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THE LEVEL OF WELL-BEING IN CHINESE UNIVERSITY EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract:

This study aims at investigating the level of well-being (PERMA) in Chinese university EFL students. Adopting stratified random sampling, a questionnaire including 15-items is distributed to 518 EFL university students of thirteen universities in Gansu. Results show that respondents overall perceived a medium level of well-being. Finally, the study discusses the results according to each sub-construct and highlights the significance of well-being (PERMA) in Chinese university EFL students.

Keywords:

Well-Being (PERMA), Level, Chinese University, EFL Students, Positive Emotions

Introduction

EFL students, especially in higher education, have long been studied as they are perceiving a high-level stress and anxiety on their academic performance. There is evidence that the university students' positive psychology and strengths is significant to their learning performance, satisfaction, learning achievement and even on their cognition (Wesson & Boniwell, 2007).

Recently, research has also shown that the students' positive psychology and strengths have a significant influence on their academic achievement (DeWitz, Woolsey, & Walsh, 2009; Norrish, Williams, O'Connor, & Robinson, 2013; Tabbodi, Rahgozar, & Makki Abadi, 2015; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2005; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2012). Meanwhile, positive psychology is tapping into positive emotion in university EFL teaching and learning strategically. More and more awareness are raised by language educators upon significance of enhancing students' language learning attitudes, habits and academic performance by developing and maintaining their strengths.

Literature Review

The formal emergence of positive psychology begins with the famous psychologists Martin E.P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who are the initiator and main promoter of the positive psychology movement. As a branch of psychology and a new field of research, through using relatively perfect and effective experimental methods and measurement means, positive psychology focuses human strengths and virtues and other positive factors contribute to a full and meaningful life, which aims to improve people's outlook on life rather than fixing what is wrong.

Positive psychology researchers have developed various theories to explain the constructs of well-being (Butler & Kern, 2016; Diener, 2009; Huppert & So, 2013; Keyes, 2002; Rusk & Waters, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; M. Seligman, 2011). There are two approaches upon well-being (Cooke, Melchert, & Connor, 2016).

The hedonistic approach to the concept of well-being focuses on pleasure and happiness, in which the most prominent one is subjective well-being, including satisfaction with life, no negative effects, and the existence of positive emotions (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). In contrast to focus on impact and life satisfaction, eudaimonic models pay attention to more areas of life, although they vary widely regarding the fundamental elements that determine well-being while positive psychology combines the hedonic and eudaimonic together.

Through multiple studies, Seligman found that people's extent of perceiving and using their "signature strengths" can impact the quality of their lives. By spending years developing a theory of well-being, he established the PERMA model of well-being which create the foundation of a flourishing life. Seligman (2011) defined his concept of well-being with his five pillars called positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment as PERMA. Mainly focusing on the strength of an individual or groups, PERMA is a model that is reliable and validated by many researches and also the multidimensional domains to give extra information on the well-being of respondents. Derived from the essence of positive psychology, Seligman's PERMA model (M. E. Seligman, 2012) was incorporated into school in order to enhance students' well-being and enable them to flourish and improve their academic achievements.

In PERMA model, positive emotions refers to perceived positive emotions including interest, hope, joy, gratitude. As for learners, positive emotions can stimulate their curiosity and allow them to explore their life satisfaction relatively, thus contributing to broadening their horizons

(Mercer, Oberdorfer, & Saleem, 2016). Therefore, a positive spiral of upward spirals (Fredrichson, 2009) significantly contributes to learners' well-being.

Engagement refers to the state that the individuals can be fully interested and absorbed in activities and use their curiosity and skills to inquiry. Engagement comes from a variety of cognitive interactions, emotional and behavioral components (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Research concerning the influence of positive psychology show that mindfulness interventions can increase learners' attention, memory, problem-solving abilities and their cognitive performance, stress, resilience, and emotional problems (J. D. Creswell et al., 2012; Froh et al., 2010; Shernoff & Hoogstra, 2001; Wesson & Boniwell, 2007; Zenner, Herrleben-Kurz, & Walach, 2014).

Relationships shows the ability that one can have positive relationships with others. Peterson (2006) summarized positive psychology into three words, that is, "other people matter". Seligman and Post reported that happy people are more givers for others (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Post, 2005). For learners, research demonstrated the social support and positive partnership as the best way to deal with learning stress (Davarniya, Shakarami, & Zaharakar, 2019). Another potentially significant relationship is the relationship between teacher and student. Numerous researches have shown that it is the positive relationship between teachers and students that significantly promotes positive engagement and learning (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2011).

Meaning indicates that the individuals can have a sense of belonging and serve something they believe to be more meaningful than themselves. Seligman holds "meaning" can provide human beings a sense of fulfilment (M. E. Seligman, 2012). Ample research shows that there is a positive correlation between the higher sense of meaning and the better academic performance among students (DeWitz et al., 2009; Tabbodi et al., 2015).

Accomplishment reveals that the individuals can pursue success, strive for and achieve the meaningful outcomes (M. E. Seligman, 2012). Accomplishment is not given but rather what students should pursue (Mercer et al., 2016) atively. Levasseur, Desrosiers, and Whiteneck showed the evidence that there is a positive correlation between accomplishment in participation in social roles and positive outcomes (Levasseur, Desrosiers, & Whiteneck, 2010).

With positive psychology tapping into the field of education by Seligman, it has been found to have a great significance with academic success and desired outcomes in university and college students (M. E. Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). Ample study available show evidence that the PERMA model has the positive influence on promoting students' psychology well-being and their relationships, academic motivation, skills and performance (Kern, Waters, Adler, & White, 2015; Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009; Norrish et al., 2013; Oades, Robinson, Green, & Spence, 2011; M. Seligman, 2011; M. E. Seligman, 2012; M. E. Seligman et al., 2009; Shoshani, Steinmetz, & Kanat-Maymon, 2016).

In spite of increasing application upon well-being in education, PERMA within EFL educational context is still an emerging thing. In addition, the majority of studies are conducted on enhancing leaders as well as teachers so as to improve their satisfaction on occupation.

Scarce attention is been paid to students, not to mention to EFL students. Besides, research upon positive psychology are mostly within western contexts, considering cultural differences, the result may not be the same. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the real perceived level of well-being (PERMA) among Chinese university EFL students.

Method

Participants and Procedure

With extensive application in non-experimental survey research (Johnson & Christensen, 2019), probability sampling yields a representative sample which can be beneficial and convenient to the generalisation of the population (J. W. Creswell & Clark, 2017). Therefore, the present research adopts the multi-stage sampling method in the probability sampling to select the samples being investigated.

The current study employed 518 Chinese university EFL students of thirteen universities in Gansu Province, China. Ranging from 17 to 22 years old, female participants were 295(57%), male participants were 223(43%). All participants took 2 to 5 minutes to answer all questions.

Instrument

A 15-items PERMA questionnaire (Butler & Kern, 2016) (a 11-point Likert-type scale) was administered in this particular research. Table 1 displays the detailed information of PERMA items.

Table 1 The Number of Items and Corresponding Dimensions of Well-being (PERMA)

Dimensions	Items	No of Items
Positive Emotions	P1-P3	3
Engagement	P4-P6	3
Relationship	P7-P9	3
Meaning	P10-P12	3
Accomplishment	P13-P15	3
Total		15

Due to non-native speakers participants are, the instrument goes through the translation and re-translation by expert in this field to ensure its comparability and precision. Also, a pre-test was conducted on 9 subjects to check and test its structure, wording, and the probable responding time. The SPSS version 24.0 was employed in both pilot and actual study.

Reliability of Instrument

In light of the result upon pilot study, which includes 239 EFL university students, the instrument was reliable (Cronbach's Alpha of positive emotions is 0.818, engagement is 0.886, relationship is 0.905, meaning is 0.869 and accomplishment is 0.897) (Table 2), all exceeding the desired standard 0.70.

Table 2 The Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient of the Pilot Study (N=239)

Construct	Sub-Construct	Whole Cronbach's Alpha	Sub-Construct's Cronbach's Alpha
Well-Being (PERMA)	Positive Emotions	0.889	0.818
	Engagement		0.886
	Relationship		0.905
	Meaning		0.869
	Accomplishment		0.897

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics is to present and describe data characteristics by statistically describing frequencies, measures of central tendency, measures of dispersal, cross-tabulations as well as standardized scores (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011), so as to summarize and discuss the features of the subjects in the research (Chua, 2013; Ho, 2013; Johnson & Christensen, 2019). Thus, it is suitable for this particular research to describe statistics.

As the standard procedure in measuring the abstract constructs, this research reported the summated scale in term of the mean and standard deviation of each construct upon Chinese university EFL students' well-being (PERMA). According to Hair et al. (1998), the summated scale is the normal measurement technique for abstract constructs. Thus, in this research, based on the Chinese university EFL students, the summated scale was reported in terms of the mean and standard deviation of dimension being measured. To determine the level of these dimensions, the composite mean obtained from the summated scale was used. As shown in Tables 3, the interpretations for the level were also presented according to the mean that was divided into low, medium and high with an equal interval.

Table 3 Interpretation of Level According to Mean of 11 Points

Mean	Interpretations (Level)
0 – 4.49	Low
4.5-8.49	Medium
8.5 - 10	High

Results

This particular study has no missing data. The descriptive statistics was employed to present the overall characteristics of 518 respondents. The results, presented in Table 4, shows overall mean value upon well-being (PERMA) is medium (M=8.155, SD=1.594), indicating that the level of Chinese university EFL students' well-being (PERMA) in Gansu is medium.

Table 4 Descriptive Analysis for Chinese EFL Students' Well-Being (N=518)

Dimension	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level
Positive Emotions	518	8.075	2.327	Medium
Engagement	518	8.474	2.340	Medium
Relationship	518	7.971	1.974	Medium
Meaning	518	8.161	2.484	Medium

Accomplishment	518	8.092	2.196	Medium
Overall Mean	518	8.155	1.594	Medium

In addition, the means and standard deviations of all items in PERMA on the basis of each construct are presented in the following Tables.

Dimension 1: Positive Emotions

Table 5 Mean and Standard Deviation for Each of the Items in Positive Emotions

Description	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level
1. In general, how often do you feel joyful?	8.021	2.635	Medium
2. In general, how often do you feel positive?	7.992	2.780	Medium
3. In general, to what extent do you feel contented?	8.211	2.738	Medium
Overall	8.075	2.327	Medium

According to Table 5, three items in positive emotions as well as the overall mean and standard deviation all reached medium level, showing that the positive emotions of Chinese university EFL students are generally not at a high level.

Dimension 2: Engagement

Table 6 Mean and Standard Deviation for Each of The Items in Engagement

Description	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level
4. How often do you become absorbed in what you are English teaching?	8.487	2.545	Medium
5. In general, to what extent do you feel excited and interested in things?	8.410	2.623	Medium
6. How often do you lose track of time while doing something you enjoy?	8.524	2.610	High
Overall	8.474	2.340	Medium

The engagement construct is made up of three items. As can be seen in Table 6, one of the items is at high level and the other two belong to medium, which indicates that engagement of the Chinese university EFL students involved in this particular study is insufficient.

Dimension 3: Relationship

Table 7 Mean and Standard Deviation for Each of the Items in Relationship

Description	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level
7. To what extent do you receive help and support from others when you need it?	8.004	2.192	Medium
8. To what extent have you been feeling loved?	8.029	2.168	Medium
9. How satisfied are you with your personal relationships?	7.879	2.102	Medium
Overall	7.971	1.974	Medium

The items of relationship are all at medium level as shown in Table 7, which implicates the perceived level of positive relationship among the Chinese university EFL students participated in this investigation should be improved.

Dimension 4: Meaning

Table 8 Mean and Standard Deviation for Each of the Items in Meaning

Description	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level
10. In general, to what extent do you lead a purposeful and meaning life?	8.069	2.934	Medium
11. In general, to what extent do you feel that what you do in your life is valuable and worthwhile?	8.082	2.776	Medium
12. To what extent do you generally feel you have a sense of direction in your life?	8.333	2.656	Medium
Overall	8.161	2.484	Medium

There are also three items in the dimension of meaning, with the result that all items are at medium level (see Table 8). It can be inferred that the level of participants' sense of belonging and fulfilment is medium.

Dimension 5: Accomplishment

Table 9 Mean and Standard Deviation for Each of the Items in Accomplishment

Description	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level
13. How much of the time do you feel you are making progress toward accomplishing your goals?	8.159	2.328	Medium
14. How often do you achieve the important goals you have set for yourself?	8.017	2.629	Medium
15. How often are you able to handle your responsibilities?	8.102	2.265	Medium
Overall	8.092	2.196	Medium

According to Table 9, three items in accomplishment and the overall mean and standard deviation all achieved medium level, showing that Chinese university EFL students involved in this research are generally have medium level of self-efficacy and sense of accomplishment.

All in all, the research result shows that Chinese university EFL students are at a medium level of well-being (PERMA) generally.

Discussion

As new blood injected, positive psychology's application in the education bridges psychology with the teaching practice to help individuals achieve a state of flourishing in community (Norrish et al., 2013). Throughout the years, Seligman contributes to the development of well-being conceptual framework which he named it as PERMA theory.

Ample research on well-being and positive education was conducted. Positive emotions can enhance the critical thinking and social engagement, life satisfaction, and physical health (Fredrickson, 2001). Engagement can promote students' well-being as well as learning outcomes (Shernoff & Hoogstra, 2001). Positive teacher-student relationships and more satisfying social relationships can protect students against depression (Resnick et al., 1997) and also, can be good for the achievement of life purpose (Hicks & King, 2009; Hicks, Trent, Davis, & King, 2012; Lambert, Clark, Durtschi, Fincham, & Graham, 2010). The higher sense of meaning students perceived, the better academic achievement they gained (DeWitz, Woolsey, & Walsh, 2009; Tabbodi, Rahgozar, & Makki Abadi, 2015). Individuals with higher positive accomplishment are found to maintain higher motivation and satisfaction.

However, the descriptive analysis of data upon participants included in this research showed that Chinese university EFL students in Gansu province are at a medium level of well-being (PERMA). Therefore, it is a necessity for the university administrators and teachers in Gansu province to look into ways to strengthen the level of students' well-being (PERMA).

Conclusion

With positive psychology tapping into the field of education by Seligman, positive emotion has been found to have a great significance with academic success and desired outcomes in university and college students (M. E. Seligman et al., 2009). However, PERMA is still an emerging thing so that the learner's well-being will come to different and inconsistent conclusions and arguments due to the different social environment, cross-cultural factors, different target population, various measurement instruments and methods.

The present research shows, in general, Chinese university EFL students in Gansu province have a medium level of well-being by the descriptive analysis, which implicates that more attention should be paid to the well-being upon Chinese university EFL students so as to improve their perceived positive emotions, engagement, relationship, meaning, and achievement; university administrators and teachers should raise awareness regarding EFL students' level of well-being and cultivate their positive emotions in teaching and management so as to strengthen the emotional support and enhance quality of foreign language learning in higher education.

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