What we can learn about strategies, language learning, and life from two extreme cases: The role of well-being theory

Rebecca L. Oxford

Oxford Associates, Huntsville, AL, USA
rebeccaoxford@gmail.com

Abstract

This article presents two foreign or second language (L2) learner histories representing the extreme ends of the spectrum of learner well-being. One story reflects the very positive learning experiences of a highly strategic learner, while the other story focuses on a less strategic learner's negative, long-lasting responses to a single traumatic episode. The theoretical framework comes from the concept of well-being in positive psychology (with significant adaptations). In addition to contrasting the two cases through the grounded theory approach, the study suggests that the adapted well-being framework is useful for understanding L2 learning experiences, even when the experiences are negative.

Keywords: well-being theory, positive psychology, language learning experiences, positive and negative emotions, learner histories

1. Introduction

Second or foreign language (L2) learners sometimes react in extremely different ways as they acquire a new language. This article presents two cases, one very positive (Mark) and the other very negative (Wanda), represented in personal

histories written by the learners themselves. Both were native Chinese speakers learning English, and yet they took two distinctly different pathways to learning their new language. The goal of this investigation is to examine these two extreme cases of L2 learning and to assess whether an adapted theoretical framework of well-being, drawn from positive psychology, is relevant to these cases. The assumption, which I consider logically justified, is that if the adapted well-being framework is relevant to these two very different cases, it will be relevant to other cases that are not as extreme. This article is organized as follows: the theoretical framework and literature review, the methodology, the results, and the discussion and conclusion.

2. Theoretical framework and literature review

The goal of well-being theory is to "increase flourishing by increasing positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishment" (Seligman, 2011, p. 12). The theory uses the acronym PERMA to reflect five elements: Positive emotion (P), Engagement (E), Relationships (R), Meaning (M), and Accomplishment (A). Underpinning the five elements are 24 character strengths (VIA Institute of Character, 2014). These strengths include creativity, curiosity, judgment or critical thinking, love of learning, perspective or wisdom, bravery or valor, perseverance, honesty or authenticity, zest or vitality, love, kindness, social intelligence (emotional and personal intelligence), teamwork, fairness, leadership, forgiveness, humility, prudence, self-regulation, appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality.

The precise relationship of the character strengths to PERMA's dimensions is not spelled out by Seligman (2011). However, in my view these strengths can be mapped onto PERMA in logical ways. For example, love, hope, and gratitude are clearly positive emotions; curiosity, perseverance, and zest are associated with engagement; honesty, kindness, social intelligence, teamwork, fairness, leadership, and (interpersonal) forgiveness are linked with relationships; perspective, appreciation of beauty and excellence, and spirituality are yoked to meaning; and creativity, judgment, bravery, love of learning, self-regulation, prudence, humor, humility, and once again perseverance and zest are tied to accomplishment. We might even say that *all* of the virtues contribute to accomplishment to varying degrees. My suggested mapping of the character strengths against the PERMA components deserves further study. The VIA Institute of Character (2014) has already showed how the strengths relate to six virtues: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence.

Well-being theory holds that each element must fit three criteria: (a) "It contributes to well-being." (b) "Many people pursue it for its own sake . . ." (c)

"It is defined and measured independently of the other elements (exclusivity)" (Seligman, 2011, p. 16). I question whether all five PERMA elements are truly independently definable and measurable; for instance, I repeatedly find that engagement and meaning are virtually inextricable, and I see that other dimensions, such as relationships, emotions, and accomplishment, are mutually influential. I also do not believe that PERMA pays enough attention to the negative emotions that occur in normal learning, as will be explained. See my comments on positive and negative emotions in the first bullet point below.

For these reasons, I decided to modify the PERMA framework somewhat. The modified framework, which reflects a complex dynamic system (Dörnyei, 2009; Mercer, 2011), is shown below. I discuss my reasons for altering Seligman's (2011) theory.

- *Positive and negative emotions* are both present in learning. Seligman's (2011) well-being theory focuses only on positive emotions, the P in PERMA. Seligman endorsed Frederickson's (2001, 2003, 2004) "broaden-and-build" hypothesis, which states that positive emotions, such as joy, interest, love, contentment, and pride, broaden the individual's options and build greater skills and competence, while negative emotions narrow the person's possibilities and often focus on survival.

  However, emotional realities in L2 learning are more complex than Frederickson's broadening and narrowing metaphor might lead us to think. Although negative emotions, such as anxiety, are particularly prevalent among less successful learners (Horwitz, 2001, 2007; Horwitz & Young, 1991), even effective learners occasionally experience negative emotions during their learning. Individuals do not always experience an ecstatic "high" while involved with learning the L2. Their feelings of happiness, contentment, and gratitude often come after they have attained some desirable goal, not necessarily during the process. Before accomplishing a given aim, individuals sometimes slog through particular activities and experience an element of boredom. At other times, some individuals experience anxiety or feel sadness or even self-retribution after failure. The master cognitive psychologist, Jean Piaget, explained that in learning, "[s]tates of pleasure, disappointment, eagerness, as well as feelings of fatigue, effort, boredom, etc., come into play. . . . [F]eelings of success or failure may occur . . ." (Piaget, 1981, p. 3). All of these are normal emotions and can be expected.

  Occasionally a negative emotion will serve as a helpful wake-up call to change something, particularly in resilient learners (Oxford, Meng, Zhou, Sung, & Jain, 2007; see also Benard, 1991; Luthar, Sawyer, & Brown, 2006; Truebridge, 2014 for resilience in general). In addition,

anxiety can sometimes have positive uses when it stimulates learners (Marcos-Llinas & Juan Garau, 2009); anticipatory tension can keep individuals on their toes.

Unlike positive psychology, which centers on positive emotions, L2 research has a long tradition of focusing on negative emotions at the expense of positive emotions. It pays to look at both positive and negative emotions. As Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) stated, "examining both positive and negative emotions in the same study is an advisable practice" (p. 242). Dewaele and MacIntyre did just that. They examined foreign language anxiety and foreign language enjoyment in a very large sample of individuals and found that (a) participants reported significantly more enjoyment than anxiety in their language classes and (b) there was a significant negative, moderate (-.36) correlation between foreign language anxiety and foreign language enjoyment.

- Instead of separating *engagement* and *meaning,* as in Seligman's (2011) standard theory of well-being, I put the two together as *meaningful engagement.* My reasoning is that people become engaged in that which they consider meaningful.

  o *Engagement* embraces intrinsic motivation, flow, self-determination, and investment. The first three are part of the standard theory of well-being, and I have added the fourth. Intrinsic motivation is the desire to do something for its own sake because it is interesting, novel, and challenging (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Two manifestations of intrinsic motivation are (a) flow, or the state of being stretched to one's limits while experiencing complete engagement in an activity that balances challenge with skills (Csíkszentmihályi, 1998, 2008, 2013) and (b) self-determination, in which inner influences outweigh external ones (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Investment, not discussed in the standard well-being theory, is the socially constructed relationship of the learner to the target language (Norton, 2010); when learners invest in a language, they understand that doing so will offer cultural capital (Ushioda, 2008). I concur with Ushioda (2008), but I add that social capital, in the form of power, interpersonal acceptance, and control, can also be gained when learners invest in a language, depending on the circumstances.

    Whether individuals decide to invest in learning the target language depends on sociocultural power issues in the environment (Norton, 2010). If individuals already feel oppressed or left out by the social system, they might have one of two reactions, in my view: to

try to be accepted by working harder in learning the language or instead to reject the system, avoid participating when possible, and refuse to try hard to learn the language (Norton, 2010). Though non-participation has been studied in the L2 field (Norton, 2001), I do not think the other option, working ever harder at L2 learning to gain social acceptance, has been sufficiently explored.

o Seligman (2011) stated that *meaning* is gained through affiliating with something larger than oneself. I add that meaning can also be gained through solitary activities, such as meditation (Zajonc, 2009), reading, or looking at artwork. At its greatest point, I contend that meaning results in peak experiences (Maslow, 1970, 1971) and inspired consciousness (Silo, 2006).

- The term *relationships* refers to interpersonal relationships. Healthy interpersonal relationships are part of well-being, according to the basic theory (Seligman, 2011). The closest Seligman (2011) came to highlighting the sociocultural context of relationships was to mention that the U.S. military mounted a campaign to promote resiliency, which is associated with well-being and relationships. Thus, under some circumstances, "institutions . . . enable people to flourish" (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014, p. 154).

Compared with the basic theory of well-being (Seligman, 2011), my adapted theory more strongly emphasizes the importance of the sociocultural environments in which interpersonal relationships occur (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Ushioda, 2009). The adapted theory adds that identity, defined as the self-definition of one's own character, abilities, and attitudes, is born in relation to people and things outside oneself within the sociocultural context (Burke, 1991; Pavlenko, 2006; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Ushioda, 2009).

- *Accomplishment* can refer to achievements of any kind (Seligman, 2011). As I apply it in the L2 setting, it includes (a) the development of general proficiency in the L2, (b) achievement in a particular curriculum or course, (c) effective use of the language, (d) self-regulated behavior, or (e) any other attainment related to L2 learning. These accomplishments are aided by the use of L2 learning strategies (Oxford, 2011b). Learning strategies are the behaviors or steps learners use to make language learning more self-regulated and effective. Examples of categories of learning strategies are cognitive (e.g., outlining, highlighting, and reasoning), affective (e.g., relaxing, using humor, and maintaining motivation), sociocultural-interactive (e.g., asking for help, learning about the culture, staying in a conversation despite difficulties), and metacognitive (e.g., planning, organizing, evaluating, and monitoring).

Certain aspects of these positive psychology dimensions, such as resilience, relationships, and learning strategies, were found in my prior work with L2 learner histories, for example, Oxford (1996, 2011a, 2013), Oxford, Massey, and Anand (2005), and Oxford, Meng, Zhou, Sung, and Jain (2007). I have only recently begun using positive psychology overtly as a theoretical framework (see, e.g., Oxford & Cuéllar, 2014), and I have done so by adapting the standard theory of well-being.

The aim of the present study, as suggested earlier, is to look at two extreme cases of language learning and determine whether the adapted positive psychology framework is relevant. As assumed, if it is relevant to these extreme cases, then it will have relevance to many other cases that are not as extreme. I now turn to the methodology of the current study.

3. Methodology

For the purpose of the study, I decided to look at two L2 learner histories, those of Mark and Wanda. I chose them because they seemed to represent opposite poles in terms of L2 learning experiences and personality.

3.1. Participants and setting

Mark and Wanda (both names are pseudonyms) were graduate students in the same department in a large university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Mark was in a doctoral program in second language education, while Wanda was enrolled in a master's program in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Mark was born and raised in the People's Republic of China and immigrated to the United States as an adult. Wanda was born in Hong Kong and immigrated to the United States at the age of ten.

3.2. Data gathering

Mark and Wanda, along with 12 other graduate students (master's and doctoral) in their department at the time, were invited to write their L2 learner histories at home. This was an optional activity, not intended for a grade or mark. The graduate students voluntarily chose to participate in order to gain deeper understanding of their learning process. They received the following guidelines:

- Participants could write as much or as little as they wished, as long as they portrayed the aspects of L2 learning that were most important to them. (Most participants chose to write between four and ten double-spaced pages.)

- Participants could write about anything they desired, such as actions, events, positive and/or negative emotions, struggles, and achievements.
- Participants could write about institutions that fostered or hindered their L2 learning, as well as teachers, family members, or others who influenced them.
- Participants could write about learning styles and strategies. In their graduate classes they had already learned about learning styles, for example, visual, auditory, and kinesthetic; extraverted and introverted; closure-oriented and open; and learning strategies, for example, cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social (Oxford, 2001).
- Participants could pinpoint any questions they had about their own L2 learning and any lessons or answers they personally found to those questions.

Mark and Wanda, as well as most other participants, gave permission for their stories to be shared. Because the stories of Mark and Wanda represented the far ends of the L2 learning continuum in terms of emotions, strategies, and self-perceptions of identity, I highlighted those stories in this article.

3.3. Data analysis procedures

The first two stages and the fourth stage of data analysis used a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), in which the explanatory theories arose from the data rather than being pre-planned. A grounded theory approach means that theories or themes should be developed in intimate relation to the data, with researchers being aware of themselves as instruments for interpretation. At the open coding stage, the researcher identifies as many detailed elements as possible. The next stage, axial coding, makes connections between thematic categories and allows condensation into broader thematic categories.

At the third stage, I compared the themes that arose from the data with the dimensions of the adapted theory of well-being—positive and negative emotions, meaningful engagement, relationships, and accomplishment—and found a close fit. This was an added stage which is not ordinarily part of the grounded theory approach. The final stage, selective coding, identifies one theme as the most important and encompassing (Corbin & Strauss, 2007).

Threats to reliability could be diminished through using more than one coder. Since I was the only coder available, I made a point of coding the data several times (over a period of years, in fact) to ensure reliability.

The issue of validity is even more crucial. The constant comparison technique is the most commonly used means of ensuring validity throughout the grounded-theory coding process. The themes are continually compared with

the data to make sure that the best fit is accomplished. If a piece of data, for example, a learner's description of an event or an emotion, does not fit the theme, then the theme has to be adjusted. If a theme is too large or two small, it needs to be reshaped.

4. Results

At the open coding stage, I identified detailed but significant elements, such as Mark's gratitude toward his brothers, his letters to grammar experts, Wanda's anger at her teacher, and her feelings about children. I roughly categorized them into preliminary themes (e.g., family, academic, and other influences and the learner's outreach to others). At the axial coding stage, I found connections between thematic categories and condensed those categories into broader categories. For example, I grouped certain themes into emotional responses, motivation/meaning/commitment, relationships, and achievement/strategies. Results of third stage of analysis, which compared themes from the data with the dimensions of the adapted theory of well-being, are presented next. Again, this third stage is not typical in the grounded theory approach, but it is crucial for the research at hand. The findings of the fourth stage, selective coding, are presented immediately before the end of the results section.

4.1. Mark's learner history in the third stage of analysis

I will provide a synopsis of the story and then analyze it according to the categories in the adapted well-being framework.

4.1.1. Synopsis of Mark's story

Mark came from an underdeveloped province in China. His first exposure to English was with a middle-school English teacher who had little knowledge of English. Later Mark had a very good teacher, but this situation was short lived, and he was left without a teacher. He decided to study English on his own and devised strategies to do so. Mark asked one of his brothers for help, and the brother bought him a precious tape recorder so he could study English. Another brother urged him to keep studying and to talk to English-speaking tourists. In high school and at university Mark strategically became close to his teachers and was treated well because of his English talents. When a delegation from Thailand invited him to teach English and Chinese at a Thai university, Mark accepted, and later he went to the United States for his PhD in teaching English.

4.1.2. Positive and negative emotions

Mark noted sadly that his first English teacher in middle school "*had studied English for only one or two years . . .* [and] *taught incorrect pronunciations of most English words. . . . You can imagine what that kind of English sounded like!*" When some of his classmates transferred to better schools in another province, Mark was envious and upset. "*I started to complain how bad my school was.*" His complaints were useful, because his parents helped him to transfer to a better school in a different district. He was very happy, stating, "*that was the first time in my life that I had met an English teacher who indeed possessed the ability to teach correct English pronunciation. . . . I realized how wonderful this new teacher's English pronunciation was.*" He became sad when, after that year, "*the teacher was not able to teach me again.*" He felt bereft; "*I had only my English textbook No. 4 and an English dictionary.*"

His emotions became passionate at this point. Mark loved English and desperately needed help.

> *I talked to my brother, who left school when he was only 15 in order to find a job to feed himself. I explained to him how much I loved learning English. I told him how desperate I felt about the possibility that I might not be able to continue my English education unless I could get a tape recorder and some tapes to go with the textbook. Soon my brother bought me a tape recorder and some tapes from the Institute at a price for which he needed to save for years.*

As a result, Mark felt very encouraged. He also made every effort to speak with English speaking tourists visiting the province (see Section 4.1.4), and this made him feel pleased.

He was happy in high school and university and while teaching and studying in Thailand (see Section 4.1.4). His advisor in Thailand recognized his happiness but challenged him to achieve still more by going to the United States. The advisor said, "*you feel happy in Thailand, but you'll feel proud in the States!*" After arriving in the United States, becoming still more proficient, and starting to earn another degree, Mark emphasized his feelings about English: "*I love it.*"

He showed significant resilience throughout the story, transforming desperation (due to lack of a teacher and of resources) into hope and success. His strategic problem-solving skills and dedication were linked with positive emotions to propel him onward. The results of his positive emotions matched the broaden-and-build description proposed by Frederickson (2001, 2003, 2004).

4.1.3. Meaningful engagement

Mark's intrinsic motivation was already present for learning English, but his brothers stirred his extrinsic motivation as well:

> I was constantly and strongly encouraged by my brother to study English. He always reminded me that if I did not earn good scores in school, I would end up like him. Another brother of mine once pointed out a group of three people, two foreigners and one Chinese interpreter, walking out of a car and said, "You would have such a life if your English is good enough." This image was engraved on my mind from that moment in my life. . . . My attitudes were very positive.

Mark threw himself into learning English, which was the most meaningful thing in his life.

> I encountered countless difficulties in studying English by myself. However, whenever I had difficulties, my brother would tell stories of those who didn't have enough education. At that time, those stories would not be difficult to find. My strong interest in English motivated me, too. I was like a sponge whenever I got a chance to learn English from others.

He continued to learn like a sponge in high school and university. His appraisal of the importance of education and of English never wavered. He wrote the following in his learner history: "*Confucius once said, 'Everything is inferior to Education.' For me, English was the most important thing to learn: I love it. It became the most reliable ticket I could have to a better future.*"

Mark appeared to have a number of peak experiences, such as talking to tourists, working as an interpreter in China and the United States, and receiving answers to the letters he sent to grammar experts. All of these were linked with relationships, discussed next.

4.1.4. Relationships

Mark's learning trajectory was sparked by relationships in sociocultural contexts. He started with a poor English teacher but, after shifting to another district, he had an English teacher who was skilled in pronunciation. Mark received help and motivation for English learning from brothers, tourists, teachers, grammar experts, professors, employers, an advisor, and his own wife. He inspired others to help him. His identity or self-definition as a high-achieving English learner was strongly influenced by relationships with others. He was highly extraverted, gaining energy from people and things around him.

His relationships with his brothers have already been mentioned. As a teenager he spent time talking with foreign tourists, and this brought him closer to realizing his dreams of learning English. This was one of his most effective learning strategies.

> *Since 1984, more and more foreign tourists came to visit my hometown, which is located in the biggest rainforest in China. My home was only half an hour's bike ride from one of the tourist destinations. Every weekend I waited there and talked with many people from different countries and got chances to know a different outside world. I believed that if I worked hard enough, I could realize my dreams.*

Mark constantly asked English-related questions of other people. Most of the questions were about English grammar. "*In China, I first asked my English teacher in middle school, then high school. When they could not answer my questions, I sent letters 600 to 2,000 miles away to ask questions.*" Asking questions was a significant learning strategy for Mark.

Building relationships with teachers in high school and university was a great social learning strategy for Mark. It led to many new opportunities.

> *In high school, English teachers treated me very friendly. They asked me to lead student morning English teaching every day in my class. In return, they let me read my own books in English class and let me use their office at that time. . . . Some of my university English teachers treated me the same way as my high school teachers. I could go audit classes in another university, and I got more and more chances to talk with native speakers who came to visit us in my university.*

Another social learning strategy was relying on others when he needed to chat personally about his English-learning process.

> *I talked to someone I trusted about my attitudes and feelings concerning the language learning process. The person I trusted about this topic was always the one who would not retell what I said to others. In high school, it was my Chinese teacher. In my university in China, it was my wife. She was my classmate then.*

His Thai academic advisor played a pivotal role in Mark's life by advising him to go to the United States for a doctorate (see Section 4.1.5).

4.1.5. Accomplishment

Mark was highly achievement-oriented. He had high aims, and he developed learning strategies to meet those aims. Many of his learning strategies have already been mentioned. Here is another example from his high school days:

I set a goal for myself. I should recite English textbooks. I then spent a lot of time listening to tapes during my dinnertime and when I went to bed or anytime I felt free. At the end of my high school, I took the National College Entrance Examination. I didn't score high enough on the written part; however, I scored 96.5% on the oral test.

He performed very well in university English courses. "*Then, after university graduation, I worked as an English interpreter for five years in the Foreign Affairs Office of my university. During those years, I translated for a lot of people who came from different countries.*" He used his translation work as a learning strategy to keep improving his English.

While working as an interpreter, Mark met a group of Thai visitors and was invited to teach in Thailand. This led to another series of accomplishments.

One of the delegations came from Thailand and they would like to invite me to be an English and Chinese teacher at their university. My responsibility was to teach Oral English Practice, sometimes English Conversation, English for Journalism, Essay and Report Writing, and Grammar and Writing. Since I only taught 6 hours per week in Thailand, three days a week, I used my spare time to get my M.Ed. in English. For me, Thailand was the beginning of my different strategies toward formal instruction in classrooms. Almost every professor of mine was a Ph.D. holder. . . . I focused my close attention on their instructions and did whatever they required me to do.

Notice that he talked about using different strategies during formal instruction. One of these strategies was to pay close attention. "*I got a straight A average for my master degree and was encouraged by many professors to pursue my doctoral degree in the States.*"

Additional strategic achievement was yet to come. Mark arrived in the States to earn his PhD in Second Language Education.

In my first year I got the chance to translate in the State Department and the Supreme Court of the U.S. I worked as an English interpreter for the Institute of Global Chinese Affairs at that time. . . . Later I taught an advanced course in English grammar to native English speakers at the master's level [in my U.S. university].

Again, he strategically used his work to gain more opportunities to improve his English, and he was well recognized for his efforts.

4.1.6. Further comments

Mark was at an extremely high level of strategic functioning throughout his L2 learning career, and he continues to learn. After he wrote his story, Mark earned

his PhD and received a position as an assistant professor and head of a university TESOL program at a new institution. He is now a tenured professor there.

4.2. Wanda's learner history in the third stage of analysis

Just as with Mark's story, I will offer a synopsis of Wanda's story and then analyze her story according to the adapted framework for well-being.

4.2.1. Synopsis of Wanda's story

Wanda was ten years old when she emigrated with her family from Hong Kong to the United States. She encountered a domineering, autocratic, and terrifying teacher in a church Sunday school. The teacher's insistence on oral reading for all children was insensitive at best. Wanda thought the teacher was intentionally cruel. Her experience with this teacher over several weeks made a permanent mark on the young girl's life and harmed her self-confidence for many years. While most students might have been able to shrug off the feelings of persecution, Wanda still carried them in her heart.

4.2.2. Positive and negative emotions

Wanda mentioned only negative emotions when describing her first experiences in the United States. Her feelings seemed to support the narrowing effects of negative emotions described by Frederickson (2001, 2003, 2004) with one exception: Those emotions helped her to develop an instructional philosophy (see Section 4.2.3).

She began her learner history this way:

Among many things in life, reading English aloud has been the most painful experience for me. This has been a huge baggage that I have been carrying for a long time, thinking that I am dumb because I wasn't able to read competently and have a good grasp on the English language.

Embarrassment, fear, and anger were among Wanda's earliest emotions in the United States. She felt like a victim.

I struggled a lot with the language when I came. It did not help that a certain lady at church, knowing full well that I was only in the country for one week, made me read aloud in Sunday school. I remembered crying as I was reading because I was so embarrassed. She did not intervene even as I was half-reading, half-sobbing. She also did not come over to speak to me afterwards or even acknowledge the fact that I was

hurt because she made me read. The other kids knew I was clearly upset but didn't know what to do. Next week, the same thing happened. And the next. I thought a lot about this, and I thought of an analogy that fits this experience. What she did was like throwing someone into water where their feet couldn't even touch the ground/floor, expecting them to figure out how to swim. Oh, better yet, the victim cried for help, but she just looked at the victim and did nothing.

Wanda's social and emotional status was undermined. She said:

Because she forced a skill onto me without any regard to my feelings, I emotionally crumbled. I became even shyer. I developed an immense fear of reading during that time and for the next 5 years. Whenever people asked me to read, I started sweating and was always on the verge of crying. Even in 10th grade in high school, I asked for special help with reading from a specialist who informed me that somehow along the way, I have seemed to have lost my confidence – but that I was a fluent reader to her.

Those weeks with this woman as the Sunday school teacher became the most trau-matic experience of my life. I don't know if I could ever forgive her. It was not the fact that she made me read that made me angry. It was the fact that she ignored my expression of feelings that I resent her for. Time after time. . . .

Even as an adult, Wanda was not able to let go of the emotions from her interaction with the Sunday school teacher.

To this day, I still have not been able to understand her motive for doing what she did to me. . . . No matter how hard I try, I cannot fathom a reason for why she did what she did to me and why she totally disregarded my feelings.

4.2.3. Meaningful engagement

Because Wanda felt traumatized when the Sunday school teacher forced her to read aloud, she gained compassion for young children, decided to become a teacher, and developed an instructional philosophy. The participant guidelines did not mention writing one's instructional philosophy, so this was strictly Wanda's own addition.

Excerpts from her instructional philosophy are as follows.

If there is one thing that I am to learn from this experience – it is to attend to emo-tional needs and learning style of the child. What happened to me should not have happened to anyone. Children are very fragile. Especially between the ages 9-16 when they are developing a concept of themselves. . . . When a child is down, my first priority is to somehow acknowledge their sadness and show concern. Then, only if they are ready, I would remind them gently that class work is very important too. . . . If

a child shows constant sadness or anger or both on a regular basis, I would need to inquire by calling the parents and even contacting the school counselor/psychologist for psychiatric evaluation. . . . In scanning for warning signs, I almost have to be like an owl, ever so watchful and alert. Children come to school with a lot of baggage besides their backpacks. It is my utmost priority to help them not let their baggage get in the way of their learning. I am also an avid proponent of the movement to incorporate various cultures and learning styles into my class.

4.2.4. Relationships

Wanda seems to have been an introverted learner, gaining energy from her inner world of feelings and concepts. The only relationship she described was the one with the Sunday school teacher, who created the "*most traumatic*" time in her life as a young girl. She ruminated about the teacher's motives but could find no answer. Her powerlessness in relationship to the teacher was influenced by her own inability to say "*no.*"

> *You might be wondering why I did not just say "No, I can't read" to the Sunday school teacher. Well, the answer lies in my culture. Before coming to America, I have been attending school where the teacher's authority is not to be questioned. It was deviant to disagree with the teacher and unthinkable to disobey him/her. What the Sunday school teacher did was that she disregarded my culture and circumstances entirely.*

Thus, an important teacher-student relationship had an immense influence on Wanda's identity. She defined herself in terms suggesting that she felt nearly hopeless and helpless in a major area of life.

4.2.5. Accomplishment

Remarkably, Wanda's learner history did not mention any of her accomplishments or strategies in learning English, only her fears in that process. By the time she wrote her learner history, she had managed to graduate successfully from high school and university and was a full-time graduate student, suggesting that she had real talents and accomplishments, but she did not mention them. The only light in the darkness was the goal of teaching children, something she had not yet done.

4.2.6. Further comments

Wanda was among the "walking wounded," feeling constantly traumatized by an early episode in life. A year after she wrote this learner history, she experienced

stress in her graduate program and was reconsidering whether she would become a teacher and even whether she would continue in graduate school.

4.3. Selective coding: The overarching theme

The overarching theme is as follows. For a vulnerable student, particularly one who has few stores of resiliency to draw upon, a single traumatic episode can permanently mar (though not completely block) the path to English proficiency. In contrast, a resilient learner can flourish even in the face of multiple difficulties and does not interpret those difficulties as traumas or as permanent barriers.

5. Discussion

As we have seen, for Mark, the path to English proficiency was much smoother, more strategic, more positively charged, and ultimately more profitable. He faced numerous difficulties, but he was resilient enough to move forward. For Wanda, the path to English proficiency was hindered by one traumatic episode, with few or no emotional, social, or cognitive strategies to provide assistance. She eventually attained proficiency but with great effort, after being scarred early in the process. Memories of her dreaded relationship with the Sunday school teacher never mellowed into a deeper, richer understanding. The following statement might fit Wanda: ". . . Individuals who generally find it difficult to derive anything positive from unpleasant situations adjust more poorly after traumatic events than people who are generally resilient and who typically find value in negative events" (Comer, 2014, p. 164).

5.1. Relationship of the PERMA categories to the two cases

How well did the categories in the adapted framework of well-being fit these two extreme cases? Were the categories, namely positive and negative emotions, meaningful engagement, relationships, and accomplishment, helpful in understanding the well-being of Mark and Wanda?

Quite clearly, the categories in the adapted well-being framework worked effectively for analyzing Mark's story. All the well-being elements operated synergistically to help him achieve his goals and become a flourishing, strategic, dynamic person. He showed many more positive emotions than negative ones. When he experienced negative emotions (e.g., sadness or desperation), he used them to spur himself further or to gain help. Engagement and meaning were completely interlocked in his story, and the statement from Confucius

seemed to capture this. In terms of relationships, Mark was a true extravert, gaining energy from interacting with others in his quest to learn English. His repeated accomplishments involved meeting very high goals from an early age with the help of well-crafted, task-relevant learning strategies. Based on his learner history, as well as my own observations over years, I would describe him as nearly the epitome of well-being.

At first I thought that the dimensions in the adapted framework of well-being did not work as well for analyzing Wanda's story as they did for analyzing Mark's. However, in thinking further, I realized that the framework was actually very helpful for revealing the serious gaps in Wanda's social, emotional, and cognitive well-being. Her negative emotions came through loud and clear, but she did not mention any positive emotions about her own life and learning. She described no meaningful engagement in her own educational process, though she hoped to be a good teacher for others. The only relationship she chose to describe was with the inflexible, frightening Sunday school teacher, and she felt she never got past the emotions involved in that relationship. She described no particular accomplishment in L2 learning, although she obviously developed a high enough level of English proficiency to enter graduate school, take courses, and write a learner history. She mentioned no learning strategies. Her articulately stated instructional philosophy, which was included in her learner history without any suggestion from the researcher, contained several positive elements, but those elements were oriented more toward helping prevent future trauma for children than toward providing a sparkling, motivating educational environment. In short, the adapted framework of well-being was just as useful for analyzing Wanda's story as for analyzing Mark's, but the picture that ultimately emerged for her was the opposite of well-being. She never learned how to thrive, become strategic, or be happy. Much of her life was stunted because of her responses to a traumatic episode.

5.2. Positive psychology interventions

Wanda's well-being might be aided by positive psychology interventions, such as those described by Cohn and Frederickson (2010), Peterson (2006), Seligman (2006, 2011), and Vaillant (2000). For instance, the ABCDE technique helps the individual learn to recognize that beliefs about adversity cause consequent (negative) feelings, but disputation, that is, presenting counter-evidence to negative beliefs, results in energization, or positive mood and behavior change (Seligman, 2006). The ABCDE technique could combat Wanda's pessimistic explanatory style (see Peterson, Seligman, & Vaillant, 1988).

Seligman's five-step pattern of post-traumatic growth might also help Wanda. The steps are: (a) understanding that a normal response to trauma is shattered beliefs about the self, others, and the future; (b) reducing anxiety through controlling intrusive thoughts and images; (c) doing constructive self-disclosure (telling the story of the trauma in safe ways); (d) creating a guided trauma narrative that includes paradox (trauma as a fork in the road that has both gain and loss, strength and vulnerability, gratitude and grief); and (e) articulating overarching life principles and stances that are robust to challenges (e.g., crafting a new identity as a trauma survivor or a more compassionate person). I am working on adapting positive psychology interventions specifically for the L2 field (Oxford, 2014).

5.3. Complex dynamic systems

In considering these two learner histories, it is helpful to be aware of the complexity and dynamism of the entire language learning process. In any complex dynamic system, such as language learning, "high-level mental attributes and functions are determined by a complex set of interconnected components that continuously evolve over time" (Dörnyei, 2009, pp. 195-196) in an organic, holistic, nonlinear, interactive fashion (Mercer, 2011). Language learning thus involves many interacting variables. For any of these variables, small tilts in one direction or another at various points can help to create lifelong attitudes. The poor teacher Mark had early in his learning perhaps gave him a greater appreciation when, thanks to his parents' willingness to move him to a school in a different district, he encountered a much better teacher. When that good teacher was removed from his life after a year, Mark had to use creative strategies to keep learning. He took advantage of the help and support offered by his brothers and his teachers in high school, college, and graduate school. Mark's story is filled with interactions of people, events, places, institutions, movement, and emotions.

Wanda, in contrast, had a negative experience that set her on a very different path. In her learner history, she kept me, like any other interested reader, at bay; she did not allow me to understand the full complexity of her language learning process. She focused on one trauma and the main people (herself and the Sunday school teacher), and the emotions related to that trauma. She thereby implicitly discounted any other individuals, institutions, happenings, changes, and feelings during her process of learning English. Though I know she was in the midst of a complex dynamic system (every learner is), her single-minded focus on the trauma hid most of the details about that system as a whole. The worst thing is that the monofocal view hid crucial information from Wanda herself, information about potential support and caring in her environment.

6. Conclusion

I conclude that the adapted theory of well-being in this article has proven its worth with these two learner histories and that positive psychology, particularly the concept of well-being, might be of significant value for enhancing L2 learning. The degree of well-being not only plays an immense role in the development of proficiency but also shapes lifelong attitudes. The narrative turn in L2 research is profoundly evident (Barkhuisen, 2011; Barkuisen, Bensen, & Chik, 2014; Kalaja, Menenzes, & Barcelos, 2008), and there will be increasing opportunities to consider the adapted well-being theory as we study L2 learner histories, diaries, and other narratives.

In the meantime, let us remember the learners at both ends of the spectrum: those (like Mark) who shine, thrive, and learn strategically no matter what the circumstances; and those (like Wanda) whose learning experiences are marked by trauma and seemingly untouched by strategies that would offer self-regulation or solace. Let us remember, too, the learners in between. We need to understand and have compassion for all students, and positive psychology might provide some useful tools.

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