

The Research on the Application of Positive Psychology in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract—Positive psychology is a theory regarding how people thrive and live better. Some contents of English subject have a certain influence on second language acquisition. This article is conducted to investigate positive psychology in the context of second and foreign language acquisition. This theory places particular emphasis on the positive emotions, positive personality qualities, as well as settings that allow people to thrive, which are significant issues in second language learning and teaching. This study aims to review the meaning and application of positive psychology in second language acquisition, mainly focusing on two categories of theory: the PERMA model and the EMPATHICS model; and finds that positive and negative emotion theories bring some enlightenment to second language teaching. For one thing, teachers' positive personality qualities are being developed in order to boost students' communicative drive. For the other thing, teachers had better foster a supportive environment in the classroom that will help the learners to learn languages in a positive environment. Moreover, this study also dialectically treats the theory of positive psychology.

Index Terms—Second language acquisition, positive psychology, language teaching, positive emotion

I. INTRODUCTION

Positive psychology as a discipline of psychology, has had significant influences on the area of second language acquisition (SLA) [1], though its development process in psychology is relatively short, only about 20 years of development. Educational psychology is a discipline used to solve problems and explain a certain phenomenon in educational contexts, and positive psychology in this category is no exception. This field is closely related to positive emotion, beliefs, motivation, feelings, and all the factors that are able to trend people towards prosperity and a better life and all the institution that can trend people towards prosperity and a better life. These elements act as an important role in teaching and learning a second language, such as language anxiety (emotion), because language learning is a prolonged and continuous procedure that calls for the positive psychology traits of persistence, optimism, and tenacity [2]. And positive psychology is potentially able to provide psychological theoretical bases and evidence for SLA and offer advice and guidance for language teaching [3]. Thus, positive psychology is regarding everyone, and more concerning every second language learner and teacher. The application of psychological education in SLA is not uncommon. Whereas, recently, fewer studies have been

made to the combining positive psychology and SLA in-depth and comprehensively. This article is conducted to explore the positive psychology theory used in SLA, and its implications in language teaching. The article is divided into five major sections, containing the introduction section. What follows is the section that introduces positive psychology from the definitions and regions. The third section digs into the application of positive psychology in SLA. The fourth section focuses on the teaching implications of positive psychology adopted in SLA. The final section summarizes how positive psychology applies to SLA and language teaching in general.

II. THE DEVELOPMENT OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

A. The Region of Positive Psychology

The positive psychology movement was first introduced in the US in 1998 by Martin Seligman. It can be seen that positive psychology has not had a long history, and its development is still a trendy field for now. As early as the 1930s and 1940s, many psychologists focused on repairing the damage and neglecting the prosperity of the human community and individuals [4]. Martin Seligman advocates those professionals should not only use psychology to treat diseases and solve difficulties, but also actively explore positive aspects of human survival from contribution to human well-being [5]. In order to further divide the purpose of psychology, spreading the focus from handling bad things and treating human diseases to promoting human positive qualities [4], positive psychology has appeared.

Regarding the field of positive psychology specifically, the word positive psychology is first mentioned by Abraham Maslow from the perspective of humanism [6]. Although he agrees with the positive qualities of promoting human prosperity, the tradition of humanistic does not focus on supporting itself with empirical research to accumulate knowledge [7]. Many humanistic psychologists seem to beg to differ from positive psychology. Robbins summarizes three reasons for this [8]. Firstly, there are some criticisms of humanistic psychology published in American Psychologist when regarding positive psychology [4]. Secondly, they do not identify with the hedonistic elements in positive psychology. Thirdly, they believe that the epistemology and methodology of positive psychology, as well as the rigor and consistency of philosophy on its ethical basis, are not obvious. Nevertheless, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi [4] point out that empirical research employing positive constructs helps to guide people to comprehend the meaning of prosperity in life. Also, other scholars [2] conclude the significance of positive psychology from Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi [4],

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which includes better research agenda balancing, happiness and well-being boosting, and prevention of untested claims and so-called quack cures. From the view of Funder, positive psychology is the rebirth and development of humanistic psychology [9]. That is to say, humanistic psychology can be seen as a pioneer in the field of research and practice of positive psychology. Despite the collision of different perspectives, positive psychology has been gradually recognized over the past few decades. Utilizing positive psychology in more complex areas will also continue to evolve.

B. Definitions of Positive Psychology

After knowing about the belief evolution of positive psychology, the definition of it should be clarified here. Gable and Haidt [10] show that positive psychology is the study of the factors and procedures that contribute to people flourishing or organizations performing at their best. Peterson simply views positive psychology as the research on what makes life work well [11]. Likewise, MacIntyre and Mercer emphasize that positive psychology “is to help people lead better lives” [1]. More specifically, positive psychology addresses the three areas of human development, and that are positive emotions (e.g., love), positive states and traits (e.g., gratitude), and positive institutions (adopting positive principles in the community for things, such as civilization, justice) [4].

Therefore, positive psychology involves various concepts and themes for people’s lives to become better. It is worth noting that positive psychology is not about research on improving bad situations to normal, but more focused on making normal life prosperous.

III. THE APPLICATION OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN SLA

A. Overview of Positive Psychology in SLA

With the gradual rise of positive psychology, some scholars such as MacIntyre and Mercer [1], Gabryś-Barker and Gałajda [12], have brought the idea of positive psychology into SLA. Before it, the variables such as affective dimension [13], and positive attitudes [14] from positive psychology had emerged. Significantly, according to MacIntyre and Mercer [1], Lake [15] is one of the first scholars to clearly apply the concept in the area of SLA of positive psychology. In his study, the author analyses the correlation between positive self, positive L2 self, self-efficacy and SLA in the context of Japan. This is also the first empirical study in SLA from the perspective of positive psychology, which can be considered as the essential practice of positive psychology to rebirth from humanistic psychology. Dewaele and MacIntyre [16] study Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) in the lesson. The result shows that both the technical and emotional skills and abilities of teachers, and supportive peers are essential for the enjoyment while studying a foreign language.

Currently, research on second and foreign language learning under the influence of positive psychology is in full swing. The quasi-experimental study made by Noori and Narafshan [17] explores the relationship between Character

Strength Based Positive Psychology Intervention (CSBPPI) and Goal Setting (GS) from Iran EFL (English as a foreign language) university learners and finds that positive psychology has a great influence on GS and contribution on a positive path for successful target achieving. Oxford et al. [18] investigate human bilingualism in depth from a positive psychology vantage point and generate an array of topics (e.g., emotion, motivation, hope, resilience, tenacity), and integrate the intellectual, emotional and sociocultural factors into language learning. The study of SLA from the viewpoint of positive psychology is diverse, which not only involves emotion, but also regards responsibility [12], emotional intelligence [19] and so on. These themes present three core dimensions in positive psychology linked with SLA. That are positive emotional experiences and feelings of foreign language teachers and learners, positive individual characteristics of learners, and good foreign language learning and teaching environment [20].

Some scholars, such as MacIntyre & Mercer [1]; MacIntyre *et al.* [2]; MacIntyre [7] classify the positive psychology contributions to SLA into different categories. By comparing the literature, the contributions of the following two aspects are mainstream. One is from PERMA to EMPATHICS in relation to language learners’ psychology of happiness and well-being [21]; the other is negative and positive emotion linked with SLA.

B. From Perma to Empathics

Seligman’s contribution to positive psychology is not only to the three pillars mentioned earlier, including positive experiences/emotions, positive states and traits, and positive institutions. The PERMA model and EMPATHICS1 model enrich emotional expression and emotional value in SLA. Seligman created the “PERMA” model, which respectively refers to positive emotion, engagement, relationship, meaning, and accomplishment. Each of them has a specific implication. P-positive emotion including emotions such as happiness and satisfaction; E-engagement in exciting activities; R-positive interpersonal relationships that are supported by others; M-considering the meaning of people’s lives; and A- recognizing achievements in the pursuit of goals [22]. Seligman considers the model as a well-being theory and he believes that these elements are really essential for well-being. After proposing the model, it is applied to the field of SLA. Siek-Piskozub [23] makes use of the PERMA model to explore the advantages of employing the Ludic strategy in a foreign language classroom, and the research indicates that the model is able to be applied to foreign language instruction research planning and the Ludic strategy meeting positive psychology claims might be a helpful tool for teaching other languages. Besides, Yang & Mohd adopt the PERMA model to measure the characteristics of PERMA for Chinese university EFL students and the result proves that the PERMA model is a reliable measuring device for studying the well-being of students at universities in China [24]. Gregersen suggests that the PERMA model contributes to encouraging SLA learners to start learning and maintain the necessary driving force for learning [25]. Therefore, the PERMA model provides a theoretical basis and a measurement tool for diversified research in the field of SLA.

In 2016, the PERMA model was further upgraded and

applied to research on teaching and learning foreign and second languages by Oxford [26], because she believed that the model has several flaws, including overlooking the existence of negative emotions, the separation between engagement and meaning of life, ignoring the background and context, and vague definition of A-achievement. Thus, Oxford [26] developed a helpful, intelligible language learner well-being model and a theoretical foundation, called the "EMPATHICS" model. Similar to the PERMA model, the nine letters of the "EMPATHICS" also represent different meanings respectively. According to Oxford [26], E refers to emotion; M indicates meaning and motivation; P can be defined as perseverance (e.g., resilience and hope); A means agency and autonomy; T shows time; H implies habits of mind; I demonstrates intelligence; C expresses character strengths; and S represents self-factors (e.g., self-efficacy). After further refining and validation, the EMPATHICS model looks to be able to accommodate the needs of language teachers as well as the teachers' and students' welfare and even beyond the SLA sector [26]. For example, a study made by Jin et al. applies the EMPATHICS model to find that contracting speaking is an appropriate method to reduce foreign language learners' language anxiety [27]. Besides, the study also demonstrates the significance of improving students' positive emotions toward foreign and second language learners. The two models both show concern about the language context and environment in SLA [28]. However, the EMPATHICS model takes more factors and considerations into SLA, especially the complexity of language learning and teaching.

C. Negative and Positive Emotion

Regarding emotion, Krashen notes a term affective filter [29]. Krashen points out that when a person has positive emotions, the lower the affective filter works [29]. In other words, when people are positive emotions, their acceptance degree of them is relatively strong. Therefore, emotion greatly affects the state of the learner. Fredrickson puts forward the functions of emotions, which "function as internal signals to approach or continue" [30]. It seems that emotion largely affects behaviors and thinking.

One of positive psychology's major accomplishments is the ability to distinguish between positive and negative emotions [31, 32]. In terms of positive emotion, Fredrickson [32] and Kushkiev [33] make use of broaden and build theory which is supposed to provide insight into how to increase positive, motivation, and creativity and strengthen interpersonal relationships to emphasize at least five aspects of positive emotion. Firstly, positive emotion helps to expand our attention and thinking to create conditions for innovation. Secondly, Positive emotions contribute to the reduction and dilution of negative emotions. Thirdly, increase resilience by inducing positive responses to stressful situations. Fourthly, positive emotions encourage the development of personal assets. Finally, positive emotions provide support for the upward spiral of a better future. Therefore, positive emotions focus on the generation of high quality of human life.

The involvement of positive emotions is noted in the field of SLA study. King & Ng study the relationship between emotional labour and foreign language teacher stress and advise on improving mental abilities through

antecedent-focused regulation strategies and emphasizing students' positive behaviours rather than "students' trigger behaviours (if they are minor enough)" [34]. Zhang & Tsung explore Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) learners' positive emotions in China, especially happiness, and the finding shows that the components that CSL learners drive the positive emotions of the CSL learners are personal fulfilment, interpersonal relations, and social bonds [35]. Another significant finding from the research demonstrates that foreign language teachers ought to strive to support students in developing strong social bonds and a feeling of community in order to increase their enjoyment of being immersed in a new cultural setting. Therefore, positive emotional experiences are essential for both SLA teachers and learners.

However, learners are also faced with some negative emotions in SLA. Language anxiety is a common issue in SLA studies (Between the terminus of the 20th century and the start of the 21st century), this stage is named the Anxiety-Prevailing Phase, because at that time, many individuals believed that emotion and cognition were interrelated, and that emotion is vital in language development [36]. MacIntyre and Gregersen [31] stated that language anxiety is a sudden and synchronised emotions that includes feelings, arousing, intentional, and expressive occurrences. Furthermore, it is a voluntary or involuntary cry for help, alerting others in the context that the nervous learner is or may be in difficulty [31].

Lazarus [37] and Held [38] made a criticism about positive psychology when dealing with emotion. Held puts forward that a forced positive attitude (unscientific positivity) may lead the client more anxious and depressed when the client facing serious difficulties [38]. Also, variants of the emotional dimension approach (negative and positive emotion) simplify the emotional complexity [37]. Izard put forward that emotions are complex and there do not act alone, which "first order emotions feelings" (e.g., happiness, sad) and "higher-order cognitive processes" (e.g., thinking) involved together are the composition of emotion schemas [39]. Regarding the point, MacIntyre et al. suggest that when analysing potential applications of positive psychology theory and research in second and foreign language learning, a balanced and context-sensitive approach is required [2].

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

EMPATHICS model provides a measuring role for teachers and students to experience and feel in language teaching and learning, and also lays a theoretical foundation for it. When negative emotions (e.g., anxiousness and tension) start to surface in language learning, people realize that the impact of emotional learners' learning should not be underestimated. In order to help learners learn better, emotional dimension methods are important for both teachers and learners. Regardless of the EMPATHICS model and the emotion theory, both of them emphasize positive emotion and the positive environment for conducting a good job in foreign and second language learning and teaching. According to positive psychology's impact on SLA, two implications for language teaching are summarized: developing teachers' positive personality traits of teachers to

increase students' motivation for communication and creating a positive classroom environment [40].

Language teaching is essentially a process of communication, cooperation, and interaction between teachers and learners. Only when the two sides are actively able to interact, can they produce optimum language learning results. Without interaction, everything is nonsense. And teachers play a great role in emotional guidance. "The more positive the emotional experience teachers have, the stronger the happiness of teaching" [40]. As teachers, they need to try to promote SLA teachers themselves and students' enjoyment and positive emotional experience at work and in the process of language learning. The EMPATHICS model mentioned above gives SLA teachers some inspiration for positive personality traits, such as positive emotion, perseverance (e.g., resilience, hope, and optimism), autonomy, emotional intelligence, and self-efficacy. When teachers have positive emotional characteristics, this not only makes teachers enjoy working, but also provides a basis for students' positive willingness to communication [40].

The Vygotsky theory shows that learning takes place initially at the interpersonally in a social setting, and then, internalization occurs in the individual mind [33]. In addition to communication and interaction, one of the most important external influences of learning is the environment. In the former chapter, the importance of the environment for SLA was mentioned more than once. The studies mention the cultural environment [35], language context and environment [28], and excellent language teaching and learning environment as one of the core dimensions in SLA regarding positive psychology [28]. Therefore, generating a positive environment for SLA learners to gain positive emotional experiences is essential. In terms of the cultural environment, teachers have the opportunity to create the appropriate cultural environment in the classroom, especially in the SLA classroom, because language and culture are inseparable. When learners are wild about a certain kind of culture, they may well aspire to learn everything about the culture, including languages. So, creating a positive cultural environment corresponding to the language is able to help learners to enjoy the process of learning, rather than taking learning as a task. In other words, students' initiative in learning is automatically enhanced because their interest in learning is awakened.

V. CONCLUSION

Positive psychology has a significant influence when it comes to SLA, especially in foreign and second language learning and teaching emotions. This paper mainly reviews the application of SLA-specific positive psychology and brings some implications to second language teaching practice. In conclusion, positive emotional experience adds colour to students' language learning and language teachers' work, and promoting students' expression will and creating a good language learning atmosphere are specific measures for gaining good emotional experience. With the continuous improvement of people's spiritual life, there are more and more aspirations in SLA. Influenced by positive psychology, the application of positive psychology in SLA is not transforming poor backward SLA into a normal pattern but

pushing and improving SLA into a more prosperous stage of development, which makes the positive psychology service in SLA benefit second language learners and teachers, and brings them more learning and work experiences with positive emotions. It reflects the development of SLA from the perspective of humanism. Positive psychology, especially negative and positive emotions, expands the interdisciplinary study of psychology and language teaching for the study of SLA. Also, it brings a broader vision and more possibilities to the study of language education. Recently, language anxiety has appeared in SLA, and in the future SLA needs to be paid more attention to and improved in the aspect of emotions, especially anxiety and positive emotion. In terms of future study in the area of SLA, which can focus on exploring the human emotional experience when engaged in second and foreign language studying and teaching.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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