

Online Autonomous Learning and Positive Psychology: Gratitude as a key Facilitator of WeChat English Learning for Chinese Undergraduates

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to provide college English teachers an overview of positive psychology and the application of the sense of gratitude to WeChat-based language learning. Specifically, a brief history of the positive psychology movement, major constructs and research findings, measurement considerations, and empirically supported intervention frameworks will be reviewed. It is hoped that the present study could shed some light on the study of WeChat-based language learning and teaching and students' autonomous learning, and also help college teachers and students better adapt to the new changes and new environment, and improve college undergraduates' English autonomous learning abilities.

Keywords: positive psychology, autonomous learning, gratitude, WeChat, college English

1. Introduction

In this world of digital information technology and mobile communication technology, modern college students should possess the ability of online learning and the traditional learning methods should switch to those of innovative learning. To meet the fast-changing needs of the global world, where individuals assume responsibility in maintaining the currency of their knowledge and skills, Lambier (2005) argues that social changes, particularly the speed of the growth of knowledge, and information and communication technology have created a need for lifelong learning in what has been called the “information society”. As an instant messaging application, WeChat enables learners to learn autonomously and requires the instructors to teach in a collaborative way, which testifies the feasibility of Internet-based teaching mode compared with traditional teaching mode.

However, some problems which limit internet language teaching and learning and impede the learning efficiency are found out in reality of Chinese college students in terms of English learning. In the first place, language learners are exposed to considerable amount of information which gets them distracted and finds it hard to stick to one App to study in a regular manner. Secondly, lack of learning strategy and effective and timely feedback lead to the students’ language anxiety. Thirdly, it’s easy for young students to be so deeply indulged in online entertainment activities that they cannot complete their learning tasks. What is worse, students who are under huge pressure of college study find themselves complaining about not feeling appreciated in some online learning communities, which might have a really negative impact on other learners. Therefore, it is a key issue to promote the teaching reform to help learners reduce language anxiety in the process of autonomous online learning and employ reasonable and effective learning strategies in the Internet-based environment.

In relation to the development of second-language learning, Holec (1981) first used the term “autonomous learner”, defining it as the learner’s ability to take charge of their learning. A large body of research has emerged since then, examining the effects of various pedagogies on the development of autonomous learning. However, there is less literature focusing on the personal qualities of university students which facilitate or impede their development as autonomous learners, particularly with reference to second-language learning in the Web-based media community, such as Chinese WeChat. We argue that online second language learning (English in this case for Chinese students) is not so much about methods of learning, but about developing capabilities in students to enable them to become autonomous and learners with positive psychological traits. In this research, we attach much emphasis to how the learner relates psychologically to the content and process of learning from the perspective of positive psychology, where students learning online take responsibility for their own learning, feel in control, and display intrinsic motivation to learn (Fazey and Fazey 2001; Little 2000).

2. Theory

2.1 Positive psychology

Shifting the focus from fixing flaws to building strengths, positive psychology is a scientific study and

relatively new area of research in psychology that explores what makes life most worth living such as positive experiences, positive character traits, and the institutions that help cultivate them (Seligman, 2007). This emerging science, which embraces the scientific approach in the study of positive human experience and validates a rich early tradition of optimism among pioneers in education and youth work, has applied psychological theory to understand the human strengths that are important for enhancing overall well-being and happiness (Seligman et al., 2005). As stated by Seligman (2011), positive psychology should teach people effective pathways to improved functioning and well-being.

Based on a large Internet study, Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2004) have identified 24 character strengths in a measure labeled the Values in Action Classification of Virtues and Strengths (VIA) and the selection of gratitude, hope, curiosity and forgiveness are all included in the VIA. While there is still some debate about the representativeness of this classification, some character strengths are very relevant to the university learning context on the basis of existing research. Among these effective factors, gratitude represents a fundamental social component of human interactions, providing an emotional foundation for reciprocal behaviors.

2.2 Gratitude

Gratitude is a positive emotion (Bartlett and DeSteno, 2006). As a psychological state, gratitude is defined as a disposition of feeling and expressing thankfulness consistently over time and across situations (Emmons and Crumpler, 2000). It is considered a subjective feeling of appreciation for life and is usually regarded as a force that helps people maintain their reciprocal obligations, a sort of inertia that causes relationships to maintain their pro-social orientation (Gouldner, 1960). Grateful people have the tendency to respond with positive emotions to other people's generosity and the ways in which others contribute to positive experiences and outcomes in one's life (McCullough et al. 2002).

Many studies have found that there is a cause relationship between gratitude and well-being, a happy and pleasant state of mind which is usually defined as an integration of general life satisfaction and positive emotions (Brulde, 2007; Diener et al. 2002). Watkins et al. (2003) found that individuals who scored higher in grateful personality traits reported more life satisfaction, higher subjective well-being, and more positive emotions than their less grateful counterparts. Experimental studies have found that gratitude interventions significantly improved individuals' well-being. These interventions include gratitude journals (Emmons and McCullough, 2003), gratitude exercises (Seligman et al. 2005), and count-your-blessings exercises (Chan, 2010). Research has also indicated that a grateful disposition enables flexible and creative thinking and facilitates coping with stress and adversity (Aspinwall 1998; Wood et al. 2008). In addition, grateful people tend to focus on the positive aspects of life (Adler and Fagley, 2005), which can be reflected in their use of more active and adaptive coping strategies. Therefore it should be relevant to the transition to university and the adaptation to new attitudes to learning that are required.

3. Methods

Our hypothesis is that by educating university students about the concept of gratitude, and making them focus on the bright side of learning experience, they would feel better about themselves and thereby boost their self-confidence to facilitate the development of their autonomous learning. The online language teaching and counseling shares a similar emphasis on personal strengths and the importance of enhancing what is good rather than merely addressing the negative aspects of adversity. The field of online learning, to be more specifically, WeChat learning, provides a solid foundation for the practice of positive psychology such as feeling grateful and there is great potential for improving learning skills for undergraduates with learning anxieties by applying positive psychology approaches in online learning practice and research.

3.1 Setting up the WeChat language learning group

The widespread use of WeChat has changed the traditional mode of language teaching and learning in Chinese universities, which is consistent with the relevant requirements of Curriculum and Teaching Requirements on College English. WeChat has obvious advantages in mobile learning when compared with other tools and English teachers are advised to set up WeChat learning group to promote undergraduates' language learning. The study group, which is composed of students of the same classroom, can better support the communications between teachers and students as well as communications among students. Teachers can use the study group to send learning materials to students and offer guidance so as to get a clearer understanding of the difficulties students meet with in learning; students can share learning materials and exchange learning experience on WeChat. On the platform of the study group, students are expected to avoid the embarrassment of face to face communication, overcome anxiety in speaking English. Teachers are likely to monitor classes effectively and improve classroom teaching efficiency. More importantly, it contributes to the preservation and utilization of information generated in the students' process of practicing oral English so as to provide the basis for student assessment and teaching evaluation.

3.2 Setting up the rule of grateful WeChat chatting mode

When a person views life as a gift, that person is able to find benefits even in unpleasant circumstances (Watkins, 2004). Similarly, when a student views the opportunity of exchanging information in the WeChat study group as a gift, that student is able to figure out his or her gains instead of losses even in face of learning difficulties in unfavorable conditions. How to cultivate the sense of gratitude along the way of learning in the WeChat study group counts much in contributing to a desirable learning outcome. As a guide rather than a dictator in the study group, a teacher's role is to set the rules of the way students exchange information. The Inventory of Undergraduates' Gratitude (IUG), developed by the researchers (Lin and Yeh, 2011) and employed to measure the participants' gratitude traits, would shed some light on the present study in terms of rules of grateful expressions that will be set by teachers in WeChat study group. With a total of 26 items, the test items included thankful statements such as "I thank others for what they have done for me in daily life." In general,

the IUG included five factors: thank others (7 items), thank God (5 items), cherish blessings (5 items), appreciate hardships (5 items), and cherish the moment (4 items).

All inventories in the study were administered in university classes by the professor who was teaching the course. Although all participants completed the inventories within 15 minutes, no other time limit was posed, with the data collected during a two-month period. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to identify the relationships among gratitude and well-being. The findings in that study have found that grateful undergraduates tend to have a higher degree of emotional-companion and informational-tangible social support, which not only has a direct influence on the students' well-being but also indirectly influence other students' well-being. This conclusion is in line with the findings that that grateful people usually act pro-socially to express their gratitude, which enhances social bonds and friendships in the long run (Harpham, 2004). Within the WeChat study group, the pro-social expressions are critical to the atmosphere of the students' study experience and the best pro-social expressions can be contained by thankful words and sentences. The grateful way of expressing ideas and exchanging information is highly contagious. Therefore, the teacher in the study group, has to take up the job to set the rule of WeChat chatting mode. Expressions such as "I am grateful to be here with you guys to learn English", "I'm grateful for completing today's reading / listening / writing task", "I really appreciate your tips", "I feel really good to stick to a learning task until it is finished" are highly encouraged. It is important to point out the concept that the learning outcome is not as important as the process of the learning. And the way students views their learning experience, the grateful way in this study, weighs the most part in the learning process. With regard to what the students learn, how they learn and how much they learn on a daily basis, language teachers are not supposed to interfere with too much. What is more, teachers are expected to follow up the chatting records with grateful reviews, which will in due course develop a harmonious environment of sharing learning experience and promote undergraduates' autonomous learning.

4. Conclusion

Research in the field of positive psychology has expanded the scope of psychology beyond its focus on mental illness to include the factors that promote happiness and well-being. Gratitude is regarded as an important human virtue among the character strengths in positive psychology. Recently, there has been a renewed interest in the empirical study of gratitude, especially the consequences of gratitude. This study takes WeChat as the learning tool to investigate the psychological process of applying WeChat in the language teaching and autonomous learning in college. There is correlational evidence that the sense of gratitude is related to and, in some cases, predicts or causes success in undergraduates' autonomous language learning. Meanwhile, it also has promoted the students to take the initiative to carry out online learning by making full use of their spare time, stimulated students' interests in taking college English courses, and improved the efficiency of classroom teaching. These patterns can therefore provide important references to college teachers and researchers who strive to improve undergraduates' English proficiency by fostering the sense of gratitude in the environment of

WeChat study group. Further study should focus on alternative mechanisms by employing experimental designs to enrich the path models supported by this study.

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