

1. Happy Learning

What great hope connects parents, guardians, and educators? We have asked many people this question, and the answer is clear: the hope is that children and adolescents thrive, enjoy going to school, and experience success in learning; that they start out in life with confidence and a realistic sense of optimism; and that they create opportunities for themselves through their education. Developmental and educational opportunities, however, are closely linked to language competencies: language is the key to academic success. Thus, learning languages turns out to be the starting point.

Happy Learning...

- contributes to development through positive learning experiences,
- improves the chances for educational success through language skills and effective learning strategies,
- shows how children and adolescents can learn languages successfully and happily,
- makes the findings of Positive Psychology applicable to everyday life,
- provides adults as well with valuable tips for greater learning success and well-being.

Can Learning Languages Make Us Happy?

It is not always easy to believe – and it may even sound a bit trivial or like wishful thinking – but yes: learning can in fact make us happy. This is especially true of language learning.

Happiness and the experience of emotional reward are associated with a specific pathway in the brain: the mesolimbic dopaminergic system and its control center, the *nucleus accumbens*. This is where the feeling of happiness, as well as of motivation and reward, have their origin – but not strictly for the sake of happiness. The neurobiological purpose behind our brain's capacity to provide us with happiness and reward is the task of learning itself. The bodily system is designed to motivate us and prepare us to learn, and even make us eager to do so.

What does this mean for the design of the language learning process? How can we help learners to accept, feel comfortable, and grow with challenges? The answer we propose in *Happy Learning* is an affirmative, strength-orientated approach: Positive Language Learning and Teaching. In the following chapters, we will explore the various facets of this concept and its potential as an educational approach.

But first, a question: Why the focus on language learning? There are several reasons for this, one of which has already been mentioned: opportunities for educational success. We will come back to this in a moment. Another important reason leads us to the organ of learning itself, which is of course the brain. Language learning is special, because it encompasses virtually every aspect of what learning can entail. Acquiring new vocabulary, for example, builds knowledge. When we try to pronounce new words, we are practicing movement sequences. Writing involves motor processes. Moreover, our brain is constantly searching for patterns and repetitions, recognizing systems and trying to apply rules. When we hear a language, we immerse ourselves in its world of sound: language is music! Which means we are also learning musical and aesthetic aspects. The list could go on, but the most important point is clear: language learning comprises a great deal, and is especially appropriate for gaining a wide range of learning experiences and developing strategies that can be valuable for other content. Much of what we build in language learning can be adapted and transferred to other areas.

Language learning thus challenges our brain in a quite characteristic way. If we learn more than just one language, this affects how our brain organizes itself (brain architecture) and how it operates, fostering good connections, effective communication between areas that work together, and the ability to monitor and organize the complex system in which languages are located. People who have learned more than one language often do better in reaction and performance tests than monolinguals do. Because of the special use of the brain when learning and speaking foreign languages, the gray matter (sometimes referred to as the *gray cells*, meaning the neurons in the brain) becomes denser in certain areas. This has been shown to delay the onset of symptoms in dementia patients. Meanwhile, the white matter (the brain's insulating and conductive layer), remains intact for longer in old age – but only if we have previously learned at least one foreign language to a certain proficiency. Studies also show that the chances of recovery after a stroke are significantly better, especially from a cognitive point of view, if more than one language is anchored in the brain (Sambanis 2020). Learning at least one foreign language is truly a worthwhile and good investment!

In addition to foreign languages, the language of classroom instruction plays a central role. Without appropriate language skills, one's participation in learning opportunities is essentially blocked, or at the very least, severely reduced. Even other, non-linguistic content becomes language in our minds, and to convey it, teachers and learners (or parents/guardians and children) need a common language. Teaching and learning means language, and this applies to a greater or lesser extent to every school subject. This is another important reason to pay particular attention to language learning. Language and educational success are thus interlinked.

And precisely because languages play such an important role in learning overall – in development, in educational and life success, and in one's ability to participate in society and culture – it is crucial not only *that* language gets learned, but above all *how* it gets learned. The approach in this handbook, based as it is on Positive Psychology, aims at an effective and sustainable way to learn – without making it feel like an obligation or jeopardizing the natural joy in it, but instead with as much *Happy Learning* as possible.

That said, we are not about achieving happiness in the sense of some simplistic and toxic good vibes only culture (Goodman 2022). What *Happy Learning* ultimately aims at is a positive basic mood, self-responsibility, self-confidence, self-efficacy and the experience of well-being, e.g., through satisfaction with ourselves or recognition by others (Gravelmann 2022).

For the younger generation, however, it is perhaps not so easy to feel happiness in a time of fundamental social crises and states of emergency such as the coronavirus pandemic, climate change, and political conflicts, as well as rapid technological development. Both small and large crises have an impact on the socialization of young people. Hence, as the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs reported in 2018, “[o]f particular importance is [...] the strengthening of pupils in their personality and identity development” (10).

But what exactly is happiness? And what does it mean when we say we are *happy*? In English, *happiness* and *luck* are usually two separate concepts, while in German we speak of *Glück*, meaning happiness as a singular concept that combines both. As we will show, *happiness* as an emotion is at least partly self-influenced, while *happiness* in the sense of luck or good fortune is something you have or you do not have in any given situation. Everyone who has ever filled out a lottery ticket knows whether they were lucky and, if they were, whether it actually made them happy. When we speak of happiness in this book, we mean it in the more restricted English sense, without the admixture of luck. Happiness in this sense combines two fundamental abilities: we increase our subjective well-being by experiencing and expressing positive emotions and having positive experiences. Positive emotions are those that we like to feel and whose presence we welcome. Things like self-efficacy, self-acceptance, and the ability to self-assess can therefore contribute to an increase in our sense of happiness. At the same time, happiness is an important protective factor or coping mechanism: a central pillar of resilience, and not just among children and young people. This is because happiness does not mean that we never experience crises or are never stressed. Rather, happiness acts as a remedy, especially in bad times. Happy people understand that, although challenges and crises are part of our lives, there are things we can actively do to give our own happiness a leg up.

In this way, happiness is simultaneously the goal and a necessary condition for successful learning and a successful life. Groups and even entire institutions function better when people are happy (Frederickson 2009). Happy people are not only less aggressive and less anxious, but they are also more likely to have stable relationships and friendlier encounters with strangers.

But how do people experience more happiness and well-being? It has been scientifically shown that our happiness depends on five central factors, which psychologist Martin Seligman summarizes in his well-known PERMA model (Fig. 1):

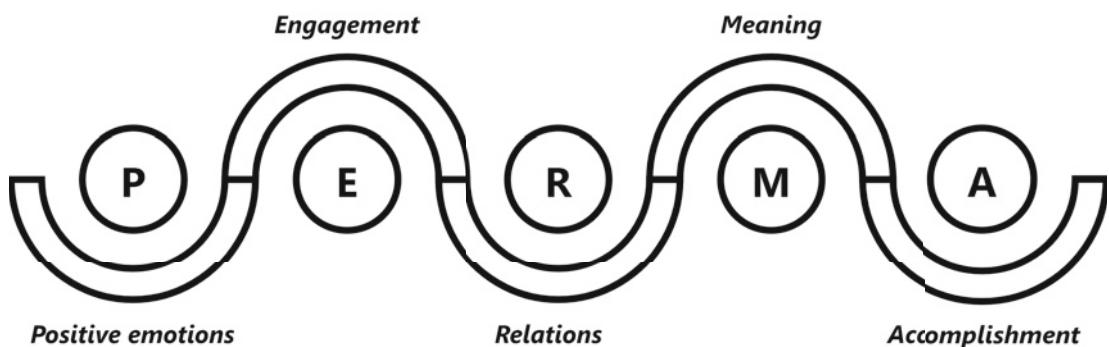


Fig. 1: The PERMA model

These components are important not only for strengthening one's mental well-being in everyday life, but also for motivating students to learn.

Getting Past Frustration

For many students, learning language(s) can be an especially big challenge. There are all sorts of stumbling blocks and hurdles that must be removed or overcome before success can happen. Often one arrives at a point of frustration, and the desire to practice starts to fade. This is particularly true whenever learners only see what they are not yet able to do – or as the case may be, when the deficiencies are what get pushed into the foreground, while the goals that have already been reached, the strengths and competencies one has already developed, drop out of sight or seem not to count. To make matters more complicated, learning a new language means more than just memorizing vocabulary and mastering grammar: it means immersing oneself in another culture and questioning one's own perspective critically. A central component of successful language learning thus takes place at the level of social relations. From the

neurobiological point of view, we are “creatures invested in social resonance and cooperation” (Bauer 2006: 35f.). The relationships between parents and children, between teachers and students, as well as between the young people themselves – all of these relationships affect the process of language learning.

What this means is that language learning is more than merely a cognitive challenge. It is also a social and above all an emotional experience. In other words, as numerous empirical studies have shown, the affective-emotional dimension plays a central role (Sambanis 2013). Moreover, the research in this area has also pointed to the special conditions under which language acquisition succeeds. From this we can derive not only the fundamental principles of successful language teaching but also specific methods and concrete activities. Building upon such work through the practical application of Positive Psychology and language didactics, this handbook opens up a new, strength-oriented perspective.

Positive Education

The concept of Positive Psychology has its origins in the work of the prominent US-American psychologist Martin Seligman, whom we mentioned above. Positive Psychology concerns itself with strengths rather than pathologies, and investigates everything that evidently strengthens a person’s well-being: “positive emotions, engagement, sense and meaning, constructive relationships, and the feeling of being effective” (Brohm & Endres 2017: 8).

Positive Education combines “education for both traditional skills and happiness” (Seligman et al. 2009: 293). It takes place not outside the classroom, separated from educational goals or unrelated to language learning, but rather in the center of it all. It is an approach that allows language learning to be connected with practices and activities focused on the learner’s strengths.

As a first theoretical basis for applying Positive Psychology to the language classroom, the foreign language learning theorist Rebecca Oxford suggests the EMPATHICS model, which takes Seligman’s PERMA model one step further, identifying central psychological strengths that help learners make progress and unfold their potential (2016). At the same time, the model shows why students with limited well-being more frequently experience frustration, fear or indifference (*ibid.*). The model encompasses the central concepts of Positive Psychology:

E motion and **e**mpathy

M eaning and **m**otivation

P erseverance, including resilience, hope and optimism

A gency and **a**utonomy

T ime

H ardiness and **h**abits of mind

I ntelligence

C haracter strengths

S elf factors (**s**elf-efficacy, **s**elf-concept, **s**elf-esteem, **s**elf-verification)

Fig. 2: Dimensions of Successful Language Learning (according to Oxford 2016)

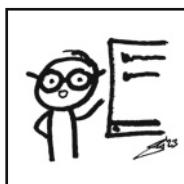
Educating and raising children are tasks that the home and the educational institutions must fulfill together. The aspect of mutual responsibility is something the German government's Report on Education, which regularly assesses the state of the education system in Germany, explicitly emphasized in 2022: "Independent of the educational institutions attended [...] it is the family that, across all age groups, has a decisive impact not only on the many educational impulses for children but also on their entire educational path" (Autor:innengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung: 86). What is true in institutional education processes is also true in families: learning is especially exciting and sustainable when it is carried forward on positive emotions. For this, the cooperation of educational institutions and families is essential.

School ought to be a place where learners feel good. Children and youth spend no small amount of their time in educational institutions. These play an important role, alongside the private and in particular the familiar environment, in the transfer of knowledge and competencies no less than in the psychological development of young people. Education and child-rearing in the spirit of Positive Psychology perceive children and adolescents no longer exclusively in their role as learners, but holistically in their multi-faceted developmental requirements.

How Can *Happy Learning* Help Me?

To make Positive Education practicable in everyday life at home and at school, *Happy Learning* presents numerous tried-and-tested activities and exercises that promote positive language learning experiences. They support mindfulness, resilience, self-efficacy, gratitude, hope, optimism, flow and the discovery of one's own strengths, while combining positive learning experiences with important language development goals.

Each chapter contains activities that teachers can use in their lessons, tips for parents/caregivers, as well as practices that students can implement themselves. In this way, the handbook recommends itself both to teachers as a resource for their own lessons and to families at home. The respective icon indicates for whom a given activity is best suited:



Teachers (in the classroom)



Parents & others (at home)



Students

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Many of the activities intended for the classroom and for home (with parents or other responsible adults) aim at shared experiences, while some also offer impulses for active movement. This reflects the recommendations of the latest neuroscientific research on happiness: connection to other human beings makes us happy, and movement is closely related in our brains with positive emotional experiences (Spitzer 2021).

The handbook places these practical impulses side-by-side with exciting glimpses into the latest science: relevant insights gleaned from neuroscience, from didactics and from Positive Psychology are presented in a way that is accessible and engaging. Most of the activities and tips can also be used by adults who themselves wish to learn languages happily and successfully.

In this spirit, we wish you *happy reading* and much joy and success in trying out the impulses we offer!

Michaela Sambanis and Christian Ludwig

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