frequency and the timing of PosPsy-based tasks in EFL classes and the factors that influence these
9. EFL teachers think that change in education towards PE should be initiated from the bottom level.	For in-service teachers, CPD events on this subject seem necessary, while for pre-service teachers, it should feature in their training in two different ways: as first-hand experiences in their own courses (as participants) and also as part of the curriculum.	investigate at bottom level, in a school community, who the mavens, the salespeople, and the connectors are (cf. section 4.7.3.2. and Gladwell, 2002)

Related publications

Schüzler, T. (2022). The vehicle for bringing Positive Education into the English-as-a-foreign-language classroom: Task-Based Language Teaching. *Central European Journal of Educational Research*, 4(2), 80-89. <https://doi.org/10.37441/cej/2022/4/2/11340>

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