

# Introduction to the special issue on positive psychology and wellbeing

Pia Resnik<sup>✉</sup> and Sarah Mercer<sup>✉</sup>

*This introduction to the Special Issue on 'Positive Psychology and Wellbeing' begins by outlining the history and relevance of Positive Psychology (PP) for ELT. A key construct in PP is wellbeing, which all the papers in this Special Issue focus on. In this introductory article, we describe how the term wellbeing has been used and how it is defined in this collection. We discuss why wellbeing matters in language learning and teaching and point out some of the key controversies surrounding this term. We then introduce the nine articles highlighting their unique contributions to furthering our understandings in this field. We conclude by reflecting on key practical implications derived from the contributions and by presenting possible avenues for future research in this area. Our hope is that this collection of papers will serve as an impetus for innovations in practice, research, and theoretical thinking about this vitally important topic.*

**Key words:** emotions, PERMA, positive psychology, wellbeing, ELT

## Introduction

This Special Issue looks at the burgeoning field of positive psychology (PP) research in language education with a focus on the topic of wellbeing in ELT. PP has a relatively recent history in language learning and teaching but has seen an explosion of research in the field (Dewaele *et al.* 2019), with an exponential growth in the area of wellbeing, in part, accelerated by global experiences in education during the pandemic (Mercer 2021). In this Special Issue, we present original research designed and conducted specifically in the field of ELT. Each study offers fresh insights into the topic and is accompanied by concrete considerations for practice on how to strengthen, maintain, and promote higher wellbeing for both teachers and learners. Overall, we hope this Special Issue will not only offer some evidence-inspired actions for practice, but it will also lay the foundation for a rich tapestry of possible directions for future research expanding on contexts, populations, interventions, methodological designs, and constructs.

## What is positive psychology?

Traditionally, psychology has focused on what is wrong with people and how to improve their situation or solve possible problems. It is an inherently deficit perspective. In contrast, PP has emerged as a counterbalance to the negative emphasis and instead incorporates a

focus on the positives, seeking to understand what people need to thrive and flourish (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). PP is built on the three pillars of scholarship: positive emotions, positive character traits, and positive institutions (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000: 5). While the former have been the centre of attention for initial research in SLA (Dewaele *et al.* 2019), research into the role of positive institutions remains scarce, which is surprising given that learners' and teachers' wellbeing is critically determined by the institutions, educational systems, and cultures they work and study in (Sulis *et al.* 2023). Especially in language education, it is to be expected the nature of the languages being taught, the contexts they are taught in, and the intercultural settings and profiles of those in language education will impact on how wellbeing is understood and experienced.

In their seminal work on PP in SLA, MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) stress the need to understand emotional experiences of language learning and teaching holistically, examining the interplay and functions of both positive and negative emotions. A prevailing myth about PP is that it only looks at the positives and ignores the negatives. This is simply not true. While there will be some studies that perhaps choose to focus on positive emotional states, this serves as a balance in the field generally to previous work in SLA which was almost exclusively concerned with the negative emotion of anxiety (see, e.g., Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope 1986) with little or no attention paid to the full range of learners' emotional experiences (Dörnyei and Ryan 2015). In reality, however, many PP-informed studies are concerned with the interplay between both positive and negative emotions, examining the function of each and how they influence one another (Dewaele *et al.* 2019). At the heart of this approach is the quest to gain a fuller, more comprehensive understanding of learners' and teachers' emotional experiences covering the full palette of emotions (Dörnyei and Ryan 2015). In respect to wellbeing, this more balanced approach has been evinced in studies which have, for example, examined both the resources that boost, protect, and strengthen wellbeing, alongside the stressors and challenges which can threaten and damage a person's wellbeing (Sulis *et al.* 2023).

## What is wellbeing?

Wellbeing is a difficult construct to grasp and define due to its complexity and the individual variation in how it is experienced. Traditionally, researchers have studied wellbeing from one of two main perspectives: hedonic and eudaimonic. Hedonic wellbeing stems from individuals' subjective assessment of their own life experiences and life satisfaction and the relative balance of positive to negative emotions. Eudaimonic approaches emphasize positive functioning, self-actualization, and finding meaning and purpose in life. To adequately address the complexity of wellbeing, some frameworks have chosen to consider aspects from both perspectives (Ryan and Deci 2001). One such blended approach is Seligman's (2011) PERMA theory of wellbeing, which captures the multidimensionality of wellbeing in five elements: positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. By including positive emotion, Seligman acknowledges its importance for wellbeing but stresses that long-term life satisfaction cannot stem from happiness and pleasure alone. Engagement refers to being absorbed in a

## Why wellbeing matters in language learning

pleasurable task of interest. With the third element, positive relationships, Seligman (2011: 24) stresses that, '[v]ery little that is positive is solitary', emphasizing the vital role relationships with other people play in wellbeing. Meaning refers to having a clear sense of purpose in life, and finding sense in what you do. The final component, accomplishment, refers to the sense of achievement people have when fulfilling goals that matter to them personally.

In SLA, the PERMA model has been the most popular, possibly due to its links to PP and its founding father, Seligman. A model that has originated in SLA specifically is Oxford's (2016) EMPATHICS model. This is a theoretical model which brings together a range of components that work together to individual degrees of significance to contribute to individual wellbeing. It stands for: emotions and empathy, meaning and motivation, perseverance (including optimism, resilience, and hope), agency and autonomy, time, hardiness and habits of mind, intelligences, character strengths, and self factors, which capture self-efficacy, self-concept, self-esteem, and self-regulation (Oxford 2016: 10). However, work using this model is in its infancy at present.

A useful lens for understanding the significance of why wellbeing matters so much is the work on positive emotional states by Fredrickson (2001) in her *broaden-and-build theory*. This theory explains how positive emotions can open up individuals' minds to learning and new experiences, encouraging them to try out new things, and, subsequently, build a repertoire of positive resources and skills. In turn, these skills can be drawn on to support further learning and generate a positive upward spiral of growth. The underlying premise is that positive emotions do not merely serve as an antidote to negative emotions, but they actually serve unique broadening and growth functions. Similarly, a person who is thriving with high wellbeing does not merely have a low level of negative emotions and stress, they are experiencing a positive state, which brings specific benefits of its own.

In general education, a large body of work already attests to the benefits of attending to learner wellbeing as it can enhance their motivation, self-regulatory skills, and, ultimately, achievement (e.g., Seligman *et al.* 2009). It has been shown that investing time in fostering wellbeing does not detract from learning and academic achievement, but it actually enhances it. As such, programmes and interventions designed to promote learner wellbeing are not only beneficial for learners in the present for their academic attainment, but also equip them with valuable skills for their future lives (Seligman *et al.* 2009). It has also been shown that teachers with higher levels of wellbeing tend to be better teachers with greater creativity and better relationships, which also reflects positively on their learners' wellbeing and achievements (e.g., Roffey 2012). Indeed, in general education, the centrality of wellbeing as a key variable in determining the quality of learning and teaching is now reflected in the OECD's decision to include measures of both learner and teacher wellbeing in all PISA studies moving forward from 2023 as a core base measure (OECD 2018). In other words, if an education system is to be evaluated on its success, it must also be evaluated on the wellbeing of its key stakeholders.

While the body of research on learner wellbeing is extremely limited both in scope and diversity at this stage, in respect to teachers, there has been more work than on learners with a blossoming of studies showing that educators with high wellbeing appear more likely to be happier in their jobs, less at risk of burnout, and more likely to remain in the profession (e.g., [Sulis et al. 2023](#)). There is also strong evidence that highlights the critical role played in language teacher wellbeing of structural and systemic conditions such as pay, working hours, administration, leadership, and workplace culture ([Sulis et al. 2023](#)). This is an important caution that although wellbeing is positioned as a subjective psychological construct, it cannot meaningfully be understood without acknowledging the impact of socio-contextual factors ([Mercer 2021](#)). This body of language teacher wellbeing research too is in its early stages and remains patchy in coverage and range. There remain notable gaps, for example, about the domain-specific character of wellbeing for English language learners and teachers, how it relates to other domains of work, learning, and life, how different cultures may conceptualize it, and how it may be differently experienced across contexts. The research agenda and field for both language learner and teacher wellbeing is thus wide open with much scope and potential for further exploration.

For those practitioners wishing to enhance their own and/or their learners' wellbeing in the field of ELT, there remain very few studies or interventions that provide practical guidelines. While there is much of value and relevance also in general education for this topic, this Special Issue is intended to be the first to explicitly mark out a pathway of action for practitioners by drawing on research evidence from across the globe specifically in the domains of ESL and EFL. By nature, it cannot possibly hope to be fully comprehensive, but it can serve as a starting point for further discussions, research, and thinking. As wellbeing is highly personal and subjective in how it is experienced, it is a field that would benefit enormously from input and insights from as many perspectives as possible including teacher researchers and participatory research projects from diverse contexts and settings. If we wish to truly embrace the goal of positive wellbeing for all in the ELT ecology, then we will need to ensure that future work embraces as many perspectives and voices on this topic as possible ([Mercer 2021](#)).

## Introduction to the articles

This Special Issue has nine empirical-based articles taking diverse perspectives on wellbeing in ELT. It starts with two papers that look specifically at the wellbeing of teachers: Using an ecological lens, Sulis *et al.*'s study reports on a thematic analysis of 30 in-depth interviews with EFL teachers based in Austria to explain how teachers exercise their agency for wellbeing, focusing on their perceived sense of control about their ability to change aspects of their personal and professional lives to benefit their wellbeing. The findings demonstrate how crucial wellbeing is for teachers to be able to teach to the best of their abilities and thus the importance of finding practical ways to empower teachers to take proactive steps in their contexts to enhance or maintain their wellbeing. In the following contribution, Gregersen and MacIntyre focus on the widely overlooked third pillar of PP, the role of institutions in human flourishing. Acknowledging that teachers' wellbeing is strongly influenced by the characteristics and

demands of the context in which they work, this study draws on teachers' voices to understand what would make a positive workplace from their perspective. The findings from this study offer valuable lessons for policy makers and leadership to reflect on what they can do to actively support their staff and promote their wellbeing.

Next, the third paper looks at the relationship between teacher and learner wellbeing. In her article, Moskowitz starts out from the fact that teachers and learners are often emotionally in lockstep, mutually influencing each other's emotional states. Based on a web-based study with 129 adult EFL learners, she investigates how students infer their teachers' wellbeing from their in-class behaviours, which has implications for learners' own wellbeing given the processes of contagion linking the two. The paper provides practical ideas for teachers, learners, and also institutions.

Pinter's paper moves on to report on an approach to conducting collaborative research with learners. Drawing on [Seligman's \(2011\)](#) PERMA model of wellbeing, the study analyses teachers' reflection data collected during a classroom action research project in India to reveal how these research partnerships with children have the potential to impact positively on both teachers' and learners' wellbeing.

The next three papers (Khajavy and Vaziri; Li *et al.*; Chik and Murray) focus on the nature of learner wellbeing looking at different contexts, populations, and the relationship of wellbeing with diverse other variables. In their study, Khajavy and Vaziri sought to understand ELT learners' perceptions of their stressors in class and what things they felt would help to improve their wellbeing. Eighteen participants were selected for oral survey interviews from a large survey sample based on the highest and lowest scores on a wellbeing measure. The findings reveal four main stressors for ELT learners with insights for practice on aspects learners may find threatening for their wellbeing.

Li *et al.* turn their attention to how L2 engagement is associated with students' general life satisfaction, which represents a core element of wellbeing. The study used an online survey with 1,109 seventh grade EFL learners from a rural secondary school in China. Data analysis shows that life satisfaction generally predicted L2 engagement positively. The findings imply that, among other things, fostering learners' positive perceptions of self, family, school, and friends could be one pathway to boosting learner engagement, which in turn could enhance their wellbeing in language classes.

Chik and Murray report on a case study of two Chinese-heritage senior migrants and the role English plays in their lives. Migrant families often invite grandparents to move to Australia when babies are born to help with childcare. These senior migrants often have only limited access to state-funded English learning opportunities and so often have to make their own informal learning opportunities. The study shows how drawing on their past experiences can enhance their quality of life, recognizing the value they bring with them and how having English competencies is key to their overall wellbeing, empowering them to engage in their families and communities.

Finally, the Special Issue closes with two intervention-style studies that show how certain teaching activities such as PP interventions (PPIs) or social-emotional learning (SEL) activities appear to impact positively on learners' wellbeing. Rogers *et al.* report on a study to investigate the effectiveness of PPIs in an intensive English program for university students using short daily activities in their regular lessons and taking PP as the content of the course. In self-report data, the learners viewed the PPIs as being helpful for their well-being, crucially, without detracting from their linguistic development. Pentón Herrera investigated ninth grade ESOL learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of SEL strategies in terms of their emotions and wellbeing. The analysis suggests students experienced positive emotions, increased emotional awareness, and a sense of safety in class. The students identified a number of key strategies as being especially effective including restorative circles, writing poetry, writing letters to themselves, and classroom decorations.

### Future directions inspired by the articles

The articles cover a wonderfully broad spectrum of contexts and perspectives on wellbeing and PP. They also suggest a number of exciting avenues for further scholarship. One of the perpetual tensions in work in wellbeing is understanding the relative roles of agency and structure; in other words, how much control do people have over their own wellbeing and what role do contextual factors play in determining an individual's wellbeing. It is clearly a blend of both, but what affects this relationship, how is a teacher's or learner's agency for their own wellbeing fostered or constrained by their social context, and how may this vary across individuals needs to be investigated. This is an area with strong and critical implications for equity and justice in practice and policy. Related to this is the central role played by institutions, especially in terms of the systems they have in place and the culture they foster. What makes a school or institution a nurturing establishment for all its stakeholders is key to understand and remains woefully underexamined from either learners' or teachers' perspectives, and whether in fact these perspectives are similar or different. We also know that teacher and learner wellbeing represent 'two sides of the same coin' (Roffey 2012) and are tightly interconnected. Yet, little is known about what processes mediate that relationship in both directions and from both perspectives. The notion of contagion is often a key justification for addressing teacher wellbeing first and foremost as this is assumed to be a precursor and determinant of learner wellbeing. Thus, understanding processes of contagion for wellbeing would help guide possible interventions.

When it comes to interventions and suggestions for practice, this Special Issue has plenty of original ideas. Pinter's paper reveals an approach to working in class together with students as co-researchers which is beneficial for both teacher and student wellbeing. This is perhaps reminiscent of work on Exploratory Practice which shows how teachers and learners benefit from working together on the quality of life in class (Hanks 2017). It also raises the question of how other didactic approaches to language teaching, including which task designs, can affect teacher and learner wellbeing. The intervention studies here also indicate the potential of integrating explicit approaches to fostering wellbeing alongside language learning, such as by using SEL as a framework or teaching with PPIs. Such

dual-focused approaches combining language and wellbeing learning objectives represent an exciting avenue for further work in practice and research, and work on transversal competences or content and language integrated learning offer possible inspiration in this regard. Finally, we need more work looking at wellbeing among different contexts and populations. Chik and Murray's study shows how migrant grandparents can boost their wellbeing through language learning that recognises their strengths and personal histories. How do other populations experience their wellbeing in the ELT context such as those with intersectional or marginalized identities or those working in diverse educational contexts in and beyond formalized instructional contexts. Research also needs to examine the cultural connotations of wellbeing and explore the possibility to which the notion of and experience of wellbeing may vary across cultures, linguistic communities, and social settings.

Collectively, the nine contributions in this Special Issue show clearly that wellbeing-supportive ELT, which empowers both learners and teachers to achieve their best, requires teacher- and learner-driven actions but also institution- and policy-driven ones to ensure that everyone can flourish while learning and teaching the language. Wellbeing is a key determinant of language learning success and, above all else, the process of learning ought to be positive and wellbeing-enhancing for all those involved. We now need to take next steps as a community to better understand what is needed to ensure that this happens for every learner and every teacher in every context. There is much work still to be done and we hope this collection inspires others to take up this challenge.

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### The authors

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**Pia Resnik** is Professor of ELT Research and Methodology at the University College of Teacher Education, Vienna|Krems, Austria. Her research interests include all aspects surrounding multicompetent LX users of English, with a particular

focus on emotions in multilingual contexts and the psychology of language learning and teaching. She has written and coauthored several publications in these areas, including the book *Multilinguals' Verbalisation and Perception of Emotions* published by Multilingual Matters.

Email: [pia.resnik@kphvie.ac.at](mailto:pia.resnik@kphvie.ac.at)

**Sarah Mercer** is Professor of Foreign Language Teaching at the University of Graz, Austria. Her research interests focus on the psychology of the language learning and teaching experience. She has written, coauthored, and coedited several books in this area including one with Tammy Gregersen on teacher wellbeing published by Oxford University Press and one with Giulia Sulis, Sonja Babic, and Astrid Mairitsch on language teacher wellbeing published by Multilingual Matters.

Email: [sarah.mercer@uni-graz.at](mailto:sarah.mercer@uni-graz.at)