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Author(s)	Záborská, Dorota
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Learning From Positive Psychology − Soft-CLIL Approach in Communicative English Class

Dorota Záborská

1. Introduction

The uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic that we were still facing in the academic year of 2021-2022 was slowly but surely taking its toll. "I am so sick of Covid! Just when I feel like I couldn't be anymore sick of it, I get sicker of it!" a colleague shared in frustration. The suffering was real. Physical, due to the lack of exercise, as well as psychological, due to the lack of in-person interactions. If we adults were longing for in-person human contact, there was no doubt that students felt the same. Gradually, classes moved or could be moved from the online environment to the physical classrooms on campus, at least partially. However, the restrictions of the number of people that could be in one room were imposed. In order to be able to teach at least some classes face-to-face, I had to split students into two groups, and have them come to the classroom for 45 minutes, in the first or the second half of the regular class time. Instead of teaching three 90-minute-long classes on Monday afternoon and two classes on Friday afternoon, I found myself in reality teaching six and four respectively. Yet, seeing students genuinely happy to be back in school, I felt motivated, and asked myself, "What can I do to make the most of this situation?" My research is anchored in positive psychology, so it was only natural for me to seek some inspiration in the wisdom and scholarship of the field.

In this article, I describe a series of communicative English classes, part of compulsory general English courses at a large private university in the Kansai area, in which I implemented tailored, soft-CLIL approaches. My aim through practicing positive communication was threefold: 1) to teach learners about interpersonal communication using Mirivel's Model of Positive Communication, 2) to address foreign language speaking anxiety by shifting students' focus towards enjoying the creative process, and 3) to enhance overall wellbeing in both online and face-to-face classroom settings.

To illuminate what informs my pedagogies, I start with a brief overview and explanation of several terms and concepts from positive psychology. I also include a short introduction of the core studies revolving around these concepts imbedded. I then explain in detail how the classes were conducted, and how the learners engaged in creating and performing positive communication dialogue skits. I also offer some of the preliminary results of an ongoing qualitative analysis of the dataset collected in these classes. The data come from two sources: 1) students' observational notes during their classmates' dialogue skit presentations, later uploaded online, and 2) their reflection reports which were collected at the end of the fall semester. Finally, I reflect on some possibilities of utilizing

online platforms in face-to-face classes, and touch upon the usage of machine translation as a potential language learning tool.

2.   Positive Psychology in Language Learning

It has been only a couple of decades since the rise of Positive Psychology as a subfield of psychology, but its applicability to various fields of study, including language learning has proved to be high and beneficial. The fruitful scholarship in Positive Psychology helps us not only to deepen our understanding of learners and learning processes, but also to develop even more practical and effective language learning activities. Among others, MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer (2019), and MacIntyre (2021) call for attention to various constructs from Positive Psychology such as grit and perseverance, signature strengths, hope and optimism, and others. These are known to play a significant role in language learning. "Language learning takes a long time, occurs in a diversity of contexts, and implicates deeply rooted psychological processes such as motivation, communication, self, and identity" (MacIntyre et al., 2019, p. 265). MacIntyre and colleagues also advocate for the development and implementation of interventions anchored in principles of Positive Psychology, ideally within the framework of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL).

Nishida's research (2021) into motivation among tertiary-level students who took soft-CLIL classes reported overall positive response from the students to such an approach, thus supporting high efficacy of introducing content in foreign language classrooms in a systematic and focused way. While "hard" CLIL's main objectives lie in teaching content, Soft-CLIL's primary goal is to develop and support linguistic competency of the target language. Nishida concluded that "Soft-CLIL is one possible way to motivate learners and empower them to open up their minds for a more globalized future while simultaneously equipping them with language skills and relevant content knowledge that they will need for their future careers" (p. 264).

2.1 Positive Language Education

Mercer, MacIntyre, Gregersen, and Talbot advocate for merging positive education with language education (2018). Positive education, informed by Positive Psychology, is a holistic educational approach which puts an equal emphasis on teaching and learning academic subjects as well as promoting wellbeing of learners. Mercer and colleagues rightly argue that "language education specifically is an ideal context within which to develop wellbeing competencies" (p. 21). While they admit that "many language teachers already promote many of these competencies in order to facilitate language learning", they also urge to "work towards a framework of Positive Language Education [...] which can be practically implemented in diverse cultural and linguistic settings without prescriptivism and in sustainable ways" (p. 24).

2.2 Positive Communication

Positive communication research is an emergent field within communication research, a field inside of social sciences. It is of an interdisciplinary nature and its fundamental goal is to contribute to the improvement of societies. Socha and Beck (2015, cited in Socha 2019, p. 31) defined positive interpersonal communication as "message processes that facilitate human needs-satisfaction" (p.188). Among such human needs, they include belongingness, love, esteem, self-actualization and more (p. 31).

In his chapter, On the Nature of Peak Communication, Mirivel "explores the small, but concrete, behaviors that seem to create happiness and joy for people" (p. 50), and proposes the Model of Positive Communication with six behaviors, each with a corresponding function (Figure 1). They are as follows: 1) greeting to create human contact and acknowledge other person's existence, 2) asking (open-questions) to discover and possibly to change the direction of interaction, 3) complimenting to highlight a person's strengths and so affect a person's sense of self, 4) disclosing to deepen relationships, closeness and intimacy, 5) encouraging to give and provide support, and 6) listening to transcend perceived differences (p. 52).

Figure1. Model of Positive Communication, Mirivel, 2013.

2.3 Communication Savoring

Savoring was introduced as a positive psychology construct in the late 1980's by Bryant and Veroff, which they popularized in 2007 as a theoretical model. Simply said, it is a positive reaction to a positive event, a form of upregulating positive experience, not only in the present moment, but also from the past or in the imagined future. Drawing on this concept, Pitts developed a typology of communication savoring, distinguishing among seven types: 1) Aesthetic Communication, 2) Communication Presence, 3) Nonverbal Communication, 4) Recognition and Acknowledgement, 5)

Relational Communication and Disclosure, 6) Rare and Novel Communication, and 7) Implicitly Shared Communication. As Pitts herself states, "Communication savoring appears to be a meaningful interpersonal practice with potential for direct relational benefits" (p. 103).

Jiao, Kim & Pitts (2021) investigated the effects of communication savoring on subjective well-being (i.e., positive and negative affect, happiness, and life satisfaction) among young adults, university students from Communication courses (M age = 20.97) through a randomized experimental study design (p. 152). The study results "evidenced communication savoring as an additional tool that individuals can use to boost their subjective well-being" (p. 167).

3.   The Teaching Context

3.1 School, Course Description, Students, and Teaching/Learning Environment

This series of classes took place at a large prestigious private university in the Kansai area. It was part of one of the semi-compulsory English courses that students can choose based on syllabi. The focus of the course was on developing speaking skills. Other series of topics in this course included 16 Personality Types, Ideal Classmates, Fighting Procrastination, Designing a Perfect Week, and others. The central theme was to better understand oneself and classmates from various psychological perspectives. Students were also introduced to an online Extensive Reading Program and were encouraged to read at least one book of their own choice for pleasure, write a book log and share it with everyone online. Book Talk presentations were used between the main series of lessons.

Three groups of second-year students (N=20, 21, 21) of mixed intermediate and upper-intermediate English proficiency levels from several departments (Faculty of Letters, Social Studies, Economics, Policy Studies, Commerce, Law, and Global and Regional Studies) met once a week for two semesters. The spring semester was conducted entirely online via Microsoft Teams and Zoom, with meetings being synchronous with the regular class schedule. The rapport between the instructor and students, and among the students themselves, was positive. Throughout the whole spring semester, class attendance was high, and students' participation on the online platforms remained active.

As pandemic-related restrictions were gradually being lifted in the fall semester, the school encouraged moving classes back to physical classrooms on campus. Since the number of students allowed in regular-size classrooms was limited to 16, each class had to be divided into halves. The classwork time for one group was split in the same manner, with 45 minutes spent with the instructor, and 45 minutes spent elsewhere on campus in areas dedicated for individual or small-group study. However, not many instructors opted to deliver classes in this way. Several students reported that this English course was the only face-to-face class for them, with the rest being continuously offered online, and very often in an on-demand form, which meant a heavy load of homework assignments and minimal contact with other humans, if at all. As these students had basically spent the previous academic year, their freshmen year, completely online, they longed for social interactions in a real

physical space.

3.2. Learning About Positive Communication

As we had a chance to discuss Zoom fatigue and its causes (ironically on Zoom) towards the end of the spring semester, I knew that many of these young students surely found interactions restricted to a computer screen rather strenuous. At the same time, however, asking them to suddenly feel confident in face-to-face conversations in English also seemed over-demanding and stressful. Therefore, introducing students to Mirivel's Model of Positive Communication (see Figures 1 & 3) seemed to be extremely timely, appropriate, and very possibly beneficial.

We started the topic of positive communication with an interactive lecture about what it means for everyone. Students brainstormed together in small groups, and shared their ideas in keywords (nouns/verbs/adjectives) with the whole class on the blackboard. A wide array of vocabulary materialized, such as smile, fun, eye contact, kindness, trust, appreciation; shake hands, compliment, praise, sympathize, show that you listen; gentle, joyful, friendly, enjoyable, interesting, or healing (Figure 2). We looked at the commonalities in the keywords, and then I introduced six components of the Model with their corresponding functions.
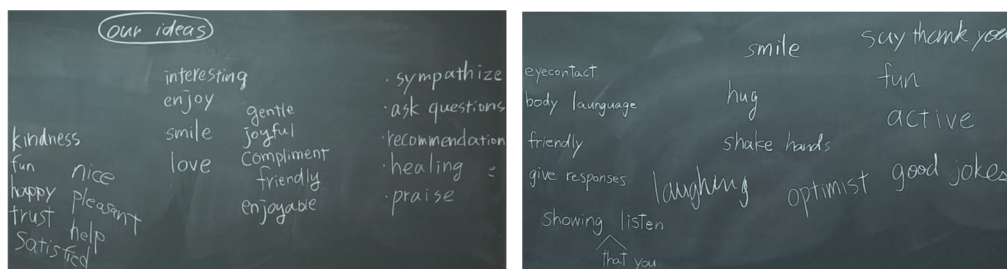

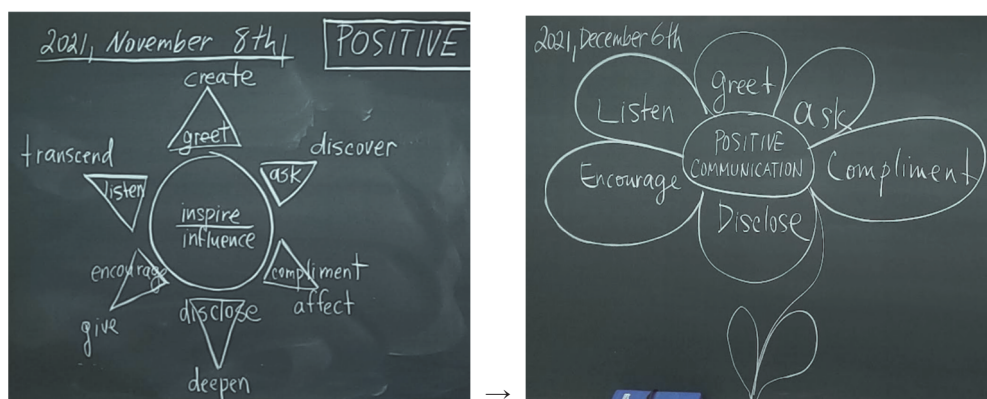Figure 2. Student-generated keywords of positive communication.

Figure 3. Hand-written diagram of the Mirivel Model in the first lecture and during presentations.

3.3 Positive Communication Dialogue Skits: Creating - Performing - Commenting - Reflecting

After studying Mirivel's Model and discussing its components as a whole class, students formed pairs, and were given the following instructions in class and in written form on MS Teams:

- ✧ *Create a dialogue with the six components of positive communication.*
- ✧ *Because you will be talking in front of everyone, it'll be a bit artificial and not completely genuine (e.g.: the 'disclose/deepen' part - you can make this part up) but the whole dialogue should be believable and realistic.*
- ✧ *In the beginning of your dialogue, tell us who you are (e.g., we're friends from high school / we're classmates in XYZ class / we're colleagues at our part-time job / we're siblings etc.)*
- ✧ *Remember that out of the six components, only the 'greet' part comes in the beginning and in the end. All other parts will appear in different order and can be repeated several times.*
- ✧ *The easiest way to approach this assignment is to have a free conversation first for a while on LINE or Google docs, then look at it and check which parts you've covered, which parts are missing or aren't sufficient. Then you can think together what you can add.*
- ✧ *Your dialogue should last more than 5 minutes (and less than 10).*
- ✧ *You can read your lines from your notebook, but practice reading it until it's really smooth and flows seamlessly.*
- ✧ *I'll ask you to submit your dialogue in a Word doc after our class next week.*
- ✧ *(You can use DeepL to check your sentences.)*

There were three rounds of positive dialogue skit presentations carried out in two Monday classes, and two rounds in the Friday class. Students could stay in the same pair/group of three, or could change partners. They could continue their dialogue, or create a new one. At the end, students in each class created, performed, and observed 3 to 4 dialogues per group, or 7 to 8 dialogues per class in each round. This resulted in a total of 63 dialogue skit presentations. Since all dialogues were available in transcript form on MS Teams, students from each half of the class could access each other's transcripts.

From the first round of these presentations, almost every student expressed great joy in creating, performing, and listening to each other's presentations. They followed the instructions well, and thought of many original situations and interesting relationships. Some of them are as follows: Situations in class, at school, at home, at a social event, at a family gathering, at a workplace, etc. Relationships between family members (siblings, parent and child, relatives), classmates from high school, classmates in university courses, friends from childhood, part-time job colleagues, members in the same club or circle, strangers in town, or a theme park, teacher-student-parent etc. (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Students engaged in their performances.

Students' warm and encouraging comments or short reflections posted and shared later in open classroom chats on MS Teams showed how genuinely they enjoyed the creative process, as well as performing or watching the final presentations. These informal comments, along with the reflective reports collected at the end of the fall semester, which I obtained practically just a few days ago from the current point of writing this article, provided me with ample and rich qualitative data. Since I am now in the initial stage of processing and analyzing this dataset in a more rigorous way, I cannot yet share any conclusive results. However, Figures 5 and 6, two screenshots of the actual students' online posts and one whole report as it was submitted by a student can illustrate the positive effect on students' wellbeing, and the enjoyment they experienced in class. For more on the upcoming reflective qualitative study, see section 4.

Students received the following instruction regarding their final report which was collected via MS Teams in Assignment section accessible only to the instructor.

Instructions

Reflect on the overall experience of

1) learning about positive communication and some of its important components (greet/ask/compliment/disclose/encourage/listen)

2) creating the dialogues (how did you approach it/how did you do it/how did you feel about it/etc.)

3) listening to (or reading the scripts of) the dialogues of your classmates (content/creativity/performance)
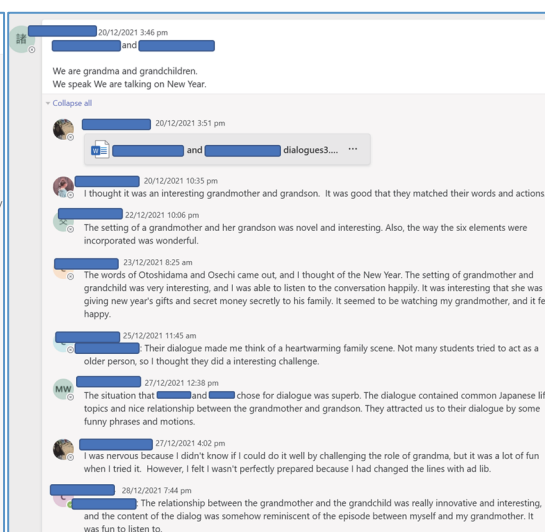
Figure 5. Screenshot of students' comments.

Figure 6. More students' comments.

Student # 16 (OM) Report:

Firstly, through the activity of positive communication, I learned that, strangers can realize positive communication only by making efforts to know partners. Although positive communications exist everywhere in our daily lives, I think it mostly realized only among close people, such as family, couples and best friends. In other words, positive communication is too difficult for strangers. However, I think all family, all couples, and all friends begin with positive communication. They must have make efforts to realize positive communication. So, it is important for all people to learn some ways of it.

Next, I consider "disclose" is most important component among 6 components. It is because that I think strangers become good friends through disclosing. Through it, you can know the essence of partners. And then, communication become deeper. Especially, betraying your weaknesses is necessary for becoming familiar. I think partners feel happy with your honestly. So, I consider "disclose" is most important component.

The group activity of creating the diary [dialogue] was very enjoyable. Our class did it three times, and my partners changed every time. So, I created different settings each time. First time, my partner was Yu. He was a stranger for me at that time. So, our setting was also the time when classmates meet for the first time in the class at university. Second time, my partner was Ayumi. After my partner was decided, I talked with Ayumi a lot on the way to home on that day. At that time, we actually talked about our hometowns and our departments. So, we used them to the assignment of positive conversation. Third time, my partners were Ryosuke and Yu. We have talked a little before, so we found a similarity between us soon. We all experienced sports. Ryosuke and Yu belonged soccer club at high school, and I belong to track and field club at university. So, we decided our setting was soccer club, we

were a coach, a player and a manager. Thus, my dialogues were all depended on actual conversations.

Moreover, through this activity, I could actually do positive communication with my classmates for creating dialogues. It was a really great opportunity for me. I feel happy with getting along with my classmates.

In the class, I have listened to (or reading the scripts of) the dialogues many times. The performances of their classmates were very stimulating. I learned a lot from them. It was really helpful for next my performance. Actually, I feel my performance got more interesting with each class.

The most impressive performance was that: the setting was parent and child, the mother gave her son some advices on his presentation in English at school. I was surprised at the creativity because I didn't have the idea. By that time, I considered settings were only classmates. So, I made good use of it, and the next week, I got out of my prejudice and my performance's setting was at a soccer club. My group members were a coach, a player, and a manager. Thus, I enjoyed my classmates' positive communication and learned a lot.

4.   Qualitative Analysis and Some Preliminary Results

4.1 Datasets

A total of 53 students submitted their final reflective report, which resulted in 12,188 words of raw textual data. The second part of the dataset consists of 56 screenshots of online posts uploaded right after or shortly after the dialogue skit presentations (as those in Figure 5 and 6).

4.2 Research Questions

RQ 1. What communication savoring types can be detected in foreign language dialogue skits, if any?

RQ 2. What perceived content and linguistic gains do the students report?

4.3 Method

To answer RQ 1, I will analyze students' comments and their reflective reports through the lens of positive psychology, operationalizing the concept of communication savoring. I will employ a Template Analysis (Brooks et al., 2015; King & Brooks, 2017), a type of thematic analysis, in which *a priori* themes can be applied. For the *a priori* themes, I will utilize Pitts' seven communication savoring types.

Regarding RQ 2, I will conduct Content Analysis drawing on the work of Clarke and Braun (2015).

4.4 Some Perceived Preliminary Results

Some perceived preliminary results can be drawn based on the initial readings through the data, and on informal discussions with the students after classes on campus, as well as from the final online Zoom meeting of the undivided classes. Many students repeatedly voiced their satisfaction and enjoyment that they experienced through the positive communication dialogue skits (See more on Enjoyment in Dewaele, 2022). Although communication savoring typology was developed based on communication in one's native language, it seems to be translatable into interactions in a foreign language.

5. Online Platforms and Digital Tools - Their Place in Face-to-Face Classes

In this section, I will only briefly reflect on the usage of the online platform, namely MS Teams, but another online tool with similar functions can be as useful. Having class notes, announcements, and homework assignments neatly organized and easily accessible for all participants, the instructor and the learners, proved extremely convenient, to say the least. The systematic "cataloguing" of everything allowed students with (hidden) learning challenges to be able to follow the course. It also provided students with a peace of mind in case they were absent from class. However, another helpful feature was the chat function and the possibility to upload posts visible to everyone. Initial encouragement to post "high-quality" comments created a lively exchange of posts which students read and reacted to.

Regarding allowing students to use the free neural machine translation service called Deep L, this seems to be a sensitive topic for some instructors. However, with proper instruction, this online tool can help students to work on their language skills on their own. Rather than prohibiting its usage, certain time should be spent to introduce it properly, so students can see how it can be used, and what it can and cannot do. Of course, clear guidance regarding plagiarism, or counteractive effects of lazy copy-and-paste attitudes is also necessary.

6. Conclusion

This paper explored the efficacy of employing a soft-CLIL approach in an EFL classroom while introducing the concept of positive communication as a kind of positive psychology intervention in times difficult for students confined by long periods of isolation and limited social contact. Preliminary perceived findings indicate that the approach was successful at least in enhancing participants subjective wellbeing. Regarding the improvement in linguistic abilities of learners and overcoming foreign language speaking anxiety, a closer analysis needs to be undertaken. However, also in this regard, instructors' impressions from ongoing monitoring of students' work and engagement are that they made meaningful progress.

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