



The impact of positive psychology on language teachers in higher education

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Abstract

This study investigates how Positive Psychology (PP) techniques might enhance the well-being of English language teachers working in East Asian higher education settings. Positive psychology programs to support teacher well-being have been rolled out across many institutions, but evaluation of their impact is lacking. Online focus groups were conducted with 86 English language teachers (70% female) from institutions in China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Thailand. Participants had completed at least one hour of training on mindfulness and gratitude practices, and two core PP interventions designed to improve resilience and emotional well-being. The focus groups were facilitated by a trained qualitative researcher with expertise in Positive Psychology, who encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences with PP techniques and their perceptions of the strategies most beneficial to their personal and professional growth. Thematic analysis of the data revealed several key themes, including the role of PP in fostering resilience, improving stress management, and enhancing professional relationships. Teachers highlighted gratitude and mindfulness practices as effective in maintaining a sense of purpose and creating positive classroom environments. The findings underscore the potential of PP interventions to significantly enhance teacher well-being in higher education settings. These results are discussed in relation to their implications for designing culturally relevant and institutionally tailored PP programs to better support educators.

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Practitioner notes

1. Institutions should consider embedding Positive Psychology (PP) techniques into professional development programs to enhance teacher well-being and resilience.
2. Since teachers operate in diverse East Asian higher education settings, PP programs should be adapted to align with cultural norms and institutional expectations for maximum effectiveness.
3. Programs to enhance emotional well-being and stress management can help educators better cope with the challenges of teaching in high-pressure academic environments.
4. Given the lack of comprehensive assessments, institutions should systematically evaluate PP interventions to measure their long-term effectiveness and refine them accordingly.

Keywords

positive psychology, language teachers, higher education, well-being, resilience

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Introduction

While cognitive theories have historically dominated the field of applied linguistics, in recent years, researchers have become increasingly interested in the role of emotions in language acquisition and teaching. This reflects significant research data suggesting that teacher well-being deficits may correlate with poorer learning outcomes for students and reduced teacher retention rates (Dreer, 2023). Typically, factors such as motivation, anxiety, and burnout have long been studied in relation to their impact on language teaching efficacy, teacher retention, and student learning outcomes. Lately, however, there has been an expansion of attention toward incorporating Positive Psychology techniques to support teacher well-being and student learning outcomes (Ryan & Liu, 2022).

Positive psychology (PP) is a sub-field focused on understanding human well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In addition to its focus on describing and understanding the factors that contribute to human well-being, PP is often accompanied by a normative agenda for advancing human well-being through better understanding and promoting the strengths, traits, and behaviours that contribute to the human well-being experience (Ben-Shahar, 2007). This makes PP distinct from a deficits-based focus on mental health that seeks to remove obstacles to well-being and instead actively seeks to promote well-being through various means. This describes the 'positive' aspect, given that it seeks to encourage a proactive approach to fostering human well-being.

The field of PP has grown substantially over the last two decades within research applied to education despite a comparative lack of attention in general psychology (Hobbs et al., 2022). Research has consistently demonstrated that PP techniques benefit individuals by supporting the development of a positive learning environment, promoting mental health, and reducing anxiety, which are key factors in encouraging student engagement and academic performance (Kotera et al., 2022). For example, implementing resilience-building activities like Growth Mindset exercises can help students develop persistence, while regular positive feedback loops can encourage them to view challenges as learning opportunities (Dweck, 2006). Integrating mindfulness exercises during class transitions can also help regulate emotional well-being and boost focus (Schonert-Reichl & Roeser, 2016). However, despite these claims, there is limited empirical evidence demonstrating the direct impact of PP in these domains, particularly within language education. This gap highlights the need for further research to evaluate how PP interventions can effectively support well-being and teaching practices in diverse educational contexts. Such research typically claims the efficacy of PP towards enhancing qualities or traits such as personal growth, enthusiasm, inventiveness, pleasure, perseverance, and resilience (Ryff & Singer, 1998).

Despite the growing interest in Positive Psychology (PP) within educational settings, there is limited understanding of how familiar higher education teachers in East Asia are with these approaches or how they perceive their relevance to professional well-being. While several institutions introduced PP initiatives and programs for teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic and in subsequent years, little research has systematically evaluated the effectiveness of these interventions or how teachers have engaged with them. Specifically, the current body of literature lacks research exploring how higher education teachers in East Asia view PP and its potential impact on their well-being, leaving an important gap in understanding the practical applications of PP in this context.

This study, therefore, aims to understand better the potential effects of a training program in Positive Psychology interventions, including techniques such as Growth Mindset exercises and resilience-building strategies, on the emotional and professional well-being of language teachers in East Asian higher education. This will offer a stronger empirical foundation for advocating the use of PP in language learning and teaching. Specific research questions were:

1. How do higher education language teachers in East Asia perceive the impact of a positive psychology program of interventions on their emotional and professional well-being?
2. What specific components of these programs do language teachers attribute to improving their well-being (e.g., structure, delivery method, or content)?
3. Which Positive Psychology strategies (e.g., Growth Mindset, resilience-building) do language teachers find most effective in fostering emotional resilience and professional satisfaction?

Literature

Positive psychology

PP forms a branch of psychology that focuses on studying and promoting positive elements of human well-being (Gable & Haidt, 2005). Rather than addressing negative aspects of human well-being, such as causes of mental illness, PP seeks to examine the factors that contribute to a fulfilling life (Oladrostan et al., 2022). Also, it studies the relationships between emotions, beliefs, attitudes, and learning outcomes and discovers and promotes practices that enhance learning well-being and outcomes (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2004). These practices include gratitude exercises, mindfulness, meditation, positive feedback, and resilience training designed to foster emotional well-being and facilitate more effective learning (Duckworth et al., 2005). In this regard, it attempts to understand the roles that positive emotions, strengths, and resilience play in contributing to well-being and understanding what practices and conditions might promote good mental health.

PP techniques enable humans to develop positive traits and strengths to improve their well-being and develop positive relationships and social support networks to bolster mental and emotional well-being (Seligman et al., 2005). For example, gratitude practices and mindfulness have been linked to improved life satisfaction and emotional health (Cheung & Lau, 2021). However, some criticisms emerged regarding the limitations of PP. Critics argue that it may oversimplify emotional and mental health issues by focusing on positive aspects rather than addressing negative symptoms or trends (Coifman et al., 2016). For example, some argue that PP can suppress negative emotions by cultivating a more positive mental state or processes (Fredrickson, 2001). Furthermore, the effectiveness of these interventions may vary across different cultural contexts. Research suggests that cultural differences are important in how learners perceive and respond to PP interventions (Bacon, 2005). Therefore, it is crucial to rely on culturally relevant research when developing PP-based programs or interventions to improve well-being and learning outcomes in diverse educational environments.

Likewise, there are concerns about how applicable PP is across different cultures, as constructions of well-being and what constitutes positive emotions or thinking may differ considerably across cultures (Lomas, 2015). For example, in many East Asian contexts, well-being is often framed in terms of collective harmony, social responsibility, and balance, whereas

Western frameworks, like those underlying much of the PP research from the USA, often emphasize individual fulfillment and personal achievement (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These differences suggest that some PP strategies, which prioritize individualistic goals, may need to be adapted to resonate with cultural values in East Asia. This highlights the importance of investigating how well PP functions in practice and exploring how it is perceived and implemented in various cultural settings. By addressing these cultural nuances, this study contributes to understanding how PP interventions can be tailored to better support teacher well-being in East Asian higher education institutions.

When applied to educational settings, PP is often associated with enhancing educational outcomes by fostering improved motivation, engagement, and mental health (Kennette & Myatt, 2018). This research is supported by studies that link certain emotions or mental states to improved educational outcomes. However, the impact of PP on teachers, particularly in terms of its role in improving their well-being, remains underexplored globally, particularly in East Asian higher education institutions. This study aims to fill this gap by examining how English language teachers perceive PP interventions in higher education across East Asia, focusing on their contributions to teacher well-being.

Emotions and language learning

Promoting Positive Psychology (PP) in educational settings is increasingly supported by research linking teachers' emotional and mental states to effective language teaching. While much of the existing literature focuses on students, growing evidence highlights the significant impact of teachers' well-being on their teaching practices and professional effectiveness. For example, studies have demonstrated that teacher motivation is vital for creating engaging and supportive learning environments and contributes to better classroom management and instructional outcomes (Anjomshoa & Sadighi, 2015). Additionally, self-esteem and self-efficacy among teachers are positively associated with their ability to implement effective instructional strategies and persevere through professional challenges, making these dispositions critical for sustained teaching success (Mills, 2014).

Moreover, mental resilience and effective coping strategies have increased teacher satisfaction and retention rates, enabling educators to manage stress more effectively and maintain a positive teaching outlook under pressure (Li, 2022). Finally, research suggests that adopting a Growth Mindset empowers teachers to perceive challenges as opportunities for personal and professional development, enhancing their well-being and their ability to inspire students through adaptive teaching practices (Zarrinabadi & Lou, 2022). These findings underscore the importance of focusing on teachers' emotional and mental states when designing and implementing PP interventions, particularly in language education.

Positive psychology and teaching

A lesser-researched area of PP and its application to education is the relationship between PP and teaching. Some suggest that PP techniques can be helpful in teaching, such as using mindfulness exercises to help teachers manage stress and remain present during lessons or incorporating gratitude practices to foster a positive classroom atmosphere and can subsequently improve teacher-student relationships, model positive behaviours to students, increase teacher creativity and innovation, and enhance teacher learning and professional development (Pluskota,

2014; Wang et al., 2021). For example, teachers practicing resilience-building activities, such as identifying strengths during challenging situations, may develop more innovative solutions for addressing classroom issues. Similarly, Growth Mindset techniques, such as reframing challenges as opportunities, can enhance teacher learning and professional development.

Beyond this, teaching may be improved as a secondary benefit of promoting teachers' well-being (Hascher et al., 2021). This well-being may be achieved by enhancing traits such as resilience, reducing teacher stress, and increasing job satisfaction (Dreer, 2020) – factors related to a reduction in teacher attrition and improved teaching quality in the classroom (Ryan et al., 2017). For instance, teachers who engage in PP-based reflection and goal-setting may experience greater job satisfaction, leading to better classroom engagement and consistency in teaching delivery.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, PP techniques have received more attention for improving teacher well-being and have inspired research into their efficacy and methods. For example, peer support in digital environments and other initiatives that boost teachers' well-being may enhance their teaching practices (Froehlich et al., 2022). However, research on this specific application is less common. For example, much of this research focuses on the well-being of teachers at the primary or secondary level (García-Álvarez et al., 2021). Similarly, much research focuses on the general impact on teachers rather than specifying according to the subject taught (Vo et al., 2022). This is a problem as what methods of implementing PP are suitable may differ according to the demands of different subjects. Specifically, it is possible to incorporate techniques and practices into school culture, professional development, and/or teachers' everyday routines.

Nevertheless, research is increasingly focusing on PP interventions as explicitly applied for the benefit of teachers rather than students and their effect on teacher well-being as opposed to teaching quality or student outcomes (Yeh & Barrington, 2023). Likewise, some research on higher education in Asian contexts points to the utility of fostering positive emotions toward improving teacher well-being (Song, 2021). The teaching environment's collective and social dynamics influence English teachers' professional well-being, highlighting that it is shaped not only by individual and subjective experiences but also by the broader social context (Nadlifah et al., 2023). Studies on using PP interventions among English language teachers are also encouraging regarding their potential outcomes (Yang, 2022).

Theoretical approach

This research takes place within a social constructionist theoretical framework. Social constructionism holds that individuals construct social reality out of the social environments they inhabit and interact with, being subject both to influence on account of institutional norms (e.g., of schools) as well as broader cultural norms (e.g., societal values, governmental policies, etc.) (Witkin, 2012). By the same token, individuals contribute to these norms through their practice (Searle, 1995). Understanding how and why individuals, in this case teachers, act in certain ways requires understanding how they interpret the social world they inhabit.

The role of emotions and attitudinal dispositions mediating teacher cognition and decision-making is well-established (Sheppard & Levy, 2019). In investigating the application of PP interventions in teaching contexts, it is necessary to understand how teachers interpret them based on their educational and teaching experiences. The social constructionist approach thus implies the utility

of an interpretivist approach to research, avoiding material epistemologies such as positivism in favour of a design that can investigate intangible factors such as thoughts, feelings, and attitudes (O'Reilly, 2009).

Existing studies focus on general well-being or student-centered applications of PP, leaving a noticeable gap in understanding how educators have received and benefited from these programs. There is a lack of specific research on how teachers in higher education across East Asia perceive the contributions of PP to their well-being. While several higher education institutions in the region have implemented PP initiatives and programs aimed at supporting teachers, particularly in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been limited exploration of how teachers perceive and engage with these interventions. Moreover, the variation in cultural contexts across East Asia, which may shape teachers' responses to PP interventions, has yet to be fully explored in the literature.

Method

Data collection and participants

The study utilized focus groups with 86 English language teachers, comprising 52 female and 34 male teachers, from higher education institutions across five East Asian localities: China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Thailand. The participants were organized into focus groups of 8–12 teachers each, ensuring manageable group sizes to facilitate meaningful discussion. Each focus group represented a mix of participants from different institutions within their locality, allowing for a broad range of perspectives.

The demographic characteristics of the participants varied in terms of age, teaching experience, and professional background. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 55 years, with an average age of 40. The group included teachers with a range of teaching experience: 30% had fewer than 5 years of experience, 40% had 5–15 years, and 30% had more than 15 years of teaching experience. The sample was predominantly female (approximately 70%) and represented teachers from diverse academic specializations within English language education, including general English, academic English, and English for specific purposes (ESP).

All participants had completed a minimum of one hour of training on Positive Psychology interventions, such as mindfulness practices and gratitude exercises, as part of initiatives implemented by their institutions. This ensured that all participants had at least a baseline understanding of Positive Psychology and its potential applications in educational contexts. Participation in the study was voluntary, and teachers were recruited through institutional invitations sent to higher education institutions in each locality.

Procedures

Participants gave their informed consent before participating in the study. They were recruited through advertisements in online social media groups for English language teachers and group emails sent out through collaborating institutions. The advertisements invited English language teachers in higher education across China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, and Thailand to participate in a study exploring their experiences with Positive Psychology (PP) interventions in teaching. Potential participants were informed that the study aimed to understand how PP techniques and strategies might impact teachers' well-being and professional practices.

Teachers were required to complete an interest form as part of the screening process. This form included a question about their awareness of PP, asking whether they had received training or education on PP techniques, theory, or activities. To strengthen the sample, only teachers who indicated that they had prior exposure to PP were included. Participants were also screened based on locality, teaching level, and at least three years of teaching experience.

Teachers were grouped by nationality into 10 online focus groups, with approximately 8–10 participants per group. The researchers conducted and led focus groups using Microsoft Teams. Participants represented a range of disciplines within English language education, including general English, academic English, and English for specific purposes (ESP).

Focus group discussions were semi-structured, with participants being asked set questions designed to explore their perceptions of PP interventions and their potential impact on professional well-being. For example, participants were asked:

1. “How have you experienced Positive Psychology strategies in your teaching practice?”
2. “What aspects of these strategies do you think have been most effective for your well-being or professional development?”
3. “What challenges, if any, have you faced when using Positive Psychology techniques in your teaching?”

The semi-structured format allowed the researchers to prompt for more detail or clarify questions as needed (Santhosh et al., 2021). Group discussions were conducted in English, and while the use of English as a second language (L2) for some participants may have influenced responses, the impact was likely mitigated by their professional experience in teaching English. The interviews were digitally transcribed and manually corrected for accuracy, using clean transcription methods to ensure the data was clear and suitable for analysis (Tang, 2023). This approach removed unnecessary filler words or repetitions while preserving the core meaning of participants' responses. Thematic analysis was then employed as the primary method for analysing the data. Transcripts were read multiple times to ensure familiarity and initial notes on relevant topics were recorded. These topics were subsequently refined and grouped into broader themes. The researchers further organized these themes into thematic cluster grids, categorizing the data into main themes and subthemes. These clusters were directly aligned with the study's research questions, focusing on teachers' conceptualizations of Positive Psychology (PP), their experiences implementing it in teaching, and their challenges. For example, clusters included themes such as resilience-building practices, teacher well-being strategies, and classroom dynamics. After completing the analysis for each focus group, the findings were consolidated into a master list of themes, which provided a comprehensive framework for interpreting the study's results. This structured approach ensured that all relevant insights were systematically identified and aligned with the study's objectives.

Reflexivity

In qualitative research, the researcher's positionality and experiences significantly influence the collection and interpretation of data. As the researchers, we acknowledge our role as both an insider and an outsider in this study. Our background teaching experiences in higher education provide a shared professional context with the participants, while one of us taught English

language courses. This shared background allowed us to establish rapport with the participants, understand their terminology and references, and interpret their experiences with greater nuance.

At the same time, we know that our role as researchers introduces an element of outsider perspective. While familiar with Positive Psychology (PP) theories and practices, we do not share the participants' training or institutional contexts. This dual positionality likely shaped how we approached the research questions, framed the interview questions, and interpreted the participants' responses. During the thematic analysis, our professional interest in PP and its potential in education may have subtly influenced how we prioritized certain themes, such as teacher well-being.

To mitigate potential biases, we employed several strategies to ensure the rigor and objectivity of the analysis. These included reflexive journaling throughout the research process, seeking feedback from peers familiar with qualitative research and PP, and triangulating findings by comparing multiple focus groups. Furthermore, we carefully allowed participants' voices to guide the analysis, ensuring that their perspectives were prioritized over preconceived notions or theoretical frameworks.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse transcriptions from focus groups (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allows researchers to identify themes relevant to research questions, offering flexibility and the ability to uncover unexpected insights (Nowell et al., 2017). It is accessible, especially for novice researchers, and can highlight differences and similarities among participants' perspectives. The thematic analysis involves coding text sections to identify themes using an inductive approach where codes are developed to represent the data through analysis rather than from pre-defined categories (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). This process requires repeated readings and data comparisons to develop codes that accurately represent the data (Thomas, 2013). These codes are then organised into themes and subthemes.

Results and discussion

Four main themes were generated from the analysis (Table 1). In summary, the first theme focuses on participants' conceptualizations of Positive Psychology, encompassing their varied interpretations of its definitions and relevance to teaching practices. The second theme examines the implementation of PP strategies, highlighting how teachers integrated techniques such as resilience-building and mindfulness into their teaching. The third theme explores the perceived benefits of these strategies, particularly their impact on teachers' professional and emotional well-being. Participants noted improvements such as reduced stress, increased job satisfaction, and enhanced teacher-student relationships. Finally, the fourth theme addresses the challenges and cultural considerations of applying PP strategies, including cultural mismatches and practical constraints within higher education settings.

This analysis underscores the interconnectedness of teachers' understanding, implementation practices, and perceptions of the effectiveness of PP strategies, offering a comprehensive framework for exploring its role in teacher well-being.

Table 1*Themes and Subthemes for Focus Groups*

Category	Subthemes	Description
Core Features of Positive Psychology	Meaningfulness	How PP enhances a sense of purpose in teaching
	Resilience	Building resilience through PP practices
	Independence	Fostering self-reliance among teachers and students
	Relationships	Strengthening interpersonal connections, including teacher-student interactions and peer relationships
	Accomplishment	Emphasizing success and growth through positive feedback
Teacher Benefits	Optimism	Improved outlook on teaching
	Improved Mood	Reduction in negative feelings and stress
	Reduced Stress	Managing workload
	Focus/ Engagement	Increased commitment to teaching tasks and active involvement in professional development
Instructional Benefits	Improved Relationships	Improving classroom dynamics and communication, fostering trust, and creating a positive learning
	Potential Impacts on Students	Empowering students to manage their learning, build confidence in their abilities, and participate actively with enthusiasm.
Challenges and Opportunities	Understanding	Limited awareness of PP theory and application
	Implementation	Difficulties in applying PP strategies within the classroom environment
	Assessment	Lack of clear ways to measure PP impact on teaching and learning
	Finding Time	Struggles to incorporate PP strategies into busy teaching schedules
	Professional Growth	Opportunities for career development and improvement through better well-being and PP practices

Core features of positive psychology

This theme explores the aspects of Positive Psychology (PP) that participants identified as most supportive of their well-being. Several factors were raised in this regard. For one, the participants stated that 'meaning' was important in improving their well-being. As one put it, 'what I had lost in my work was a sense of purpose, and I feel that engaging in positive psychology strategies restored that to me' (TC2). Meaning is one of the main components of some PP models, such as Seligman's (2011) PERMA (Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishments) model, which emphasises meaning as a core component of well-being. Participants' ability to reconnect with a sense of purpose underscores the practical impact of incorporating PP interventions into their professional lives, such as connecting language to certain life goals.

Another significant factor identified by participants was resilience, which they perceived as a direct outcome of applying PP strategies. While resilience is sometimes seen as a product of PP rather than a core element, specific PP interventions are designed to build resilience, often linked to a Growth Mindset (Duckworth et al., 2007). One participant noted, “I feel more capable of bouncing back after setbacks, which has improved my mental outlook” (CA4). This finding aligns with Frydenberg's (2017) work on grit and perseverance, where resilience is described as a crucial skill in maintaining a positive and productive outlook, both personally and professionally. In the context of language teaching, students can be guided to perceive difficulties not as failures but as opportunities for learning.

Similarly, participants identified themselves as more ‘independent’ using PP strategies: ‘I feel like I am less needy in my relationships. I can rely upon myself in a way that I couldn’t before because I know I have the skills I need’ (CA6). Focusing on relationships was a common feature of PP mentioned by the participants as generating good results for their well-being and professional life. This aspect of PP is commonly integrated into educational programs to foster student well-being, further suggesting its applicability in classroom settings. Teachers can apply these PP strategies to model and promote resilience and healthy relationship-building in their students.

The teachers also emphasised the important role that accomplishments played in PP. One participant set out their view on the role this plays:

I think when we talk about applying PP, we are expecting better outcomes to accomplish something. But actually, what it does is put your accomplishments into perspective. So with my colleagues here, I’m thinking about, okay, why have I not been promoted? But actually, it’s more about, look how well I’ve done to get here. As well as that, sometimes you get what you want and you’re still not happy. So it’s about how you identify and respond to accomplishments rather than, ‘I want to use PP to achieve that’. (JA1)

A sense of accomplishment is often associated with quality of life and well-being. However, the teacher correctly identifies that the attitude toward accomplishment is an important element within PP theory (Seligman, 2011). This distinction reflects that PP encourages individuals to adopt a growth-oriented mindset, where large or small accomplishments are viewed as stepping stones for personal and professional development. By reframing their perspectives on accomplishments, teachers can maintain a positive outlook, even in the face of perceived failures or unmet goals. This approach enables teachers to embrace the challenge of setting new goals with resilience and optimism, key elements of PP that can have a transformative impact on their professional well-being and classroom effectiveness.

Teacher benefits

Another category of theme in the teachers’ responses was about the benefits of PP to themselves as teachers and individuals. One of the main ways teachers reported improvements was through a more optimistic outlook on their work and life. Some teachers were unequivocal in stating how much it had improved their view of work:

Previously, I had a tendency to be quite negative about my work life because there was a culture of this in the staffroom. The narrative is ‘we’re overworked and underpaid’. Okay, but actually we’re quite well-paid and I like my work. Sometimes you can adjust your whole

outlook on life through taking a step back and looking at your situation differently and these strategies encourage you to do that. (HC7)

Teachers spoke of their improved optimism regarding their personal lives and careers and the future of their working practice.

Reduced stress and improved moods were common themes reported across the focus groups. This was not correlated with a reduction in workload but rather an improved ability to cope with the workload, which was one of the main stressors:

I know we have a tendency to look at a big pile of marking and go 'I can't cope with this', but actually we can. We do it everyday and we still find time to make the dinner and see our families. So now my attitude is, 'no, I can cope with this'. (JC4)

I used to be a very stressful person. I would stress my wife out, I would stress over stress. And I think it can be helpful to get perspective on that. But really some of these strategies, it's like doing exercise. It's not necessarily cognitive reasoning, it works on a more base level, like a hormonal shift caused by new thought patterns or behaviours. (TA2)

PP strategies aim to increase coping skills and resilience to no small degree, which may be particularly useful for teachers who struggle with workload (Watson et al., 2019).

Several teachers also felt they had become more focused on their work and engaged with their practice using PP strategies. One Chinese teacher reported how they felt PP had helped them to change their attitudes towards their work:

I think before I would often come in like 'oh, I can't wait for the day be over', but now it's more like, 'I am excited to see my students and to see them have fun'. I am more engaged; I am a more fun teacher. I want to be there because I like to talk to my students. (CC4)

Although PP is often more associated with student engagement (Kotera et al., 2022), it presumably can function according to similar mechanisms to induce improved teacher engagement. Notably, the teacher (CC4) describes increased motivation to complete their work without mentioning changing circumstantial factors, suggesting that the PP strategies or interventions were responsible for this shift in attitude.

Instructional Benefits

One of the main categories of response that the language teachers gave was regarding their experience of the instructional use of PP. They emphasised how PP could improve their relationships with their students. Participants gave several responses indicating the potentially positive nature of improvements to these relationships because of mutual gratitude:

One of the things that I like to focus on most is respect for each other. We can be grateful for each other: them for myself as a teacher and I for them as students. (TC4)

I feel that when we are encouraged to be grateful to each other, we are more likely to honour our relationship as teacher and pupil. (JA5)

The teachers interviewed highlighted the importance of working towards improving relationships in the classroom and how getting to know their students better encouraged more dialogue and improved language acquisition. Some linked this to communicative learning teaching (CLT) (Toro et al., 2019).

Another benefit identified by the teachers was the potential impact of PP on students. Teachers identified PP as possibly aiding students to engage better with their material by focusing on their strengths and encouraging curiosity. For example, operationalising PP in the classroom could empower students to manage their learning, build confidence in their abilities, and participate actively with enthusiasm:

What positive psychology does is not simply improve how you think about the world but how you think about yourself. When you are positive about your abilities and potential, you get out of your own way and stop holding back your own learning. You go headlong into it. (HB4)

What the teachers described as 'self-confidence' may be better described from the perspective of educational psychology as 'self-efficacy' insofar as it was related to motivation on behalf of students (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2021). What Teacher HB4 describes also contains aspects of a 'Growth Mindset,' or an attitude by which acquiring new skills and knowledge is possible and desirable (Limeri et al., 2020).

Teachers also believed that students potentially benefited significantly from greater self-regulation because of PP strategies. Self-regulation can positively impact how students go about their independent learning (Sukowati et al., 2020), as was described by one teacher in Thailand:

When a student's confidence improves, they are more comfortable completing self-study. And this is what I've noticed. So, if you can improve how students view their own abilities to learn, you can encourage them to take learning into their own hands. In turn, you'll see students come to you better prepared and having completed work in anticipation of you setting it. (TC1)

PP strategies such as fostering self-awareness, setting goals, and inculcating resilience have been associated with improvements in self-regulation (Fomina et al., 2020). This might explain why teachers associated PP and self-regulation due to the empirically established relationships between PP strategies and behaviours conducive to effective independent learning.

Challenges and opportunities

The participants were asked about the challenges they could identify regarding employing PP strategies successfully, as well as what opportunities they saw for applying PP either professionally or personally. A significant challenge was the limited understanding of PP, its theories, and its practical application among teachers. Providing concrete examples of how PP could be operationalized in the classroom, such as through Growth Mindset exercises, resilience training, and regular feedback loops, would be essential to enhance its practical application. Although only a few participants explicitly stated unfamiliarity with PP, many sought clarifications on its strategies and purposes, and some echoed the responses of others, suggesting limited independent understanding. This indicates that many language teachers in East Asia have minimal exposure to PP in their training or professional experience, revealing the need for targeted training and professional development. Such training could help educators better understand and apply PP principles, empowering them to improve their well-being and teaching effectiveness. Teacher training programs should develop educators' self-regulation and socio-emotional skills to enhance their well-being and manage stress effectively. Providing concrete examples of how PP could be operationalized in the classroom, such as through Growth Mindset

exercises, resilience training, and regular feedback loops, would be essential to enhance its practical application.

Teachers mentioned challenges for implementation within professional contexts regarding its use in instruction. Interestingly, some teachers identified few opportunities for its implementation and others plenty:

I think whilst I agree with the principles of it, I don't know how we can put it into practice in the classroom. If you're looking at grammar lists or whatever, it's difficult to say then, 'By the way, feel good about yourself'. It seems like something that's not appropriate for education at this level. (KA4)

So when I'm teaching, I like to encourage the students to be as positive as possible. When we're giving feedback, we can emphasise, 'You have the potential to do this', or when we are setting assignments, I want to encourage, 'You really can do this, you have all the resources.' So I want them always to think positively because you can learn English naturally. (KA2)

Interestingly, in the above example, both teachers worked in the same department at the same university, demonstrating that perceptions of opportunities for implementation in English-language teaching differ considerably between university teachers. However, one factor they appeared to agree on was that it was often difficult to judge its effects, with many teachers who were asked to employ it stating that they struggled to assess how effective an approach was proving in practice.

When talking about their personal use of PP strategies, the teachers often stated that they found it challenging to find the time to use PP. One participant stated, 'I agree that it would probably help me a lot if I did it, but I just can't find the time to do it' (HC5), whilst another argued that they simply did not have the time to work on themselves (CB3). However, others disagreed and stated that finding the time to employ it was necessary because it could contribute to their professional growth. As one teacher argued, PP has the potential to improve career outcomes for teachers:

We're talking about what it can mean to think positively and teach positively, but what about in terms of your own education and career? [...] Because you can really transform yourself with your mind. The only difference between someone that is stuck at the bottom and another who is a department head is time served and work done. If you can change your attitude, you change your habits and that can transform your career. (TC6)

Teachers felt that improving their well-being could improve their careers and teaching, indicating that professional and personal growth was a motivating factor behind adopting PP strategies.

Overall, the above findings reveal several issues. For instance, teachers reported various personal benefits concerning their outlook, mood, focus, and stress levels. At the same time, they also noted instructional benefits, such as improved relationships with students, greater self-regulation, increased confidence, and higher engagement among students. Likewise, the teachers noted similar challenges, such as finding time to implement PP strategies in practice and their own lives. Nevertheless, they acknowledged specific benefits to PP, such as enhanced meaningfulness, resilience, independence, relationships, and accomplishment.

Finally, the analysis highlights an opportunity to deepen teachers' understanding PP's theoretical foundation and implementation strategies. Although teachers recognised its potential for personal

and professional growth, their lack of deep understanding of the concept suggests that the likelihood of them successfully applying it without further education and training is limited. This gap may impact the reliability of the responses and should be considered when concluding.

Limitations

This study did not directly evaluate the impact of teacher PP training on student learning outcomes. The findings rely on teacher perceptions, which may influence subjective interpretations of classroom dynamics. Future research should include direct measures of student behaviour and performance to substantiate these claims. Additionally, as discussed in the literature review, cultural differences may explain why some aspects of PP are emphasised differently across the focus groups, particularly when compared to Western perspectives on positive psychology. It remains the case, however, that PP as a theory is shaped by international research. Still, in some cases, the teachers' understanding of the core theoretical assumptions of PP and its specific applications was quite poor, highlighting the need for further pre-service teacher training and professional development on PP in education.

Future Research

This study has several limitations that might be addressed through future research. For one, the study did not compare how participants responded to specific PP strategies, programs, interventions, or practices, meaning there is limited scope for making recommendations as to what specific measures might be taken to improve the well-being of teachers. An experimental design may rank the utility of various interventions to improve teacher well-being. Besides, the acknowledgment of apparent differences in responses to the questions about PP across the educational systems included in the study invites future cross-cultural comparisons of teachers' perspectives on the utility of PP in education. This study points the way to future research in these areas. Finally, the teachers received limited training for PP. Further PP training for teachers is suggested to improve well-being and classroom practices. For example, training workshops could incorporate mindfulness techniques for stress management, Growth Mindset exercises for building student motivation, and resilience training for managing classroom challenges. These practical applications can help teachers foster both their well-being and their students' engagement.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of positive psychology (PP) in English-language education, focusing on its impact on teacher well-being. Interviews with 86 teachers from five East Asian countries revealed that PP strategies provided personal benefits such as enhanced optimism, mood, focus, and reduced stress, as well as professional benefits like stronger teacher-student relationships and improved student confidence, engagement, and self-regulation. Teachers valued PP for fostering meaningfulness, resilience, independence, and accomplishment, though many faced challenges like limited time for implementation and a lack of theoretical understanding. Despite these barriers, teachers viewed PP positively, recognizing its potential to enhance personal well-being and professional practice. The findings underscore the need for better education and training on PP to maximize its benefits for teachers and students. Further research is recommended to explore effective implementation strategies within East Asian education systems.

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