

The power of gratitude in the language classroom

Jeffrey Wilang reports on reactions to his article.

True gratitude is never just a word on the lips but a lifestyle and an attitude of a noble heart.

– Mark Haydu

The article, 'Promoting gratitude among learners' was published by *MET* in October 2018 (see Volume 27, Issue 4). The author, based on classroom research, identified 19 antecedents or 'gratitude provoking situations' in the English classroom including giving advice on language learning, appreciating students' output, managing class adequately, encouraging students through class activities, correcting students' errors, treating all students as equal, improving students' production, exposing local students to foreigners, promoting open-mindedness, creating positive impact, providing learning opportunities, sharing ideas and knowledge, and using resources in teaching and learning. The above antecedents can be provoked by various agents, including teachers, peers and classmates.

In response to the above article, Haranaka (2019), a *MET* subscriber and teacher trainer in Brazil, wrote in her blog, encouraging teachers to start practising gratitude to 'start a great semester'. Doing so would be beneficial, as Gleisberg (2019) noted that gratitude speaking and writing prompts increase student and teacher engagement, connection, community and English language acquisition. The results correspond to positive psychology,



which underscored the overwhelming benefits of positive emotions in language education (see the works of Peter MacIntyre, Sarah Mercer, Tammy Gregersen, among others).

In an email I received from Diana, who lives in Lima, Peru, she asked if I could share other antecedents that I could add to the list previously published. Her request inspired me to collate insights from *MET* readers, which I have detailed into two parts in this article. The first part provides classroom pieces of evidence of the benefits of promoting gratitude for motivation, learning, teaching, relationship and teacher morale. The second part suggests other gratitude provoking situations, including switching design, heart-4-heart strategy, use of L1, silence and scaffolding.

Gratitude applies to various contexts

This article is full of many exciting ideas that apply to a variety of settings. The information is authentic and well-conducted. When teachers express their attentiveness to students' learning process, students will be pleased to learn and will definitely have a positive attitude towards the subject. In my experience, whenever I gave constructive comments to students, they would show a positive reaction and improvement in their learning. In return, their positive response and outputs can result in the teacher's appreciation of the student's effort.

*John, Pre-service teacher,
Northeastern Thailand*

Benefits of promoting gratitude among learners and teachers

Gratitude promotes motivation among language learners

This article is one of the most fascinating classroom research in the magazine that I have ever read. As an in-service government school in the southernmost part of Thailand, there are three takeaways as to why gratitude promotion positively affects my teaching. First, learners in the south obviously enjoy studying with kind teachers. And culturally, teachers are considered as mature advisors and second parents, whom the students can trust and consult on some (personal) issues. The element of trust drives students to feel more secure in the language learning process. When students are thankful for their teachers, their motivation increases.

Another is the promotion of gratitude through language practice, which helps keep students motivated. Accordingly, when teachers do productive language activities in the English class, students are thankful for it. Based on my observations, most students in rural areas in Pattani (Thailand) have lower proficiency in the English language. Most of the time, students prefer enjoyable activities that let them practise speaking skills. They literally dislike sitting down and writing the teacher's lecture in *tutu*. They claim that it is such a boring class ever.

Lastly, to keep students motivated is knowing how to manipulate the class activities effectively. To be one of the good teachers, teachers need to understand how to control the classroom and the learners effectively. For example, when students become playful, I go down to their level. It would be easier for me to control and input every kind of lesson to them. The students will appreciate it after that. I firmly believe that those techniques suggested for promoting gratitude will help many teachers who are finding a way to motivate students in their English language class.

Varis Je-Awae, Government School Teacher, Southern Thailand

Gratitude can improve both learning and teaching

Promoting appreciation among learners is one of the most crucial research descriptions in language education that I have read. It suggests 19 ways for teachers and educators to improve not only the effectiveness of their students' learning but also that of their teaching. When students feel grateful and appreciative of what teachers do in class, they reciprocate positively by showing an increased motivation to learn, such as the following.

Promoting gratitude reminds me of its advantage in my Academic Writing class I taught a year ago. In that class, my high school student had difficulty focusing and organising her ideas because she refused to pay attention. Worse, she came to me only three

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days before her exam. As a result, I decided it would be the two of us writing on the whiteboard together for the whole period. I adapted and rearranged her ideas more transparently. Later she learned how to make sound arguments on her own. The process helped her become more appreciative of my efforts and the lessons. Her attention has increased considerably. She got accepted to college after that exam, and I always reminded myself to be at least as effective in my other classes.

Also, promoting gratitude has recently helped me in teaching my grammar class. In the previous article, it emphasises the fact that when teachers value students' outputs, the latter appreciate it. When I read about this advice, I realised how little time I took to thank my students' homework and outputs. After reading the article, I commended students on their efforts to complete the assignments despite their many mistakes. I have seen their faces brighten up for the first time in a while. At the end of the class, they have asked me for more grammar homework. To my surprise, I have been aware, as the saying goes, 'a person who feels appreciated will always do more than what is expected'. Since then, I learned to compliment my students' effort, good or bad.

By showing our students that we see, hear and appreciate them, we are halfway through the effective teaching highway. Above all, gratitude's impacts extend far beyond the world of language teaching to all other types of teaching as well as the non-academic spheres.
Patdanai Puvacharoonkul, English Tutor, Central Thailand

Gratitude promotes good impression and relationship

First of all, promoting appreciation can be the guidance for new teachers who have no experience of teaching, as good impressions and relations are needed among teachers and students. Promoting gratitude is the key answer. For example, managing class effectively is challenging for new teachers. By creating an attractive

level, students will enjoy and do not get bored. An enjoyable class will create a positive feeling of gratitude. In the end, they will pay more attention and be willing to learn.

When I was in Australia, the teacher enhanced my weak English language by promoting gratitude in class. Teachers provided extra hands by practising the English in every class, for instance, by doing role play, interview, group discussion, among others. Students received productive activities more than receptive activities, and this gave benefits to students for improving themselves. Moreover, treating all students as equal is very vital. Teachers did not discriminate me even I was not good at English. Teachers encourage me to speak by asking some simple questions. After I could answer, I had more confidence and willing more to speak and participate in class. My English skills were improved quickly in a short period. I strongly agree that promoting gratitude is useful in learning. *Tissana Kimthong, Pre-service teacher, Thailand*

Learner appreciation can boost teacher morale

The concept of being motivated by teachers is undeniable; however, I will talk about the side benefits of receiving thankfulness from learners and how teachers are pushed forward. In Vietnam, I got many chances of observing the teachers and realised that they are incredibly pleased with gratitude from students and its positive effects on my teaching.

In primary schools, I experienced that students regularly coped with daily difficulties such as congestion, sickness, lack of rest, which might cause stress and animosity. Nonetheless, when students say 'Thank you' for engaging lessons or showed how they enjoyed the activities, the teachers' heavy load would be diminished immediately. Eventually, it would push the teacher to become more energetic and enthusiastic. Learner appreciation elicited my firm belief that gratitude from learners is a precious gift as it might be a therapy for teacher's stress.



Appreciation from students did not come from words or actions, but they showed it with their smiling eyes and happy facial expressions. It gives me the motivation to carry on with my teaching. Many times, after an exhausted day from work, a message from a student who said that how enjoyable she/he was in the class is a fulfillment. That encouraged me to prepare lessons more carefully and create more exciting activities.

Besides, thankfulness from learners can tighten up the invisible but enduring bond between teachers and students. I have recently received some messages from a group of students whom I taught years ago. Those words touched my heart, and I am sure I will never forget them in my entire life. Again, student gesture is a proof confirming that gratitude from students could give strength to teachers to contribute unceasingly in the present as well as the future.

Hà Phú Quý, English Teacher, Vietnam

Other gratitude antecedents from readers

'Switching design' and 'heart-4-heart' strategy

Language learning is not only driven by the contents or teaching methods, but it can be promoted cooperatively with gratitude between teachers and learners. Collaborative promotion of appreciation between the teacher and students is the belief that I developed after I finished reading the article. According to my experience, I can share two strategies I developed, such as switching design and

heart-4-heart strategy to promote learners' gratitude in English language learning.

In the Thai context, it is challenging to plan and adjust lesson plans to fit every learner due to numbers of students and differences in their background, preferences and learning styles. Switching design was useful to maintain high-competent learners' focus, and to encourage the learning motivation of weak students. For the switching design, I decided to divide a lecture class apart from doing activity in class because most of my students prefer to be receptive learners. Moreover, combining lectures and activities in a class is time-consuming. In a lecture class, I usually applied the grammar-translation method to describe grammar and vocabulary, and audiolingual methods to develop their listening skills and pronunciation. I regarded this class as a preparation for the activity class that would be chronicle afterward. For an activity class, I adapted the content in the previous lecture class into activities. For example, if I teach about describing directions in lecture class, I would create a game for activity in class. This balancing technique was useful to the course I taught because learners that could not learn well through lecture still had the opportunity to learn through activities. Furthermore, I observed that high-competent students generally enjoyed helping and encouraging their friends (middle or weak competent learners) in activities. When I use a variety of teaching methods, students feel part of the lesson prompting appreciation of the teacher.

Another psychological technique that can promote a better language learning environment is heart-4-heart strategy. Though it might be not directly connected to language learning, it could affect learners' attitudes towards English language learning. In my point of view, learners can develop their gratitude and motivation when they know, trust, and believe in their teachers. I usually gave them my heart by embracing their different backgrounds and understanding their individuality. I did not abruptly judge when some of them showed an incorrect answer. But I always asked them what made you think like that to perceive the rationale behind their response. After that, I gradually explained to them to build understanding to a particular point. This way made them feel comfortable to be wrong, confident to show their opinion, and willing to develop their knowledge. However, it depends on the students' nature. Some learners might consider that correcting is to embarrass them, so I had to talk to some students individually after the class to avoid this adverse effect. At last, students regularly performed 'mutual-flow effect' (White, 1999) by returning their gratitude to me. This effect proved that my learners were happy and open-minded towards English language learning, which probably leads to future achievement and a positive attitude in English language mastery.

Phoom Sathutam, Former Government School Teacher, Northern Thailand

Using L1 and allowing silence

After reading the article, I related it with my previous experience in the Cambodian context. Among students, they usually bring their work to teachers for explicit language corrections. Often, I explain the corrections in English, but most likely, they would misunderstand it. When I said in L1 (Khmer), my (less proficient) students' faces brighten. I concluded that using L1 results in a higher level of appreciation among my students and can promote teacher-student relationships.

Allowing silence is another antecedent. When the class listens and doesn't laugh at any mistakes, the student becomes grateful. In Asian culture, saving face

is highly valued. I usually remind my students that when their classmates make a mistake, they should not laugh at them. I told them if they cannot do anything better, they should stay silent.

Above all, the research about promoting gratitude is instrumental since it recommended activities for teachers on what to do in their classroom, and those activities are suitable for student learning as well. In my view, I suggest this type of research to be conducted in other to find out different culture-specific grateful situations among language learners.

Kuyleng Kim, English teacher, Cambodia

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Scaffolding students

Having read 'Promoting gratitude among learners', I have found that many factors are behind this concept (e.g. teachers' actions, class activities, classmates, etc.), but it is the teachers' action factor that matters the most. When learners feel appreciative, it creates better connections between teachers and them. Further, an excellent learning environment is being promoted by everyone in the classroom because of the feeling of gratitude. As a result, learners can learn effectively and perform better in academics.

I have a differing view of the antecedent of exposing local students

to foreigners to some extent. I agree that this gratitude provoking situation allows learners to be exposed to authentic or real-world English and how people with various cultural backgrounds use English. However, I can see that at the same time, it could push pressure on some students in the class. According to my experience, not all students would feel comfortable having foreigners as their classmates (or a teacher). The reason is that they cannot speak. They could be paranoid all the time as to when and how the foreigners would respond to them, that would make them feel embarrassed. Before exposing students to foreigners, students should be given help over time. Scaffolding inevitably generates multiple instances of grateful situations in the language classroom.

Nopakun Prakongwong, Pre-service teacher, Eastern Thailand

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Jeffrey Dawala Wilang hails from Dilong, Tubo, Abra and currently lectures in the Department of Language Studies, School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi. His research interests include emotions in language learning, English as a lingua franca, innovative research methods, and language education in indigenous contexts. If you have any comments or suggestions, please send an email to jeffrey.wil@mail.kmutt.ac.th.