

# The Role of Positive Emotions in Second Language Acquisition: Some Critical Considerations<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the claims put forward by Barbara Fredrickson and her broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions that suggests that certain positive emotions, such as interest, joy, contentment and awe, have the capacity to broaden individuals' thought-action repertoires. Such positive emotions might facilitate the discovery of new knowledge, alliances and skills towards building people's enduring personal resources (Fredrickson, 2001; 2004). These propositions may have a direct impact on the language learning and acquisition process, emotions being at the heart of teaching (Hargreaves, 1998) and learning. This may be particularly true for acquiring a new language, which is a significant investment of personal resources and utilization of personal strengths. The paper also examines the interactionist position in second language acquisition, in particular, Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of human mental processing and his concept of zone of proximal development (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). The paper further discusses the possibility of complementing our knowledge of second/foreign language learning theories with the insight the broaden-and-build theory provides to the educational field. Finally, the criticism levelled at the hyperbolized role of positive emotions on human flourishing on the part of Lazarus (2003a & b) is critically analysed along with the different perspective of emotions he holds.

## Resumen

Este artículo discute las afirmaciones presentadas por Barbara Fredrickson y su teoría de ampliación y construcción de las emociones positivas que sugiere que ciertas emociones positivas, como el interés, la alegría, la satisfacción y el asombro, tienen la capacidad de ampliar los repertorios de acción mental de los individuos. Tales emociones positivas podrían facilitar el descubrimiento de nuevos conocimientos, alianzas y habilidades para construir los recursos personales duraderos de las personas (Fredrickson, 2001; 2004). Estas proposiciones pueden tener un impacto directo sobre el proceso de aprendizaje y adquisición de idiomas, ya que las emociones están en el corazón de la enseñanza y el aprendizaje (Hargreaves, 1998). Esto puede ser particularmente cierto en el proceso de adquisición de una nueva lengua, que requiere una inversión significativa de recursos personales y la utilización de fortalezas personales. Este artículo también examina la posición interaccionista en la adquisición de un segundo idioma, en particular, la teoría sociocultural del procesamiento mental humano de Lev Vygotsky y su concepto de zona de desarrollo próximo (Lightbown y Spada, 1999). El artículo discute además la posibilidad de complementar nuestro conocimiento de las teorías de aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras con el conocimiento que la teoría de ampliación y construcción proporciona al campo educativo. Finalmente, se analiza críticamente la postura de Lazarus (2003a y b) sobre el papel de las emociones positivas en el aprendizaje de un idioma.

## Introduction

Though the study of emotions has attracted some serious interest on the part of researchers in several fields such as psychology, sociology, anthropology and education, the literature on emotions and the emotional experiences of teachers remains limited. Researchers in the field of emotions, such as Sarter (2012) and Damasio (2003), claim that the body of knowledge in the area of human emotions has been significantly enriched in the past half century. The last two decades have been particularly important in researchers' advanced understanding of the nature and role of emotions on human cognition, motivation and problem-solving skills, which constitute the set of 21st century skills both second/foreign learners and ESL/EFL teachers are expected to possess in the modern classroom.

Despite the progress made in this subject knowledge, emotions remain a highly debatable topic for researchers as there has not been an agreed-upon definition of emotion, and the primary focus of studies has been placed on the negative set of emotions as well as on debilitating behaviours such as stress, anxiety, burnout, and more recently, ADHD and self-harming. The formal study of positive emotions in education as an area of inquiry had been in its embryonic stage prior to the year of 2000 when Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi started the positive psychology movement with the aim to disseminate knowledge and create awareness about positive emotions, positive traits and positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Despite the momentum the movement has

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been gaining ever since, some voices, both intra-disciplinarily and cross-disciplinarily, have raised their concern that positive psychology does not offer any novel ideas, nor is “a magic elixir of health and well-being” (Lazarus, 2003b, p. 93). Nevertheless, the last two decades of continuous research in this domain have created a momentum for more research to be conducted on the role of positive emotions as they are pertinent to second/foreign language acquisition.

It is, therefore, the primary goal of this paper to shed some light on the debate over the role of positive emotions on human cognition towards fostering more sustainable interpersonal relations with reference to second language acquisition (SLA). In so doing, it is hoped that this essay will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on positive emotions and their allegedly facilitating role in learning and acquiring a foreign language. This paper does not prescribe any recipes for classroom intervention, though the implications the debate is intended to have for the English language classroom are discussed. In a nutshell, the concept of positive emotions from a socio-cultural perspective is explored, critically analysing the possible role of positive emotions in SLA as informed by the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2000; 2004). The paper further draws on the sociocultural theory of human processing as hypothesised by Vygotsky (Li, Myles & Robinson, 2012) to investigate whether positive emotions can facilitate the language acquisition process if properly cultivated and channelled. Even though this article discusses some criticisms levelled at both theories and critically analyses the claims of both sides, its purpose is to present a new perspective on the facilitative role of several phenomenologically distinct positive emotions, which can lead to approaching behaviour in a second language classroom and contribute to a broadened mindset.

### **Positive emotions can facilitate language acquisition**

Fredrickson (2001; 2004) posits that certain discrete positive emotions have a broadening effect on the human processing faculties and can lead to approaching behaviours, which facilitate interaction and collaboration among individuals. Learning and acquiring a foreign language employs certain mental processing abilities that might be partially or fully affected by the emotional state or attitudes of the learners. For example, Krashen’s affective filter hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) states that learners’ motives, needs and emotional states may hinder or help individuals’ internalisation of the language input. Therefore, insights from the broaden-and-build theory might complement the existing knowledge of specific ways for learners to filter down, or reduce their level of anxiety, while experiencing positive emotions or being in a positive mental state. Some discrete positive emotions such as joy, interest, contentment, awe and love “signal flourishing...(and) also produce flourishing” (Fredrickson, 2001, p.218). Because positive emotions have the ability to contribute to humans’ accrual of intellectual, social and psychological resources, this theory offers an advanced understanding of optimal human functioning on both intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. Unlike negative emotions, which trigger specific action tendencies such as the urge to fight, expel or react, their positive counterparts widen the array of long-term adaptive benefits and offer “a new perspective on the evolved adaptive significance of positive emotions” (Fredrickson, 2001, p.220). Such a revised reading of the role of emotions might underpin the contribution of recent theories that have been proposed to explain SLA. Even though the three major schools of thought in language acquisition—behaviourism, innatism and the interactionist position—offer disparate views on language learning based on their interpretation of neurological research findings and have failed to provide a unified agreement on a complete theory of language acquisition, they all acknowledge that learning a language a) is exclusively dependent upon individuals’ characteristics and b) always involves or is better facilitated by social interaction with peers or someone more knowledgeable.

Despite the incongruences that abound in defining emotions, whether positive emotions add any significant value to optimal human functioning, and how emotions positively affect learning a foreign language, it becomes evident that emotions are features as complex as the learning process. Researchers might also agree that emotions are primary ingredients in human communication, especially during teaching and learning a language, which require a long-term interaction and employment of mental and physical endurance skills.

Therefore, debating over the use of positive emotions and whether they could be facilitative for the second language classroom may expedite our understanding of emotions and the extent to which they influence human cognition and action. Teaching and learning, for that matter, are two examples of mental labour that are inextricably linked to emotion, as Beard and Wilson (2006) claim. Furthermore, through debate and exchange of scientifically informed opinions and views based on rigorous studies, we could bridge the gap in our conflicting understanding of social phenomena. Both emotions and SLA

are highly contested topics in their respected fields. Neither has been underpinned by a unified voice of researchers. Stated positions in published works represent polarised ideas, each claiming a different contribution to knowledge and validity. The body of knowledge in SLA can benefit from recent findings by positive psychologists and their research on the broadening effect of positive emotions. Nonetheless, the subfield of positive psychology needs to respond to the major criticism it sustains for basing its claims on very limited cross-sectional research, dominated by correlation studies. So far, positive psychology has not produced much evidence to prove a causal relationship between emotions and health or well-being (Lazarus, 2003 a & b). In the sections to follow, some of the criticisms against the positive psychology movement and its primary focus of attention on positive emotions are elaborated on, concentrating on the allegations that pertain to the broaden-and-build theory. The paper critically evaluates the arguments from both sides in order to present an interpretation of the claims relevant to SLA.

### **A new perspective on positive emotions**

Fredrickson's model of optimal human flourishing fuelled by the cultivation of certain distinct positive emotions is deeply rooted in the positive psychology movement (MacIntyre, 2002). As a relatively young and burgeoning field of science, positive psychology is indeed a contemporary debate. Many of its tenets have been scrutinised and questioned by mainstream psychology practitioners. Similarly, the field of education, and SLA in particular, is a fast-growing field due to the evolving nature of learners and their unique educational needs. Twenty-first century learners have different learning needs from their earlier counterparts. The pervasive use of technology has created a new reality both inside and outside the classroom. The student-student, student-teacher, teacher-teacher, teacher-administration interaction now requires a more modern set of personal characteristics such as critical thinking skills, emotional intelligence, problem solving, collaboration and teamwork. Therefore, in order to acquire the ability to better know themselves, students and teachers may require a broadened mindset, more resilience and long-lasting personal assets. Thus, the broaden-and-build theory is thought to offer one perspective on how to fuel positivity, creativity and improve interpersonal relationships. These three factors are on the list for a facilitated learning and conducive study environment. Because educational contexts can be perceived differently in the social reality, the next section presents some of the definitions of emotions from a socio-cultural perspective.

### **Defining emotions**

As previously mentioned, definitions of emotions vary greatly among researchers due to emotions' complexity and short life span. For example, Anttila, Pyhältö, Soini and Pietarinen (2016) define emotions as "intense, short-lived active states that arise in response to particular stimuli" (p.453). Although this definition is straightforward and generic enough, it fails to encompass the complexity of emotions as omnipresent social phenomena. Abou-Assali (2013) claims the literature on emotions, though lavish with definitions, has not been consistent in providing one set definition of emotions due to the wide range of perspectives at play—philosophical, psychological, sociological and historical, to name a few. She provides perceptions of emotions from different perspectives in her research exploring student-teacher emotional experiences in the practicum. Further, she outlines some major concepts of emotions—evolutionary, Freudian, cognitive-appraisal and cultural-social—and contributes to a more organised collection of definitions with a focus on teacher emotions. Drawing on Abou-Assali's (2013) classifications of teacher emotions, the psychological and cultural-social positions on emotions are utilised in this paper in order to illuminate the discussion on the part of positive emotions in acquiring a foreign language.

In the educational arena, attempts have been made to explain the nature of emotions, with a focus on the negative ones such as test anxiety and stress (Anttila et al., 2016). Pekrun (2005) is credited with the notion of *academic emotions* to describe the spectrum of emotions experienced during studying, teaching and other academic activities. Though the majority of such studies have dealt with (supposedly) negative emotions such as shame, fear and academic loneliness, Pekrun also reports on enjoyment, gratitude and admiration that add to the number of emotional states individuals may experience in any given moment. Thus, it is suggested that emotions can be perceived as antecedent states that fuel cognitive and physical reactions and responses to particular stimuli. Emotions can also be described as the reactive tendencies humans have to some external impetus.

In addition, Hargreaves (1998) claims that emotions are at the heart of teaching, as teaching and learning are emotional practices. He further hypothesises that education as a social activity presupposes the involvement of both emotion and cognition. Teachers can colour their students'

experiences in different hues, enthuse or bore students, for instance, so emotions should be studied in context. In later works, Hargreaves (2000) continues to give primary importance to emotions as a field of inquiry "for deepening our understanding of the nature, conditions and consequences of teaching and leading in schools today" (p. 811). His contribution to the body of literature on emotions in education is valuable in furthering the debate that emotions should be studied and that they cannot be compartmentalised away from cognition or any other bodily or mental functions. His insight is useful in solidifying the argument that emotions need to be studied more rigorously and their implications for classroom use reinforced. Hargreaves (1998; 2000) has been one of the major voices in researching emotions in educational settings, and his insight is helpful in understanding emotions as omnipresent elements of teachers' lives and their unique role in the interaction with students. Therefore, the following parts offer definitions of emotions from a socio-cultural perspective and the perceptions of positive emotions according to the broaden-and-build theory.

### **The socio-cultural perspective on emotions**

Abou-Assali (2013) states that the theories on emotions have been categorised in terms of context, and the four major ones are "a) evolutionary, b) early experience "Freudian", c) cognitive appraisal, and d) cultural-social" (p. 32). As far as language acquisition is concerned, it is argued that the cultural-social stance can provide the most useful insight into the complex phenomenon of human interaction and knowledge transfer. Therefore, emotions are studied as a product of the human mind, the social milieu and the cultural background of individuals. In other words, "social interactions trigger certain emotional reactions which are centred in the person's social world" (Abou-Assali, 2013, p. 35). Such an interpretation of the essence and function of emotions is in line with the interactionist position in SLA that posits that a significant amount of language acquisition happens through social interaction (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). In a typical English as a second language (ESL) classroom, the dominant philosophy is the communicative approach, which presupposes acquiring the language through authentic or semi-authentic classroom collaboration. The role of the teacher is to act as a facilitator and encourage learners to be active in pair work, extended pair work, and group discussions. The lessons are integrated as they are meant to teach the language skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking) as well as systems (grammar and vocabulary). The target language is taught through elicitation, which is interactive in nature and provides ample opportunities for classroom interaction.

What is more, Vygotsky's theory states that all cognitive development comes as a result of social interaction between learners. In other words, he believes that learning first happens on an interpersonal level in the social environment, and then becomes internalised in the minds of individuals. In addition, the proponents of the socio-cultural perspective give primary importance to the communication between humans because emotions are seen as social facts that are situated in society. On a micro level, emotions guide the way learners think, act and reflect their experience of social phenomena. Teacher and student emotions are then "conceptualised within the societal norms and cultural dynamics" (Abou-Assali, 2013, p. 36) on a macro level. It becomes evident that emotions play an important role in both the cognitive appraisal of antecedent events and in shaping the social bonds interculturally. Other factors, such as personality traits, circumstances and experience, influence the intensity and essence of social interaction that further exacerbate the complexity of the issue. Further research is needed on the role of emotions on human cognition in forging professional relationships, especially the role of positive emotions on individuals' appraisal and judgements of social phenomena. Nevertheless, some researchers agree that learning a second language is an emotionally driven task (MacIntyre, 2002; Dörnyei, 2005) and that learners attain the language more meaningfully when actively engaged (Bolitho, Carter, Hughes, Ivanic, Masuhara & Tomlinson 2003; MacIntyre, 2002). Furthermore, the interest in positive emotions as potent agents of social interaction and influencers on the language learning and acquisitions process has been growing. One such theory, though not directly related to SLA, is Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, which might potentially offer certain useful insights into the broadening effect of emotions on human mental processing.

### **The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions**

To advance understanding of the role of positive emotions on human cognition and action, Barbara Fredrickson developed the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions nearly two decades ago (Fredrickson, 2000; 2001). The model was necessary to fill the void in the scarce and random research on positive emotions. It has served as an empirically supported theory to explain how certain emotions, though phenomenologically distinct, have the shared capacity to broaden individuals'

thought-action repertoires to build more enduring personal resources. The model was situated within the fledgling field of positive psychology that came into existence as a counterbalance to the long-established practice of the mainstream psychology to accentuate negative emotions and exclusively examine their debilitating effect on the human mind. Nonetheless, positive psychology remains a highly debatable topic because it lacks methodological clarity and a rigorous conceptual framework, according to opponents such as Lazarus (2003 a & b). For the sake of depth of knowledge in this analysis of the field with reference to SLA, the current paper critiques the claims the broaden-and-build model has made.

After its inception, the model is presented as a "new theoretical perspective on positive emotions" (Fredrickson, 2001, p.218) that constitutes the set of theories from which positive psychology derives its tenets. Such claims for novel ideas and updated thinking on positive emotions have attracted numerous criticisms from humanistic psychologists for its "spurious claims of being new, but, in reality, in one form or another it is thousands of years old" (Lazarus, 2003a, p. 94). Whereas there might be some validity in this criticism, the movement has undeniably managed to instigate a paradigm shift and drive the research on emotions in a new direction. Moreover, in one of her first publications on the model, Fredrickson calls for "an effort to begin a substantive dialogue on the often-neglected and trivialized topic of positive emotions" (Fredrickson, 2000, p. 1). Whether it is of any value to polarise emotions' valence into positive, negative or neutral, the accentuated role of positive emotions may appeal to educators and educational psychologists who would welcome a shift in research focus from anxiety, stress and burnout to creativity, resilience and cultivation of interpersonal skills. It is also noteworthy that Fredrickson (2000; 2004) invites a dialogue on our understanding of optimal human functioning that is supported by empirical findings. The next sections refer to the criticism levelled at this model in more detail.

In all of her published works, Fredrickson calls for a debate on the nature of emotions, the role of positive emotions on human flourishing, and further research to advance the field of psychology in general. She posits that, even if previously explored, positive emotions have been studied using models that worked well for negative emotions. In doing so, she problematises the models of thinking about emotions because each and every positive emotion has a distinct trajectory of existence and intensity. Fredrickson (2001) agrees that definitions of emotions are inconsistent across researchers and that they are a subset of a broader class of affective phenomena, according to which emotions are "best conceptualized as multicomponent response tendencies that unfold over relatively short time spans" (p.218). In her model, negative emotions are thought to lead to specific action tendencies that urge the mind to act in a specific way such as escape, attack or expel in situations that necessitate quick and decisive action. In juxtaposition, positive emotions such as joy, interest, contentment, pride and awe, widen the array of thoughts and actions (Fredrickson, 2000). Such conceptual knowledge could complement the created awareness from the socio-cultural theory of human processing that when learners interact with a more knowledgeable other within their "zone of proximal development", their interaction is even more productive when they experience a positive emotion like joy, which "broadens by creating the urge to play, pushes the limits to be creative" (Fredrickson, 2001, p. 220). Interest also creates similar urges to explore, absorb new information and expand the self, according to the model. In later works, Fredrickson (2004; 2009; 2013) conceptualises the phenomenology and possible function of ten distinct positive emotions based on a decade of empirical testing in her positive emotions and psychophysiology (PEP) lab. As a result, a key proposition of the theory is that, unlike the traditional models of emotions based on specific action urges, broadened mindsets have long-term adaptive benefits that result in accumulated personal resources (Fredrickson, 2004).

Another key idea of the theory is its "undoing hypothesis". If negative emotions narrow the scope of attention, lead to specific actions and limit thought-action repertoire, positive emotions with their broadening capacity should act as antidotes for the languishing effects of negative emotions. Therefore, positive emotions are thought to undo the after-effects of previously experienced plaguing emotions. Fredrickson and colleagues tested the effect of inducing positive emotions after asking participants to partake in stressful experiences such as preparing to give a speech and discovered that, when injected with positivity, participants' cardiovascular recovery was faster than when participants were injected with neutral emotions or negative ones. Positive emotions help individuals see "the big picture" and position events in a broader context, "lessening the resonance of any particular negative events" (Fredrickson, 2004, p. 1371). Though the number of evidence-based studies on the undoing effects of positive emotions is growing, Fredrickson's model and its key propositions, being part of the positive psychology movement, have been attacked for relying heavily on cause-effect studies to

corroborate their major hypotheses. Positive emotions are generally connected to the overall human flourishing and well-being without a sufficient number of longitudinal studies to corroborate such claims. Fredrickson (2001) believes that positive emotions not only signal health and well-being, as previously suggested, but they also *produce* health and well-being. She further conjectures that positive emotions have the capacity to make individuals more socially integrated, resilient and effective. In other words, positive emotions are the key to human flourishing (Fredrickson, 2004, p.1371). Her nonlinear dynamic model developed with Losada (1999), which emerged from mathematically studying the medium performance of management teams, suggests a tipping point, a positivity ratio of 3 to 1: for every negative emotion experienced, it takes three positive emotions to balance out its lingering effects. Even though such assertions may resonate with second language teachers in offering insight on how to reduce anxiety levels of students before giving a presentation or before a test, to date, no study examining the effects of positivity to counterbalance the crippling effect of negative emotions on students has been published to confirm such a hypothesis. Classroom dynamics and student interaction are too complex and intertwined with other factors for this model to be applied to all SLA settings. Further research on the possible effect of positive emotions on SLA is needed to derive any conclusions. Such research studies should examine the effect of one or two positive emotions, such as joy and interest, on a focus group of second language learners of similar social and cultural background during a particular classroom activity— giving a presentation, working in pairs or preparing for a test. Learning a second language and managing emotions are too intricate to be prescribed a “one size fits all” intervention. The following sections will discuss the socio-cultural theory of SLA, and the good that positive emotions could have in the language classroom.

### **Positive emotions and social interaction in SLA**

So far, this paper has presented the definition of emotions from a sociocultural perspective despite the differences of opinion among scholars. The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, though partially informed by the cognitive appraisal school of thought, does have some important social implications. As previously mentioned, both the study of positive emotions and second language acquisition are relatively young arenas of scientific inquiry. The prevailing paradigm in SLA in the past decade has been communicative language teaching (CLT), which has served as a philosophical ground on which subsequent principles of andragogy have been based. Teaching principles informed by CLT adopt an eclectic approach—oftentimes a synergy between task-based language learning and teaching, inductive teaching and the Lexical Approach. Affected by the previously popular innatist approach and the work of Krashen, language classrooms are now seen as places of libertarian or transformational learning (Li et al., 2012), in which language acquisition is conscious, desired and negotiated between learners and teachers through collaboration and interaction. A strong emphasis is placed on the fact that adult learners have various learning preferences, come from different cultural, educational and social backgrounds and usually have a clear idea about what learning outcomes the language lessons should have. Furthermore, other variables affecting the quality and speed of language acquisition are at play, such as “developmental factors, affective factors (personality, attitudes and motivation, level of anxiety, and cognitive factors including aptitude, learning styles and multiple intelligences” (Li et al., p. 52).

Language classrooms are extremely complex microsystems of human interaction in a socially constructed reality. The Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who believed that the above set of factors cannot and should not be separated and that learning is the result of social interaction, adopted such a position on effective language learning (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). Behaviourist and innatist theorists, such as B.F. Skinner and Noam Chomsky, may argue against such a view because Vygotsky was not a researcher in the area of SLA. Another strong argument against the theory is that language classrooms that utilise the grammar-translation method and the audio-lingual method still produce well-learned individuals, who are competent in a second language and are able to communicate with native speakers even though they have never had any authentic communication in the classroom or outside. Nevertheless, Vygotsky’s sociocultural model is appealing to language teachers because it offers practical insights. For example, teachers may group low achievers with more advanced students to allow for more efficient collaboration, a practice in line with Vygotsky’s notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is the space between the actual level of the learner and the potential development level they can reach with the help of a more knowledgeable other. Critical to the theory is the concept of scaffolding, or the increasing/decreasing level of support with the purpose to “draw learners out and engage them in conversation” (Li et al., 2012, p.63). What is more, most of the teacher training courses such as the Cambridge CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching) and

TESOL training courses adopt the communicative curriculum to train novice teachers in proper classroom management and class dynamics that are based on active student interaction and collaboration. Often, students placed in the same language level have a range of prior background knowledge and experience with the language, so the concept of working with a more knowledgeable student is very much applicable in all modern ESL classrooms. Pairing and grouping students is another common approach ESL teachers use to increase student-talk time and maintain proper classroom management. Even though it offers practical implications for most ESL classroom situations, Vygotsky's theory is not ubiquitously recognised as researchers still debate how second and foreign languages are best acquired.

As is the case with other universally applied theories, the supporters of Vygotsky have ruffled some feathers. According to Chaiklin (2003), the ZPD is primarily meant to explain children's development of their first language and does not necessarily apply to adult second language learners. Chaiklin (2003) also claims that the ZPD is too vague a concept to clearly represent a child's actual level of capabilities and level of motivation. In the same vein, Liu and Matthews (2005) take issue with the theory because it disregards, they claim, the role of each individual for the sake of the collective. In other words, each individual's mind becomes part of the social group; hence, specially gifted children or prodigies cannot rise above the social norms. These authors also contend that this socio-cultural theory does not represent all cultures or social realities because different peoples have distinct understandings of social interaction and engagement. Though such assertions may have some validity, the contribution of this model to mainstream psychology, in general, and educational psychology, in particular, is undeniable. The field needs an updated interpretation of the theory to reflect the new reality in language classrooms. For digital natives, for example, interaction with their peers might not necessarily mean a face-to-face interaction. They tend to be less social in real life and more active in virtual reality. In multicultural contexts like Canada, language classrooms are comprised of students from various countries who have a dissimilar interpretation of social reality. Some may be unwilling to collaborate freely with students who look different and act differently. In summary, learning a second language is a unique mental process whose successful outcome is determined by a multitude of factors, many of which vary across individual learners and the specifics of the classrooms. If positive emotions lead to approaching behaviour and willingness to interact with other individuals more openly and efficiently, and if acquiring a second language is primarily the product of constructing knowledge in the social reality through human interaction with more experienced peers or teachers, then these two models, when applied in synergy, may serve as a springboard for developing new theories and prescribing classroom interventions that are both conceptually and methodologically rigorous.

### **The socio-cultural theory and the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions come together**

Generally speaking, one can deduce that there are many more commonalities between humanistic psychology being the "father" discipline of positive psychology and language teaching being the major field from which SLA stems. The concept of treating illnesses has been prevalent in mainstream psychology since its focus is on palliative care and curing diseases as much as prevailing paradigms in pedagogy have been centred upon instructing the learner in lecture-style classrooms where the teacher is the master and the knowledgeable authority whose primary function is to fill empty vessels rather than discover, activate and utilise learners' potential through meaning negotiation and learning by doing. Understandably, the positive psychology movement came into existence to provide a different perspective on human functioning and place the focus on prevention and building personal resources instead of on only fixing problems with humans and their interpretation of social reality. Mercer and MacIntyre (2014) highlight that Seligman started the movement to expedite a shift in research focus to explore positive human emotions, positive character traits and positive institutions.

Nevertheless, this movement's body of knowledge and ideas are deeply rooted in humanistic psychology, whose contribution to understanding how the human mind functions is indisputable and well recognised. Similarly, the humanistic movement in language teaching was prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s, according to Mercer and MacIntyre (2014), as learners' holistic characteristics began to be taken into consideration more profoundly. Therefore, the learner is not a *tabula rasa* whose cognitive and affective characteristics play no significant role in selecting the most suitable approaches to language instruction. The influence of the humanistic tenets on psychology and language acquisition is evident from the development of new theories in their respective fields, such as Fredrickson's model and Vygotsky's ZPD. However, integrating affect and cognition is by no means a novel concept; in fact,

they both have a long past but a short research history in their domains. Emotions, for that matter, have always been a subject of interest in one way or another. Fredrickson's theory of positive emotions sheds light on the neglect positive emotions have sustained for years. Her conclusion that positive and negative emotions are not dichotomous corrects the previously held idea that positive and negative emotions are the two ends of the same continuum as Krashen's affective filter hypothesis states. The implications of the broadening effects of positive emotions for SLA can be valuable in supporting a two-dimensional view on emotion, which "opens up the possibility of examining ambivalence" (Mercer & MacIntyre, 2014, p.163). MacIntyre's (2002) work on ambivalence in SLA provides some useful insight into looking at the nuanced emotions language learners experience in classroom situations or when interacting with native speakers.

Informed by Fredrickson's model and in light of Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, it can, therefore, be concluded that a) learners may experience both positive and negative emotions at the same time; b) positive emotions broaden learners' perceptibility and may lead to more enduring personal resources; c) some negative emotions, such as anxiety, do not necessarily take learners into a downward spiral— anxiety creates a certain level of alertness in the learner in action-prone situations such as sitting an exam; d) learning is more profound when students interact with each other and are in a positive mental state, and e) the social and cultural context influences the intensity and speed of language acquisition. So, it is argued that the positive psychology field in general, and the broaden-and-build theory in particular, offer SLA the potential to mobilise empirical research on the effect of positive emotions on language acquisition. It is encouraging to witness the social turn in SLA towards examining its contexts as being diverse, intertwined with learners' background, cognitive abilities and current mental states. From a modern perspective, no classroom intervention would be complete without creating proper interaction between learners and teachers. Similarly, no meaningful collaboration can be fostered without considering the positive emotions, personality traits and positive social milieu in which learning occurs. It is also suggested that this updated thinking on positive emotions and the role of the context in language learning can be applied in all language classrooms regardless of the methodological diversity in the field.

### **Too good is no good?**

For the sake of objectivity, this section looks at some of the criticisms levelled at the positive psychology movement with reference to Fredrickson's theory and SLA. A major opponent of the positive psychology's claims was Richard Lazarus, whose response has been widely cited. Unfortunately, he only managed to publish two articles before passing away, but those contain important points of his critique. Lazarus (2003a) speculates that the movement is "in danger of being just another one of the many fads" (p.93). Ever since this statement, positive psychology has been rapidly growing in followers and empirical studies that rely extensively on empirical data. In the case of Fredrickson's model, the progressing pattern of the theory can be observed along with its claims as it becomes more substantiated and corroborated with evidence.

Moreover, in her initial publications, Fredrickson (2000) only refers to several positive emotions, gradually expanding the list to 10, "the big 10 emotions- love, joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration and awe" (Fredrickson 2009, p.41). In her book *Positivity* (Fredrickson, 2009), she elaborates on the mathematically derived positivity ratio of 3-1, which was later critiqued from an empirical viewpoint. The tipping point of positive versus negative emotions is another criticism her research has undergone. Lazarus (2003a) calls it the emotion valence problem, voicing his concern that positive emotions tend to be grouped together as counterparts to negatives ones. However, each positive emotion is qualitatively distinct from its "peers", which is reflected in Fredrickson's (2013) most recent works confirming that, though phenomenologically different, all positive emotions have the unique capacity to broaden awareness, which leads to the accrual of new resources.

Another major critique of the claims of positive psychology is the limitations of cross-sectional research (Lazarus, 2003a). As mentioned before, positive emotions are generally short-lived and elusive, which makes researching them much more challenging. At the same time, positive emotions as the potent agents of well-being and flourishing are attributed a high position in mobilising human potential. However, as Lazarus (2003b) claims, establishing causality based on cross-sectional research raises many concerns. No predictions should be made from "one time or circumstance to a later time or circumstance in the same group of participants" (Lazarus, 2003b, p.97). When this issue of causality is projected on the language classroom, this lapse becomes even more evident given the specifics and



uniqueness of each cohort. One intervention that previously proved to be effective with a group of learners may not be as useful with another group of similar background and learning capabilities.

A final point of criticism the current paper discusses is measuring emotions. Defining and measuring emotions has posed a conundrum to researchers for decades. The issue is even more complex with positive emotions as they are more fleeting and ephemeral. The inability for an accurate and in-depth measurement deters the possibility to explore specific emotions as objects of scientific study. Lazarus (2003b) takes issue with the assumed correlation between emotions, health and well-being and Fredrickson's (2001) claim for the undoing effect of positive emotions. He hypothesises that the current emotional state of individuals "depends on the cardiovascular sequelae of negative emotions and experimentally induced emotions rather than careful emotion measurement" (Lazarus, 2003b, p.104). He urges for a differentiation to be made between a fluctuating state and a more long-lasting personality trait because experiencing joy or gratitude occasionally may or may not lead to better health in the long run.

In short, the process of learning and acquiring a new language induces a plethora of emotions at any given time in any given context. Whether and how these emotions might facilitate the process remains a subject of debate and scientific inquiry. It also becomes evident that both the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions and the socio-cultural theory of mental processing have some useful insights to advance the body of knowledge in the field. Further research is essential with a "process-oriented approach" (Mercer & MacIntyre, 2014, p. 164) to understand and explain how learners' positive experiences facilitate the process of language internalisation at the social level as hypothesised by Vygotsky.

### Conclusion

In summary, this essay explores the role positive emotions are thought to have on human cognition by broadening the momentary thought-action repertoires (Fredrickson, 2001) and subsequently leading to more enduring personal resources. The paper also draws on Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of human processing and his concept of Zone of Proximal Development as one perspective on second and foreign language acquisition. The insight these two novel theories offer researchers and theorists in several areas of knowledge such as psychology, sociology and pedagogy, may expedite a paradigm shift in the way practitioners investigate positive emotions and how these can contribute to a more optimal human functioning. A key notion of the broaden-and-build theory is that emotions radiate like invisible ripples. As a result, rarely do one's emotions remain undetected by other individuals. Positive emotions, though harder to pin down and describe, create urges to explore, play and be more socially proactive. Such propositions complement Vygotsky's idea that acquiring a foreign language is predominantly a social process before the language input becomes internalised in the minds of learners.

While more research is needed to understand how positive emotions affect human cognition and behaviour, Fredrickson's contribution to the scarce body of knowledge on positive emotions is recognised. In the SLA field, the focus has been on providing theoretical and practical implications for classroom interventions that create opportunities for second/foreign learners to communicate in class to be able to process the language input more profoundly and practice the target language more efficiently. If acquiring a foreign language occurs primarily through communication, and if human interaction is better facilitated by positive emotions, then Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory and Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of human processing create the necessary synergy to inform future studies in coining updated theories and developing pedagogical applications to meet the ever-growing demands of students and other stakeholders.

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