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| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Positive Psychology in Emergency Distance Education in Saudi Arabia during the Pandemic and Beyond

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| **ABSTRACT**

Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, there was a sudden transition from face-to-face to distance learning (DL) at Saudi schools and universities. 55% of students surveyed were dissatisfied with DL, online communication and had difficulty understanding the course material. Students showed low self-efficacy, engagement and motivation, a negative role and absence of goals. They were mostly concerned about passing with exams. Starting Fall 2021, Saudi universities resumed face-to-face instruction in combination with DL on alternate days. Unlike the past 3 semesters, instructors and students join their online classes from campus, not home. The instructors are still complaining of students' lack of interest, engagement, and interaction in online classes. Students are still inattentive and uninterested in class participation. Instructors' survey showed unfamiliarity with positive psychology and how its principles can be applied in DL courses. To enhance college students' self-efficacy, interest, interaction, and engagement in DL, and help students become happy and relaxed learners, overcome their anxiety, this study proposes the integration of positive psychology and gives practical guidelines to develop positive attitudes, positive thinking, build students' resilience and teach them how to cope with and manage challenging learning situations in DL by setting clear teaching and learning goals, standards for passing courses, sending positive messages, writing success stories, providing moral support, reading self-help books, watching self-improvement videos and giving positive feedback. It also gives sample activities for increasing students' engagement, interaction, and communication.

1. Introduction

As in many countries around the world, there was a sudden transition from face-to-face to distance learning (DL) at Saudi universities starting March 2020 due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 Pandemic. For 3 consecutive semesters, all college courses were delivered online using a variety of platforms. Results of a survey conducted in Spring 2020 showed that 55% of students at language and translation departments were dissatisfied with DL, online communication with their instructors and had difficulty understanding the online course material. The students showed low self-efficacy, absence of goals and a negative role. Many were uninterested in doing assignments, in class discussions and refused to give oral presentations. They would appear online, but in reality, they were away, since they had a recording of the lecture. The online course attendance was not as high as in face-to-face classes. The students were mostly concerned with exams and passing their courses with high grades. They would oversleep, start an exam late, ask for extra time, cheat on exams, ask to be passed or exempt from exams. DL was characterized by absence of students' agency, low student engagement, motivation, and enthusiasm (Al-Jarf, 2020b).

In Fall 2020 and Spring 2021, Saudi universities had taken numerous steps towards solving platform problems, improving internet connection, setting new online exam procedures and standards. They offered pedagogical training and support for teachers. Results of the survey in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 showed that some instructors went beyond using a PPT in DL. They started to use online language, translation, linguistics, and literature activities for increasing students' engagement. Although the students

adjusted to DL to some extent, they still complained and were worried about exams and grades. Lectures were held online, but exams were held face-to-face. Universities made a change in mark distribution to avoid students' complaints (Al-Jarf, 2022b; Al-Jarf, 2021d).

Starting Fall 2021, college students and instructors in Saudi Arabia resumed face-to-face instruction in combination with DL on alternate days. However, unlike the three previous semesters, instructors and students join their online classes from campus rather than from home. Responses to a survey conducted in Fall 2021 revealed that instructors are still complaining of students' lack of interest, engagement, and interaction in online classes. Students are not attentive and not interested in DL class participation. They are rather busy eating and chatting with their friends while online classes (Al-Jarf, 2022b).

As to the course curriculum during the Pandemic, survey results showed that no adaptations were made in the DL course curricula offered to students in the Spring 2020, Fall 2020, Spring 2021 and Fall 2021 semester. The course content, and amount of material covered were the same as those before the Pandemic. No digital resources have been added or required. However, 45% of the instructors surveyed started to use activities that are meaningful and relevant to the students such as project-based, task-based, problem-solving, debates, inviting guest speakers, integrating apps and others (Al-Jarf, 2022a; Al-Jarf, 2022b; Al-Jarf, 2021b).

Since negative emotions experienced by students are always present in the classroom, any transition from one mode of learning to another requires some transition pedagogy and re-designing learning activities so that they include strategies and content that facilitate the transition from face-to-face to online DL, to help students cope with the new mode of learning and enhance their psychological, emotional, and social wellbeing. Therefore, to help students and instructors combat the challenges imposed by DL during the Pandemic, this study aims to explore language, linguistics, translation, and literature instructors' familiarity with positive psychology and whether they apply its principles in their teaching. It proposes a model for integrating the principles of positive psychology in DL to enhance college students' interest, interaction, and engagement, help them become happy and relaxed learners, help them overcome their stress and anxiety and make more achievements and improvements in DL courses. The study will give practical guidelines that would assist students develop positive attitudes, positive thinking, build students' resilience and how to cope with and manage challenging situations in DL during the Pandemic and post-Pandemic era. Furthermore, the study will recommend activities for increasing students' self-efficacy, resilience, engagement, interaction, and communication.

1.1 What is Positive Psychology
Positive Psychology[1] is a scientific approach that focuses on studying human behavior, thoughts, and feelings. It also focuses on people's strengths that enable individuals and communities to prosper, build the good in life and enhance their lives up to the *"great"* level. It is based on the notion that people can be inspired to develop their best selves and achieve their maximum potential. It focuses on positive states and traits that contribute to greater emotional resilience, gratitude, visualizing, success and mindfulness; positive experiences; positive institutions; factors that help people achieve a sense of fulfillment and manage stress more effectively; and what contributes to people's happiness, emotional health, strengths and virtues (Peterson, 2008; Seligman, 2009). Noble and McGrath (2008) added that educational wellbeing is based on having a sense of purpose, positive emotions, and engagement through strengths, emotional and social competence, and positive relationships. Furthermore, Luangpipat (2018) added that students' self-efficacy is related to academic achievements directly and indirectly. It helps them achieve a better result in learning and minimizes the effect of negative experiences that lower their self-efficacy (Al-Jarf, 2022e).

1.2 Positive Psychology and Teaching and Learning
There is a growing research base of scientific study to validate the significance of the positive psychology theory in teaching and learning situations particularly in foreign language learning. For example, MacIntyre and Mercer (2014) and Budzinska and Majchrzak (2021) introduced positive psychology to the study of language by describing its key principles with reference to the humanistic movement in language teaching, studies of the good language learner, models of motivation, the concept of affective filter, and concepts related to the self. Budzinska andMajchrzak (2021) also explored affectivity, positive emotions, enjoyment, engagement, empathy, a positive L2 self-system, positive language education, positive institutions, and how resources taken from positive psychology can benefit both teachers and students. Other studies focused on a specific aspect of positive psychology such as:

1) **Well-being and resilience:** Kardas and Yalcin (2021) found that all the variables in the well-being and resilience model (gratitude, life orientation, self-esteem, and the multidimensional perceived social support) have significant positive relationships with each other. Gratitude contributes to the psychological need satisfaction through the perceived self-esteem and social support, whereas need satisfaction enhances Turkish college students' well-being and resilience levels.

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[1] positivepsychology.com/what-is-positive-psychology-definition/

2) ***Psychological capital:*** Khajavy, Makiabadi and Navokhi (2019) assessed the role of psychological capital (self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience) in Iranian EFL students' willingness to communicate, motivation, and achievement. Their findings showed that the students' psychological capital was a positive significant predictor of their willingness to communicate, motivation, and achievement in EFL.

3) ***Executive functioning***: Marshall (2016) found that executive functioning skills of college students, involved in goal directed activities, predicted positive affect, optimism, grit, and life satisfaction. This means that metacognitive abilities such as holding information in the working memory, planning sequences of behavior, and monitoring tasks are more connected to the positive psychology attributes compared to behavior regulation skills such as inhibiting, shifting attention, and regulating emotional control.

4) ***Emotional factors*** such as satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the communication needs created positive or negative emotions in international students learning Ukrainian as a foreign language, and affected their communicative activity, instructional, and cognition process. When students do not see their progress in language learning and have difficulties in L2 listening comprehension, they will have negative emotions such as disappointment, concern, indifference, dispossession, and apprehension. Therefore, effective instructional techniques should provide verbal, extra-linguistic and an active role and use emotional stimulation as an effective way of activating communication and learning (Tsurkan, Ilkiv, Maksymiuk, Struk & Shatilova, 2020).

5) ***Self-efficacy***: Slight differences in sources of self-efficacy existed between students with different nationalities and different programs of study. Experience was the highest source of positive self-efficacy, whereas social persuasion was the least influential source. Hence, teachers and administrators should develop strategies for implanting positive self-efficacy to help students learn, and lead those with individual differences to be autonomous learners (Luangpipat, 2018).

6) ***Emotions, anxiety, and enjoyment***: Advanced EFL university students in Mexico performed a 45-s mindfulness activity, a reflection designed to promote a growth mindset, a discussion of a famous bilingual individual, and free voluntary reading. Reilly (2021) found a variety of achievement emotions emerged during the course. Instructors should help L2 students experience pleasant achievement emotions by including activities like those of the study.

7) ***Motivation*** and ***autonomy***: Student motivation can be increased by engaging them on their own terms and involving their reality and creativity in the language learning process through activities that enable them to act as L2 users such as translation and literature. When the classroom is a venue of real communication, it will have a positive impact on students' motivation (Csizér and Illés, 2020).

8) ***Social adjustment:*** Chinese international students performed several activities to overcome language barriers and facilitate their social adjustment such as structural guidance and active mobilization; shared intersubjectivity and contradictions; support within their zone of proximal development; realizing their English capabilities; becoming actively engaged in interactions; and experiencing positive emotions while carrying out the activities (Ma, 2020).

9) ***Engaged School Leadership*** that is characterized by goal achievement, commitment, accomplishment, engagement, care, coping and flow. "Goal achievement," "commitment," and "accomplishment" were found to be significantly related to "flow". "Flow" was significantly related to "engagement," while "care" was significantly related to "commitment" and "coping" (Beard, 2018).

A second group of studies focused on aspects of negative psychology that should be avoided in educational settings. For example, Kruk, Pawlak and Zawodniak (2021) found that boredom was mainly caused by repetitiveness, monotony, and predictability of what is happening during class. Higher levels of foreign language enjoyment were linked to higher attitudes towards the foreign language, the foreign language teacher, foreign language use in the classroom, proportion of time spent on speaking, relative standing, and stage of language development. Similarly, lower levels of foreign language classroom anxiety were related to higher attitudes towards the foreign language, relative standing and stage of development. Foreign language classroom anxiety was less related to teacher and teaching practices than foreign language enjoyment (Dewaele, Witney, Saito and Dewaele, 2018). Moreover, anxiety had a direct and negative effect on achievement, whereas positive attitudes toward the learning situation had a positive effect on students' motivation to learn Chinese. There was a low negative effect of anxiety on achievement and a strong positive effect of attitudes toward the learning environment on motivation. Both anxiety and motivation predicted achievement in Chinese (Wang & Du, 2020).

A third group of studies focused on activities and interventions that increase students' self-efficacy, motivation, and autonomy. For instance, a psycho-educational intervention was designed by Macaskill and Denovan (2013) to increase students' self-efficacy and self-esteem and facilitate autonomous learning. The first day of college, the psychological character strengths of 214 students were assessed. Two weeks later, the students' three highest strengths were given to them in the form of study skills modules. The students became more confident, and their levels of autonomous learning increased significantly as a result of the intervention. Their character strengths were associated with self-efficacy, self-esteem, and autonomous learning.

James and Walters (2020) developed a unit of study through an enabling program that aimed at introducing freshman students to proactive solutions and strategies, to develop their strengths, capacity, and virtues rather than focusing on their past weaknesses. The unit had a positive impact on students who completed it.

In Japan, university students learning English kept a confidence-building diary for a week in order to understand the benefits of maintaining a positive attitude towards learning, to find out what activities the students were engaged in, what emotions they had, and how the activity influenced their motivation to learn L2. The confidence-building diary proved to be effective in promoting positive feelings and supporting students' basic psychological needs that are necessary to heighten and maintain motivation for sustained learning (Shelton-Strong & Mynard, 2021).

In South Africa, Gush and Greeff (2018) developed a textbook for Grade 8 Afrikaans as a second language in which positive psychology interventions combining Maslow's self-actualisation, Hettler's wellness approaches, Seligman's PERMA, the psychosocial system approach, and the 24-character strengths identified by Peterson and Seligman. The intervention provided wellbeing-enhancing activities to the students in a natural but structured framework utilizing existing school subjects, infrastructure, and staff. The intervention was a powerful tool for facilitating growth and wellbeing.

The "Flourishing in a Second Language" project, that integrates Positive Psychology, Transition Pedagogy and Content and Language Integrated Learning principles was developed as a freshman language curriculum to create learning experiences that are relevant to the students, and that align linguistic goals, students' interests and cognitive challenges posed by the tasks. The project re-designed language learning activities for beginners and included strategies and content to facilitate transition, and enhance students' emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing (Strambi, Luzeckyj & Rubino, 2017).

In Korea, Lee and Lee (2021) utilized Informal Digital Learning of English and the L2 Motivational Self System consisting of "the ideal L2 self" and "the ought-to L2 self" to explore how they are linked with foreign language enjoyment. The authors surveyed EFL middle school, high school and university students who engaged in extramural digital activities. Digital Learning of English and "the ideal L2 self" significantly predicted Foreign Language Enjoyment of all groups, while "the ought-to L2 self" predicted only middle school students' foreign language enjoyment. The results suggested that students' engagement in extramural digital activities and their motivation influenced their emotions towards learning EFL.

As for the integration of the positive psychology principles in DL during the Covid-19 Pandemic worldwide, the literature review revealed lack of studies that focus on that. In Saudi Arabia, there is also lack of studies that apply the principles of positive psychology in DL during the Pandemic and post-Pandemic to help Saudi students overcome their problems mentioned above and help students achieve self-efficacy, resilience, and well-being.

2. Methodology
2.1 Participants
A total of 55 instructors from language, translation, linguistics, and literature departments at five Saudi universities (King Saud University, Imam University, Princess Noura University, King Khalid University and King Abdul-Aziz University) participated in the study. The instructors have an M.A. and/or a Ph.D. degree and teach different English language, linguistics, translation, and literature courses. They have varying degrees of teaching experience.

2.2 Instrument
To explore instructors' awareness of the principles of positive psychology and whether they apply any of them in their DL courses, a questionnaire-survey with open-ended questions was developed and administered. The questions asked the instructors about student engagement, interaction, and communication; how instructors encourage and support students, make them feel better, and help them cope with DL; kinds of assignments, activities, and feedback they give; how they raise students' level of perseverance, participation, enjoyment, motivation, and self-efficacy, and how they reduce their anxiety, boredom, and negative attitudes towards DL.

2.3 Data analysis
Instructors' responses were analysed in terms of the principles of positive psychology described such as: positive states and traits; positive experiences; positive institutions; helping students manage anxiety; and contributing to students' self-efficacy, resilience, enjoyment, happiness, and emotional health.

3. Results

Analysis of the instructors' responses showed that all participating instructors are not familiar with positive psychology and its principles. They do not know how to apply positive psychology in their online classes during the Pandemic. They declared that they were overwhelmed with the sudden transition from face-to-face to DL. They had to teach online without prior notice and without prior preparation technically and instructionally. They had problems coping with the platform, delivering courses online and dealing with the students' lack of interest and anxiety. But in the second and third semesters of the Pandemic, some instructors could overcome the challenges of DL by joining training course, reading, and seeking the help of some colleagues. 45% of the instructors, especially those with an M.A. degree, made changes to the course activities to maximize students' attendance, participation, engagement, interaction, enjoyment and feedback. Those are reported in the next section.

4. Recommendations

To promote students' educational well-being, develop positive attitudes, positive thinking, build their resilience, help them cope with and manage challenging learning situations in DL, this study recommends applying the principles of positive psychology in DL courses as follows:

- Instructors should set clear teaching and learning goals and standards for passing courses.
- Guiding students in setting their own academic and professional goals and helping them become aware of their strengths and weaknesses.
- Sending positive messages, writing success stories, providing moral support, posting links to self-help books and inspirational videos and reading inspirational quotes, and requiring the students to read and watch them and post summaries of them online. College and university administrators should listen to students' complaints and provide solutions whenever possible (Al-Jarf, 2021a; Al-Jarf, 2021).
- Promoting students' self-efficacy by associating students' belief in their ability to succeed with the level of effort they exert and the determination to persist and try again when facing problems and challenges; understanding that they have the potential to achieve more; providing multiple opportunities for developing mastery of their learning; sharing experiences about role models who had overcome difficulties; attending to students' physical and emotional states, i.e. listening to students talk about their fears; and understanding that they can succeed.
- Externalizing students' thinking and self-reflection, practicing self-assessment, building critical awareness, and giving and receiving ongoing feedback from classmates and instructors.
- Selecting teaching strategies for meeting students' goals.
- Developing students' autonomy and encouraging independent learning.
- Encouraging independent learning, teaching effective learning strategies such as organizing, note-taking and rehearsing.
- Making learning social through group work and service-learning experience.
- Personalizing learning by encouraging students to take the initiative, demonstrating mastery of concepts and skills, ensuring students' response to activities, enhancing students' cognitive ability, and increasing motivation.
- Adapting courses to the DL environment; creating learning environments that optimize motivation and engagement.
- Re-designing language learning, translation, linguistics, and literature activities used in DL. Some instructors in Al-Jarf's studies used online activities that promote engagement, interaction, enjoyment and practice such as using debates; problem-solving, competency-based, project-based, interest-based and task-based learning; summarizing a research paper; attending a thesis defense and writing a report about it; translating Wikipedia articles and discussing the translation quality with classmates online; participating in online interpreting contests; inviting specialized guest speakers; analyzing a video of their choice in terms of semantic theories, speech acts, interaction, pragmatic relations; using digital story assignments such as stand-up comedy or an Opera Winfrey Talk Show and having the students analyze it; creating a digital story using some semantic notions; creating an ethnolinguistic profile; analyzing collocations, slips of the tongue, mannerisms, children's L1 acquisition in family-speech; collecting and analyzing translation errors from T.V.; selecting topics from the Kingdom's 2030 Vision such as improving life quality, humanizing cities, ecological balance and writing essays about them; students-created podcasts, and utilizing Vocaroo, Kahoot and Slido (Al-Jarf, 2022b; Al-Jarf, 2021; Al-Jarf, 2021b; Al-Jarf, 2020b).
- Additional instructional activities for DL include the integration of participation goals in speaking and writing courses (Al-Jarf, 2021c); collecting, reading and analyzing linguistic landscapes and inspirational quotes (Al-Jarf, 2021h; Al-Jarf, 2021); utilizing TED Talks and online videos in listening, speaking, and interpreting practice (Al-Jarf, 2021j; Al-Jarf, 2012a); integrating a variety of mobile apps in learning EFL (Al-Jarf, 2020c); in listening and speaking (Al-Jarf, 2021b; Al-Jarf, 2021f; Al-Jarf, 2012b); reading and writing (Al-Jarf, 2021a; Al-Jarf, 2013a; Al-Jarf, 2009); literature (Al-Jarf, 2016; Al-Jarf, 2015b); vocabulary development (Al-Jarf, 2022c; Al-Jarf, 2022d); specialized dictionaries (Al-Jarf, 2022f); and test preparation (Al-Jarf, 2021g); using Learning Management Systems and web-conferencing software for EFL language practice (Al-Jarf, 2021e; Al-Jarf, 2019; Al-Jarf, 2014; Al-Jarf, 2013b; Al-Jarf, 2010; Al-Jarf, 2007a; Al-Jarf, 2007b; Al-Jarf, 2007c; Al-Jarf, 2006; Al-Jarf, 2004; Al-Jarf, 2002); using mind-maps in vocabulary, reading and writing to help students learn, retain, and

connect information (Al-Jarf, 2021i; Al-Jarf, 2015a; Al-Jarf, 2009a); using blogs to develop students' writing skills (Al-Jarf, 2022; Al-Jarf, 2022); integrating social media in witing and translation instruction (Al-Jarf, 2020; Al-Jarf, 2018; Al-Jarf, 2015; Al-Jarf, 2014); and integrating social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, WhatsApp for instructor-students and student-student communication, interaction, and feedback (Al-Jarf, 2020a; Al-Jarf, 2009b); through online SMS, Chatbox and email (Al-Jarf, 2020; Al-Jarf, 2020; Al-Jarf, 2009b).

The author tried out the above-mentioned positive psychology principles and strategies and technologies in teaching a variety of EFL and translation courses to her students before the Pandemic. These principles, strategies and technologies proved to be effective in enhancing students' achievement, self-efficacy and attitudes towards language and translation courses. However, a follow-up study is needed to assess the effectiveness of applying the principles of positive psychology proposed herin in DL by instructors at Saudi universities in the future.

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