

Sarah Mercer and
Herbert Puchta's

101

Psychological Tips

Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers

Pocket editions

Series Editor: Scott Thornbury

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and Herbert
Puchta's 101
Psychological
Tips

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Key: T = Tip

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Why we wrote this book

An understanding of psychology is fundamental to good teaching practice. All teachers need to understand the basics of psychology such as how to motivate learners, reduce anxiety, prompt engagement, develop positive group dynamics, etc. However, very often the advice in this area covers big issues such as ‘build positive rapport with learners’ or ‘develop a sense of group identity’. These are important things to do, but they take time and are not amenable to easy interventions. For some, it may also be unclear where to begin in concrete terms with practical steps to turn these notions into action. There are no quick fixes for psychological issues and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to psychological interventions – every teacher, learner, group and educational context is different. Nevertheless, there are some specific actions which have been shown to generally lead to positive changes in thinking and behaviour.

In this book, we draw on research and theory from psychology to suggest practical tips to language teachers for small changes you can make to your practice which lead to positive effects on learning and/or teaching. The tips centre on three main areas of influence: language teachers’ own psychology; that of your learners; or that of the group as a whole. In order to be included in the collection, a tip must fulfil two core criteria: (1) it must be a relatively small and easy intervention in concrete terms that teachers can make; and (2) there must be some evidence that this action can impact on learning/teaching behaviours and outcomes. In this way, the book is based largely on research and evidence, but remains extremely practical, grounded, and easy to implement. However, there is a caveat to add here. The outcomes of educational research can often be interpreted in different ways and there will always be diverse opinions about their practical application. Furthermore, a host of factors can influence the effect of any intervention depending on localised and individual factors. Indeed, given that language teaching is inextricably tied to social and cultural contexts, the interpretation and application of such research will vary and be locally determined. As such, we are aware others may hold different opinions, and every reader will need to critically reflect on the appropriacy of any tip for you and your learners in your specific

cultural and institutional setting. Given that this book is designed to be short and easy to engage with, we have omitted lengthy discussions of issues surrounding the advice and instead we have adopted a stance based on our experiences, convictions and understanding of theory, literature and existing research. For simplicity, we have included only one or two references for each tip to illustrate the evidence and suggest pathways of further reading.

Naturally, we do not expect teachers to try to employ all 101 tips at once – that might even be counter-productive and create an express route to burnout. We offer this collection of psychological tips as a palette of ideas and actions to choose from, and each teacher will use your own experience and expertise to make decisions what to use, when, and maybe how to adapt.

We have organised the book around six core areas of the psychology of language learning and teaching. We begin, in section A, by suggesting a selection of tips for teacher wellbeing which is a crucial but often overlooked component of good practice. The emotional state of teachers can impact on the entire learning dynamics of individuals and the group. Next, we consider the ways in which a teacher can lead a group or class with compassion, authority and skill. This section encompasses aspects of methodology, classroom management techniques and interpersonal skills. The focus in section C is on the socio-emotional climate of the group as a whole and diverse aspects of group dynamics. The focus then switches to the learner as an individual and concentrates on three key psychological areas that are defining for language learning success: learner engagement, self-esteem and empowerment (also known as *agency*). The aim is to cover core psychological areas for the teacher, the learner and the class as a whole in ways that will positively impact on their psychological, socio-emotional and motivational states.

We expect the book to be relevant for teachers of all students, as many aspects covered are central to human learning and language processing at all levels and ages. The book and tips can be read in any order, but we do recommend you commence with the first section about your own psychology and wellbeing. It is perhaps the most important area to address before reflecting on what ways you can care for others. We hope the book inspires and supports you as language teachers.

A: Psychological tips for teacher wellbeing

Wellbeing refers to the sense of satisfaction, meaning and balance a person feels. It is more than just positive emotions; it involves experiencing manageable levels of stress and leading a life that feels personally satisfying. We start the book with a section on teacher wellbeing as we believe it is the foundation of good practice.

- 1 Be unapologetic about taking time for self-care**
 - 2 Set boundaries**
 - 3 Find a time management strategy that works for you**
 - 4 Focus on strengths**
 - 5 Be a good colleague**
 - 6 Learn when to exercise acceptance**
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 - 8 Remind yourself of the meaning of your work**
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 - 16 Learn to satisfice**
 - 17 Tweak your job to make it more enjoyable**
 - 18 Connect with nature regularly**
 - 19 Take mindful minutes**
 - 20 Know the signs of burnout**
 - 21 Use a wellbeing checklist**
-

1

Be unapologetic about taking time for self-care

Taking time to engage in self-care is essential for wellbeing, so teachers can teach to the best of their abilities.

Our first tip is deliberately chosen to highlight how important it is for language teachers to attend to their wellbeing and take time for their own self-care. Self-care refers to consciously paying attention to your physical, emotional and mental wellbeing. To do so is not a selfish indulgence, but rather it is a basic necessity for healthy functioning.

Ideally, the responsibility for wellbeing lies not only with the teacher, but it is actively supported by the social context and institutions where educators work. However, this is not always the case. While self-care can never compensate for precarious and difficult work conditions, it remains one important strategy that teachers can engage in to protect and nurture their wellbeing.

Teacher wellbeing is fundamental for good practice as it helps educators to teach more creatively, build better relationships with others, and cope with daily stressors among other benefits. One challenge is that teachers tend to be very other-oriented: in their dedication to their jobs and families, they often spend all their time on meeting the needs of others. Yet, ‘you cannot pour from an empty cup’. It is vital that teachers deliberately set aside time to engage in self-care by:

1. Understanding your needs and what kind of things nourish you, e.g., hobbies, nature, socialising, music, art, alone time, reading, yoga, spirituality, etc. (see 13 and 18).
2. Keeping a log of your self-care activities to make visible your actions.
3. Attending to the health triangle: nutrition, sleep and exercise.
4. Marking out ‘me time’ in the calendar and committing to it.
5. Seeking out help or social support if feeling overwhelmed.
6. Engaging in any of the other tips in this section that appeal!

Mercer, S. & Gregersen, T. (2020). *Teacher Wellbeing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Turner, K. & Thielking, M. (2019). Teacher wellbeing: Its effect on teaching practice and student learning. *Issues in Educational Research*, 29(3), 938–960.

Creating boundaries and being able to detach from work is important for wellbeing and life satisfaction.

The majority of teachers often take work home, and even engage in professional development outside working hours. The boundaries between work and home life become blurry: a situation exacerbated by the shift to online teaching. While some people may relish the flexibility of this work mode, others have difficulties creating boundaries and struggle to detach, which can negatively impact their wellbeing, life satisfaction and relationships.

The term *work/life balance* was intended to capture the notion of an integration of work and non-work. However, the term is misleading. Firstly, there is no such mythical state of perfect balance. It is constantly changing, and every person has different needs in this regard. Secondly, the words themselves create the impression we have two separate domains: work and life. We have life; one life, which must incorporate our work as well as our non-work lives.

To manage a healthy synthesis of work and non-work, it can help to create three types of boundaries:

1. *Temporal boundaries*: This refers to deliberately setting time aside for leisure, family and friends. Put time for self-care in one's calendar and protect that as a fixed appointment. Ensure evenings and weekends include sufficient non-work time.
2. *Spatial boundaries*: Working from home can mean there is no physical escape from work. Keep work restricted to one room, one set of bookshelves, or tidied away in your bag when you are not working. Home needs to be a place for relaxation and disconnection.
3. *Technological boundaries*: Switch off technology, and disable notifications. Ask yourself whether students and/or parents need your contact details outside of work.

3

Find a time management strategy that works for you

Time management strategies reduce stress and anxiety, by giving teachers a sense of control over their time.

Many teachers feel they have more things to do in a day than there are hours available. This means everyone needs to decide on their priorities and what they allocate their time to. *Time management* refers to strategies that you consciously employ in order to take control of how you use your time. Research shows that using time management strategies can help reduce anxiety and stress, acting as a buffer against burnout and exhaustion. It is important to understand that time management strategies must be utilised to ensure time for leisure, friends and family, not just work.

There are many time management strategies, but it is important to find the one that works for you as an individual. Here are some examples:

- *Time blocking*: This is when you set aside a realistically estimated block of time for a specific task and ensure it is completed within that time. Also build in buffer zones to reduce stress and leave space for the unexpected. Be sure to schedule leisure blocks, too.
- *Pomodoro technique*: A strategy which involves working intensively without any distractions for 20–25 minutes and then taking a five-minute break. After four such blocks of work, it is then recommended to take a longer break of around 30 minutes.
- *To-do list*: The most traditional strategy, which involves drawing up a list of what needs to be done short- and long-term as well as possibly setting priorities in degrees of urgency and deadlines (e.g., list A to be done today; list B this week; list C this semester).
- *Learn to say no*: Saying no to unnecessary or unenjoyable requests frees up time to say yes to other things you would rather do.

Misra, R. & McKean, M. (2000). College students academic stress and its relationship to their anxiety, time management, and leisure satisfaction. *American Journal of Health Studies*, 16(1), 41–51.

A strengths-based approach to education looks at identifying and building on strengths for growth.

In education, there can be a tendency to focus on weaknesses and deficits in learners as well as teachers. Teachers are encouraged to reflect on what went wrong in their classes, what needs improving, and how to solve problems in their practice. While that can be useful, it also risks creating a sense of perpetual dissatisfaction and negativity. Professional improvement can also come from building on successes and strengths, not just from addressing weaknesses. Indeed, the use of ‘can-do’ statements in learning contexts is an attempt to foster a more positive sense of achieved competence.

One suggestion of how to focus on strengths is to use Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider & Godwin, 2013). AI encourages individuals or groups of people to identify and critically reflect on their successes and strengths, and consider how these can be built upon or transferred to other contexts. The authors propose a 4D cyclic model to carry out AI:

1. *Discovery*: What are my strengths and successes? Why was something successful? What contributes to my strengths?
2. *Dream*: How would I want my classes to look?
3. *Design*: How could I use my strengths or understanding of my successes to achieve this vision?
4. *Destiny*: What happens when I transfer my insights from my successes or strengths in other contexts?

Next time you reflect on your teaching or engage in peer observation, take an AI approach and learn from moments of success and strengths. What went well, why, and how can we use that knowledge in the future?

Bushe, G. R. & Kassam, A. F. (2005). When is appreciative inquiry transformational: A meta-case analysis. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 41(2), 161–181.

Cooperrider, D. L. & Godwin, L. N. (2013). Positive organizational development: Innovation-inspired change in an economy and ecology of strengths. In Cameron, K., & Spreitzer, G. M. (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship* (pp. 737–750). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

5

Be a good colleague

Being kind to others can have a positive influence on our own emotions and our physical and mental health.

In a meta-study on the effect of altruism on adults, Post (2005) shows that there are clear correlations between caring about and being kind to others and our own physical and mental health, emotions and even longevity. Supporting others 1) makes us feel more connected socially, 2) diverts us from our own problems, 3) gives meaning to our actions, 4) leads to an increased perception about our efficacy, and 5) contributes to a more active lifestyle. Moreover, it enhances our creativity, flexibility and openness to new ideas and new information.

However, we should aim at reasonable altruism, remaining aware that it's possible to get overwhelmed by attempts to care for others. It has also been shown that being caring in order to get rewards rather than genuinely being motivated by concern for others does not have the positive effects listed above.

Here are a few ideas of how to be a good colleague:

- If you notice a colleague is stressed or feeling down, show your empathy and offer your support by, e.g., sitting down for a cup of coffee with them and offering to listen to them actively if they want to share what's bothering them.
- You may engage in doing 'random acts of kindness' – e.g., offer to help a colleague carry out an unpleasant task; ask a colleague how their day is going; bring some treats for the coffee break for everyone to share; offer to become a mentor for a colleague in their first year of teaching; SMILE!
- Get engaged in volunteer work, e.g., become an active member of a teachers' association.

Post, S. G. (2005). Altruism, happiness, and health: It's good to be good. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 12(2), 66–77.

Acceptance is a coping strategy which can lower stress levels and reduce the risk of burnout.

When people have good or bad experiences, they explain the reasons for them as being either due to things within their control (*internal locus of control*, e.g., my use of strategies or effort) or to things outside their control (*external locus of control*, e.g., a colleague or luck). Those who have an internal locus of control are likely to feel that they can change things and make a positive difference. This sense of control, as opposed to feeling helpless, is empowering and can significantly reduce stress.

A related coping strategy is that of acceptance. Some things are truly out of our control. When appropriate, learning to accept those things means we can stop worrying about them and move on to expending our energy elsewhere. The key is to understand which things are within our control. Ruminating over something we cannot change is wasted time and emotion. However, there are also instances where acceptance is not appropriate. Accepting things we are unhappy about but could change will lead to dissatisfaction. For example, we may be facing unacceptable work conditions in which seeking change, support, or choosing to leave the situation may be the wiser path of action.

- Identify the problem you are concerned about.
- Brainstorm as many reasons as possible why this issue is as it is.
- Consider whether any of these reasons are within your control.
- Is the situation so unacceptable that you need to agitate for change or leave?
- Choose a path of action based on what you can control and what is reasonable for you to accept. Consider how you will feel one year from now about this decision.

Nakamura, Y. M. & Orth, U. (2005). Acceptance as a coping reaction: Adaptive or not? *Swiss Journal of Psychology*, 64(4), 281–292.

To ensure emotional balance, it is important to consciously seek out the positives.

Humans have a natural negativity bias, which means we tend to focus more on the negatives of a situation. Through habit, we can train ourselves to look out for and identify positives. This does not mean ignoring the negatives in life or suppressing negative emotions. Rather, it is about ensuring we have emotional balance and can become aware of the positives around us (see 21).

One strategy for seeking out the positives is to find ‘silver linings’ when we experience a stressful or difficult situation. This means looking at our experience and thinking consciously of those aspects which are positive, any possible benefits, or ways in which we were fortunate, as the situation could perhaps have been even worse.

Another strategy to boost positive emotions is to create a *positivity portfolio*. This is a folder in which you regularly collect the things that remind you of happy moments in your life. You could include a kind email from a colleague; photos of special moments, places or people; or a drawing from a student. When things are not going so well, you will have something to guide you back to feeling more positive.

Finally, another key source of positivity can be your own inner voice. Self-compassion is about being kind to yourself. It means treating yourself as you would your dearest friend. Teachers can often be their own fiercest critic, judging their mistakes harshly, calling out their own shortcomings, and comparing themselves negatively to others. Self-compassion encourages you to talk kindly to yourself, identify your strengths and successes, and accept that all humans are imperfect and make mistakes.

Cassidy, T., McLaughlin, M. & Giles, M. (2014). Benefit finding in response to general life stress: Measurement and correlates. *Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine*, 2(1), 268–282.

Fredrickson, B. (2011). *Positivity: Groundbreaking research to release your inner optimist and thrive*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.

Neff, K. (2011). *Self-compassion: The proven power of being kind to yourself*. New York: Harper Collins.

Remind yourself of the meaning of your work

8

Reminding yourself of the difference your work can make to others supports your motivation and wellbeing.

According to Nelson Mandela, 'Education is the most powerful weapon to change the world.' When asked why they initially wanted to become teachers, many frequently refer to higher goals, such as wanting to help students develop as human beings or contribute positively to society. For language teachers, they may be driven by the ability to empower students for global interaction and to contribute to intercultural understandings. However, given the stress teachers frequently suffer from, it is not surprising that many teachers can lose sight of their initial motivations and these meaningful dimensions to their work.

Schueller and Seligman (2010) mention pleasure, engagement and meaning as three pathways towards wellbeing. Pleasure, such as watching a great movie or eating a delicious dessert, can boost one's mood but does not contribute to wellbeing beyond that moment. Engagement and meaning, however, have been shown to be positively correlated with wellbeing in the long term. They promote positive relationships, help us set effective goals, and allow us to stay connected to our sense of purpose.

- Think about your initial motivation to become a teacher. Imagine a dialogue between yourself from that time and you now. Take notes of any insights it might give you.
- Notice when you feel more strongly connected to your sense of purpose. When are you most actively engaged?
- Chat with colleagues who seem very engaged. Ask them how they feel about their work and what drives them. Is there anything you can learn from them?
- Leave a note or image near your desk to remind yourself every day of why what you do matters to the world at large.

Schueller, S. M. & Seligman, M. E. P. (2010). Pursuit of pleasure, engagement, and meaning: Relationships to subjective and objective measures of well-being. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 5(4), 253–263.