

*Emotion as the amplifier and the primary motive:
Some theories of emotion with relevance
to language learning*

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Abstract

Emotion is crucial to living and learning. The powerful intertwining of emotion and cognition ignites learning within a complex dynamic system, which, as several sections of this paper show, also includes societal and cultural influences. As "the primary human motive" (MacIntyre, 2002a, p. 61), emotion operates as an amplifier, which provides energetic intensity to all human behavior, including language learning. This chapter explains major theories of emotion drawn from positive psychology, social psychology, social constructivism, social constructionism, and existential psychotherapy. It also offers implications for language learning related to understanding and managing emotions; expressing emotions appropriately despite cultural and linguistic differences; viewing emotions as transitory social roles; enhancing positive emotions and developing resilience; and recognizing, perhaps paradoxically, both the negative and the positive aspects of anxiety. The chapter concludes with the statement that language learners can become more agentic in dealing with their emotions. This form of self-regulation can lead to greater success in language learning.

Keywords: language learning; positive psychological, social, and existential theories of emotion

1. Introduction

Emotion is “the primary human motive,” said MacIntyre (2002, p. 61). The human brain is an emotional brain (Le Doux, 1998; see also Johnson, 2014; Lewis, Haviland-Jones, & Barrett, 2008). It creates relationships among thought, emotion, and motivation in a complex dynamic system in which components interact in complex, nonlinear, organic, and holistic ways (Dörnyei, 2009; Mercer, 2011). Emotion “functions as an amplifier, providing the intensity, urgency, and energy to propel our behavior” in “everything we do” (MacIntyre, 2002a, p. 61). All learning is a powerful combination of cognition and emotion (Lewis, 2005; Piaget, 1981), so Dörnyei (2009) spoke of a “cognition-emotion interface” in language learning.

As a background to my own research with learner histories and as a means of deepening my understanding of learner anxiety and other emotions, I decided to study emotion theories. This article and a prior one (Oxford, 2015) grew from that interest. My aim here is not to provide a review of research on emotions in language learning nor to examine all theories of emotion. Instead, I intend to describe several focused theories of emotion drawn from various branches of psychology, sociology, and philosophy and to explain how those theories apply to language learning. The article addresses theories of emotion in (a) positive psychology, (b) social psychology, (c) social constructivism, (d) social constructionism, and (e) existential psychotherapy.

2. Emotion theory in positive psychology

The goal of positive psychology is to “increase flourishing by increasing positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishment,” said Martin Seligman (2011, p. 12), the father of positive psychology. According to So and Huppert (as cited in Seligman, 2011), “flourishing [is] . . . defined as having high positive emotion, plus being high on any three of the following: self-esteem, optimism, resilience, vitality, self-determination, and positive relationships” (p. 238). Well-being is the operationalization of flourishing.

Some discussion areas in the theory of well-being in positive psychology are particularly germane to understanding emotions. These areas relate to positive emotions, negative emotions, flow, resilience, and emotional intelligence. Though positive psychologists do not tend to refer to a mix of emotions, I include this topic along with positive emotions, because every human life contains a mix of emotions.

2.1. Positive emotions and a mix of emotions

In Seligman's (2011) well-being theory within positive psychology, positive emotion is one of the five key areas, accompanied by engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment, summarized as "PERMA." Seligman (2011) endorsed Frederickson's (2001, 2003, 2004) "broaden-and-build" concept of positive emotions by saying "the positive emotions broaden and build abiding psychological resources that we can call on later in life" (p. 66). The broaden-and-build concept says that positive emotions, such as happiness, curiosity, and interest, broaden the individual's awareness and encourage innovative, diverse thoughts and actions. This broadened range builds skills and resources. For instance, pleasure in interacting with someone else can build up friendship and social skills, joy in childhood's rough-and-tumble play can lead to motor skills, and curiosity can lead to searching skills. Positive emotions (a) "trigger upward spirals toward emotional well-being" (Frederickson & Joiner, 2002, p. 172), (b) broaden the scope of attention (Frederickson & Branigan, 2005), (c) contribute to resilience (Frederickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003; Waugh, Tugade, & Frederickson, 2008), and (d) speed up recovery from cardiovascular situations related to negative emotions (Frederickson & Levenson, 1998).

Oxford and Cuéllar (2014) and Oxford, Pacheco Acuña, Solís Hernández, and Smith (2014) significantly adapted Seligman's well-being theory (PERMA) to interpret histories of language learners who were selected for the studies because of their record of success and high proficiency. We were interested in capturing a true mix of emotions—both positive and negative ones—and not just concerned about the presence of positive emotions, as Seligman might have been. With these successful learners, we discovered a mix of emotions but realized that positive emotions, such as interest and happiness in learning, were more prevalent than negative emotions, such as sadness and anxiety. We framed the narrative task by asking: "What obstacles did you face in language learning? Were you able to overcome them, and if so, how?" The learners in these studies proved to be resilient in working to overcome their difficulties. We also asked: "What were the peak experiences in your language learning?" We avoided defining a peak experience so that the learners could respond freely. Maslow (1970) described peak experiences as transient but powerful moments of self-actualization. In his view, a peak experience is "a great and mystical experience, a religious experience if you wish – an illumination, a revelation, an insight . . . [leading to] 'the cognition of being,' . . . almost, you could say, a technology of happiness . . ." (Maslow, 1971, p. 169). Peak experiences are especially joyous, exciting, ego-transcending moments in life, involving sudden feelings of intense happiness or ecstasy, creativity, meaning, well-being, wonder, awe, love,

unity, empathy, limitlessness, and timelessness. Maslow (1971) indicated that “most people, or perhaps all people, have peak experiences, or ecstasies” (p. 168). Peak experiences can never be a goal; they are byproducts of engaging fully in something meaningful. In analyzing language learner histories, Oxford and Cuéllar (2014) and Oxford et al. (2014) found that many of the successful learners had peak experiences gained through interacting with teachers, fellow students, and native speakers in the target language and experiencing the richness of the culture.

In other narrative research that did not apply positive psychology (see Kao & Oxford, 2014; Ma & Oxford, 2014; Oxford, 1996, 2011a, 2011b, 2013, 2014; Oxford, Ehrman, & Lavine, 1991; Oxford, Lavine, Felkins, Hollaway, & Saleh, 1996; Oxford, Massey, & Anand, 2005; Oxford, Meng, Zhou, Sung, & Jain, 2007; Oxford et al., 1998), we allowed learners to talk and write about the negative and positive relationships with teachers and their experiences with language learning as a whole. We opened the door to anything they might want to say. Results showed an array of emotions, connected in various ways with learners’ personalities, goals, self-esteem levels, self-concepts, and experiences of crossing linguistic and cultural borders (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000), often involving moving to other countries. While some of the emotions, such as anger, shame, guilt, and anxiety, were negative, other emotions experienced by these learners, such as love, confidence, pleasure, pride, contentment, and joy, were highly positive.

2.2. The roles of negative emotions

In contrast to positive emotions, “negative emotions warn us about a specific threat: when we feel fear, it is almost always preceded by a thought of danger” (Seligman, 2011, p. 139), such as sadness being preceded by a thought of loss or anger being preceded by a thought of trespass. Our negative emotional reaction is often disproportional to the actuality of the danger. Negative emotions—“the firefighting emotions” (Seligman, 2011, p. 66)—narrow the individual’s response options to survival behaviors (Frederickson, 2001, 2003, 2004). For example, anxiety leads toward the fight-or-flight response.

In other researchers’ narrative studies of language learning, multiple emotions were found, most of which were negative and potentially “narrowing” in the sense of Frederickson’s theory. In Pavlenko’s (2006) investigation, the narratives of bilingual writers who had learned English as a second language displayed “an array of emotions,” such as guilt, insecurity, anxiety, worry, sadness, and confusion (p. 5). Japanese women learning English self-identified responses of longing, disappointment, sadness, and powerlessness, but also occasional confidence (Piller & Takahashi, 2006). In her book *Lost in Translation*, Hoffman (1990) explained the emotional changes and sense of dispossession that occurred

when she moved with her family from Poland to Canada. In *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, Rodriguez (2004) portrayed emotional and social alienation from his familial linguistic and cultural identity. One wonders why the emotions were mostly so negative. Did the sociocultural aspects of language learning make the process such a profoundly unsettling psychological experience (Guiora, 1983)? Why was so little positive emotional value found for some of these individuals during a large part of their language learning process?

Research on language anxiety reveals that this frequently found emotion has many negative correlates for learners: (a) worsened cognition and achievement (Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret, 1997; Horwitz, 2001, 2007; MacIntyre, 2002a), (b) negative attitudes toward the language (Dewaele, 2005), (c) decisions to drop the language (Dewaele & Thirtle, 2009), (d) less willingness to communicate (MacIntyre, 2002b), and (e) diminished self-confidence, reduced personality, and lowered personal agency and control (Horwitz, 2007; Horwitz & Young, 1991). However, contrary to positive psychology's pessimistic reaction to negative emotions, evidence also exists that language anxiety can occasionally be stimulating and helpful (e.g., Marcos-Llinas & Juan Garau, 2009). The Janus-like (Dewaele & McIntyre, 2014) negative and positive natures of language anxiety can be explained from an existential psychotherapeutic perspective: "Anxiety has a negative expression in angst or anguish and a positive one in excitement and anticipation" (van Deurzen, 2012, p. 153).

Language anxiety (and implicitly other negative emotions) can be managed through particular emotional strategies promoted by positive psychology. For instance, the ABCDE macrostrategy (Seligman, 2006, 2011), drawing on the theory and practice of rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT; Ellis, 2003), contains a set of interlocking strategies. Specifically, the learner must recognize that beliefs, especially irrational beliefs, about adversity cause consequent negative feelings (e.g., anxiety) but disputation, which means presenting counterevidence, results in energization, or a positive change of mind (Seligman, 2006). Within the ABCDE macrostrategy, the strategy of identifying irrational beliefs—"I must/should" (dogmatic demands), "It's terrible" (awfulizing), "I can't stand it" (low frustration tolerance), and "I'm worthless and incompetent" (self/other rating)—is very important, especially for language learning. Many language learners hold dysfunctional, irrational beliefs about their own learning, and this contributes to language anxiety. The strategy of identifying irrational beliefs must always be accompanied by the strategies of (a) identifying counterevidence and (b) creating a new mindset. The ABCDE macrostrategy combats the pessimistic explanatory style (Peterson, Seligman, & Vaillant, 1988), which is often found in anxious learners. Well-being theory notes that "emotions don't follow inexorably from external events but from what you think about those

events, and you can actually change what you think” (Seligman, 2011, p. 90). In REBT, the ABCDE macrostrategy is a central focus for personality change, but it can also be deployed to diminish language anxiety specifically. (See Cohn & Frederickson, 2010, for predictors and consequences of positive psychology interventions.)

2.3. Flow

Csikszentmihályi (2008) described flow not as passive or relaxing but as occurring when an individual’s mind and body are stretched to their limit in a quest to accomplish something worthwhile and difficult. Flow is comprised of complete engagement in an activity, merging of action and awareness without distraction, intrinsic motivation (autotelism, or the desire to do the task for its own sake because it is enjoyable), balance between challenge and skill (task is neither too easy nor too hard), heightened control (security and lack of worry about failure), effortlessness, lack of self-consciousness, and an altered perception of time (slowing down or speeding up) (Csikszentmihályi, 1998, 2008, 2013; Csikszentmihályi & Csikszentmihályi, 2006).

Flow is associated with emotion by means of skill level and challenge. As noted, a state of flow occurs when the tasks’ challenge matches the person’s skill level. When skill level and challenge are imbalanced, lack of flow is assured and one of the following negative emotional states is likely to emerge: anxiety (higher challenge than skill level), boredom (lower challenge than skill level), or apathy (both challenges and skill levels are low) (Nakamura & Csikszentmihályi, 2005). Peterson (2006) stated, “the aftermath of the flow experience is invigorating . . . [although] flow in the moment is nonemotional and arguably nonconscious. People describe flow as highly and intrinsically enjoyable, but this is an after-the-fact summary judgment, and joy is not immediately present during the activity itself” (pp. 66-67). Flow can produce emotions such as pleasure, joy, and excitement—but, as Peterson contended, after the experience is over.

2.4. Resilience

Resilience is the ability to successfully spring back from adversity. Language learners need resilience in times of emotional, cognitive, and/or physical stress. Some resilience theories and research studies emphasize “personal strengths (e.g., cognitive, social, emotional, moral/spiritual)” (Truebridge, 2014, p. 15), such as hope, interest, excitement, outgoing personalities, ability to enlist support and develop competence, problem-solving ability, and self-esteem (Masten & Obradovic, 2006; Werner & Smith, 1992). Benard (1991) listed the following personal, individual components of resilience: positivity (e.g., hope for the future,

interest, engagement), persistence, hardiness, goal-directedness, achievement orientation, educational aspirations, a sense of anticipation, a sense of purpose, and a sense of coherence. Resilience also involves social factors, such as compassionate relationships, messages that focus on strengths and build positive emotions, and opportunities for responsible participation (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Luthar, Sawyer, & Brown, 2006; Truebridge, 2014). Resilience was theoretically linked to “psychological fitness” in the military (Seligman, 2011, pp. 127, 240). The opposite of resilience often involves giving in to negative emotions, such as depression or anger, when situations become very difficult.

In a study involving multiple learner histories (Oxford et al., 2007), resilience in language learning emerged as the main theme. In one of these learner histories, a Chinese learner of English overcame her anxiety, embarrassment, and shame about speaking English. To help her teacher, whose instruction was being evaluated by the district education authorities, the student stood up and spoke in English when other students would not. This action saved the teacher’s reputation in the eyes of the inspectors and served to make the student feel competent, confident, and resilient. The study contained numerous stories of learner resilience.

2.5. Emotional intelligence

Daniel Goleman’s (2005) view of emotional Intelligence (EQ) grew out of prior work on multiple intelligences, empathy, neuro-linguistic programming, and transactional analysis. Goleman asserted that the intelligence quotient (IQ), or traditionally described intelligence, is too narrow to explain variation in human behavior and contended that it was essential to consider emotional intelligence. He identified the domains of emotional intelligence as knowing and managing one’s own emotions, motivating oneself, recognizing and understanding other people’s emotions, and managing relationships. Emotional intelligence has been shown to reduce stress and anxiety, decrease conflict, improve relationships, and increase stability, self-motivation, social awareness, and harmony (Goleman, 2005). With increased awareness and effort, it is possible to develop new aspects of emotional intelligence in individuals and organizations (Goleman, 2005).

Emotional intelligence theory is useful for understanding differences in the attitudes and behavior of language learners and users. Dewaele, Petrides, and Furnham (2008; see also Dewaele, 2013) found that adult multilinguals with higher emotional intelligence had lower levels of foreign language anxiety in various situations and languages. They discovered that in communication situations such individuals, compared to individuals with lower emotional intelligence, perceived themselves as more capable of (a) gauging the emotions of their interlocutor, (b) controlling their own stress, and (c) feeling confident (and

hence less anxious). Other factors in lower anxiety and stronger confidence were younger age of acquisition of the foreign language, stronger socialization in that language, higher self-perceived proficiency, use of the language outside the classroom, communication with a larger network of people, and knowledge of more languages (Dewaele et al., 2008).

As we have seen, emotions and related phenomena (such as flow) play an important role in positive psychology, which therefore has implications for understanding language learners' emotions. In the next few sections, we see that emotions are very social. As is evident in their names, social psychological theory, social constructivist theories, and social constructionist theories all emphasize the social nature of emotions. Existential psychotherapy also suggests the involvement of social relationships in an individual's emotions. I will now outline briefly each theory and its relevance for this discussion.

3. Emotion theory in social psychology

Social psychologists Markus and Kitayama (1991) discussed the influence of culturally-based self-construals on emotional expression. They first described the differences in self-construals between people in collectivist cultures and those in individualist cultures. Collectivist cultures, such as Asian, Latin-American, African, and some southern European cultures, stress harmony, interdependence, cooperation, long-term relationships, and group loyalty, in contrast with individualist cultures, which view the individual as unique, independent, special, self-reliant, autonomous, and competitive, with many loosely connected, short relationships. Markus and Kitayama (1991) contrasted emotional expression in collectivist and individualist cultures. In collectivist cultures, emotional expression "may or may not be related directly to the inner feelings [of a person]" because of the desire to retain interpersonal harmony (Markus & Kitayama, p. 236). Emotional expression is often "a public instrumental action" (p. 236). Overt expression of anger and of other intense emotions might threaten the interdependent self and is typically avoided. In individualist cultures, emotional expression is expected to be a literal portrayal of an independent person's feelings. For example, overt expression of anger and grief are seen as acceptable expressions of the independent self. For further information on the social psychological view of culture, self, and emotion, see Kitayama, Markus, and Matsumoto (1995).

4. Emotion theory in social constructivism

Social constructivists argue that knowledge and artifacts are socially constructed, though the degree to which this happens is disputed even among themselves.

Some social constructivists, such as Vygotsky (1978), Palincsar (1998), Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989), and von Glasersfeld (1995), have been especially concerned with the socially constructed way in which learning takes place. Von Glasersfeld offered the most radical perspective, that is, that the process of constructing knowledge depends strictly on the individual's subjective experience, not on any objective or actual "reality."

4.1. Averill's concept of transitory social roles

Emotion theorist Averill (1980, 1982, 1985, 1986, 1996) took a position that was, perhaps confusingly, called social constructivist by Dewaele (2006) and social constructionist by Ratner (1989). Because Averill's work has been cited as social constructivist in the language learning field, I will include his work in this section on social constructivism. Averill criticized overly simplified views on emotion, such as cognitive appraisals or patterns of arousal alone. In his view, emotions are part of larger sociocultural systems that link culture and cognition and are therefore socioculturally constructed. He argued that emotions can be analyzed socially, psychologically, and biologically. Averill (1980) defined an emotion as "a transitory social role (a socially constituted syndrome) that includes an individual's appraisal of the situation and that is interpreted as a passion rather than as an action" (p. 312). These transitory social roles or syndromes are generated by social norms and expectations, which are mentally represented by schemata, or cognitive structures. Although individuals actually choose the roles, they are not aware of this; they perhaps surprisingly interpret their own emotional responses not as active decisions but as passive responses to situations (Averill, 1982; see Johnson, 2014), responses which are shaped by what the culture determines as what, where, when, and how to feel and act.

In Averill's perspective, emotional syndromes or subsystems "are composed of such elements as physiological changes, expressive reactions, instrumental responses, and subjective feelings" (Dewaele, 2006, p. 122). Averill (1982) described syndromes as sets of covarying responses and as subsystems of behavior. A syndrome also includes beliefs about the nature of the stimulus. For instance, grief is a syndrome with many possible grief responses and many potential targets, and it is based partially on beliefs about what conditions should elicit genuine grief. For Averill, emotions echo "the thought of an epoch, the secret of a civilization. It follows that to understand the meaning of an emotion is to understand the relevant aspects of the sociocultural system of which the emotion is a part (subsystem)" (p. 24, as cited in Dewaele, 2006, p. 123).

Dewaele (2006, p. 123) stated that Averill's social constructivist position was "ideally suited" for his own sociolinguistic analyses of emotions of multilingual

individuals. Dewaele (2004a) found that the perception of emotional force of swearwords was associated positively with self-rated language proficiency in multilinguals. These individuals generally preferred to swear in their first language, though they sometimes swore in their other languages, depending on the effects on the interlocutor (perlocutionary effects) and the competence of the interlocutor. Dewaele (2006) reported that multilingual study participants used their native language most frequently to communicate anger. However, he found that another language can indeed become the most frequent language of anger expression, depending on socialization in that language. Though not studying personality factors in the 2006 study, he mentioned that such factors might play a role. He had found in an earlier study that extraverts, compared with introverts, were more willing to express strong emotions in their nonnative language (Dewaele, 2004b).

4.2. Linguistic approaches to social constructivism

Cognitive linguists Wierzbicka and Harkins (2001) also took a social constructivist stance, specifically arguing that emotions are socially constructed and that language is crucial in the development and expression of emotions. Though they accepted many neuroscientific advances in studying emotions, they cautioned that brain research on emotion was too generally applied and that such research did not consider people from different cultures and with different languages (see Dewaele, 2006). “[W]hatever the conditions that produce an emotion like anger, whether or not it is visibly expressed, and whatever physiological responses accompany it, it is only through language (if at all) that we can know that what is experienced *is* anger” (Wierzbicka & Harkins, 2001, pp. 2-3). Panayiotou (2006) likewise described emotions as socially constructed through language. She argued “that emotions that seem key in some cultures may be linguistically non-existent in others” (p. 183). The operative word is “linguistically,” because Panayiotou depicted emotions as “language dependent,” since “the raw of bodily experience of an emotion must be filtered through a cultural meaning making system . . . , that is, language, before it can be defined as an emotion” (Panayiotou, 2006, p. 187). Languages “actively construct and reconstruct” emotions (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 209).

Certain emotions may have supposed equivalents in translation, but they are not adequate equivalents due to the contrasting salience in different cultures. For example, the emotion of guilt, that is, feeling criticized for what we have done or a transgression we have committed, and the emotion of shame, that is, feeling criticized for the person we have become (Wollheim, as cited in Panayiotou, 2006) have been differentially applied to various cultures, which

have subsequently been called “guilt cultures” and “shame cultures.” Panayiotou (2006, p. 188) maintained that “every language contains its own ‘naïve picture’ of the world, including its own emotionology (Stearns & Stearns, 1988)” and uses its particular emotion words. This shapes the way people in that culture experience emotions.¹ A bilingual person draws upon two “emotional universes” (Panayiotou, 2006, p. 204) that offer certain emotion terms, which are often incongruent, but these universes are intertwined by virtue of the fact that that the bilingual person experiences them.

5. Emotion theory in social constructionism

Like social constructivists, social constructionists contend that knowledge and artifacts are socially constructed. However, following Berger and Luckmann (1967) and Gergen (1999, 2007), their emphasis is often on *what* is socially constructed. This would include the texts, activities, objects, beliefs, emotions, and moral systems that are produced by the group or society and that help shape how each person behaves in the group or society. There are many different social constructionist approaches, not just one position (Harré, 2002; Stam, 2001; Weber, 2012).

Social constructionists adopt a functional framework, suggesting that the transfer of judgments, beliefs, and cultural norms serves the purpose of sustaining cultural values (Armon-Jones, 1985, 1986). Kingston (2011) argued that a contextual approach should look to the cultural continuities of basic beliefs, evaluations, and behavior patterns that help to construct emotional experience, but it should also allow for some degree of personal interpretation of cultural rules.

5.1. Strong and weak forms

Social constructionism has different forms. One strong form of social constructionism argues that emotions are of purely social origin, with no emotion existing naturally outside of our ability to understand and describe it socially through language (see Hacking, 1999 for a critique of such a form of social constructionism). Some social constructionists’ emphasis on language and emotion is reminiscent of the linguistic approach described earlier by Wierzbicka and Harkins (2001), social constructivists discussed in the prior section.

A weak form of social constructionism acknowledges an underlying naturalist impulse in certain situations (i.e., a desire to see emotions as natural rather than purely social and existing outside of language) but still highlights the fact

¹ The Greek language has no word for emotion and does not discriminate between feelings and emotion (Panayiotou, 2006).

that the power of social norms can significantly shape the experience of emotions. All social constructionism shares the assumption that culture specifies ways to appraise, feel, and act when experiencing or performing a certain emotion.

5.2. Role of social practices in constructing emotions

Social constructionists Harré (1986, 1995) and Harré and Finlay-Jones (1986) noted that cultural aspects such as language and social practices are keenly influential in the construction of emotions. People develop emotions based on direct or indirect social experiences. For example, Harré and Finlay-Jones (1986) described the emotion of *accidie*, which involved “boredom, dejection, and even disgust with fulfilling one’s religious duty” (p. 221) in the Middle Ages. At that time, *accidie* was felt to be a sin. *Accidie* no longer exists as an emotion because of the shift of cultural priorities and a different view of the moral order (Harré & Finlay-Jones, 1986).

For social constructionists the purpose of emotions is to support the norms and values of society. Emotions regulate socially undesirable behavior and promote attitudes that endorse certain political, aesthetic, social, religious, and moral practices. Envy at someone else’s success and guilt over cheating are “both emotions that have been prescribed by the individual’s society so that the individual will take the appropriate attitude towards success and cheating,” stated Johnson (2014) in explaining the social constructionist perspective of Armon-Jones (1986). If an emotion violates the norms and values of the majority of the society, Armon-Jones (1986) insisted that such an emotion is still socially learned, but from a social subset or peer group whose norms and values the individual identifies with, rather than from the society at large.

6. Emotion theory in existential psychotherapy

The goal of existential psychotherapy is to help people “gain insight into the unavoidable paradoxes that life presents and to gain strength from that knowledge,” rather than to provide “quick pragmatic solutions” (van Deurzen, 2012, p. xiii). Existential psychotherapy puts responsibility on the individual to be authentic and purposeful in life, and it strongly emphasizes the importance of social relationships. Emmy van Deurzen, a major authority in the field of existential psychotherapy, proposed an explanation of a large set of emotions, many of which are related to social interactions. From an existential viewpoint, we might consider that a person’s emotions are affected by, and in turn affect, social interactions, as illustrated in Figure 1.

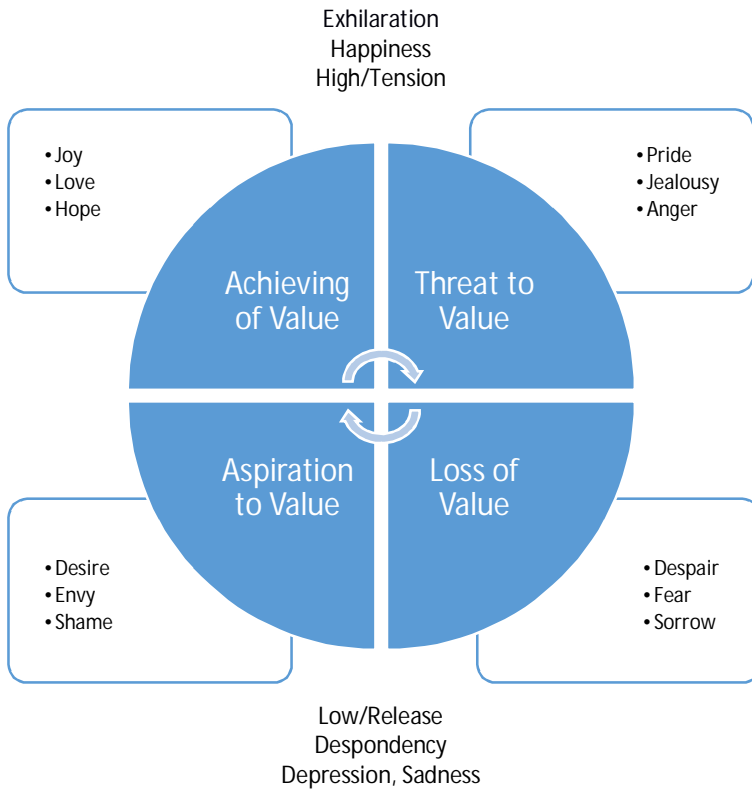


Figure 1 The compass of emotion; adapted from Figures 5.1 through 5.7 in van Deurzen (2012, pp. 151-155)

In Figure 1, exhilaration and happiness are at the high-tension apex of the “compass” or circle of emotion, while despondency, depression, and sadness are at the low-tension, release-based nadir. The emotions located in between occur in relation to our wanting something important (our value). In the upper right quadrant are pride, jealousy, and anger, which reflect perceived threats to value. These threats can come from other people or situations. Pride occurs when we still feel control of what we value but are perhaps too eager to show it off, suspecting that it might be under threat. Jealousy arises when what we value is being threatened and we feel that it might be taken away. Anger emerges when what we value is deeply threatened and we are making a last-ditch effort to get it back or to keep on grasping it.

Despair, fear, and sorrow are emotions in the lower right quadrant, and they signify the loss of value. Despair occurs when we recognize we might have to give up what we value. Fear is an apprehension that the threat might steal what we value, possibly requiring us to let go. Sorrow arises when we realize

that the threat has actually taken what we value, and we have no choice but to let go. At the bottom of the circle we experience general sadness and depression, a sense of being without energy.

The bottom left quadrant contains shame, envy, and desire, which together signify aspiring to what we value when we do not have it. Shame emerges because we feel we are unable to accomplish anything of value. Envy happens when we see what we value being gained by others; we feel we cannot be the same as they are, so we covet what they have. Desire occurs when we start reaching out once more toward what we value.

The upper left quadrant involves hope, love, and joy, which together signify the gaining of value once more. (However, in language learning, attaining what the learner values, a personally acceptable degree of proficiency and self-confidence, might occur for the very first time, rather than "once more.") Hope springs forth when we have an inkling that we can actually gain what we value once again. Via love, we participate in committing to what we value and in working toward attaining it. Joy arises when we feel we are finally integrating with what we value. At the top of the circle we experience genuine exhilaration and happiness, reflecting a positive, high tension.

All of the emotions described by van Deurzen can apply to language learners, although the salience and frequency of the emotions will vary across learners and across time. For instance, learners might feel shame if perceiving themselves unable to accomplish anything valuable in learning. They might experience envy if someone else can communicate in the target language more effectively than they. They might experience hope and exhilaration if they believe they might someday be able to use the language effectively. They might experience joy if they attain what they value, which might be any or all of the following: a desired level of proficiency, self-efficacy and confidence to go with it, an ability to communicate easily in the target language and get to know aspects of the target culture intimately, an ability to forge friendships with people from the target culture, and so on.

Anxiety is not specifically shown in Figure 1. van Deurzen (2012) indicated that anxiety is "a more general and basic experience" (p. 153). As noted earlier, van Deurzen described anxiety as being negatively expressed in anguish and positively expressed in excitement. She also stated: "the emotional cycle swings downwards from possession of something that is deeply valued, and considered essential, to its loss and eventual absence. The emotional cycle swings upwards from the sense of emptiness of existence through a lack of what is valued to an aspiration to obtain what is desired and to fulfillment in its ultimate possession" (van Deurzen, 2012, p. 153).

Figure 1 and its explanation imply that language learners who experience negative emotions, such as despair, fear, sorrow, shame, and envy, can hope to experience positive emotions, which are part of the same cycle. There is a “potential for transformation of destructive emotional experience to constructive emotional experience” (van Deurzen, p. 153). Van Deurzen cautioned that loss and gain are not the same as failure and success and that letting go is as important as building up. She disparaged positive psychology’s tools, which she considered to be overly simplistic techniques and one-sided solutions. Nevertheless, I contend that some positive psychology strategies, including REBT and aspects of resilience and emotional intelligence, might help struggling language learners transform negative emotions to positive ones.

7. Implications for language learners

This paper has presented a number of theories of emotion drawn from positive psychology, social psychology, social constructivism, social constructionism, and existential psychotherapy. The discussion so far leads to the following implications:

1. Managing emotions is a critical part of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2005). Positive psychology offers readily teachable techniques for managing emotions (Seligman, 2011), and research on language learning strategies (Oxford, 1990, 2011b) highlights affective strategies for doing the same. These are very important and readily sharable techniques and strategies. In teaching them, language teachers can help learners develop their emotion management capabilities.
2. Resilience involves both personal factors, including emotions and problem-solving skills, and social factors, such as a supportive environment (Truebridge, 2014). Teachers and learners can work together to strengthen the resilience of all involved in the language learning process.
3. Expressing emotions might be useful in some settings and not in others. Cultural individualism and collectivism influence whether it is wise to express an emotion publicly (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Teachers can help learners identify their emotions and decide whether and how to express them in different settings.
4. Cultural and linguistic differences make it difficult to understand all the subtleties of emotional communication in another culture and language (Dewaele, 2004a, 2004b, 2006), and, indeed, some emotions and emotion words do not have translations in some languages. Teachers and native informants can help learners understand the complexities of emotion across cultures.

5. Averill (1980) asserted that emotions are transitory social roles that language learners—and all other individuals—actively accept, though they do not usually understand that they are literally taking on roles. If teachers help learners understand that both positive and negative emotions are transitory social roles, learners might feel motivated to take on positive ones when possible and might feel relieved to know that any negative emotions are only transitory.
6. Moreover, if emotions are socially and linguistically created, as argued by many social constructivists and social constructionists, teachers might enable learners to develop social and linguistic techniques for dealing with negative emotions and enhancing positive emotions.
7. According to van Deurzen (2012), existential psychotherapy suggests that anxiety can have positive or negative expression. Existential psychotherapy also implies that language learners who experience negative or destructive emotions, such as despair, fear, sorrow, shame, and envy, can expect or hope to experience positive or constructive emotions at some point in the cycle. Thus, we might say that no learner is doomed.

Knowing that emotions can be managed, controlled, shaped, and transformed makes the learner less of a purely passive recipient and more of an agent in the emotion game. Recent research (e.g., Kao & Oxford, 2014; Ma & Oxford, 2014; Oxford & Cuéllar, 2014; Oxford et al., 2014) reveals that some successful language learners already grasp this important truth.

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