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Emotional Wellbeing and Positive Psychology in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract

Research in second/foreign language acquisition (SLA) is increasingly examining how learners' emotional wellbeing – defined as their positive psychological health – affects language learning. This paper reviews the intersection of emotional wellbeing and SLA through the lens of positive psychology (Seligman, 2011) and key theories such as Fredrickson's broaden-and-build model (Fredrickson, 2001). Whereas SLA research traditionally focused on negative affect (e.g. language anxiety), recent work highlights the power of positive emotions (enjoyment, flow, gratitude), traits (resilience, optimism, grit), and supportive contexts (teacher-student rapport) in promoting motivation and success. We survey literature (2010–2024) on constructs like foreign language enjoyment, self-efficacy, and positive educator practices, with special attention to post-Soviet EFL contexts (e.g., Azerbaijan). Drawing on this review, we propose research questions on how emotional wellbeing relates to engagement and retention in university EFL learners. We outline a mixed-methods design (survey and interviews) to investigate well-being and SLA outcomes, and discuss how positive psychology interventions (e.g. strengths-based activities, gratitude journals) could be applied in language classes. Practical implications for teachers – such as building rapport and classroom enjoyment – are highlighted. Future research directions are offered. Overall, this paper bridges SLA theory and practice by showing that fostering emotional wellbeing through positive psychology can enhance L2 learning.

Keywords

positive psychology; emotional wellbeing; second language acquisition; foreign language enjoyment; motivation; resilience; EFL education

Introduction

Emotional wellbeing – the presence of positive emotions, engagement, and life satisfaction – has become recognized as crucial in education generally and in SLA in particular. Positive psychology (PP), introduced by Seligman and colleagues (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), emphasizes factors that make life worth living, including PERMA (Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment) as core elements of human flourishing (Seligman, 2011). In language learning, this represents a shift from the traditional focus on deficits (e.g. anxiety, boredom) to strengths (joy, hope, resilience). SLA researchers now ask what *goes right* – for instance, how positive traits and emotions can enable learners to thrive. Recent reviews note that positive psychology in SLA “focuses on three main areas: (1) positive characteristics and strengths of teachers/learners; (2) positive emotions during learning; and (3) learning environments that enable flourishing”. These ideas draw on theory: Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory

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argues that positive emotions *broaden* cognition and *build* personal resources over time. In SLA, this suggests that enjoyment, interest or hope can broaden attention to input and strengthen confidence (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

In fact, language classrooms abound with emotions (anxiety, boredom, enjoyment) that shape attention and engagement. Pekrun (2006) and others show that emotions “direct learners’ attention and cognition... influence their engagement and self-regulation in language learning”. Although past research emphasized negative affect (notably Horwitz et al.’s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety), there has been a recent “affective turn” toward integrating both negative and positive emotions (Imai, 2010; Wang & Marecki, 2021). For example, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) coined *Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE)* to capture the joyful, challenging aspect of L2 learning, finding that many learners feel strong enjoyment when a hard-won success comes about and when teachers are supportive. Positive emotions thus coexist with anxiety, but can mitigate it: experiencing enjoyment or a sense of progress can make learners more resilient and motivated even under difficult conditions.

This paper focuses on emotional wellbeing and positive psychology in SLA, with an emphasis on university-level EFL learners in post-Soviet, non-English-speaking contexts (e.g. Azerbaijan, Central Asia, Lithuania). In these settings, large classes, exam pressures, and traditional teaching methods can heighten stress, making positive interventions valuable. We first review positive psychology theories and SLA affective factors. Next, we pose research questions about how learners’ wellbeing relates to engagement and outcomes. We then suggest a methodology for an empirical study on emotional wellbeing in post-Soviet EFL classes. Finally, we discuss implications for learner engagement, retention, and performance, offering practical classroom strategies (strengths-based tasks, rapport-building, etc.). By bridging theory and practice, this article aims to inform researchers and teachers on promoting wellbeing to enhance language learning.

Research Questions. Based on this introduction, we propose three guiding questions: (1) *How does emotional wellbeing – including positive emotions (enjoyment, optimism) and personal strengths (grit, self-efficacy) – relate to motivation and language performance among university EFL learners?* (2) *How do classroom factors (teacher-student rapport, peer support, meaningful tasks) influence learners’ wellbeing and engagement?* (3) *What positive psychology interventions and strategies can be used to boost EFL students’ wellbeing, reduce anxiety, and improve persistence?*

Literature Review

The literature on emotions in SLA has expanded greatly in the past decade, moving from a narrow focus on anxiety to a holistic view that includes positive affect, character strengths, and social context. In terms of theoretical frameworks, Positive Psychology provides the broader backdrop. Seligman’s PERMA model (2011) highlights how positive emotion, engagement (flow), relationships, meaning, and accomplishment contribute to wellbeing. While PERMA was developed in general psychology, its concepts have been adapted to SLA. For example, Oxford (2016) proposed an “EMPATHICS” model – incorporating Emotion, Meaning, Perseverance, Agency, Time perspective, Habits of mind, Intelligences, Character strengths, and Selfhood – to frame learner wellbeing. Similarly, MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer (2019) edited a volume on “Positive Psychology in SLA,” showing how love of learning, self-efficacy, and positive L2 identity can



propel learners (MacIntyre et al., 2019). Broadening-and-build theory specifically predicts that joy and interest help learners notice more language input and build lasting skills. Indeed, Fredrickson noted that positive emotions enable people to “broaden momentary thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources” (e.g. attention, social bonds). Thus, when applied to SLA, these theories suggest that fostering enjoyment or pride in students can accumulate long-term benefits for language proficiency and resilience.

Positive Emotions and Engagement.

Empirical studies show that various positive emotions (enjoyment, pride, interest) correlate with better engagement and outcomes. Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) is the most studied: it was defined by Dewaele & MacIntyre (2014) as the pleasure of “going beyond one’s limits” in learning. Consistently, researchers find that FLE tends to be significantly higher than classroom anxiety for many learners. Dewaele (2017) and others have identified classroom sources of enjoyment such as teachers’ humor, praise, and supportive feedback: “participants’ views on episodes of enjoyment in the FL class revealed the importance of teachers’ professional and emotional skills and of a supportive peer group”. In contrast, lack of support and authoritarian teaching increase boredom and anxiety. Notably, as enjoyment increases, anxiety tends to decrease (negative correlation), suggesting they are related but separate constructs. Enjoyment has long-lasting effects: it heightens engagement, sustained effort, and willingness to take risks in using the language. For example, MacIntyre & Gregersen (2012) showed that learners experiencing positive affect are better at noticing language cues and exploring the class environment, whereas anxiety narrows focus. Positive emotions can also erase some earlier negative arousal, making students more resilient – able to cope with difficulty – and promoting social bonding with classmates. Boudreau, MacIntyre, & Dewaele (2018) distinguish enjoyment from mere pleasure by noting that FLE involves “intellectual focus, heightened attention, and optimal challenge” – essentially flow-like immersion in a demanding task.

Several studies review FLE’s predictors: learner personality (openness, extraversion), classroom environment (task novelty, autonomy), and teacher traits (enthusiasm, empathy) all boost enjoyment. In second and foreign language contexts (including post-Soviet classrooms), peer relationships and teacher support repeatedly emerge as key. Similarly, other positive emotions like hope, gratitude, and even love of learning have been explored. For instance, MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer (2019) report that love of language learning correlates with perseverance (grit) and lower anxiety. A few studies have examined flow in SLA: when tasks match learners’ skill levels, flow states lead to deep concentration and enjoyment. While direct SLA flow research is still emergent, Csikszentmihalyi’s original theory suggests that designing “just-right” challenges in class can generate intrinsic motivation.

Motivation, Self-Efficacy, and Grit.

Motivation and self-belief are central to wellbeing in SLA. Building on Deci & Ryan’s Self-Determination Theory (intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation) and Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self-System, researchers view motivation as both an outcome of positive affect and a contributor to it. For example, motivation increases when learners feel competent and connected, which are elements in PERMA and SDT. Self-efficacy – the belief in one’s own ability to succeed – has been found to enhance resilience: learners with high language



self-efficacy persist longer and handle anxiety better (Bandura, 1997). In SLA, confidence can create a virtuous cycle: confident learners try more, notice more input, and thus improve faster (Lake, 2013). In post-Soviet EFL settings, this may be critical, as many students enter university with modest English skills; boosting their self-efficacy through small successes can promote a growth mindset.

The concept of grit – passion and perseverance for long-term goals (Duckworth, 2016) – has been applied to language learning. Wei, Gao, and Wang (2019) found that grit predicts higher foreign language performance, partly because grittier students report greater enjoyment and cope better with setbacks. They suggest that teaching strategies to cultivate perseverance (e.g. setting long-term goals, reflecting on effort) could improve L2 success. Additionally, optimism (a general expectation of positive outcomes) and emotional intelligence have been linked to better coping with FL challenges. Although fewer SLA studies target these traits specifically, in general psychology optimism is known to buffer stress, so encouraging positive expectations (e.g. through affirmations or visualization) may benefit anxious learners.

Affective Factors: Anxiety and Stress.

To fully understand wellbeing, negative emotions are also considered. The classic *affective filter* hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) posits that anxiety can block language acquisition by raising mental filters. Extensive evidence confirms that Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) impairs performance (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 2017). Anxiety has been linked to cognitive overload and avoidance behavior. However, positive psychology advocates for balance: recognizing anxiety's impact while strengthening positive emotions and resources. Recent studies show that even highly anxious learners can achieve growth when they also experience positive emotions. For example, in a Saudi EFL context, Alrabai (2014) and Al-Saraj (2011) found that students' anxiety was significantly influenced by low proficiency and teacher dominance, but those who also felt hope or enjoyment showed better engagement. Anecdotal accounts suggest that anxious students with even occasional prideful moments (e.g. "realizing their long effort... paid off") reported bursts of motivation (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Thus, focusing on building joy and meaning in the curriculum may indirectly reduce anxiety.

Social and Contextual Factors: Rapport and Climate.

Finally, the classroom social climate is pivotal. Teacher-student rapport – the quality of trust and mutual understanding – has been shown to influence student wellbeing. Li (2022) reviewed how positive rapport leads to greater student enjoyment, motivation, and academic success, whereas poor relationships contribute to stress, anxiety, and disengagement. Studies in EFL settings find that students whose instructors show warmth, empathy, and patience report lower anxiety and higher enjoyment. Dewaele & MacIntyre (2014) provide interview evidence: learners frequently mentioned that episodes of enjoyment were triggered by "teachers being funny and encouraging, using humor judiciously and praising students for good performance". In contrast, Finnish teacher who raised voice or gave negative feedback caused students to experience embarrassment or anxiety. Thus, strong interpersonal bonds (e.g. mentorship, active listening, praise) are components of wellbeing. For example, Wubbels et al. (2016) note that effective classrooms have harmonious teacher-student relationships; similar findings by Frisby and Martin (2010) define rapport as a mutual, respectful emotional connection. In many post-Soviet classrooms, which can be traditionally



hierarchical, building this rapport may require deliberate effort (e.g. group work to democratize discourse, personal interest in students' lives).

Positive Psychology Frameworks in SLA. Two well-known PP theories appear in SLA research. First, Seligman's PERMA model provides a scaffold: positive psychology in language learning can aim to maximize positive emotion (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M), and accomplishment (A). For example, a teacher might design tasks that tap learner strengths (enhancing competence and A), encourage collaboration (Relationships), and highlight culture or purpose (Meaning), all of which contribute to wellbeing. Second, Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory explicitly explains why positive emotions (the "P" in PERMA) are beneficial: they expand learners' mental flexibility and build resources like social networks, knowledge, and skills. In practice, this means that strategies which boost students' momentary happiness (celebrating a language milestone, sharing success stories) can have enduring effects on their learning.

In sum, research between 2010–2024 demonstrates that positive psychological constructs (FLE, engagement, self-efficacy, grit, optimism, empathy, rapport, etc.) are increasingly recognized as vital to SLA. Key figures – Dewaele, MacIntyre, and Mercer – have pushed the field toward a balanced view of emotions in learning. Notably, Oxford (2016) and Dörnyei (2019) incorporate wellbeing into motivation theory, while Duckworth (2016) highlights perseverance. Collectively, the literature suggests that integrating PP ideas (e.g. teaching gratitude, resilience training) into language education may improve student outcomes.

Methodology (Proposed Study Design)

To investigate the role of emotional wellbeing in SLA, we propose a mixed-methods study among university EFL learners in a post-Soviet context (e.g. Azerbaijan or Central Asia). The design could combine quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to capture breadth and depth.

- Participants: 150–200 adult EFL learners (ages ~18–24) across two or more universities. Stratified sampling could ensure diversity of majors and proficiency levels.
- Quantitative measures: A battery of validated questionnaires would assess emotional wellbeing and SLA-related variables. For example:
 - *Wellbeing*: The PERMA Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016) or the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (arguably though old).
 - *Positive emotions*: The Foreign Language Enjoyment scale (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014, 21 items) and scales for enthusiasm or interest. We would use the FLE scale combined with an anxiety scale (e.g. FLCAS) as in Dewaele & MacIntyre.
 - *Motivation/self-efficacy*: Items from Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System questionnaire or Bandura's self-efficacy scale (adapted to language learning).
 - *Grit*: Duckworth's Grit Scale (Duckworth et al., 2007) to measure perseverance.



- *Optimism/resilience*: Revised Life Orientation Test (Scheier & Carver, 1985) or Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale.
- *Teacher-student rapport*: The Teacher-Student Relationship Scale (Pianta et al., 2002) adapted for higher education, or student-rated rapport measures (Li, 2022, suggests items on trust and support).
- *Language proficiency*: Standardized test or self-rated proficiency.
- *Outcomes*: Measures of engagement (e.g. Utrecht Work Engagement for Students, Schaufeli et al., 2002), retention intentions, and actual course grades/attendance.

Students would complete the survey mid-semester. Statistical analyses (correlation, regression, or structural equation modeling) would test how wellbeing variables (PERMA, enjoyment, grit, etc.) predict language performance and engagement, controlling for background (age, gender, proficiency). We would look for expected patterns: for example, that higher FLE and self-efficacy predict greater engagement and performance even after accounting for anxiety.

- **Qualitative data**: A subset of 20–30 students (and possibly 5–10 teachers) would be interviewed or take part in focus groups. Semi-structured interviews would ask participants to describe emotional experiences in language classes (times of high enjoyment or anxiety, coping strategies, perceptions of support). For example, students might recount a moment of pride when they realized their effort paid off (as Dewaele & MacIntyre found) or discuss how teacher encouragement affected them. Teachers might be asked how they attend to student emotions or apply positive practices. Data would be audio-recorded and thematically coded (using qualitative analysis software) to identify recurring themes, such as “supportive classroom atmosphere,” “goal setting,” or “avoidance behavior.” This would illuminate how students conceptualize wellbeing and what in-class factors matter most.
- **Analysis**: Triangulating the survey and interview data would allow a rich understanding. For instance, one might find that classes where students report strong rapport (quantitative) are also described qualitatively as “safe spaces.” We could also compare subgroups, such as younger vs. older learners, or by nationality (if data from multiple countries).

To adapt specifically to post-Soviet contexts, the study could incorporate cultural considerations: examining whether collectivist values (emphasizing peer support) or historical pedagogical styles (lecture-focused) moderate the impact of emotions. The methodology would include pilot testing surveys in local languages and ensuring measures are culturally valid. Ethical considerations (informed consent, confidentiality) would be followed strictly.

Discussion

Implications for Engagement and Performance. Our literature review and proposed study suggest that emotional wellbeing is tightly linked to classroom engagement, retention, and L2 performance. Learners who experience positive emotions like enjoyment and pride are more attentive, willing to participate, and



persistent with challenging tasks (Dörnyei et al., 2019). For example, positive emotions “can foster learners’ engagement in learning, performance, intellectual growth, motivation and resiliency”. In practice, an engaged student attends class regularly, contributes to discussion, and completes assignments, which in turn leads to better grades and language gains. Our findings would likely echo previous results: students with higher self-reported wellbeing tend to achieve higher test scores and report fewer intentions to drop the course. Conversely, students with chronic negative affect (anxiety, frustration) may disengage and consider quitting (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014; Li, 2022). Importantly, emotional wellbeing also affects long-term retention: motivated, happy students often pursue additional language opportunities beyond the classroom.

Practical Classroom Strategies. Drawing on positive psychology, we suggest several teacher strategies to enhance wellbeing. First, strengths-based instruction: allow students to identify and apply their personal strengths (curiosity, perseverance, etc.) in learning tasks, which boosts confidence (Seligman et al., 2009). For instance, incorporating student interests into content can spark intrinsic motivation. Second, fostering a growth mindset and positive feedback: praising effort and improvement rather than just correctness helps students interpret mistakes as learning steps, reducing anxiety. Third, enjoyment-enhancing activities: use gamified exercises, role-plays, storytelling, or humor, all of which can generate joy. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) noted that “teachers being funny and encouraging” and creating fun activities made classes more enjoyable. Fourth, gratitude and reflection: assigning short journal entries where students note what they learned or appreciated each week can increase positive feelings (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Fifth, goal-setting and self-monitoring: having students set achievable goals (e.g. learn five new words a week) and track progress can foster accomplishment (the A in PERMA) and self-efficacy.

Building rapport is also critical. Teachers should seek to build trust by showing empathy and respect; simple acts like learning students’ names, asking about their experiences, and responding patiently can make learners feel valued (Li, 2022). A friendly, supportive climate encourages shy or anxious students to take risks (speaking up) without fear of embarrassment. Group work and peer feedback can strengthen a supportive community. The literature confirms that positive teacher-student relationships lead to more enjoyment and motivation, whereas negative climates (e.g. public reprimands) increase withdrawal. In post-Soviet cultures where teacher authority is traditionally high, educators may need to intentionally soften roles (e.g. by acting as coach/mentor rather than strict evaluator) to foster openness.

Cultural and Age Considerations. Culture and learner age can moderate emotional dynamics. For example, Dewaele (2013) found that adult learners (older age groups) often report lower anxiety than younger adolescents, possibly due to maturity and perspective. In a university EFL context, older or more experienced students may use coping strategies better. Culturally, learners from collectivist backgrounds (common in Azerbaijan and Central Asia) might value group harmony; thus, group-based positive experiences (collaborative projects, peer praise) could be especially effective. Conversely, cultural norms about emotional expression might influence how openly students display enjoyment or ask for help. Teachers should be sensitive to these factors, perhaps by providing private encouragement or anonymous feedback channels for more reserved students.

Limitations and Future Directions. While emphasizing positive factors, researchers must avoid oversimplifying. Emotions are dynamic: a learner may feel both anxious and joyful in the same class. Future



research should use longitudinal and dynamic methods (experience sampling, diaries) to capture emotional fluctuations over time. Comparing different cultural settings in post-Soviet vs. East Asian vs. Western contexts would deepen understanding of how cultural values shape language learner wellbeing. Experimental studies testing specific interventions (e.g. a “grit-building” curriculum or teacher training in rapport) would help establish causal effects.

Conclusion

This review highlights that emotional wellbeing and positive psychology have significant implications for SLA, especially for university-level EFL learners. By broadening the research lens to include positive emotions, traits, and supportive environments, educators can better understand how to foster *flourishing* learners. Key findings indicate that enhancing positive affect (enjoyment, pride, optimism) and building personal resources (self-efficacy, resilience, grit) contribute to higher engagement, persistence, and achievement. Practical recommendations for teachers include creating a warm classroom climate, integrating strength-based tasks, and explicitly teaching emotion-regulation and positive reflection techniques. For example, setting clear achievable goals and celebrating small successes can give students a sense of accomplishment (the “A” in PERMA), while encouraging meaningful use of language (the “M”) can increase motivation. Emphasizing teacher-student rapport and collaborative learning also provides the Relationships component of well-being.

Given the complexities of learners’ emotions, future research should pursue longitudinal and mixed-method designs in diverse SLA contexts. Investigating how positive psychology interventions work across cultures will be particularly valuable. For teachers in post-Soviet EFL settings, the takeaway is to address emotions as integral to learning: plan for students’ psychological needs as much as their cognitive ones. In sum, applying positive psychology in SLA offers a promising path to help language learners *thrive*, not just survive, by leveraging their emotional strengths as tools for success.

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