

Book Review

RELC Journal

1–3

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DOI: 10.1177/0033688220924852

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English Teaching and the Science of Happiness

(Tokyo and San Francisco: ABAX ELT Publishers, 2019). 281 pp. ISBN 978-1-78547-013-4
¥4,015 (¥3,650) (Pbk.)

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A compilation of English Language Teaching activities is often organized around an explicit rubric with a clearly signposted linguistic approach, whether functional, lexicogrammatical, task-based and so on. What marks this collection of activities for learners as very different is the organizing principles which centre on a concept which could almost sound trite and ‘Hallmarkish’ in its obviousness: *The science of happiness*. Yet the science of happiness is centred on research and the practice of positive psychology as described by Peterson (2006). Concepts are effectively articulated and applied in the three sections of this book with techniques for multiple levels of learners. The writer is no stranger to positive approaches to motivating learners in English as an additional language contexts. Marc Helgesen is a professor in the Department of Modern Business at Miyagi Gakuin Women’s University, Sendai, Japan. He teaches a course on ‘Positive Psychology in ELT’ and also teaches in Nagoya University of Foreign Studies on the MA TESOL Programme. He has authored several books including the *English Firsthand* series from Pearson Education. The experience of publishing other articles on theory and practice which combine ELT (English Language Teaching) with positive psychology and *NeuroELT (Brain Science in ELT)* is evident in his website resources and in this compilation.

The foreword and research-driven introduction simply and clearly introduce the permeating principles of positive psychology, which underpin task design. The graphic of *Do more of what makes you happy* sets the tone with greater complexity outlined through an overview of research into the science of happiness such as seen in the academic work of Hills and Argyle (2002). The currently popular notion of *flow* is presented as ‘experiencing spontaneous joy when individuals become utterly absorbed in a task’ (Biedron and Pawlak 2016: 172). For such a positive environment to be created, one needs a supporting structure of varied tasks. This task collection is certainly organized with variation revolving around the language foci and the principles of facilitating happiness. Haidt (2006: 223) is quoted as seeing happiness as the ‘connection between people and projects beyond ourselves’. In crafting this text, Helgesen sets out to show that ‘the correct

version of the happiness hypothesis is that happiness comes from *between* with that *between* being the interaction generated by people learning within a variety of engaging tasks. The text clearly is not just focussed on acquiring a knowledge base of the concepts of positive psychology as one can find in the research of Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) among others. It could be suggested that teachers could react negatively to having to deal with yet another level of ideas and content to be taught to learners, in addition to fostering language acquisition. It is the *principles of happiness* and building motivation through interaction that underpin a more conventional set of rubrics, designed with aspects of East Asian curriculum in mind.

Happiness is front and centre in the Table of contents with Chapter 1 of three sections being *Introducing happiness*. Chapter 2 has eight sections of *Happiness language activities* including *health, mindfulness* and *learn to deal with problems and stress*. Chapter 3 *Happiness 2.0 PERMA* introduces five conceptual aspects: *Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaningfulness* and *Achievement/Agency/Goals*. The latter chapter goes beyond what may at first sight appear to be platitudes, by contextualizing the thinking in clear introductions to a series of ready-to-apply communicative tasks.


All sections actually begin with a one-page introduction, written at an upper intermediate level. This describes the principles of the section such as *Engagement* or *Forgive*. These introductions could be useful for both teachers or learners. Many of these 'scene setting' pages are linked to research references, adding validity to clearly spelt out principles underlying the whole text. One is indeed led into the *flow* (Egbert, 2004) before moving into the practicalities of learning and teaching. A greater familiarity for classroom practitioners unfolds in the *language focus by activity* descriptors. Purists may argue there is a mix of levels with some functional approaches, some discrete grammar items such as the perennial tense difficulties, along with some macro skills and sub-skills such as syllabification. However, the writer clearly knows his learners and in particular Japanese learners, as major English as Foreign Language areas for a wide range of abilities are covered. The text therefore does not ask for community involvement or assume a supportive outside community of English language speakers, as some TESOL communicative texts do.

The coverage of varied linguistic levels is one of the less obvious strengths of the book, with many of the skills named as a *language focus* applicable across varied groups of learners. Each section has the *language focus* followed by the *positive psychology* focus. *Age, level* and *time needed* are followed by clear preparation *steps*. These are very practitioner friendly. Addressing multiple-level needs is supported not only by clear *procedural steps*, but also by the *variations* section which, at times, provides for simplification, extension, individualization or teacher-led additions. In a clear acknowledgment of the importance of sustainability, each section has a *Paper-light* option, an aspect often lacking in texts. One is also not left dependent on further expenditure for digital add-ons, as task sheets that can be photocopied are generously interwoven throughout the book.

The instructions are sensibly written at a difficulty level below the linguistic demands of the task. Many tasks have a reflective element, elicit emotional responses and would require skilled facilitation. However, as mentioned earlier, the class facilitator is provided with a framework and introductory reading for each section which contextualizes the tasks in terms of *positive psychology*. The *happiness management* tasks are cleverly

interwoven into the task procedures, which are wide ranging in terms of varied learner levels. Many are multi-level. Some tasks are five minutes long and others range from 40 minutes to a long project approach. In this way, this compilation of tasks is a rich resource book and not a coursebook. *English Teaching and the Science of Happiness* applies principles of generating flow and provides learning which avoids traps of negativity and any feeling of being in a day-to-day grind. The resource asks us to look openly, embrace happiness and develop ourselves in this time when positivity is much needed.

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