

# At the Intersection of Language Learning and Psychology

by Simon Laraway (Editing and Publishing '23)

**A research group at the English Language Center investigates how psychology mixes with language learning—and what effects this has on students of English.**

**A**ny language student is likely familiar with the feelings—frustration, stress, helplessness—that arise when hitting a snag while learning a language, especially in immersion environments. You think you have the target language down, but suddenly you find yourself ordering food and you forget how to say, “Hold the cheese.” Maybe the word for *Wednesday* slips your mind while making plans, leaving you awkwardly open mouthed. Maybe you have car problems and are unable to even begin to explain to the mechanic what is going on (hard enough in your native language!). These little stressors can build up, making language learners feel frustrated or, worse, want to throw in the towel.

Teachers at the English Language Center (ELC) have become increasingly aware of how these sorts of difficulties impact language learning. The ELC is a lab school connected to the Department of Linguistics that serves students who come to Provo to learn English, most of whom are from other countries. Students at the ELC have diverse needs and skill levels, but many students share a common sentiment: the process of moving to the US and learning English is no easy feat. “They are leaving their country, their family, their friends—everything they are familiar with,” says Carolee Rogers, TESOL MA graduate and teacher at the ELC. “It does add an extra level of stress.”

At the ELC, helping students navigate the stress and difficulties of learning English has become increasingly tied with pedagogy. This is thanks to the formation of a new research group involving language learning and psychology. Essentially, this group aims to uncover how language teachers can use interventions based on research in psychology to simultaneously promote well-being and aid in learning—two ends that go hand in hand. “Increasing the well-being of a student increases his or her ability and capacity to learn,” explains Ben McMurry, program coordinator of the ELC.

The research group, formed several years ago and continuing today, has produced MA theses and projects, undergraduate projects, and other research. “We’ve focused on two areas of the psychology of language learning: one is self-regulation and another is positive psychology,” McMurry says.

## RESEARCH IN SELF-REGULATION

Students’ ability to self-regulate—including setting goals, setting expectations for themselves, and monitoring themselves—is essential to helping them stay motivated in their language learning.

“It kind of all started with motivation,” says Maryann Phillips, a TESOL MA student who recently graduated. “You need motivation and things like that to learn a language because it can be really discouraging.”

To help students self-regulate and stay motivated in the language-learning process, several studies at the ELC have investigated how students can successfully implement short-term goal setting, particularly using a framework called WOOP. WOOP, which stands for Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, and Plan,<sup>1</sup> helps students recognize obstacles impeding their goals and plan to overcome them. “I worked on the application of WOOP in ESL classrooms as a way to increase ESL students’ self-regulation,” says Claudia Mencarelli, who graduated with a TESOL MA in April 2021. Finding the results promising, her research ended up turning into her thesis project.

Other studies in progress at the ELC suggest long-term benefits of this goal-setting framework. “We just finished two semesters of doing a research study on this,” McMurry says. “We’re still looking at the data. As part of another student’s MA thesis, we examined the effect of students using the WOOP framework over two semesters—something that we hadn’t previously done.”

For students facing obstacles to their proficiency (from lack of confidence to difficulty with language features to low motivation) researchers hope that this goal-setting framework will prove useful.

## POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN THE CLASSROOM

A feature of all language learning is that students must be exposed to input (i.e., listen and read) and produce output (i.e., speak and write) in the target language. New research approaches and curricula being developed in the ELC have implemented positive psychology topics combined with these tenets of language pedagogy. The idea is that by receiving input and producing output on positive psychology topics, students are more aware—consciously or not—of these principles in their lives. “We’re using the positive psychology input to

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Students learning in the ELC classroom.

help them with life skills, such as gratitude, resilience, perseverance,” explains Rogers.

In a project spearheaded by Phillips, the group has produced a book of lessons that combines English teaching principles with these themes. For example, a lesson plan targeted to novice English speakers focuses on helping students learn formulaic language and memorized phrases when talking about or expressing gratitude. In the lesson, students are encouraged to call a loved one for whom they are grateful, express their gratitude, and reflect on the experience in the target language using set phrases in English. Tasks like these allow language learners to develop language skills while putting them in touch with their emotional and psychological state.

“Students found it a bit strange at the beginning, but as the term went on, I could see them opening up to the idea and finally embracing it,” Mencarelli says of the first time she implemented these lessons in the classroom. “There was a special mood in the class whenever we focused on those topics.”

Jessica Sousa, current TESOL MA student, has been working on an online textbook that explores similar themes for English learners but with a focus on reading skills. Her textbook provides readings gauged to different fluency levels and instructions for teachers on creating their own reading materials; the book is also open for additions. “I’m hoping other teachers continue to develop these lessons so they can use them in conjunction with listening and speaking lessons,” she says.

The group hopes the learning materials they create can be applied beyond the English language classroom in different contexts and with different subject matters. Sousa says, “I’ve started to pilot these lessons at the refugee center because the refugees have added challenges in their lives. My hope is that this can be something that can be really useful in other contexts beyond the classroom.”

#### THE IMPACT ON TEACHERS

The ELC provides a unique environment in which research like this can be conducted. As a lab school, it not only provides an environment where TESOL students can improve their teaching with real language learners, but students can also conduct research and pilot curricular innovations. As this research group is uncovering, helping learners maintain their mental well-being can be a crucial element in their language-learning journey.

At the same time, the research and teaching materials are being produced by students, who are themselves subject to the stress of school. “As a graduate student, of course, everything is really stressful,” Sousa confirms. But she attests that the positive psychology materials she is working with have indirectly benefitted her own mental well-being. “I’m making these materials for other people, but they’re also helping me.” Phillips agrees, “It has hopefully helped me to be more positive,” she says. “But if anything, it helped me be aware of positive psychology topics and subjects in my own life.”



# Learning and Teaching beyond the ELC

## TOEFL VERSUS LATS

BYU recently changed ELC students' application requirements in the hopes of reducing stress—in particular, the stress of taking costly standardized tests.

A good score on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), a standardized English proficiency test, is one of the main requirements for admission of ELC students. But the TOEFL has some drawbacks—not the least of which is that it's expensive (roughly \$245 to take once).

"We've often felt like our institutional tests are much better than the TOEFL and other alternatives in terms of identifying if students are ready for university work," McMurtry says. Thanks to negotiations between BYU admissions and the ELC, a program is being piloted in which the ELC's own Language Acquisition Tests (LATs) are used as a free alternative to the costly TOEFL to meet admission requirements.



*Though the program is still being tested, initial results are positive. Read more about the program by scanning the QR code above.*

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The ELC does more than just prepare non-native English speakers to enter English-speaking society—it also helps prepare teachers of English to teach wherever it might be necessary. Recently, thanks to collaboration between the ELC, the Department of Linguistics, and the MTC, missionaries have been able to gain a teaching and proselytizing foothold in an unlikely location: Mongolia.

The story begins in 2010, when MTC administrators realized a new way that missionaries could bless the lives of the Mongolian people. English teachers, they realized, were welcomed with open arms—whereas missionaries had begun to meet bureaucratic roadblocks to entering and proselytizing in the country. The solution was to kill two birds with one stone: missionaries would be certified to teach English so they could impart both language skills and doctrinal insights.

MTC administrators reached out to Professor Norman Evans (TESOL) and Professor Neil J. Anderson (TESOL) to see if they could help get missionaries certified as English teachers during their time at the MTC. Evans and Anderson agreed and immediately started creating a course that would turn new missionaries into English teachers with practical skills.

But acquiring these practical skills would not happen by studying pedagogy from a textbook. The best way to prepare these missionaries to teach was to have them work with actual English learners. The ELC provided a perfect environment to do this. Pretty soon the first batch of missionaries had completed the program and were able to enter Mongolia toting English teaching certificates and lesson plans.

With their newly acquired skills in English teaching, missionaries turned out to be a hot commodity. "A Mongolian medical school, for example, would like to sponsor many missionaries, but the government only allows four sponsorships per organization," Evans says.

Continuing to today, the 12-year-old program has awarded over 400 missionaries English teaching certificates. In addition to its benefits for Mongolians and the Church in Mongolia, "much good has also come to BYU faculty and students who have been involved," Evans says. 

1. Gabriele Oettingen is the leading researcher behind WOOP. To learn more about it, visit [woopmylife.org](http://woopmylife.org).



Students in a Mongolian medical school receive English lessons from missionaries trained at the ELC.

Photo courtesy of Professor Norman Evans