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Mind needs body! Practicing positive psychology in English language teaching

Christian Ludwig & Michaela Sambanis

Positive emotions are recognised as important for successful foreign language learning. Learners develop a positive attitude towards a language, are motivated to learn, and experience enjoyment through regular, meaningful, and positive engagement. Little attention, however, has so far been paid to the links between Positive Psychology, one of the reasons for the growth of interest in emotions, and embodied cognition which advocates the importance of the body and positive sensations for successful learning. While methods such as Total Physical Response (TPR) can help to get learners moving in class, learning through drama seems to be particularly apt to facilitate embodied learning. Students physically engage with situations, characters, and feelings as they inhabit different spaces, often collaboratively. This paper first introduces embodied cognition. It then discusses the links between embodiment and Positive Psychology, taking Seligman's PERMA MODEL as a point of reference. Following this, it shows how embodied learning can be integrated in the English as a foreign language classroom by using techniques from improvisational theatre.

1 Introduction

For a long time, as Swain poignantly put it, emotions have been "the elephants in the room – poorly studied, poorly understood, seen as inferior to rational thought" (2013, p. 195). However, more recently, research has increasingly focused on the role of emotions in English language teaching, especially on the kind of positive and constructive emotions that individuals need to flourish as foreign language learners (MacIntyre & Ayers-Glassey, 2022).

Little attention, however, has so far been paid to the links between Positive Psychology and embodied cognition/embodiment, a field of study which is based on the idea that the mind and body are in a reciprocal relationship. In other words, our mind directs the body as much as our cognition is influenced by our physical experiences and the features of the environment in which we have these experiences.

Against this background, this paper discusses the links between embodied cognition theory and Positive Psychology, arguing that embodied Positive Psychology means that our body not only helps to create positive emotions but also plays an important role in understanding intellectual concepts. Taking this as a starting point, the article looks at the practical implications of the mind-body connection, examining how whole body movements such as

posture and gestures can support the dynamic interaction between the brain, the mind, the body, and emotions in learning English as a foreign language (Kemp & McConachie, 2019).

In this context, teaching language through drama-based approaches is promising as theatre and drama techniques explicitly seek to connect body and mind to enhance the learning experience (Sambanis & Walter, 2022). In other words, drama techniques offer students opportunities to connect with their own body and the environment and experience positive emotions such as enthusiasm, excitement, or joy, while, at the same time, learning the foreign language.

As introducing all aspects and techniques of drama-based learning would go beyond the scope of this paper, improvisational theatre (often simply referred to as improvisation or improv) is discussed as one possible form of drama-based education. The basic idea of improv exercises is that stories, characters and dialogues are spontaneously created on stage as the 'actors' support each other in developing ideas and moving the plot forward. The two sample activities discussed in this paper can be used to encourage students to become more aware of their own body, experience positive emotions, and enhance well-being, while, at the same time, promoting their foreign language learning. Dialogue, characters, and the story are created spontaneously on stage.

2 Embodied cognition and foreign language learning

Embodied cognition (also grounded cognition or embodiment theory) is a relatively new field of study which appreciates the significant role a person's body plays in cognitive processing. It is based on the view that cognitive processing involves the "interaction between perception, action, the body and the environment" (Barsalou, 2008). Thus, it dismisses the notion of the brain as the sole and exclusive seat of cognition and, instead, emphasises the importance of the physical body and the environment in enhancing cognitive abilities. As Fuchs (2005, p. 115) poignantly puts it: "[C]onsciousness does not develop in an isolated brain, but only in a living organism enmeshed in its environment. The brain may well be the central organ of the mind, but it is not its 'seat'".

Similarly, Wilson contends that, "[c]ognitive processes are deeply rooted in the body's interactions with the world" (2002, p. 625); they are based on the inextricably linked interaction between cognition and sensorimotor processes.

Embodied cognition has implications for foreign language learning as a "person's bodily sensations and actions will impact how he/she comprehends language" (Lan et al., 2015, p. 640), retains information, and solves problems. For example, there is evidence that perceptual experiences and sensorimotor actions shape cognitive processing (Shapiro & Spaulding, 2021,

cf., also, Wilson ibid.), as actions become associated with word meanings as much as they help to learn and access conceptual information. One example is Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR) where teachers demonstrate actions to introduce new words. Then, in a next step, the teacher usually gives commands based on the newly introduced words and the learners respond in an embodied way, i.e. by doing the corresponding action.

A recently published study by Schilitz (2021) with upper secondary students in Germany explored vocabulary learning in combination with movement and relaxation techniques drawing on insights from embodied cognition and embodiment theory. The multi-sensory activities used in the classroom during vocabulary acquisition were compared with more traditional strategies that the learners usually relied on for learning vocabulary, such as going over a list of words, covering one side, trying to recall and checking by uncovering. In the short term, the use of the more familiar strategies proved to be superior, but in medium-term retention (participants were retested after 6 weeks), the students scored best with the movement/gesture condition, i.e. with embodied learning. Thus, the use of gestures in encoding and consolidation phases helped the learners to retain more words over time compared to learning procedures that did not specifically address their sensorimotor system. An additional positive side-effect of the sensory and motor learning experiences employed in the study was the reported enhanced sense of self and increased well-being among 53.6% of the learners (Schilitz, 2021.). This seems relevant as, prior to the study, the learners had no contact to embodied vocabulary acquisition, i.e. they might have felt uncomfortable using gesture and mime which would have contradicted the idea of using embodiment to positively enhance not only the learning outcome but also the learning experience – on an emotional level. When establishing a connection between embodied cognition (translated into practice as embodied learning) and Positive Psychology, one has to take into account not only the cognitive outcomes but also the emotions as both cognitive and emotional processes are interconnected and the body plays an important role in constituting cognitive performance as well as emotional responses.

3 Embodied cognition and positive psychology

Positive Psychology emphasises the importance of moving away from a problem-oriented approach which mostly focused on negative emotions and feelings towards a more positive and appreciative perspective. Yet, a connection which is still rarely made is that questioning the cognitive paradigm and taking an embodied cognition approach to learning also offers the opportunity for taking a more holistic stance on language learning and looking at the interplay between body, environment, and positive emotions. If cognition spans the brain, the body, and the environment, (foreign) language learning takes place in a body-brain environment in

which conscious, positive (embodied) experiences have an influence on how information is taken in, processed, comprehended, and retained. In other words, embodied Positive Psychology requires an understanding of well-being as a holistic experience of positive emotions.

Thus, in the classroom, educators can support learners by creating opportunities which allow learners to experience learning through embodied cognitive and emotional processes in which,

- the body becomes actively engaged in cognitive processing, e.g. through movement and sensorimotor activities
- body and mind connect through mindfulness activities such as yoga, meditation, and other contemplative practices
- body movements or relaxation techniques can help overcome tiredness and find a healthy balance between concentration and relaxation.

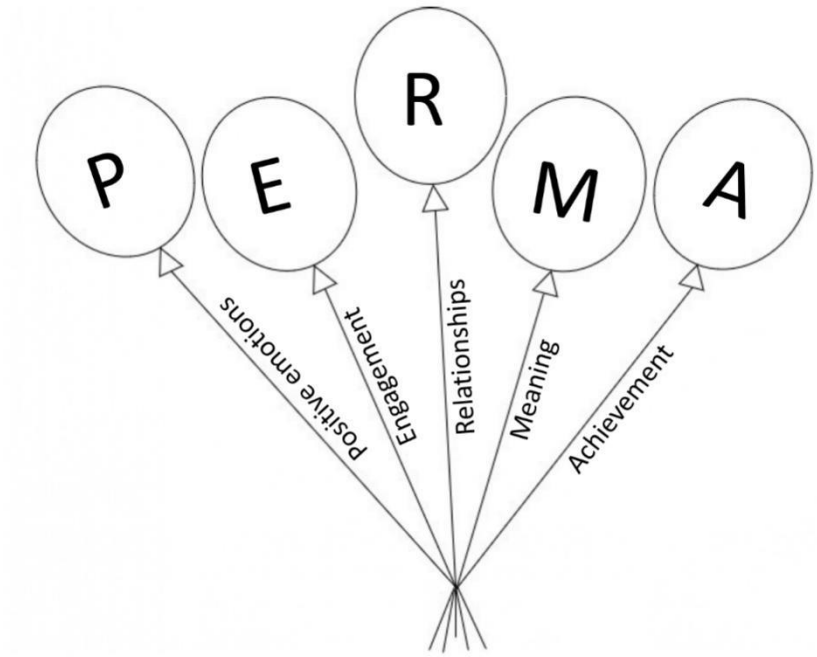


Figure 1: Seligman's PERMA model (adapted by B. Spindler, FU Berlin, from Seligman 2011)

One model which can be used to understand well-being including positive emotions is Seligman's well-known PERMA model of well-being (cf. Fig. 1). The model describes five components from which well-being emerges: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments (Seligman, 2011). Seligman's model emphasises the fact that positive emotions do not exist in isolation but have to be seen as a complex web of

interrelations. With regard to the foreign language classroom, the PERMA model encourages us to create learning spaces in which learners can engage in activities that they enjoy, helping them to fully focus on a task, and live in the moment. Ideally, they work on tasks with others, allowing them to strengthen existing social networks and build new ones. Furthermore, learners should see a purpose in what they do and engage with content that matters to them. Last but not least, they should feel a sense of accomplishment through working towards clearly defined and achievable goals which are based on measurable outcomes.

Understanding Seligman's (2011) PERMA model as an expression of well-being and combining this with principles of embodied cognition suggests the potential for language learning offered by drama pedagogy:

- how all our experiences are based on action
- how our physical body interacts with the world (Wilson op.cit., p. 625) and how this interaction allows learning
- how positive experiences and emotions are related with (body-based) creativity.

For reasons of space, the section exclusively focuses on improvisational theatre, which can help to promote embodied learning in the classroom, while, at the same time, realising each of Seligman's dimensions of well-being.

4 Improvisation theatre in English language teaching

Drama-based approaches are grounded in the idea that students are not only engaged in academic but also aesthetic and affective learning, in other words, positive feelings and emotions can increase students' motivation and willingness to learn as well as spark their curiosity. Drama approaches encompass a wide range of formats through which typically students are asked to portray themselves or another person in an imaginary situation, for example, through pantomime, imitation, role playing, acting, and improvisation. What all these techniques have in common is that they help to create prosocial relationships, foster connectedness which, in neuroscientific terms, means that drama activities may foster the synchronisation of multiple brains (Sambanis & Walter, 2022), which is experienced as a collective rapport. They aim at positive learning experiences, the strengthening of learners' resilience, their self-efficacy, etc. The focus in drama-based instruction is not on the audience but on the benefits for the learners, including, for example, the acquisition of language skills in interactive scenarios, verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication, and aspects of personal growth such as an increased self-awareness etc.

One common form of drama-based education is improvisation theatre (improv), in which participants engage in an unplanned and unscripted performance and in which most or all performative elements are created collaboratively through interaction. Improv theatre can stretch from individual, short scenes to whole plays, which may include little or even no dialogue as well as no or only minimal dramatic activity as the actors receive suggestions from the audience or spontaneously react to impulses from other actors.

With regard to the foreign language classroom, improv activities can be used as icebreakers but also to increase students' language skills as they learn to actively listen and spontaneously communicate in the foreign language.

Before moving on to concrete classroom examples, we want to take a glimpse into the existing research on improvisational theatre and its influence on well-being. A recently published study by Schwenke et al. (2021), for example, shows "beneficial effects of improv on self-esteem and self-efficacy. Furthermore, a statistical trend for resilience points in the same direction" (p. 41). The study set out to investigate possible effects of improv by testing three hypotheses, the first one on the improvement of creativity, the second one on the tolerance of uncertainty, and the third one on psychological well-being. In addition, their research also emphasises the potential of improv theatre to create positive and open mindsets among learners as well as acceptance towards failure.

In their paper, the researchers explicitly refer to a basic principle for the use of improvisational techniques or, more generally speaking, for teaching and learning impulses, derived from the performing arts, in particular from theater, namely the *Yes, and…-principle*. It states that as a participant, you do not question other participants' contributions but accept them as impulses to work with. On the one hand, this trains tolerance of uncertainty – you never know what comes next; on the other hand, it can enhance learners' self-efficacy, self-esteem, and acceptance of shortcomings as the other participants have to also accept your ideas. The training of spontaneous communicative language skills in foreign language teaching constitutes a major challenge that calls for the creation of a field where *Yes, and…* becomes a guiding principle. Alongside these language goals, performative impulses address the aforementioned variables that have been identified as key factors for well-being (Schwenke et al. ibid.), namely, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and resilience.

By way of illustration, two performative techniques will be described in the following paragraphs and connections to Seligman's PERMA model will be established. The selected activities are part of a recently established collection of performative impulses for language teaching, freely accessible as videos both in English and German on www.didactx.org/performativedidactx/.

In Conscience Alley, one person is faced with a problem or a decision-making task. The class forms two lines facing each other. Those on the left side are instructed to give opposing advice to those on the right. The decision-maker slowly walks down Conscience Alley as each participant speaks their advice. When the decision-maker reaches the end of the alley, they think out loud, weighing the advice and, finally, making a decision. In Conscience Alley, opposing positions are embodied by the students forming two lines. Thanks to the application of the *Yes, and…-principle*, respect for different arguments is fostered. Conscience Alley demands active listening, constitutes a collaborative effort in decision-making and constructing of meaning. Taken together, Conscience Alley can be regarded as a technique that addresses all of the elements of the PERMA model.



Figure 2: Still from Conscience Alley on www.didactx.org/performativedidactx/, FU Berlin.

The second performative impulse, Slideshow, works with still images that are collaboratively created by the learners. The activity is based on a text, either a fairy tale or any other text that describes a chain of activities or events. One person takes on the role of the narrator and starts to read out the text. As shown in the video on www.didactx.org/performativedidactx/, the teacher can be the reader, making it possible for the learners to focus on comprehension and the embodied representation of the contents. The reader/narrator pauses after a little while, making a click sound as if using a presentation clicker to show a slide, namely an illustration of the text so far. The learners spontaneously create a corresponding still image. Then, the narrator reads out the next bit of the story, and so on. Slideshow is particularly easy to adapt to different levels, it can be used with beginners as well as with intermediate or advanced learners. It addresses emotions, oftentimes allows aesthetic experiences, demands

engagement, strives towards collaboration and creation of meaning as well as accomplishment while using the body as a tool and a means of expression.



Figure 3: Still from Slideshow [German: Diashow] on www.didactx.org/performativedidactx/, FU Berlin.

The two examples illustrate that improv can be used to encourage learners to be creative in unknown situations, which requires them to use sensory information to create action and movement as they focus both body and mind on the impulses they receive and how they can use their environment or props available to actively contribute to the improvised scene. It requires physical action and, depending on the activity, (non-)verbal communication and interaction as it involves learners in different situations and environments. Thus, improv activities help to create prosocial relationships and positive learning experiences, strengthening learners' resilience and their self-efficacy.

Both examples show how drama-based activities can help to bring embodied cognition approaches and Positive Psychology together as participants learn to listen to their own body's sensations while, at the same time, keeping all senses open for input from the environment. Furthermore, by observing, through feedback, discussion, and reflection after performative activities, they learn how their mood influences their facial expressions, posture, and gestures and vice versa. Last but not least, (abstract) concepts and their cognitive representations are linked to actions, body sensations, and emotions and feelings.

5 Conclusion

The assertion that body, brain, emotions, and mind all interact and play a vital role in cognitive processing also has implications for the foreign language classroom. It means that it is worth creating learning spaces in which connections between body, emotion, and cognition can be established and in which learners can experience how positive emotions and bodily movement can also enhance learning. Improv theatre represents one strategy to achieve this aim as actions are directly dramatised, allowing learners to actively experience and thus understand how our "thoughts, feelings and behaviours are grounded in sensory experiences and bodily states" (Meier et al., 2012, p. 2). Indeed, many drama-based activities not only foster the connection between body, emotion, and cognition within the individual but by means of shared emotions, actions and reactions also establish synchrony between multiple individuals, thus stimulating joint attention and the feeling of belonging.[1]

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