

# ‘Biasing for the Best’: Looking at New Elements in a Model of Language Learner Well-Being

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**Abstract** This chapter builds on EMPATHICS, Rebecca Oxford’s positive psychological model of language learner well-being. Positive psychology focuses on the strengths of human existence and promotes human well-being. It looks for the best in people. In fact, it does exactly what applied linguist Merrill Swain urged language teachers and testers to do more than three decades ago: ‘Bias for the best’, i.e., allow and encourage the best in language learners. In this chapter, Oxford briefly explains why the EMPATHICS model of language learner well-being, originally containing 18 elements but in this chapter recognizing three more, has all the hallmarks of a complex system. Then the chapter moves to its main focus, where three elements of language learner well-being (identity, investment, and imagination) are discussed for the first time as major components of EMPATHICS. The *identity* discussion offers general comments about identity, poststructuralist views of identity, and the link between identity and self-esteem. The *investment* section explains that power relations, beliefs, and autonomy issues are usually at the heart of the learner’s decision about whether to invest in language learning. The *imagination* section not only cites the well-known motivational function of imagination but also highlights imagination in relation to (a) the creative imagination of language teachers and learners and (b) imagined communities. The conclusion synthesizes the main points regarding the three newly incorporated elements of language learner well-being. It also reminds readers to “bias for the best,” use the information found in this chapter to improve teaching, and continue to explore the complex system of language learner well-being.

**Keywords** Identity • Investment • Imagination • The EMPATHICS model of positive psychology in language learning

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[R]eality is its messy self.  
(Byrne & Callaghan, 2014, p. 257<sup>1</sup>).

1 Introduction

What does it take for a language learner to experience *well-being*, that is, optimal experience and functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2001)? What characteristics must the learner develop so that the highly demanding process of language learning will be pleasant and will result in proficiency? My EMPATHICS model of language learner well-being helps to answer these questions from the viewpoint of positive psychology. The model originally listed 18 elements (Oxford, 2016b, c), but three more elements are recognized in the current chapter, creating a total of 21 (see Table 1).

**Table 1** Components of the evolving EMPATHICS model of language learner well-being

E: <u>e</u> mpathy and <u>e</u> motions (2 elements)
M: <u>m</u> eaning and <u>m</u> otivation (2)
P: three selected <u>p</u> erseverance components (hope, optimism, and resilience) (3)
A: <u>a</u> gency and <u>a</u> utonomy (2)
T: <u>t</u> ime (1)
H: <u>h</u> ardiness and <u>h</u> abits of mind (2)
I: <u>i</u> ntelligences, plus three <i>additional</i> elements: <u>i</u> dentify, <u>i</u> nvestment, and <u>i</u> magination (4)
C: <u>c</u> haracter strengths (1)
S: four selected <u>s</u> elf components (self-efficacy, self-concept, self-esteem, and self-verification) (4)

The 18 initial components of EMPATHICS (see Oxford, 2016b, c) are not the focus here. Instead, this chapter dwells on identity, investment, and imagination, the three added elements (see Table 1) that are clearly relevant to language learner well-being. Still other possible elements will be explored in the future. I created the EMPATHICS model because I felt it was important in the development of an overall “positive psychology of language learning” (see MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer, 2016). Positive psychology centers on the strengths of human existence and promotes human well-being (Lopez & Gallagher, 2011). Unlike traditional psychology, positive psychology avoids labeling individuals (Oxford, 2016a) and looks for the best in people, as reflected in the title of a four-volume work, *Positive psychology: Exploring the best in people* (Lopez, 2008). Positive psychology does exactly what applied linguist Merrill Swain (1984, in Mendelsohn, 1989, p. 102) urged language teachers and testers to do more than three decades ago: ‘Bias for the best’, i.e., allow and encourage the best in language learners.

<sup>1</sup>This saying appeared in a longer quotation from Byrne and Callaghan in Dörnyei, MacIntyre, and Henry (2015, p. 3)

Language learner well-being is complex. Before discussing the three additional well-being components, let us look for a moment at complexity.

## 2 The Complexity of Language Learner Well-Being

The 21 aspects of EMPATHICS, including the three that are the crux of this chapter and the other 18 explained elsewhere (in Oxford, 2016b, c), all interact with each other in incredibly complex, dynamic, and, yes, 'messy' ways, as witnessed by the epigraph. As a result of criteria mentioned in the next paragraph, we can describe language learner well-being as a *complex system*. Phillip Hiver, an expert in complex systems, stated, "What you have explained as language learner well-being satisfies all of the conditions for a complex system (...). A complex system really is the best way of conceptualizing language learner well-being" (personal communication, Nov. 17, 2015).

Hiver synthesized the crucial criteria for complex systems. Complex systems: (a) are composed of multiple interacting parts; (b) exhibit dynamic change that is self-organized (occurring over time through spontaneous interaction of the parts, rather than happening linearly or directionally); (c) sometimes settle into patterns of stability that are "emergent," i.e., they are non-additive in the sense that they cannot be reduced to the sum of parts or the sum of interactions; (d) are frequently situated within a larger context or web of systems; and (e) are open and adaptive to this larger context or web. In addition, to be researchable, complex systems must contain an agent (or agents), such as the language learner, and should be phenomenologically real, e.g., not something like 'interest' or 'goals' (P. Hiver, personal communication, Nov. 17, 2015). We will not go further into complex systems or complexity theory in this chapter. Interested readers can refer to Davis and Sumara (2015), de Bot and Larsen-Freeman (2011), De Villiers-Botha and Cilliers (2010), Dörnyei (2009a), Dörnyei et al. (2015), Ellis (2007), Hiver (2015), Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008), Mercer (2011, 2013, 2014), and Sitte (2006).<sup>2</sup> We now turn to our attention to the three added elements in the EMPATHICS model of language learner well-being.

## 3 The Added Elements: Identity, Investment, and Imagination

This section deals with identity, investment, and imagination. These three constructs, now part of the EMPATHICS model of language learner well-being, interact with each other in complex ways.

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<sup>2</sup>Ellis (2007) pointed out that language itself has been called a complex dynamic system.

### 3.1 Identity

This discussion deals with general comments about identity, poststructuralist views of identity, and a model uniting identity and self-esteem.

#### 3.1.1 General Comments About Identity

*The handbook of identity: Theory and research* (Schwartz, Lyuckx, & Vignoles, 2011) asks whether people have a single identity or multiple identities, whether identity always in flux or generally stable, whether identity is individually or collectively oriented, and whether it is personally or socially constructed. In response, the handbook argues that the picture of identity is more complex than such dichotomies can reveal. Many theories of identity are included in this handbook. For example, Waterman (2011) described eudaimonic identity theory, in which identity is seen as self-discovery.<sup>3</sup> Heppner and Kernis (2011) discussed self-esteem in relation to identity (see also Reasoner's model in Sect. 3.1.3). Gregg, Sedikides, and Gebauer (2011) explored self-enhancement and self-assessment as dynamic aspects of identity.

In a four-volume compilation on positive psychology, Lopez (2008) included a vast range of identity-related theories such as these: First, a given individual possesses many social identities (see Sect. 3.1.2). Second, social identity combined with a sense of belonging can lead to social integration and generativity. Third, positive emotions broaden identities. Fourth, ego identities relate to developmental stages. Fifth, life narratives reflect identities, goals, beliefs, and behaviors.

#### 3.1.2 Critical Poststructuralist Views of Identity

Poet Walt Whitman wrote, "I am large, I contain multitudes," referring to his many different social identities (1855, sec. 51). Not too differently, critical poststructuralists strongly contend that individuals have multiple identities and that these identities are closely connected to social contexts. Weedon (1997) described socially contextualized, identity-related conversations that reflect multiple subjectivities, i.e., conscious and unconscious emotions, thoughts, and self-perceptions of individuals.

Ushioda's (2009) *person-in-context* relational view of emergent identity and motivation emphasizes the importance of context for language learners.<sup>4</sup> Because every person is made up of many selves associated with varied contexts and communities of practice, identity is a complex system, even for monolinguals. Identity becomes increasingly complex as a learner gains proficiency in another language and

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<sup>3</sup>Elsewhere, Ryan and Deci (2001) asserted that the eudaimonic approach focuses on meaning, self-realization, and well-being defined as full functioning, in contrast to the hedonic approach, which focuses on personal happiness, pleasure, and pain avoidance.

<sup>4</sup>Ushioda's person-in-context relational view clearly reflects an orientation to complex systems but also links well with a critical poststructuralist perspective.

culture (Pavlenko, 2006; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Ushioda, 2009).

Much poststructuralist work on identity, including language learner identity, has focused on migrants, who are facing tremendous changes in their social contexts and thus must renegotiate or reconstruct their identities. The general term *migrant* refers to a person who moves, either temporarily or permanently, from one area or country of residence to another. *Immigrants* are people who are moving into a country from another and who plan to stay permanently, but they, unlike *refugees*, are not defined as moving based on a fear of persecution. Under international law, including the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, refugees are those who are outside their country of habitual residence, have a well-founded fear of persecution (due to religion, race, nationality, group, or political status), and, because of fear of persecution, are unable or unwilling to return to the country of habitual residence. People who are displaced due to natural disasters are not given refugee status under international law (Labbé, 2014; United Nations High Commission on Refugees, 2011), even though their needs are great.

In new contexts, immigrants and refugees typically face unequal power relationships vis-à-vis members of the receiving community, so their identity construction becomes a site of struggle (Noels, Yashima, & Zhang, 2012; Norton, 2001, 2010, 2014). A similar theme is that language learning involves a struggle for participation and identity in a "symbolically mediated world" (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, p. 155). Block (2003, 2006) also noted struggles in language learner identity. He depicted identity construction as an ongoing negotiation that involves reshaping oneself in lifestyle sectors, communities of practice, discourse communities, and discourses, all of which are sites of struggle among complex, contradictory interpretations of who we are in relation to others.

Immigrants and refugees usually want to be accepted by the more influential receiving communities, but these communities frequently do not understand or accept newcomers' cultures, languages, or needs. Evidence of this situation comes from observations, narrative studies, and studies linking language use to identity negotiation (Block, 2006; Kanno, 2000; Norton, 2001; Noels et al., 2012). The desired identities of immigrants and refugees are often not endorsed by receiving communities (Noels et al., 2012). These communities frequently ignore the talents, abilities, and experiences that newcomers offer their new communities. Anti-immigrant and anti-refugee prejudices become very frequent if refugees or immigrants are part of massive human waves arriving all at once, as is happening now in Europe, North America, and elsewhere.

Noels et al. (2012), like others mentioned earlier, emphasized that identities are contingent on context. They further explained that context is inseparable from the person's lived experience and from any communicative use of language. Newcomers are expected to learn the dominant language of the receiving community as soon as possible, but if they are in a weak, marginalized sociocultural identity position, they might have fewer opportunities to practice the new language communicatively in all four skills (Norton, 2014). In addition, many migrants face a lack of material resources, a deficiency which influences identity construction, social practices, and learning. Attention to opportunities, resources, identities, and practices can improve language learning contexts of newcomers (Norton, 2014).

Compared to other immigrants, certain very fortunate immigrants are able to appropriate more favorable identity positions, which offer greater agency and more interaction in the target language. Such was the case of Zeta, the daughter of Chinese immigrant parents in the U.S. (Zhou, Oxford, & Wei, 2016). When her parents arrived they had few possessions, but they had cultural capital because of their fluent English, prior teaching experience, and educational promise as accepted Ph.D. students. Zhou et al. (2016) analyzed the parents' involvement in Zeta's education in a highly multicultural, immigrant-friendly community. She started with studying English as a second language; was soon mainstreamed into classes with native English speakers and accepted by peers of many backgrounds; experienced spectacular confidence, success, and honors throughout her school career; and developed strong, positive academic and social identities. To facilitate all of this, Zeta's parents created an intense, demanding, literacy-rich (in English and Chinese) home context for their daughter, thus supporting the efforts of school teachers. The authors noted that "much literacy acquisition can happen outside of school and that immigrant parents can become agents of their child's education by providing a home literacy environment, opportunities for second language literacy learning, and direct teaching of literacy skills" (p. 38). Obviously the highly favorable identities that Zeta developed are not experienced by all immigrants.

Studies disclosed that language confidence, defined as lack of anxiety when communicating in the second language, was important to immigrants' life satisfaction and psychological adjustment, while immigrants with low language confidence tended to feel stress (Sampasivam & Clément, 2014). High language confidence was associated with immigrants' frequent use of the second language, not only with native speakers of that language but also with first language peers, sometimes to the detriment of first language skills (Noels, Pon, & Clément, 1996 in Sampasivam & Clément, 2014). Moreover, compared with less confident international students, more confident international students acculturated and adjusted more rapidly (Yu & Shen, 2010) and had more contacts in their first language group and their second language community (Swagler & Ellis, 2003). Such findings suggest a lively interaction of confidence, adjustment, identity, and language contact.

### 3.1.3 Identity and Self-esteem

Identity is one of the dimensions of Reasoner's (1982) model for building self-esteem. Rubio (2014) applied Reasoner's model to language learning and asserted that language teachers can support and enhance learners' unique identities by demonstrating acceptance and care and helping learners build awareness and positive self-images. In addition to support for identity development, other dimensions of the model include: (a) the sense of security or emotional and physical safety; (b) the sense of competence or of having the needed aptitude and ability; (c) the sense of purpose or of having objectives and a direction; and (d) the sense of belonging or acceptance by a group.

## 3.2 *Investment*

Investment is learners’ historically and socially constructed relationship to the target language, along with their frequently conflicted feelings about whether and how to learn and practice the language (Norton, 2010). The construct of investment connects (a) a learner’s desire and commitment to learn the target language and (b) language practices of the community or classroom (Norton, 2014). As shown below, power relations, beliefs, and autonomy issues are usually at the heart of the learner’s decisions about investment.

### 3.2.1 **Power Relations, Beliefs, and Investment**

Investment is based largely on learners’ sense of identity in the context of socio-cultural power relations around them. Learners respond to and act upon perceived power relations, which might marginalize them or, in some cases, welcome them (Norton, 2010, 2014). The choice to invest in learning the language usually reflects autonomy and agency. Investment is also associated with the belief that something important will be gained through learning the language. “When learners invest in learning a new language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will enhance their cultural capital, their conception of themselves, and their desires for the future” (Ushioda, 2008, p. 24).

In short, the positive decision to invest in learning another language is most easily made when (a) learners perceive that the current sociocultural power relations are welcoming and (b) they believe that the effort will result in resources that ultimately enhance cultural capital, identity, and future desires. On the other hand, learners might choose to resist language learning, i.e., *not* to invest, when (a) and (b) do not apply. If learners view the sociocultural power relations as acting against their own identity needs, and if they perceive that investing in learning will not result in additional resources or capital that they desire, they will likely feel ambivalent or negative about investing in language learning.

### 3.2.2 **Autonomy and Investment: A Potential Paradox**

Benson (2011) defined autonomy as “the capacity to control or take charge of one’s learning” (p. 14). Oxford (2008) described autonomy as fundamentally “taking responsibility” for one’s own learning (p. 43). Paradoxically, although the decision to invest in language learning usually signifies autonomy, in other cases the decision *not* to invest indicates autonomy. Regarding the latter situation, if learners perceive that inequitable power relations exist and that desired resources will not be accessible, they might show realism and autonomy by resisting rather than investing in language learning (see Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton, 2001; Oxford, 2011).

### 3.3 *Imagination*

Imagination allows us to see things and people, including ourselves, in new ways. It is “a process of expanding our self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves” (Wenger, 1998, p. 176). Here I not only mention imagination as part of the motivational self system (Sect. 3.3.1), as I did in a prior discussion of EMPATHICS (Oxford, 2016b), but I also highlight imagination in its own right with regard to the creativity of language teachers and learners (Sect. 3.3.2) and to diverse ways of understanding imagined communities (Sect. 3.3.3).

#### 3.3.1 *Imagination and Possible Selves*

Imagination can take us into the future, to which we can project fresh images and energies. With imagination we can help shape who we will become and can therefore influence what might happen. Imagination defines a trajectory that connects our present actions to an extended, projected identity (Wenger, 1998). However, imagination is not just future-oriented. It can allow us to examine and reframe our past selves and to change our perceptions and actions of our present selves. In helping us to re-envision our possible selves, imagination contributes to creating identities (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004) and opening up possibilities.

Possible future selves are the imagined selves most often considered by psychologists and language learning researchers. Ryan and Irie contended that for an imagined future self to have consequences in behavior, there must be an expectation that this future self is plausible, can actually be realized, and can even be ‘experienced’ in the present. Focusing on future selves, Markus and Nurius (1986) described three *possible selves*: what the individual might become, what he or she would like to become (ideal self), and what he or she is afraid of becoming (feared self). Higgins (1987) centered on two self-guides: the *ideal self*, or hoped-for attributes, and the *ought self*, i.e., the last being an extrinsically-oriented combination of characteristics that the individual dutifully believes, based on others’ wishes, he or she is ‘supposed to’ possess. Building on Higgins’ theory and adapting it to language learning, Dörnyei (2009a) developed the L2 Motivational Self System. The first element of this system is the L2 learning environment and experience. Two other elements are future self-guides: the ideal L2 self (the L2-specific aspect of the person’s ideal self) and the ought-to L2 self (corresponding to Higgins’ ought self). For the ideal L2 self to be an effective motivator, it must be both a vision of oneself in a future state and a knowledge of how to attain that state. Each of these three components or subsystems of the motivational system—environment/context, ideal L2 self, and ought-to L2 self—can serve as a coordinating influence on behavior, but the cumulative effect will be greater of these three are harmonious (Dörnyei, 2009a, b).

Ryan and Irie (2014) provided practical applications of imagined selves. First, to sustain a sense of agency, i.e., the power to act volitionally to influence outcomes,



learners should beware of setting implausible, unrealistic, or impractical goals. Second, to help transform their mental images into goal-directed behavior, learners could benefit from explicitly describing their ideal L2 selves with others. Third, to help learners achieve success, teachers could help them retrain their attributions for failures and successes, focusing more on the factors that learners can personally control rather than on external factors that are beyond their control. Finally, because possible selves relate to identity, the imagination aids language learners in developing and negotiating their identities.

### 3.3.2 Creative Imagination of Learners and Teachers

Creative imagination is often present when individuals use learning strategies, such as seeking out language practice partners, identifying foreign language media sources, searching for a native speaking informant who can explain language pragmatics, inferring or predicting from the context, or using images to help with vocabulary learning. Learners are particularly creative when they use metacognitive strategies, which allow them to plan, organize, monitor, and evaluate their own language learning and become more independent (Oxford, 1990, 2011). Learners might generate their own learning strategies or develop them with the help of the teacher, the textbook, or formal strategy instruction, but under every circumstance these strategies reflect and expand creative imagination during the learning process. In short, I contend that any form of increased strategic self-regulation signifies the use of creative imagination for taking personal control over learning.

Teachers also use creative imagination. John Fanselow's (1987) book *Breaking Rules* calls for language instructors to objectively, nonjudgmentally observe their own teaching and then do the opposite, i.e., discover new, creative, adventurous instructional alternatives. He did not mean that what teachers were doing was necessarily wrong or boring, but he wanted teachers to open up new portals of creative imagination and establish exciting, communicative, learner-centered classrooms in which much incidental learning occurs. Building on Fanselow's ideas, Maley (2010) encouraged teachers to try new alternatives. He spoke about the creative "designer methods" like Suggestopedia, as well as the imaginative ways ordinary teachers can enhance their own language teaching through a knowledge of NeuroLinguistic Programming, neuroscience, multiple intelligences, creativity theory, and the psychology of consciousness.

### 3.3.3 Imagined Communities

Imagination also touches upon communities. The term *imagined communities* is a shape-shifter, with various definitions over time. When Benedict Anderson (1991) introduced the term *imagined communities*, it referred to a feeling of nationhood with others whom one would probably never meet. A nation "is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their

fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 1991, pp. 6–7).

The term *imagined communities* entered the language learning field later. In the language field it initially meant communities that immigrants hoped to enter but to which they did not have access (Norton, 2001). These immigrants had little power and had to face many identity struggles, as noted earlier. For Murray (2011), the term *imagined communities* encompasses a range of imagined language learning contexts beyond learners’ immediate networks. Norton (2014) described a target language community as “a community of the imagination, a desired community that offers possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future” (p. 62).

## 4 Conclusions

This chapter has presented three important components of language learner well-being, i.e., identity, investment, and imagination, which were not yet included as key themes or dimensions in the earlier version of EMPATHICS (Oxford, 2016b, c). These three elements have many interrelationships. For example, learners’ identities, which are frequently a site of struggle, help shape decisions about investment in second or foreign language learning and use, while investment decisions also affect their identities. Imagination affects identity and investment, with imagination depicting possible future selves. For at least some learners, the ideal future self would optimally be invested in learning and using the language. In a different sense, identity and investment affect the amount of imagination the learner uses and the possible selves the learner might allow himself or herself to see. In other ways of looking at imagination, learners and teachers can use creative imagination to enhance the language learning process, and learners can experience a desire for an imagined community.

This chapter suggests that language learner well-being is a complex system reflected in the EMPATHICS model. This evolving model started with 18 components (Oxford, 2016b, c), but this chapter recognized three more components. Readers who are interested in discussing the model or helping to validate it should contact the author. Let us all remember to ‘bias for the best’, apply the information found here to improve teaching, and continue to explore the complex system of language learner well-being.

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