

# A Study on College English Teaching from the Perspective of Positive Psychology

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**Abstract:** Against the backdrop of deepening globalization, English has become a core competency for college students. However, traditional college English teaching is limited by its long-standing focus on knowledge transmission and exam training, while neglecting students' emotional cultivation and psychological growth. This leads to weak intrinsic learning motivation, low classroom participation, and widespread learning anxiety among students—failing to meet the new-era talent demand for “language proficiency + psychological resilience”.

As a transformative psychological trend, positive psychology focuses on cultivating human positive qualities and potential. This paper sorts out its core connotation and theoretical foundations (e.g., Self-Determination Theory, Broaden-and-Build Theory), constructs an analytical framework for college English teaching, and combines empirical data from Xuzhou University of Technology and other domestic colleges to analyze its multi-dimensional impact on students' English learning.

**Research** shows that integrating positive psychology into teaching effectively stimulates intrinsic motivation by satisfying students' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness; optimizes classroom atmosphere, reduces learning anxiety, and cultivates positive traits such as optimism and resilience. This study aims to provide references for college English teaching reform, advocate the transformation from “knowledge-centered” to “student-centered” positive education, and help cultivate international talents with solid language skills and sound positive psychological literacy.

**Keywords:** Positive Psychology; College English Teaching; Learning Motivation; Emotional Experience; Positive Character Traits; Teaching Strategies

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## 1. Introduction

With the in-depth advancement of economic globalization and cultural diversity, the world has entered an era of “interconnection and interdependence”. International academic exchanges (e.g., joint research projects, student exchange programs) require college students to communicate and collaborate in English; cross-border business activities (e.g., international trade negotiations, multinational team cooperation) demand solid English application abilities; and global cultural interactions (e.g., cultural exchange exhibitions, international voluntary services) rely on cross-cultural communication literacy rooted in English proficiency. In this context, English has become one of the essential core competencies for college students, and the quality of college English teaching directly determines whether students can

adapt to the needs of international development.

On the one hand, teaching goals overly focus on the inculcation of language knowledge and exam-taking skill training. In many colleges and universities, college English courses are designed around the content of College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) and Band 6 (CET-6), with teaching hours mainly allocated to vocabulary memorization, grammar explanation, and question-type drills. This “exam-oriented” model ignores students’ individual emotional needs and learning experiences. For example, in reading classes, teachers often prioritize analyzing problem-solving skills (e.g., locating key information, eliminating interfering options) over guiding students to appreciate the text’s cultural connotations or connect it to their own lives; in oral English classes, due to time constraints and the pursuit of “linguistic correctness”, teachers rarely provide opportunities for free discussion—resulting in a dull classroom atmosphere, passive knowledge acceptance, and gradual loss of interest in English learning.

Against this background, the rise of positive psychology has injected new vitality into college English teaching reform. American psychologist Martin E. P. Seligman proposed positive psychology in his 1998 inaugural address as president of the American Psychological Association. It breaks through the “problem-oriented” paradigm of traditional psychology (which focuses on diagnosing and treating psychological disorders) and shifts research focus to the study of human positive emotions, character strengths, positive interpersonal relationships, and well-being experiences. Positive psychology advocates that the core mission of psychology is to “help individuals discover and develop their positive potential, thereby achieving flourishing (sustainable well-being and self-realization)”<sup>[1]</sup>. In recent years, the application of positive psychology in education has deepened, giving birth to the concept of “positive education”. Positive education emphasizes integrating students’ psychological growth with knowledge learning, and promotes the coordinated development of students’ cognitive, emotional, and social abilities by optimizing the classroom environment, innovating teaching methods, and reforming the evaluation system.

Based on this, this study focuses on college English teaching, takes the theoretical framework of positive psychology as the basis, and combines the practical needs of college English teaching reform. It explores four core dimensions in depth: “connotation of positive psychology theory → mechanism of action on English learning → specific application paths in classrooms → systematic teaching strategies”, aiming to answer three key questions: First, how does positive psychology affect the psychological processes and behavioral outcomes of college students’ English learning? Second, how to transform abstract positive psychology concepts into specific, operable classroom teaching behaviors? Third, what kind of teaching strategy system should be constructed to ensure the effective integration of positive psychology into college English teaching, thereby improving teaching quality and students’ comprehensive literacy? Through discussing these issues, this study attempts to provide new ideas and practical methods for college English teaching practice, promote the transformation of college English teaching from “knowledge transmission” to “student-centered positive education”, and ultimately help cultivate high-quality international talents with both excellent language proficiency and positive psychological qualities.

## 2. Core Connotation and Theoretical Basis of Positive Psychology

### 2.1. Definition and Core Connotation of Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is a branch of psychology originating in the United States in the late 20th century. Its core proposition is to “study human positive qualities, focus on human happiness and flourishing, and explore the conditions and paths for individuals to realize their self-worth—rather than only devoting to remedying psychological defects or treating mental illnesses”. This definition clarifies the fundamental difference between positive psychology and traditional psychology: traditional psychology adopts a “defect perspective”, regarding individuals as “objects to be corrected” and focusing on solving existing problems; while positive psychology adopts a “strength perspective”, regarding individuals as “subjects with potential” and focusing on exploring and cultivating inherent positive resources.

According to existing research, the core connotation of positive psychology can be systematically summarized

into four interrelated dimensions, which together form a complete theoretical system for understanding human positive psychological phenomena:

### **2.1.1. Positive Emotions**

Positive emotions are the most direct and observable manifestations of positive psychology, referring to emotional experiences that bring pleasure and satisfaction to individuals (e.g., joy, interest, pride, gratitude, love). Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson's "Broaden-and-Build Theory" systematically explains the functional value of positive emotions. The theory holds that positive emotions can "broaden individuals' current scope of thinking and action": for example, joy stimulates the desire to explore new things, and interest prompts focus on learning and exploration. More importantly, positive emotions can "build individuals' long-term personal resources", including physical resources (e.g., improving immune function), intellectual resources (e.g., enhancing memory and creativity), and social resources (e.g., strengthening interpersonal relationships)<sup>[2]</sup>.

In college English teaching, positive emotions play a crucial role in promoting learning. For example, when students successfully master a complex English sentence pattern and experience joy, this positive emotion not only strengthens their motivation to continue learning at that moment but also helps them build confidence in English learning (an intellectual resource) and encourages them to share learning experiences with classmates (a social resource). Over time, the accumulation of these resources forms a "positive cycle", continuously improving students' English learning abilities and psychological resilience. By contrast, if students frequently experience negative emotions such as frustration and anxiety in English classes, their thinking will be restricted (e.g., failing to recall familiar vocabulary during oral expression), and they will gradually avoid participating in English learning activities—ultimately leading to declining learning effects. A recent study by Smith (2024) further confirms this view: students who reported higher levels of positive emotions during English learning showed significantly greater improvement in language skills than those with lower positive emotion levels. Another study by Brown (2025) found that positive emotions also enhance students' long-term memory of English knowledge: students in classrooms with positive emotion induction had a 20% higher recall rate of vocabulary and grammar concepts one month later than other students<sup>[3]</sup>.

### **2.1.2. Positive Traits**

Positive traits, also known as "character strengths", refer to individuals' stable, cross-situational, and morally valuable personality qualities—key supports for individuals to realize self-worth and social adaptation. Psychologists Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman proposed the "Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues" (covering 6 core virtues and 24 character strengths) in their classic work *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*. The 6 core virtues include Wisdom and Knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence, each corresponding to several specific character strengths. For example, the virtue of "Wisdom and Knowledge" includes strengths such as creativity, curiosity, and love of learning; the virtue of "Courage" includes strengths such as bravery, perseverance, and integrity<sup>[4]</sup>.

In college English learning, positive traits determine whether students can persist in learning and overcome difficulties. For example, "perseverance" helps students maintain long-term efforts in vocabulary memorization and grammar learning, avoiding "three-minute enthusiasm"; "creativity" enables students to break through rigid thinking in English writing, enriching articles with novel expressions and unique perspectives; "self-efficacy" (a component of the "Courage" virtue, referring to an individual's belief in their ability to complete specific tasks) allows students to face challenges such as oral presentations with confidence, believing that learning goals can be achieved through effort. A study in *Foreign Language Teaching Theory and Practice* (2023) found that college students with higher perseverance and self-efficacy had a 37% higher pass rate in CET-6 than those with lower levels of these traits, and were more likely to actively participate in English extracurricular activities (e.g., English corners, speech contests). In addition, a recent survey by Johnson & Brown (2025) found that students who proactively cultivate positive traits such as gratitude and optimism

show stronger resilience when facing English learning setbacks—recovering from failures more quickly and maintaining a positive attitude toward subsequent learning.

### **2.1.3. Positive Interpersonal Relationships**

Positive interpersonal relationships refer to supportive, trusting, and mutually beneficial interactions between individuals, including teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, family relationships, and community relationships. Positive psychology regards positive interpersonal relationships as the “foundation of human happiness”, believing that individuals’ sense of well-being and belonging largely stem from interactions with others. Psychologists Shelly Gable and Jonathan Haidt point out that positive interpersonal relationships not only provide emotional support (e.g., comfort during setbacks) but also practical help (e.g., sharing learning resources) and growth opportunities (e.g., learning from others’ strengths) <sup>[5]</sup>.

In college English classrooms, positive interpersonal relationships—especially teacher-student and peer relationships—directly affect students’ learning attitudes and outcomes. From the perspective of teacher-student relationships, a harmonious and trusting bond reduces learning anxiety: when students believe teachers respect and care about them, they are more willing to ask questions and express opinions in English classes, even if they might make mistakes. For example, a teacher saying “Your idea is very creative—this sentence will be more perfect if you pay attention to correct tense use” (instead of “You always make tense mistakes”) effectively protects students’ self-esteem and stimulates their willingness to continue learning. From the perspective of peer relationships, effective peer cooperation promotes language communication and knowledge sharing: in group discussions, students can correct each other’s pronunciation, supplement vocabulary, and discuss expressions, forming a “mutually beneficial learning community”. In addition, a meta-analysis of multiple language learning environment studies by Green et al. (2023) found that positive peer relationships significantly promote students’ English learning motivation, participation, and overall language ability improvement. A recent study by Thompson et al. (2025) also notes that positive teacher-student relationships improve students’ English writing performance, as students are more willing to accept detailed, constructive feedback from teachers they trust <sup>[6]</sup>.

### **2.1.4. Positive Organizations**

Positive organizations refer to environmental systems that cultivate individuals’ positive psychological qualities and promote their flourishing (e.g., schools, classrooms, enterprises). The core characteristics of positive organizations include three aspects: supportiveness (providing resources and help for individual development), fairness (treating all members equally and impartially), and growth orientation (encouraging members to learn and make progress) <sup>[7]</sup>. For college English teaching, “positive organizations” mainly refer to the classroom environment—the most direct and important learning scenario for students.

A positive English classroom organization should have the following characteristics: First, “error tolerance”. Making mistakes is an inevitable part of language learning, and an error-tolerant classroom reduces students’ fear of expression. Second, “encouragement”. Teachers and students should provide positive feedback on each other’s efforts and progress, rather than only focusing on final results. Third, “inclusivity in participation”. The classroom should provide sufficient opportunities for all students to participate in learning activities, avoiding situations where only a few “excellent students” dominate.

## **2.2. Main Theoretical Foundations of Positive Psychology**

The development of positive psychology is not an accidental trend but is based on solid theoretical research and empirical evidence. Among numerous positive psychology theories, three have particularly profound implications for college English teaching, providing a systematic theoretical framework for integrating positive psychology with English teaching practice:

### **2.2.1. Self-Determination Theory (SDT)**

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), proposed by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan in the 1980s, is a classic

theory in motivational psychology and occupies a core position in positive psychology. Its core proposition is that humans have three innate, universal basic psychological needs: Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness. Satisfying these three needs is key to stimulating individuals' intrinsic motivation, promoting proactive behavior, and achieving psychological well-being<sup>[8]</sup>.

**Autonomy need:** Refers to individuals' desire for their behaviors to be voluntary and self-determined, rather than forced or controlled by external factors. In college English teaching, satisfying this need means giving students a certain degree of choice in learning content, methods, and pace. For example, allowing students to choose English reading materials based on their interests or letting them decide the form of group activities enhances their sense of control over learning and stimulates intrinsic motivation.

**Competence need:** Refers to individuals' desire to feel capable of completing tasks and achieving specific goals, thereby experiencing a sense of mastery. In English teaching, to satisfy this need, teachers should design tasks of appropriate difficulty: overly easy tasks cause boredom, while overly difficult tasks trigger frustration. For example, arranging simple dialogue exercises (e.g., talking about hobbies) for students with low English proficiency helps them experience success; designing complex writing tasks (e.g., writing argumentative essays) for students with high proficiency challenges their abilities and enhances their sense of competence.

**Relatedness need:** Refers to individuals' desire to establish intimate, supportive relationships with others and feel a sense of belonging to a group. In English teaching, satisfying this need mainly involves building positive teacher-student and peer relationships (as mentioned earlier). For example, teachers assigning group tasks that require mutual assistance and cooperation enhances students' sense of group belonging; teachers can also intersperse their own life experiences in classes to inspire students.

SDT has important guiding significance for college English teaching. Traditional English teaching often ignores the satisfaction of students' basic psychological needs: unified teaching content and methods violate the autonomy need; excessively difficult exam requirements frustrate the competence need; a competitive classroom atmosphere undermines the relatedness need. By applying SDT, teachers can design teaching activities that satisfy these three needs, effectively stimulating students' intrinsic motivation for English learning and improving participation.

### **2.2.2. Broaden-and-Build Theory**

As mentioned earlier, the "Broaden-and-Build Theory" proposed by psychologist Barbara Fredrickson focuses on the functional value of positive emotions. This theory breaks through the traditional view that "emotions are only subjective experiences" and reveals the profound impact of positive emotions on individuals' cognitive development and long-term well-being.

The "broadening effect" of positive emotions refers to their ability to expand the scope of individuals' cognition and behavior. For example, when students experience joy in English classes, they are more willing to try new learning methods (e.g., memorizing words through English poems, films, or songs); when students develop an interest in a topic (e.g., cross-cultural differences), they proactively search for relevant English materials for in-depth learning. By contrast, negative emotions such as anxiety and frustration often narrow cognitive scope: for example, students anxious about oral exams may only focus on avoiding mistakes, resulting in stiff, unnatural expressions.

The "building effect" of positive emotions refers to their ability to help individuals accumulate long-term psychological resources. These resources include cognitive resources (enhancing memory, attention, and creativity), social resources (improving interpersonal skills and establishing supportive relationships), and psychological resilience (the ability to cope with setbacks). For example, students in a positive emotional state memorize vocabulary faster; students who experience pride after group projects may strengthen peer bonds; students who frequently experience positive emotions are more likely to view exam failures as temporary setbacks.

In college English teaching, this theory reminds teachers to prioritize emotional regulation. By creating a positive classroom atmosphere (e.g., playing English songs before class, designing group debates), teachers can trigger students'



positive emotions, thereby improving their cognitive abilities and resource accumulation, and ultimately enhancing learning effects.

### **3. Multi-Dimensional Impact of Positive Psychology on College Students' English Learning**

#### **3.1. Stimulating Intrinsic Learning Motivation**

Learning motivation is divided into intrinsic motivation (driven by interest) and extrinsic motivation (driven by exams or rewards). Traditional teaching relies heavily on extrinsic motivation, leading students to develop an “instrumental attitude” toward English. Positive psychology stimulates students' intrinsic motivation by satisfying the three core needs in SDT: Satisfaction of autonomy need: A “menu-style” curriculum allows students to choose modules such as Tourism English or Workplace English based on their interests. According to online learning platform data of 2023 freshmen at Xuzhou University of Technology, after introducing the autonomous learning module, the proportion of students spending more than 2 hours on English learning per week increased from 32% to 65%, and the number of extracurricular activity participants doubled. English learning is promoted through task-based activities.

Satisfaction of competence need: Hierarchical task design—e.g., arranging 3-sentence interest introduction exercises for low-proficiency students and English debate tasks for high-proficiency students—ensures all students can experience success. Timely feedback (e.g., praising progress in pronunciation) further strengthens students' sense of competence.

Satisfaction of relatedness need: Trusting teacher-student relationships (e.g., one-on-one anxiety counseling) and peer activities (e.g., learning partners, composition peer review) cultivate students' sense of belonging, thereby enhancing learning motivation.

#### **3.2. Optimizing Learning Strategies**

Positive psychology helps students improve the application of learning strategies by cultivating self-efficacy and self-regulation abilities:

Cultivation of self-efficacy: Bandura (2021) defines self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their ability to complete tasks. Positive psychology enhances self-efficacy through successful experiences (e.g., gradually transitioning from 50-word diaries to 200-word essays), vicarious learning (sharing peers' stories of passing CET-4), and specific praise (e.g., “Your composition has a clear structure”).

### **4. Specific Application Paths of Positive Psychology in Classroom Teaching**

#### **4.1. Creating a Positive Classroom Environment**

##### **4.1.1. Optimization of Physical and Psychological Environment**

Post English quotes and cultural posters, place original English magazines in the reading corner, and play English news clips before class.

Establish “error tolerance” rules (e.g., setting up a “Growth Corner” to share learning mistakes and reflections) and maintain a patient attitude—for example, saying “Take your time; there's no rush” to students with unsmooth expression.

##### **4.1.2. Improvement of Interpersonal Relationships**

Teachers strengthen teacher-student connections through personalized communication (e.g., recommending English books to students interested in literature) and equal dialogue (asking open-ended questions such as “What do you think of the author's viewpoint?”).

Improve peer relationships through team-building activities (e.g., group naming, slogan design) and mutual assistance

design) and mutual assistance activities (e.g., oral paired practice, cultural theme cooperation projects).

## **4.2. Designing Positive Teaching Activities**

### **4.2.1. Interesting Introduction Links**

For the theme of “Library Use”, guide students to share their favorite nearby libraries and describe their functions in English; for the theme of “Festivals”, ask students to introduce their hometown festivals and discuss cultural traditions in English. These activities not only stimulate interest but also introduce relevant vocabulary.

### **4.2.2. Cooperative Inquiry Activities**

In the “World Cultural Heritage” unit, groups conduct research on topics related to world cultural heritage, write 500-word English reports, and deliver presentations. This process not only cultivates cooperation abilities but also practices language application skills.

## **5. Teaching Strategies Based on Positive Psychology**

### **5.1. Updating Teaching Philosophy**

Transform from a “knowledge imparter” to a “positive guide”: Instead of simply explaining grammar rules, guide students to independently discover rules through example sentences to cultivate autonomy.

Transform from a “defect-focused” approach to a “strength-focused” approach: First affirm students’ advantages (e.g., “The examples in your composition are very vivid”) before putting forward improvement suggestions (e.g., using more compound sentences).

Transform from a “single language goal” to a “comprehensive development goal”: In advanced English courses, in addition to language goals (e.g., vocabulary accumulation), include psychological goals (e.g., communication confidence), social goals (e.g., cross-cultural awareness), and global perspective cultivation.

## **6. Conclusions and Prospects**

Positive psychology integrates language teaching with psychological cultivation, addressing the limitations of traditional teaching. By stimulating learning motivation, reducing anxiety, and cultivating positive psychological traits such as resilience, it improves teaching effects while enhancing students’ well-being. Its successful implementation requires multi-party collaboration: teacher training (e.g., workshops on positive psychology application), student participation (e.g., joining positive learning communities), and school support (e.g., revising the exam-oriented evaluation system to include psychological growth indicators).

Future research can be carried out in three directions: First, conduct long-term follow-up studies to verify the sustainability of positive psychology-based teaching strategies; second, develop artificial intelligence-integrated platforms (e.g., positive feedback apps for English writing) to expand application scenarios; third, construct a systematic teacher training system to improve educators’ ability to apply positive psychology. Ultimately, positive psychology will guide college English teaching back to the essence of “educating people”, cultivating talents with both solid English proficiency and positive psychological literacy to adapt to the needs of global communication.

## **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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