
A Review of Emotions in Second Language Acquisition from a Positive Psychology Perspective

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Abstract

Since the 21st century, many scholars have adopted the perspective of positive psychology (PP) to study emotions in second language acquisition (SLA). This study aims to interpret the connotation and development of PP, introduce the three stages of SLA study from the PP perspective, and discuss the study on emotions in SLA from theoretical foundations, study topics, and study methods. Through the analysis of relevant literature from both domestic and international sources, this study finds that: 1) Theories related to PP are continually deepening and innovating; 2) Study topics in this field are diverse, with further potential for study in online learning environments; 3) Study methods are varied, yet there remains significant room for innovation in study design, scenarios, participants, and tools. The study provides implications for foreign language education in China, suggesting that future study should explore the impact of PP in online learning environments and develop more innovative and diverse study tools.

Keywords: *Positive Psychology, Second Language Acquisition, Emotion*

A. Introduction

Foreign language learning is an activity that stimulates cognitive and thinking development in learners, causing them to experience a range of emotional experiences. Learners' emotions interact with their cognition, jointly restricting the effectiveness of language acquisition. Although the field of foreign language teaching and second language acquisition (SLA) has always emphasized the importance of language learning and cognition in the teaching process, research on emotions in this process has not received much attention (Garrett & Young, 2009). While SLA theory emphasizes the role of affective factors, such as the Affective Filter Hypothesis in Krashen's (1982) language acquisition theory, which focuses on the role of affective factors in second language learning, in real second language classroom learning environments, there are few studies on learners' emotions (Garrett & Young, 2009).

Since the 21st century, with the "positive turn" in psychological research, many scholars have adopted the perspective of positive psychology (PP) to conduct research on emotions in second language learning. This research has revealed the complex dynamics, individual differences, and socio-cultural characteristics of second language emotions (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; MacIntyre et al., 2019). Positive psychology was introduced into the field of SLA around 2012 (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012), and since then, there has been a surge in research both domestically and internationally, particularly in the field of emotions. Many domestic scholars have published relevant research in mainstream international applied linguistics journals, contributing significant academic strength to this emerging field.

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Previous research has shown that positive emotions, such as happiness, optimism, and self-confidence, can enhance language learning performance by increasing learners' motivation and courage to actively participate in learning activities. PP theories have demonstrated that creating a positive learning environment can boost learners' engagement and attachment to the material being studied. However, despite this promising evidence, there is still a need for more in-depth research exploring various dimensions of positive emotions in the context of SLA.

This study aims to fill the gap in the literature by examining the relationship between PP and emotions in SLA. The primary objective of this research is to interpret the connotation and development of PP, introduce the three stages of SLA research from a PP perspective, and discuss the research on emotions in SLA based on theoretical foundations, research topics, and research methods. Specifically, this study will explore how PP theories can be applied in the context of second language learning and how positive emotions can be harnessed to improve learning effectiveness. The study will also examine the various methodological approaches that have been used in research on emotions in SLA and identify areas where further innovation can be made. This includes research design, research scenarios, research participants, and research tools. By understanding how positive emotions can be integrated into second language learning practices, this research hopes to provide practical guidance for language educators and future researchers.

The researchers assume that integrating PP principles into SLA research is not only relevant but also urgent given the dynamic changes in modern learning environments. In the current digital era, where online learning is becoming increasingly common, understanding the role of positive emotions is more critical than ever. The researchers believe that by emphasizing positive emotions, foreign language education can become more inclusive, enjoyable, and effective. Additionally, this assumption is based on the belief that a learning environment supported by PP principles can help reduce anxiety and other emotional barriers often faced by second language learners, enabling them to reach their full potential.

B. Methods

1. Research Design

This study adopts a literature review method, focusing on the study of emotions in second language acquisition (SLA). A literature review is a systematic approach to evaluating and analyzing existing research to identify patterns, themes, and gaps in the literature. In this context, this study focuses on exploring the connotation and development of positive psychology (PP) and its application in the study of emotions in SLA from three main aspects: theoretical basis, research topics, and research methods.

2. Research Procedure

The research process began with a literature search in prominent databases such as CNKI and Web of Science. Authoritative articles were selected based on their relevance and credibility, while non-standard journal articles were excluded to ensure high-quality data. Each selected article was summarized, organized, and compared for further analysis. This procedure aimed to obtain a comprehensive overview of research on emotions in SLA from the perspective of PP.

3. Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through literature searches in the aforementioned academic databases. Keywords used in the search included "positive psychology," "second language acquisition," "emotions," and other relevant combinations. Each article found was evaluated based on predetermined inclusion criteria such as relevance to the research topic, methodological validity,

and theoretical contribution. Articles meeting these criteria were then downloaded and stored for further analysis.

4. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using a qualitative approach, employing thematic analysis techniques to identify key themes emerging from the literature. Selected articles were first summarized to understand the context and main findings of each study. Subsequently, the data were organized into categories based on theoretical aspects, research topics, and research methods used in the studies. Comparative analysis techniques were also used to compare research findings across different contexts and times to identify trends and gaps in the literature. In the data analysis, special attention was given to how PP has been applied in SLA research and its impact on language learning outcomes. This includes examining how positive emotions such as happiness, optimism, and confidence influence learners' motivation and active participation in language learning activities. The analysis also included an evaluation of the various research methods used to identify opportunities for further innovation in research design, research scenarios, research participants, and research tools. Through this approach, this study aims to make a significant contribution to our understanding of the role of emotions in SLA from the perspective of PP. The findings from this research are expected to provide practical guidance for language educators and future researchers and pave the way for further studies that can integrate PP principles into second language learning.

C. Findings and Discussion

1. Research on Emotions in SLA from The Perspective of Positive Psychology

Research on emotions in SLA from the perspective of Positive Psychology (PP) encompasses an extensive examination of how PP principles can enhance our understanding of emotional dynamics in second language learning. This research integrates a robust theoretical foundation that draws on the work of scholars like Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, who emphasized the importance of positive subjective experiences, individual characteristics, and public qualities in fostering human well-being. Research topics in this area are diverse, exploring the impact of positive emotions such as happiness, optimism, and self-confidence on language acquisition, and how these emotions can enhance motivation, engagement, and overall learning effectiveness. Methodologically, studies employ a variety of approaches, from qualitative analyses that provide deep insights into learners' emotional experiences to quantitative studies that measure the effects of specific positive psychological interventions. This holistic exploration not only highlights the complex interplay between emotion and cognition in SLA but also underscores the potential of PP to create more supportive and effective language learning environments, thus providing valuable implications for educators and researchers aiming to harness the power of positive emotions in language education.

2. Research on SLA from the Perspective of PP

Li (2021b) categorizes SLA research from the perspective of Positive Psychology (PP) into three distinct stages: the initial stage spanning from 2012 to 2016, the development stage from 2016 to 2018, and the prosperity stage from 2018 to 2021. These stages reflect the evolving trends and increasing scholarly interest in integrating PP principles into the study of emotions and language acquisition. During the initial stage, researchers laid the groundwork by exploring

theoretical foundations and initial applications of PP in SLA contexts. The subsequent development stage saw a surge in empirical studies and methodological refinements, contributing to a deeper understanding of how positive emotions influence language learning outcomes. In the prosperity stage, research expanded to encompass diverse educational settings and participant demographics, highlighting the transformative potential of PP in enhancing language learning experiences and educational practices overall.

Initial Stage

At the initial stage, PP has just been introduced into the SLA, and the relevant research is scattered, mainly the preliminary exploration of relevant theories. MacIntyre & Gregersen (2012) took the lead in introducing the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001). Based on this theory, they distinguished positive emotion from negative emotion, and called on scholars to pay attention to both negative emotion and positive emotion with broaden-and-build function. Lake (2013) systematically introduced the important concepts in PP, verified the applicability of the two conceptual structures of “overall positive self” and “positive foreign language self” among Japanese EFL students, and pointed out through empirical research that the foreign language positive self-variable may play a mediating role between the overall positive self-variable and motivation variables (such as effort and self-efficacy), thus having a certain impact on foreign language learning. This is the first PP empirical exploration in SLA field.

In 2014, the second issue of *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching* was set as a special issue of PP research. MacIntyre & Mercer (2014) expounded PP at the conceptual level, sorted out its main line of research, responded to criticism of its research methods (such as lack of empirical research and relatively simple research methods), pointed out its possible contributions to the SLA field, and pointed out the direction for future research. Another important mark of PP's start in SLA field is the two collections of papers in 2016: *Positive Psychology in SLA* (Gregersen et al., 2016) and *Positive Psychology Perspectives on Foreign Language Learning and Teaching* (Gabrys'-Parker & Gałajda, 2016).

Development Stage

At the development stage, the rapid development of emotion research has broken the long-standing “cognitive dominance” in SLA (Dewaele & Li, 2020). Dewaele & MacIntyre (2014), based on broaden-and-build theory, took the lead in exploring the foreign language enjoyment and anxiety experience of international second language learners, providing an example for empirical research on positive emotions in this field. Since then, many countries in the world have begun to pay attention to the foreign language enjoyment and anxiety experience of second language learners under different language education backgrounds, such as Dewaele (2017), Dewaele & Li (2018), Dewaele et al. (2019) and Saito et al. (2018).

Scholars have explored other emotions, but these emotions are usually scattered. For example, MacIntyre & Vincze (2017) found that the most common positive emotions experienced by second language learners are joy, gratitude, calm, interest, expectation, pride, inspiration, awe and love, while the negative emotions are anger, contempt, nausea, embarrassment, guilt, hatred, sadness, fear and stress.

Prosperity Stage

At the prosperity stage, the field of SLA continues to concentrate on emotions, with related emerging studies in international journals, monographs, and collections. MacIntyre et al. (2019) published a review, presenting the theory, practice and research development of PP in SLA.

Emotion, as the core topic from the perspective of PP, has received the most attention and the most fruitful results. In addition, at this stage, PP research has made breakthroughs in the diversity of topics and theories, showing a trend of prosperity. First of all, the types of emotion researches are diversified, and no longer only focus on foreign language enjoyment and anxiety, while the number of studies related to boredom has soared, such as Li et al. (2021). Pawlak et al. (2020) investigated the influencing factors of boredom in English class. Li (2021) explored foreign language learning boredom in English class of university students in China. Secondly, other PP traits other than emotion have also attracted the attention of scholars at home and abroad, such as emotional intelligence. Finally, with regard to the theoretical perspective of emotion research, scholars are no longer limited to the broaden-and-build theory, and begin to try other theoretical exploration.

3. Theoretical Basis

At present, SLA research from the perspective of PP is mainly based on two levels of theory, namely, well-being theory and topic-related theories.

Well-being Theory

According to Seligman (2002)'s authentic happiness theory, the theme of PP is happiness, which is composed of "PEM", which represents Positive emotion, Engagement and Meaning. Seligman (2011), the father of modern psychology, revised the authentic happiness theory and put forward the well-being theory. He believes that improving human well-being is the ultimate goal of PP, and the theoretical model of well-being is composed of five dimensions of "PERMA". The five letters represent Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationship, Meaning and Accomplishment. This theory provides enlightenment for foreign language education, that is, the goal of foreign language education should not be limited to improving the knowledge and language skills of learners and the effectiveness of teachers, but also should pay attention to the psychological health of teachers and students, so as to promote their well-being.

Oxford (2016) expanded and innovated the well-being theory and proposed a "EMPATHICS" model on the basis of "PERMA", including nine dimensions: Emotion and Empathy; Meaning and Motivation; Perseverance; Agency and Autonomy; Time; Hardiness and Habits of Mind; Intelligence; Character strengths and Self-factors such as self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-confirmation. Compared with "PERMA", "EMPATHICS" attaches importance to various individual differences and environmental factors. Moreover, Oxford (2016) also pointed out that these dimensions are interrelated and dynamic, which together influenced learners' language achievements and individual well-being, and called for relevant research in combination with complex dynamic system theory (CDST). At the level of educational practice, this "EMPATHICS" model can be used as an important reference dimension for teacher training (Oxford, 2016). In other words, the theory not only provides a specific research framework, but also provides a direction for the practice of foreign language education: that is, the integration of active education and language education, taking a "whole person" perspective to pay attention to the learning achievements and individual well-being of second language learners.

Topic-related Theories

The sub-topics in PP have their own theoretical basis. As for the most concerned emotion, the main theory is the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001). This theory distinguishes the different effects of positive emotion and negative emotion, and presents that the former has

the function of expanding individual thinking and action resources, while the latter has the opposite contractive function. This theory makes more and more scholars pay attention to positive emotions. However, the broaden-and-build theory only emphasized the one-way influence of emotion on individual cognition-psychology-motivation-social resources, and did not examine whether there was a two-way relationship between emotion and its cause and consequences (Dewaele & Li, 2020).

Pekrun (2006) proposed the control-value theory. Academic emotions includes three dimensions: object focus, valence, and activation: 1) Object focus can divide academic emotions into activity-related emotions (such as enjoyment and boredom) and outcome-related emotions (such as anxiety); 2) As for valence, academic emotions can be grouped into positive emotions (such as enjoyment) and negative emotions (such as anxiety); 3) In terms of activation, academic emotions can be divided into physiologically activating emotions (such as enjoyment and anxiety) and deactivating emotions (such as boredom) (Li & Li, 2022). This theory provides a more comprehensive and powerful support for the empirical research of emotion, involving the conceptual structure, generation, impact, change, complex relationship and adjustment strategies of emotion.

Egbert (2003) also introduced the flow theory into SLA, and proposed the relationship model between flow and learning. The causes of flow state include both environmental factors and individual factors and the state of flow itself has a direct positive impact on academic performance, which will influence learners in turn.

Research Topics

Since PP was introduced into the SLA field, there has been a wave of emotion research in this field (Dewaele & Li, 2020), and other emotions other than anxiety have begun to receive attention, such as enjoyment, shame, guilt, boredom, pride, interest, anger, love, hope, etc. (MacIntyre & Vincze, 2017). Among them, foreign language enjoyment, anxiety and boredom have received the most attention. Relevant research can be divided into four directions: 1) The conceptual structure exploration of emotion and the development of measuring tools; 2) Causes or predictors of emotion and the predictive effect or influence of emotion on second language learning achievement; 3) The development, self-regulation and intervention of emotion; 4) Emotional interaction between teachers and students.

First of all, scholars fully consider the importance of different backgrounds (Oxford, 2016), explore the conceptual structure of a certain emotion in the specific field of second language learning or in a specific cultural background, and develop corresponding measurement tools. These tools include Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), Chinese Version of Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (CFLES) adapted by Li et al. (2018) from the Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014), and Foreign Language Learning Boredom Scale (FLLBS) developed and verified by Li et al. (2021).

Secondly, some scholars investigate the factors that influence emotions. Li (2020) and other scholars found that learners' own factors (such as gender, age, second language level, class ranking, emotional intelligence, etc.) and external factors (such as classroom environment, teachers' strictness and second language use frequency, etc.) can affect the level of enjoyment and anxiety.

Some scholars have investigated the predictive effect of emotion on second language learning achievement. Based on the control-value theory, Li & Li (2022) examined the

independent and joint predictive effects of enjoyment, anxiety, and boredom on L2 achievement. Dynamic systems theory was first advocated by Larsen-Freeman (1997) and applied to SLA research. Under the framework of CDST (Larsen-Freeman, 2007), some scholars have explored the development and change of emotion. Boudreau et al. (2018) used the personal dynamic approach to explore the changes of college students' enjoyment and anxiety in second language communication. The study of academic emotion mostly explores the academic emotion at a certain point in time from a static perspective, while the study of the dynamic change and development of emotion still needs to be in-depth. On the whole, the number of tracking studies is relatively small, and the space for exploration is relatively large. Future research can explore the emotional development and changes in different types of language classes, interactions or task types and the reasons for the changes. Few studies involve the regulation and intervention of negative emotions. Moreover, there are relatively few studies on emotional intervention.

The communicative and interactive characteristics of emotions are recognized (Dewaele & Li, 2020), but the empirical research is limited. Talebzadeh et al. (2019) used the concept of "emotional contagion" in the field of psychology and adopted the idiodynamic approach to record the interaction of 5 pairs of Iranian teachers and students in listening and speaking class, and analyzed their multimodal data (such as language, gesture and posture) to explore the interaction mechanism of teachers and students' enjoyment. Because teacher-student emotional interaction is related to classroom teaching effect, and also the key to building a good teacher-student relationship, such research has important practical significance. However, such research problems have certain challenges in research methods, and the number of relevant research is extremely limited at present. In addition, the interaction between emotion and other important psychological factors, such as emotion and cognition, is also one of the directions of future research.

Research Methods

Research in the field of emotions in SLA shows a predominant use of quantitative research methods, particularly through non-experimental designs such as questionnaire surveys. While there is a growing trend towards mixed methods and qualitative approaches, experimental research examining causal relationships remains limited but is identified as a crucial area for future exploration (Dewaele & Li, 2020). Addressing this gap could provide significant insights into the mechanisms by which positive emotions impact language acquisition, thereby enhancing educational practices.

In terms of research scenarios, current studies primarily focus on traditional foreign language classrooms, neglecting other prevalent educational contexts such as online learning environments, homework settings, extracurricular practices, and gamified learning scenarios. Future research should aim to integrate emotional research across various educational settings, especially pertinent in the context of modern technology-driven language teaching environments. This integration could offer comprehensive strategies to optimize language learning experiences and outcomes.

Regarding participant demographics, existing research predominantly involves college students, with limited representation from middle school and graduate students, and insufficient attention to language-disadvantaged groups such as left-behind children and disabled students. Future studies need to prioritize understanding the language learning psychology and individual development of these vulnerable groups, thereby contributing practically to the advancement of foreign language education in China and beyond.

Instruments utilized in emotional research often rely on self-reported measures like language proficiency assessments and visual reviews based on audio-visual materials. Qualitative tools such as in-depth interviews, observations, and written materials are also common. However, there is a notable underutilization of physiological and behavioral measurement tools such as heart rate monitors, blood pressure gauges, and eye movement technology to gauge emotional responses, which could enrich the depth of emotional research in SLA (Dewaele & Li, 2020)..

D. Conclusion

This study introduces the connotation and development of positive psychology, reviews the research on SLA and the research on emotions in SLA, including theoretical basis, research topics and research methods, summarizes the development status of emotion research and the shortcomings of existing research, and points out the direction for future research. This study concludes that: 1) The theoretical exploration of emotion from the perspective of positive psychology is deepening, both the verification of relevant theories and the expansion and innovation of theories; 2) The research topics in this field are rich and can be further expanded in the future, especially in online learning environment; 3) The research methods are diverse, and there is still much room for innovation in research design, research scenarios, research participants, research tools and other aspects. This study provides enlightenment for foreign language education in China, such as integrating the perspective of positive psychology with foreign language teaching, aiming at improving students' happiness and mental well-being in foreign language learning.

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