

Magic Moments: Positive Psychology in Action in the Classroom

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Abstract

Recent research has discussed the potential benefits that positive psychology can bring to education and to language learning, but teachers still need a wider range of concrete ideas and activities. This paper presents a practical learning activity called “Magic Moments,” which brings aspects of positive psychology into the EFL classroom. The rationale for the activity is explained within the framework of PERMA, an influential model in the field of positive psychology put forward by Seligman (2011) which uses the constructs of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement. Instructions for carrying out the activity are presented. A study based on the magic moments activity is discussed with reference to student survey responses, student comments, and other observations. The study offers support for the hypotheses that the magic moments activity provides benefits from the perspectives of both positive psychology and language learning.

最近の研究では、ポジティブ心理学が教育と語学学習にもたらし得る利点について議論されましたが、教師はまだ具体的なアイデアやアクティビティを必要としています。本稿では、ポジティブ心理学の側面を EFL の教室に持ち込む「Magic Moments」という実践的な学習アクティビティを紹介します。ポジティブ心理学の

分野において影響力のあるモデルである PERMA の枠組みの中で説明され、アクティビティを実行するための指示が表示されています。「Magic Moments」のアクティビティに基づく研究は、学生の調査回答、学生のコメント、および他の観察を参照して議論されています。この研究は、「Magic Moments」のアクティビティがポジティブ心理学と言語学習の両方の観点から利益をもたらすという仮説を支持しています。

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Positive psychology can be defined as “the scientific study of what makes life most worth living” (Peterson, 2008) or as “the scientific study of how human beings prosper and thrive” (MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer, 2016). Since the 1990s, the field of psychology has widened its focus from what is wrong with people towards what people can do to bring more positive emotion and engagement into their lives.

In the field of education, recent research has seen an increasing number of studies and amount of discussion in the field of psychology on the potential benefits that positive psychology can bring to learning, including a recognition of the synergy between positive emotion and learning and higher levels of student engagement (Martin Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). More specifically, within the learning of foreign languages, positive psychology has been posited to improve classroom relationships that facilitate learning, foster positive emotional states that support learning such as curiosity, enjoyment and flow, and develop helpful character traits such as empathy, hardiness, and perseverance (MacIntyre et al., 2016).

While some work has been done in showing the specific kind of learning activities that can support positive psychology (e.g. Helgesen, 2018), teachers need a wider range of concrete ideas and activities to actually realize the potential benefits of positive psychology. This paper presents one such practical learning activity called “Magic Moments,” which aims to bring aspects of positive psychology into the EFL classroom while simultaneously acting

as a useful language learning activity. Instructions for carrying out the activity are presented. This is followed by a description of a study conducted in a Japanese university based on the Magic Moments activity, student responses, and student feedback on the activity.

What is a Magic Moment?

One way to quickly understand the idea of Magic Moments is to look at some song lyrics. For example, in the 1956 song called *Magic Moments* by Perry Como (Como, 2003), he sings:

The way that we cheered whenever our team was scoring a touchdown

The time that the floor fell out of my car when I put the clutch down

The penny arcade, the games that we played, the fun and the prizes

The Halloween hop when everyone came in funny disguises

In each line, Como has captured a vivid experience that the listener can share in. Through his sensory descriptions, we can clearly see the situation, hear the sounds, and feel something of the same emotion that he felt at that time. This is the kind of sensory description that we are aiming to elicit in the Magic Moments activity. Everyone has had moments like this, such as

- a special time when you felt really alive
- a time when something really changed in your life
- a moment when you were in 'flow'
- a 'light-bulb' moment when you had a new understanding about something

While Como's examples are vivid, most of them refer to a class of magic moments rather than a specific moment. For example, "the way that we cheered whenever our team scored" is a generalization from many individual moments. A better example of a very specific magic

moment is described in the beautiful sensory-based language in Tom Waits' song, *Ol' 55*

Well my time went so quickly, I went lickety-splickly out to my old '55

As I drove away slowly, feeling so holy, God knows, I was feeling alive.

Now the sun's coming up, I'm riding with Lady Luck, freeway cars and trucks,

Stars beginning to fade, and I lead the parade

Just a-wishing I'd stayed a little longer,

Oh, Lord, let me tell you that the feeling's getting stronger.

And it's six in the morning, gave me no warning; I had to be on my way.

Well there's trucks all a-passing me, and the lights are all flashing,

I'm on my way home from your place.

Again, the songwriter has created a rich sensory description that enables the listener to understand and vicariously share in the magic moment. In this way, songs or poems are often a good way to introduce the idea of magic moments to students.

Why Use Magic Moments as a Learning Activity?

This raises the question as to why magic moments should be used as the basis of a learning activity. Below, this is examined from the perspective of positive psychology and then from the perspective of language learning.

Positive Psychology

One commonly used model within the field of positive psychology is called PERMA (Seligman, 2012). This model attempts to understand *well-being* by encapsulating the five psychological constructs listed below.

Positive emotion (feeling good)

Engagement (finding flow)

Relationships (authentic connections with other people)

Meaning (a purposeful existence)

Achievement (a sense of accomplishment)

From the perspective of this model, helping people to notice the magic moments in their life has several benefits.

a) Simply remembering a moment like this mentally transports people right back to that time and helps them to re-experience the joy, curiosity, awe, or other positive emotions of that time (the “P” of Perma).

b) Recalling a magic moment is a form of awareness raising and may increase the likelihood that people will seek out similar moments in the future (the “E” of Perma). A magic moment is often a moment of “flow” when engagement is very high and a person becomes totally immersed in a situation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

c) By sharing these important moments with other people, it is easy for them to feel a greater sense of closeness (the “R” of PERMA).

d) By raising their awareness of these times of a heightened sense of being alive, people can also feel a greater sense of meaning in their lives (the “M” of Perma). In addition, sharing highly emotional events like magic moments helps to “disambiguate their meanings by assessing others’ reactions to the events.... [because] meanings are not automatically attached to emotional events, but develop over time through reflection, sharing, and comparing with other experiences” (Thorne, 2000).

Language Learning

From the perspective of language learning, using magic moments as the basis of a learning activity offers several benefits.

- a) The content of the activity is based on the learners' own lives and is thus completely personalised. Personalisation "makes language relevant to learners, makes communication activities meaningful, and also helps memorization" (British Council, 2017).
- b) Magic moments by definition naturally include the "interest, enjoyment, and inherent satisfaction" which self-determination theory suggests will lead to intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).
- c) It can lead to more trust between learners and a more collaborative learning environment. Sharing stories and experiences with others "increases the perceived value of those events, especially when others respond enthusiastically... [and] promote the development of trust and a prosocial orientation toward the other" (Reis et al., 2010).
- d) The magic moments activity encourages learners to recall and express the experience in sensory terms: what they saw, heard, and felt at that time. This practice in creating rich sensory descriptions is an important part of developing writing skills, particularly in the genre of narrative which is "often set apart by its usage ... sensory details, and ... students can 'show' their stories in an exciting way" (Davis, 2018). For both oral and written communication, this will help the learners to have richer and more fulfilling communication.
- e) As explained in the instructions below, the magic moments activity is intrinsically motivational and can be used to practice opportunities for listening, speaking, writing, reading, and presentation skills.

Eliciting Magic Moments

How do we help people to elicit these magic moments and communicate them in a vivid description? This question can be usefully divided into two parts: a) eliciting an experience and b) using questions to help the person to recall the experience and be able to express it vividly.

Elicit the Experience

One way to elicit the experience is to have the person imagine that they are back in the original situation and reliving the moment. This is called association in the field of neuro-linguistic programming (Bandler & Grinder, 1979) and a simple elicitation protocol following this methodology might be:

“Remember a specific moment when you felt really alive.

Imagine that you can step back into that time now.”

This kind of elicitation protocol is immediately clear to most people and they can quickly pull up an experience from memory. Occasionally someone, however, may describe a generic class of experiences rather than any particular experience. For example, rather than describing the moment when they bought that beautiful red coat that fitted so well, they describe the generic class of experiences of shopping. In that case, we can emphasize that it should be a “specific” experience.

Make the Experience Vivid

Even when a specific experience has been elicited, many people will provide a description that is difficult for another person to clearly imagine. Below are two hypothetical descriptions of the same magic moment. The first is expressed primarily in non-sensory language, and the second is much more sensory and easy to imagine.

Description 1: I was sitting on the lawn in the front garden of the house where I grew up. The weather was good and it felt nice. I hung out there for a while... not really doing much at all... just enjoying the day. It seemed to last forever.

Description 2: I was sitting on the dry grass on the lawn in the front garden of the big gray house where I grew up. The grass was a dark shade of green. It was long, maybe about 12 centimeters high and it felt so smooth and velvety to the touch. The weather was just perfect. I could feel the gentle sun on my shoulders and neck and it made my whole body so relaxed. There were a few sounds in the distance like a dog barking and an occasional car passing by, but what I really noticed was the silence. And I felt a sense of peace in my heart. I stayed there, looking at the daisies and the hedges for a long time. Time seemed to have flown away and left me to enjoy the day.

Description 2 is clearly more interesting to read, and creating it is both more challenging and beneficial for learners. From the perspective of positive psychology, the sensory language is also much more likely to generate positive emotions since our brains seem to extract meaning from words by internally creating them in sensory terms (Bergen, 2014). In order to have learners produce sensory-based descriptions of this type, we can again borrow from the methodology of neuro-linguistic programming (Bandler & Grinder, 1979) and add the following to the elicitation protocol.

What do you see?

What do you hear?

What do you feel?

Notice that the questions are posed in the present tense to encourage the learner to actually associate into the experience fully at that time, rather than remembering it more abstractly.

The full elicitation protocol is shown below in the instructions to the Magic Moments

activity.

The Magic Moments Activity

A sample handout for learners is shown below. It is divided into three parts, which can be carried out in a single lesson or multiple lessons, depending on the teaching context. In part 1, learners work with other examples of magic moments in their own lives. In part 2, learners work in pairs or small groups, and share their magic moments. In part 3, each learner chooses one magic moment and makes a presentation to other learners or the whole class. In this presentation, the goal is to describe the magic moment experience in sufficient detail that the listeners can also experience a little of the same feeling. To achieve this, the teacher should help learners to create sensory based descriptions, showing exactly what they saw, heard, and felt during the magic moment.

Part 1. Identify Magic Moments

Everyone has "magic moments" in their life. List at least one example for each type of magic moment.

... a special time when you felt really alive	
... a time when something really changed in your life	
... a moment when you were in 'flow'	
... a 'light-bulb' moment when you had a new understanding about something	

Part 2. Share Magic Moments

Use the chart below to interview your classmates about their magic moments.

		<i>Try to experience the moment again. Imagine stepping back into that moment.</i>		
Partner Name	What was one of your magic moments?	What do you see?	What do you hear?	How do you feel?

Based on your interviews, which of your partners' magic moments would you like to experience?

.....

What is one thing you can do to have more magic in your life?

.....

Part 3. Recreate a Magic Moment

1. Choose one of your magical moments.
2. Prepare a presentation of your magical moment. Describe what you saw, what you heard, what you felt, and what you experienced at that moment. Really get into the moment and try to be as specific as possible so that the audience can almost experience the magic moment.

A Study Based on Magic Moments

Context

A study based on the Magic Moments activity was carried out in an EFL learning context at a Japanese university. The 46 participants were 19-20 years old with an average TOEIC score of 600 points. The activity provided useful practice in writing, speaking, listening, and presentation.

Hypotheses

In this study, in line with the rationale for the Magic Moments activity presented above, it was hypothesized that there would be benefits from two perspectives: positive psychology and language learning. These are shown in Table 1 below and will be referred to later in this paper.

Table 1. Hypotheses for the Magic Moments Study

<i>Positive Psychology Perspective</i>	<i>Language Learning Perspective</i>
<p>It was hypothesized that...</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The activity will enable students to step back into the magic moment. 2. Students will feel positive emotion while sharing their magic moment. 3. Listeners will feel positive emotion. 4. Listeners will be able to experience the magic moments vicariously. 5. Students will become more engaged and open to magic moments in the future. 	<p>It was hypothesized that...</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students would become more aware of sensory language. 2. Students would become more aware of the importance of narrative and presentation skills. 3. Greater trust would develop between students. 4. The magic moments activity would be intrinsically motivating.

Procedure

Students followed the activity as explained above which culminated in a presentation in which they tried to have other students experience the magic moment vicariously. The presentations were recorded on video for later viewing, and students submitted a written report in English of their magic moment. Students also signed an ethics release form agreeing to the sharing of their work anonymously. Field notes provided observational data, and students also filled in post-activity surveys.

Results and Discussion

Examples of Student Work

A representative example of a student’s written work is given below. Student errors and

phrasing have been kept intact. Two more examples are shown in the Appendix.

Example 1

I will introduce my magic moment that I felt alive. Please close your eyes and imagine if you wouldn't mind. It was February night in Cambodia. It was warm but not so humid. I was riding a car on the only road in Cambodian countryside. Every inhabitant had already slept, so there is no light and no sound without our car's light and sound. Then, I opened the car window. I breathed the fresh air. Looking out the window, it was amazing. I saw a star filled sky. I was breathless. That was the clearest and most beautiful stars in my life. I felt that I am part of nature.

Below, the results of the student comments, survey, and observational data are discussed from the dual perspectives of positive psychology and language learning.

Positive Psychology Perspective

Table 2 shows some representative student comments. These are classified according to the hypotheses stated in Table 1.

Table 2. Student Comments for Positive Psychology Perspective

Hypothesis	Typical student comment
1. Ability to step back into magic moment <i>(Supported)</i>	“It brought me in the time when I went to Taiwan.” “I tried to remember the sight, smell and sound of that time clearly.” “I can remember my magic moment and change to words.”

<p>2. Positive emotions when sharing own magic moment <i>(Supported)</i></p>	<p>“I was glad to share my magic moment with classmates.”</p> <p>“I was very nervous but I could even imagine pictures of my magical moments in my head. It was very exciting to share my magical moment because it is such a precious moment for me.”</p>
<p>3. Positive emotions while listening to others <i>(Supported)</i></p>	<p>“That was really fun.”</p> <p>“I was attracted [to] their presentations.”</p> <p>“I want to listen to more stories.”</p>
<p>4. Experiencing other’s magic moments vicariously <i>(Supported)</i></p>	<p>“All presentations were easy to imagine.”</p> <p>“Tomoko’s presentation was very real!”</p> <p>“I experienced others’ magic moments. It was fun!”</p> <p>“I was so excited to listen Tomoko’s story. I could imagine the view of London.”</p> <p>“Listening to others’ magical moments was so fun because it was like I myself am experiencing their moments together. It was cool to imagine and picture their moments in my head.”</p> <p>“I could imagine and feel their experiences’ reality.”</p> <p>“I could imagine all the magic moments.”</p> <p>“Imagining others’ magical moments in my head is very interesting.”</p> <p>“Many people talked about visiting abroad so I enjoyed imagining the scenery in many countries.”</p>

	<p>“Akiko’s presentation is so nice. I can imagine the life in France.”</p> <p>“Eiko’s presentation was very good. I could remember as a schoolchild.”</p> <p>“The presentation about food made me eat something.”</p>
<p>5. Be more engaged and open to magic moments in the future</p> <p><i>(Supported)</i></p>	<p>“The magic moment is not only special. One of them talked [about] a part of really usual life, and other talked usual experience. But ‘usual’ is not bad. I notice that I can get more magic moments around us through ‘usual life’.”</p>

As can be seen in Table 2, the selected student comments supported all the positive psychology hypotheses, and the majority of the other student comments were similar in nature. Table 3 shows some further supporting data in the form of a simple student survey. Students answered each survey item on a scale of 0-10 and the numbers represent the mean score.

Table 3. Results of Student Survey

1. This exercise helped me to experience the magic moment again.	8.6
2. I was able to help others experience my magic moment.	6.8
3. I will use this technique again to help me re-experience other magic moments in my life.	8.3
4. This was a useful exercise.	8.7

Although there was no control group in the experiment, the high figures for questions 1, 3, and 4 clearly provide further support for the hypotheses. It is interesting to note that the lower

figure in question 2 indicates that students were not confident that their explanation enabled others to share in their magic moment experience, and this could be examined in future research.

As a way of investigating the way that students accessed and represented the magic moment, Table 4 shows the student responses to the question about which sensory system they used when remembering the magic moment.

Table 4. Sensory systems reported to be used in recalling magic moment

When I remember something, I use	Pictures	Sounds	Feelings	Words	Tastes	Smells
	7.5	6.8	8.6	6.9	6.1	6.8

Again, there was no control group or experience to act as a baseline with which to compare these numbers, but we can note that students are accessing and representing the magic moment experience most frequently through triggers of a feeling, and next most frequently through the triggers of a mental picture. Other sensory systems (sound, taste, smell) and verbal triggers are relatively less important. In future work, it might be useful to deliberately encourage the use of a variety of triggers to create a richer memory and description.

Language Learning Perspective

Table 5 shows some representative student comments related to the language learning hypotheses (shown in Table 1).

Table 5. Language Learning Perspective

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<p>1. Awareness of need to improve sensory description skills <i>(Supported)</i></p>	<p>“I could tell what I saw and heard and how I felt, but I should have told about what I tasted and smelled.”</p> <p>“I used feelings, actions, tastes greatly in my presentation, but I didn’t use sounds... so I want to remember memories more clearly.”</p> <p>“I should use moving words more. It’s good to use concrete words which is ‘like emerald jewel’, ‘like today’s temperature.’”</p>
<p>2. Developing narrative and presentation skills <i>(Supported)</i></p>	<p>“I noticed making stories was important when I need to tell my experience to others”</p> <p>“Next time, I want to say ‘close your eyes’.”</p> <p>“Some students use gesture, so I want to learn it. And I think eye contact is really important.”</p> <p>“I want to know about English metaphor to help students to imagine.”</p> <p>“Using various similes make me possible to imagine their moment. It is good way to explain.”</p> <p>“If I said ‘please imagine...’ or ‘you can see/hear/feel etc.’, they would be easy to image the situation.”</p> <p>“The speech which subject is ‘you’ is easy for me to understand the situation.”</p> <p>“Maybe I could use more body language to make my presentation more real.”</p>
<p>3. Building trust and</p>	<p>“I think it is important to share the others’ experience.”</p>

<p>a better community <i>(Supported)</i></p>	<p>“I empathize with many others’ experience.”</p>
<p>4. Intrinsically motivating <i>(Supported)</i></p>	<p>“It was interesting. I will use this technique again.” “Presentation was very nice and impressed.”</p>

These comments and the many similar comments by other students lend strong support to the language learning hypotheses.

Other Observations

Some other observations and notes are given below, and some will be explored in future research.

- When a student said “close your eyes...”, it helped the listeners to experience the magic moment more clearly. This is presumably because there is less interference from external visual stimuli and the listener can create stronger internal mental representations.
- The enthusiasm of presenters was a big influence on the listeners, and future research will look at the paralinguistic aspects of sharing magic moments. Maintaining eye contact with the audience and using gestures also had a clear positive impact on listeners.
- Using “you” as the subject was more evocative, for example, saying “you are standing in front of the ocean” rather than “I am standing in front of the ocean.” This switch from first to second person is called a change in referential index in neuro-linguistic programming and is often used in hypnotherapy and related therapies (Bandler, Grinder, & DeLozier, 1996)

- Many students talked about their magic moment helping them to build a new belief or open up a new horizon. This seems to support Fredrickson's view that positive emotions function as a way to "broaden and build" resources (Fredrickson, 2009). This effect of magic moments will be explored more deeply in further research.
- The content of the magic moment experiences included many references to overseas travel, music, and being with friends. The content of these moments may show useful patterns and this will be analysed in further research.

Conclusion

Student feedback shows that Magic Moments activity is a useful activity for the language learning classroom. As a positive psychology activity, it offers strong opportunities for improvements in several areas of the PERMA model including positive emotion, engagement, relationships, and meaning. As a language learning activity, it is an intrinsically motivating and personalized activity which raises awareness about sensory language and narrative skills, builds trust between students, and can provide an excellent practice opportunity for writing, speaking, listening, and presentation skills.

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Appendix

Magic Moment Example 2

My magic moment – that was the first hitchhiking of my life. I was really surprised at kindness of people. In this February, I had been in the U.S. to travel with rental RV. Before we got our RV, we enjoyed Los Angeles. After we went to the amazing city Hollywood, we were going to Griffith Observatory on foot. It took more than 30 minutes, and that was a little hard walking for us because we had walked so much time till morning at the day. However, the scenery and stars we saw after hard walking was amazing.

After the tour in Griffith Observatory, we found that our Wi-Fi became out of service. We were at a loss about what should we have done because we were planning to ride Uber, the car sharing service, to go home. If we walked to home in the darkness, it would take more than 1.5 hours. We could not find any cabs in the parking. So, we decided to hitchhike divided into 2 groups. I had no good idea to hitchhike, but two of my friends were experts in hitchhiking. Surprisingly, they caught two cars in less than 5 minutes.

The driver whose car we ride was a man looked 30's. I asked him "why do you take us?" he answered, "because I have hitchhiked like you and traveled many places in the U.S. when I was young". He also said that "my father has been to Japan because his job. I want to go to Japan, too someday". He was so kind as to take us just in front of our home we stayed and he never asked for a return.

I do not know as if I could do the same as he did in the same situation. I was impressed about his kindness.

Magic Moment Example 3

My Magic Moment I was very excited was sightseeing to Kyoto. I went to Nijo-Castle, Emperor house, and Kennin-temple. Especially, I was surprised by Nijo-Castle. It was better than pictures of books or textbooks. Decoration of gate was so gorgeous. In addition, the secondary bailey's ceiling and fusuma was so luxurious because they are used a lot of gold. I was moved to imagine the Restoration of Imperial Rule and historical hero see this sight. This time many elementary school and junior high school students came to Nijo-Castle. Therefore I heard cheerful voices of children. Moreover, garden was pretty nice. This trip, I was able to see, hear, and smell historical atmosphere. Thank you!