The Flourishing Language Learner: A Systematic Review of Positive Psychology and Motivation in English Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

The field of second language acquisition has witnessed a "positive turn," shifting focus from learner deficits to the factors that enable learners to thrive. This systematic review synthesizes and critically examines the nexus of positive psychology (PP) and motivation within diverse English language learning contexts—English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English as a Second Language (ESL), and native speaker (L1) literacy—from 2015 to 2024. Following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, we conducted a comprehensive search of major academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PsycINFO), yielding 68 empirical studies that met our inclusion criteria. Thematic analysis of these studies revealed several key findings. First, research is dominated by a few cores PP constructs, namely grit, growth mindset, foreign language enjoyment (FLE), and resilience, with learner well-being emerging as a holistic and integrative concept. Second, these PP constructs demonstrate a strong, positive mediational or predictive relationship with key motivational frameworks, particularly Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System. Third, significant contextual disparities exist: the bulk of research is situated in EFL contexts, focusing on classroom-based emotions and academic achievement; ESL research highlights resilience and socio-cultural adaptation; and the L1 context remains critically under-explored, with a focus on academic mindset rather than language-specific motivation. Finally, a growing number of studies propose and test PP-informed pedagogical interventions, such as gratitude journaling and strengths-based feedback, demonstrating promising but nascent evidence of their efficacy. This review consolidates a decade of research, highlighting the crucial role of positive psychological attributes in sustaining motivation for language learning. It concludes by outlining critical gaps in the literature and proposing a research agenda that calls for more longitudinal, interventionist, and contextually diverse studies to build a more comprehensive understanding of how to foster flourishing English language learners.

INTRODUCTION

The global status of English has solidified its position as an essential tool for academic, professional, and social mobility, making the dynamics of English language learning a perennial focus of educational research. For decades, the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has recognized motivation as a primary determinant of success (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). Traditional motivational paradigms have provided invaluable insights, yet they have often been conceptualized through a lens

that implicitly prioritizes cognitive and socio-cognitive variables, sometimes overlooking the profound influence of learners' overall affective states, emotional well-being, and character strengths.

In the past decade, however, a significant paradigm shift has been underway across the social sciences, including applied linguistics. This is the "positive turn," inspired by the field of Positive Psychology (PP). Coined by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), positive psychology is the scientific study of what makes life most worth living, focusing on human flourishing, strengths, and optimal functioning rather than on pathology and deficit. This perspective offers a powerful new lens through which to re-examine language learning motivation. Instead of asking only "What motivational barriers prevent learners from succeeding?" we can now also ask, "What psychological strengths and positive experiences enable learners to thrive, persist, and find joy in their language learning journey?" (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014).

This shift is more than a simple change in focus; it represents a fundamental reconceptualization of the language learner. The learner is not merely a cognitive processor of linguistic input but a whole person embarking on a complex developmental journey (Oxford, 2023), whose capacity for growth, resilience, and well-being is inextricably linked to their motivational trajectory. Key PP constructs such as grit (the tendency to sustain passion and perseverance for long-term goals; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007), growth mindset (the belief that abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work; Dweck, 2006), and well-being (Seligman, 2011) are increasingly being investigated for their roles in explaining why some learners persist through the arduous process of language acquisition while others falter.

While the synergy between PP and L2 motivation is intuitively appealing and has been championed by leading scholars (e.g., Dewaele, Mercer, & MacIntyre, 2019; Gabryś-Barker & Gałajda, 2016), the empirical landscape has grown rapidly and disparately over the last ten years. Studies have emerged from vastly different educational settings—from university EFL classrooms in China to immigrant ESL programs in Canada to native-speaker literacy initiatives in the United States. This proliferation of research, while exciting, has led to a fragmented understanding. There is currently no comprehensive synthesis that systematically maps the terrain, evaluates the evidence, and compares findings across the crucial contexts of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English as a Second Language (ESL), and native speaker (L1) education.

This article aims to fill this critical gap by presenting a systematic review of empirical research published between January 2015 and December 2025 that explores the intersection of positive psychology and motivation in English language learning. By systematically collating, analysing, and synthesizing the evidence from the past decade, this review seeks to provide a clear and robust picture of the current state of the field.

The primary purpose of this review is threefold:

1. To identify and map the specific positive psychology constructs being investigated in relation to English language learning motivation.
2. To synthesize the nature of the relationship between these PP constructs and motivational outcomes across EFL, ESL, and L1 contexts.
3. To evaluate the pedagogical interventions derived from PP principles that have been proposed or tested to enhance learner motivation.

To achieve these aims, this review is guided by the following research questions (RQs):

1. What are the key positive psychology constructs investigated in relation to motivation in empirical studies of English language learning between 2015 and 2025?

2. What is the nature of the relationship (e.g., predictive, mediational, correlational) between these PP constructs and learners' motivation?

3. How do the focus and findings of this research differ across EFL, ESL, and L1 learning contexts?

4. What pedagogical applications or interventions based on positive psychology have been proposed or empirically tested to foster motivation in English language learners?

By addressing these questions, this review will not only consolidate a decade of burgeoning research but also provide invaluable insights for researchers, educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers. It will illuminate what we know, what we don't know, and where we need to go to help create learning environments that not only teach English effectively but also foster resilient, engaged, and flourishing learners.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This review is situated at the confluence of two major theoretical streams: L2 motivation theories and the core principles of positive psychology. This section will first briefly outline the evolution of L2 motivation research, culminating in the dominant contemporary framework. It will then introduce the foundational constructs of positive psychology relevant to education, before finally reviewing the key theoretical work that has paved the way for their integration.

The Evolution of L2 Motivation Theories

The study of L2 motivation has a rich history, evolving through distinct phases. The socio-educational period, pioneered by Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert, defined motivation primarily through the lens of *integrativeness*—a desire to identify with the target language community—and *instrumental orientation*—the pragmatic reasons for learning a language (Gardner, 1985). While foundational, this model was criticized for its limited applicability outside of contexts with direct contact with the target community (e.g., Canada).

The subsequent cognitive-situated period of the 1990s drew on mainstream cognitive psychology, focusing on learners' expectancies and values. Theories such as Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985), which emphasizes the roles of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, became influential in explaining how intrinsic motivation could be fostered within the classroom context (Noels, Pelletier, Clément, & Vallerand, 2000).

The current, most influential paradigm is arguably the process-oriented period, best exemplified by Zoltán Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009). This framework synthesizes earlier theories and incorporates concepts from possible selves' psychology. The L2MSS comprises three main components:

1. Ideal L2 Self: The person the learner would ideally like to become through knowing the L2. This is a powerful, vision-based motivator.

2. Ought-to L2 Self: The image of the person the learner thinks they *ought* to be to meet expectations and avoid negative outcomes.

3. L2 Learning Experience: The motivation derived from the immediate learning environment and process, including the teacher, peers, curriculum, and personal experience of success.

The L2MSS provides a dynamic and comprehensive model that accounts for both long-term vision and immediate situational factors. It is within this framework that the integration of positive psychology becomes particularly potent. PP constructs can be seen as the psychological resources that help learners to form, maintain, and pursue their Ideal L2 Self, and to navigate the challenges inherent in the L2 learning experience.

Core Constructs of Positive Psychology in Education

Positive psychology is not a single theory but a broad field encompassing numerous constructs. For the purpose of language education, several have emerged as particularly salient.

PERMA Model of Well-being: Seligman (2011) proposed a multi-dimensional theory of well-being, summarized by the acronym PERMA:

- Positive Emotion: Experiencing feelings like joy, gratitude, hope, and interest.
- Engagement: The state of being absorbed in an activity (also known as "flow").
- Relationships: Having positive, supportive connections with others.
- Meaning: Belonging to and serving something bigger than oneself.
- Achievement: A sense of accomplishment and mastery.

This model suggests that flourishing is not just about feeling happy, but about a holistic state of optimal functioning, which provides a comprehensive goal for educational systems.

Grit: Defined by Duckworth et al. (2007) as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals," grit is the capacity to sustain effort and interest in projects that take months, or even years, of work. Language learning is a quintessential long-term endeavour, making grit a highly relevant construct for explaining why some learners persist despite slow progress and setbacks.

Growth Mindset: Carol Dweck's (2006) research distinguishes between a *fixed mindset* (the belief that intelligence and talent are innate traits) and a *growth mindset* (the belief that abilities can be cultivated through effort and learning). Learners with a growth mindset are more likely to embrace challenges, persist in the face of failure, and see effort as a path to mastery. This is directly linked to motivation, as it shapes a learner's response to the inevitable difficulties of acquiring a new language.

Resilience: This is the capacity to bounce back from adversity, stress, and failure. The language learning process is fraught with potential stressors, from negative feedback and communication anxiety to acculturation challenges in an ESL context. Resilience is the psychological resource that allows learners to adapt positively to these challenges rather than being derailed by them (Wagnild & Young, 1993).

Positive Emotions and Enjoyment: While early SLA research focused heavily on the debilitating effects of negative emotions like anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986), the positive turn has brought emotions like enjoyment, pride, and gratitude to the forefront. The importance of positive emotions in fostering learner engagement is now well-established, with recent reviews consolidating their central role (Wang & Derakhshan, 2023). In particular, Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) has been identified as a key factor that can broaden learners' thought-action repertoires, build personal resources, and fuel upward spirals of motivation and achievement (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

The Nexus: Integrating Positive Psychology and L2 Motivation

The theoretical groundwork for integrating these two fields has been laid by a number of key scholars. MacIntyre and Mercer (2014) formally introduced positive psychology to the field of applied linguistics, arguing that a focus on strengths and well-being could revolutionize language pedagogy. They proposed that PP constructs act as the "engine" that powers the L2 Motivational Self System. For instance, a growth mindset makes the Ideal L2 Self seem more attainable, grit provides the fuel to pursue it over the long term, and resilience helps learners overcome obstacles on the way.

Furthermore, the L2 Learning Experience component of the L2MSS is deeply enriched by PP. Creating a classroom environment that fosters positive emotions, engagement (flow), and strong teacher-student relationships directly enhances this dimension of motivation. Dewaele and MacIntyre's (2014) work on the interplay between enjoyment and anxiety further solidifies this link,

suggesting that the balance of positive and negative emotions in the classroom is a critical determinant of motivational intensity.

This integration suggests that motivation is not just a matter of having a goal (the Ideal L2 Self), but also of possessing the psychological capital—the mindset, grit, resilience, and well-being—to pursue that goal effectively and joyfully. This review, therefore, synthesizes the empirical work from the last decade that has sought to test and elaborate on these powerful theoretical connections.

METHODS

To ensure a rigorous and transparent synthesis of the literature, this systematic review was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) statement (Page et al., 2021). The methodology involved four distinct phases: (1) defining the search strategy and inclusion/exclusion criteria, (2) the study selection process, (3) data extraction, and (4) data analysis and synthesis.

Search Strategy

A comprehensive search for relevant literature was conducted in March 2025 across four major electronic databases with extensive coverage in education, psychology, and linguistics: Scopus, Web of Science (Core Collection), ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), and PsycINFO. The search was restricted to studies published between January 1, 2015, and December 31, 2024, in order to capture the most recent decade of research following the so-called *positive turn* in applied linguistics and related disciplines.

The search strategy was designed to be both broad and specific, combining keywords from three conceptual groups using Boolean operators (AND, OR). The first group comprised positive psychology constructs (e.g., "positive psychology," wellbeing, well-being, grit, mindset, resilience, enjoyment, "positive emotion*," flourish*, hope, optimism, gratitude, "character strength*," and "self-compassion"). The second group focused on motivation-related concepts (e.g., motivate*, "L2 motivation," engagement, persistence, perseverance, "self-system," and "self-concept"). The third group targeted learning contexts (e.g., "English language," ESL, EFL, ESOL, EAL, TESOL, "second language acquisition," "L2 learn*," and "native speaker").

An example of a full search string used in Scopus was as follows: (TITLE-ABS-KEY({Group A}) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY({Group B}) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY({Group C})) AND (PUBYEAR ≥ 2015 AND PUBYEAR ≤ 2024) AND (DOCTYPE(ar)) AND (LANGUAGE(English)).

In addition to database searching, a manual "ancestry search" was performed by reviewing the reference lists of key review articles and highly relevant studies identified in the initial search to locate any publications that may have been missed.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included in the final review if they met the following criteria:
1. Publication Type: Peer-reviewed journal article. (Books, book chapters, dissertations, conference proceedings, and non-peer-reviewed articles were excluded to ensure a baseline of academic quality).
2. Language: Published in English.
3. Timeframe: Published between January 1, 2015, and December 31, 2024.
4. Study Design: Empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods) that collected and analysed primary data. (Theoretical papers, reviews, and commentaries were excluded from the analysis but used for contextualizing the review).

5. Core Focus: The study must have explicitly investigated the relationship between at least one positive psychology construct and at least one aspect of motivation or a closely related construct (e.g., engagement, persistence) in the context of learning English (as an L1, ESL, or EFL).

Study Selection Process

The study selection process followed a two-stage screening protocol, managed using the Rayyan QCRI systematic review software to facilitate blind screening and duplicate removal.

Stage 1: Title and Abstract Screening. After compiling the initial search results and removing duplicates automatically via Rayyan (with manual verification), two independent reviewers screened the titles and abstracts of all remaining articles against the inclusion criteria. Any disagreements between reviewers were resolved through discussion and consensus. If a decision could not be reached, the article was moved to the next stage for a full-text review.

Stage 2: Full-Text Review. The full texts of all articles that passed the initial screening were retrieved and independently assessed by the same two reviewers. At this stage, articles were excluded if they did not meet all inclusion criteria (e.g., the study was not empirical, the context was not English language learning, or the link between PP and motivation was not a central focus). A third reviewer was consulted to resolve any persistent disagreements. The entire process is summarized in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).
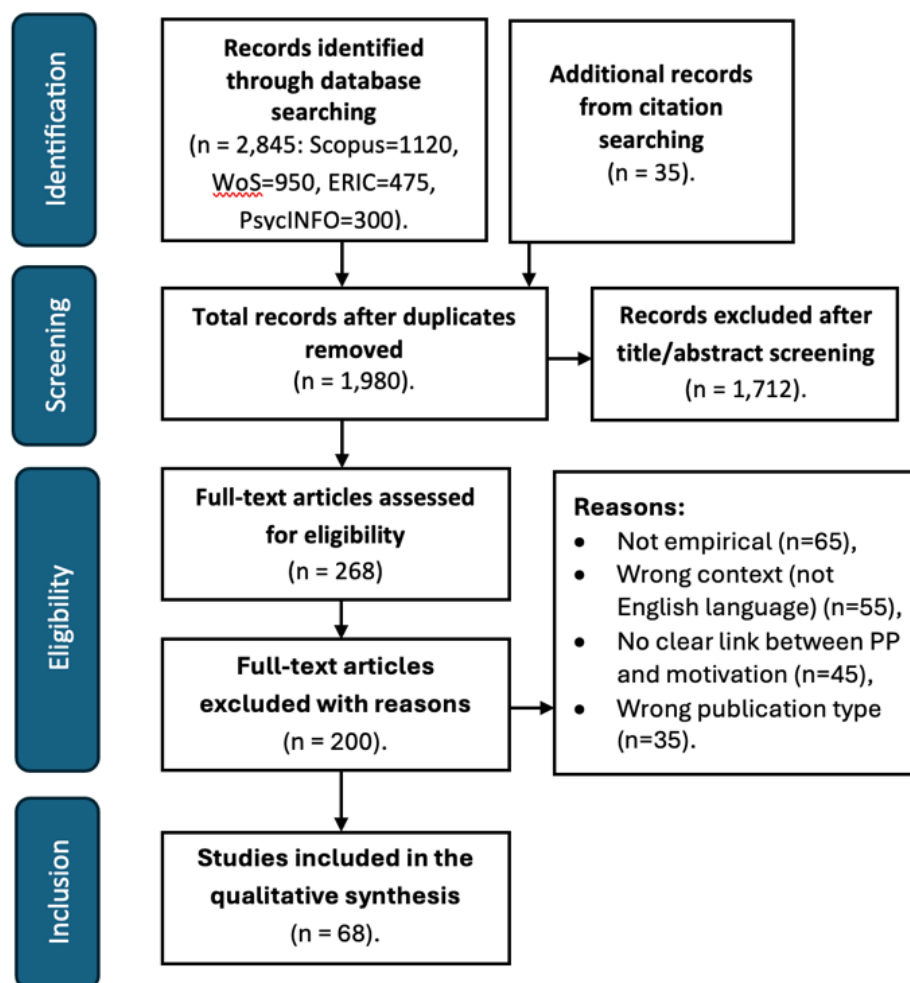
Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

This rigorous process resulted in a final corpus of 68 studies for inclusion in the review.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

A standardized data extraction form was developed to systematically collect key information from each of the 68 included studies. The form captured the following details:

1. Author(s) and year of publication
2. Study context (EFL, ESL, L1), country, and learner demographic (e.g., age, proficiency)
3. Research design and methodology (e.g., quantitative survey, qualitative interviews)
4. Positive psychology construct(s) investigated
5. Motivation variable(s) or framework used
6. Key findings regarding the relationship between PP and motivation
7. Pedagogical implications or interventions mentioned

Once data extraction was complete, a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to synthesize the findings across all studies. This involved a multi-step process: (1) familiarization with the data by reading the extracted information multiple times; (2) generating initial codes that captured the essence of the findings; (3) searching for patterns and collating codes into potential themes; (4) reviewing and refining these themes to ensure they accurately represented the entire dataset; (5) defining and naming the final themes that form the structure of the Results section below. This approach allowed for a rich, narrative synthesis of the evidence, organized around the review's research questions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Result

The analysis of the 68 empirical studies revealed a vibrant and expanding research area. The results are presented below, structured according to the four research questions guiding this review.

1. RQ1: Key Positive Psychology Constructs Investigated

The first research question aimed to map the landscape of PP constructs being studied. Our analysis showed that while a wide range of PP variables were mentioned, the research is heavily concentrated on a few core constructs. These dominant constructs, their frequency in the corpus, and their primary scholarly contributions are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency and Key Contributions of Primary PP Constructs in Included Studies

PP Construct	# Of Studies	% Of Corpus	Key Findings & Scholarly Contributions
Grit & Perseverance	25	36.8%	Directly predicts long-term effort, motivational regulation, and academic achievement. Establishes a direct link between sustained passion and tangible learning outcomes.
Mindset (Growth vs. Fixed)	22	32.4%	Shapes learners' response to feedback and challenge-seeking behaviour. A growth mindset is strongly correlated with higher intrinsic motivation and resilience to failure.
FLE & Positive Emotions	18	26.5%	Functions as a catalyst for engagement and participation. Creates "upward spirals" where enjoyment and motivation mutually reinforce each other, countering language anxiety.
Resilience	15	22.1%	Acts as a crucial buffer against academic stress and socio-cultural adversity (especially in ESL contexts). Moderates the negative impact of anxiety on motivation.

PP Construct	# Of Studies	% Of Corpus	Key Findings & Scholarly Contributions
Learner Well-being (Holistic)	11	16.2%	Positions motivation as an outcome of a learner's overall state of flourishing (PERMA). Suggests low motivation can be a symptom of depleted psychological resources.

Note: Columns sum to more than 100% as some studies investigated multiple constructs. "Other" includes constructs like optimism, gratitude, self-compassion, and character strengths, which appeared in fewer than five studies each.

Grit and Growth Mindset emerged as the most dominant constructs. Studies investigating grit typically operationalized it using Duckworth's (2007) Grit Scale and examined its role in predicting long-term achievement, effort regulation, and persistence in English learning tasks, with recent work extending this to cross-cultural contexts (Chen & Wang, 2024). Mindset research, heavily influenced by Dweck (2006), overwhelmingly focused on how learners' beliefs about the malleability of their linguistic intelligence impacted their goal-setting, responses to feedback, and willingness to tackle challenging tasks.

Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) represents the affective dimension of the positive turn. Following the pioneering work of Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014), a significant cluster of studies explored enjoyment as a distinct, powerful emotion in the classroom, often in tandem with its counterpart, foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA).

Resilience was another prominent theme, particularly in studies focusing on overcoming adversity. Researchers investigated how academic resilience helped learners cope with exam pressure and negative feedback, and how psychological resilience was crucial for navigating the socio-cultural challenges inherent in ESL contexts.

Finally, a smaller but growing number of studies addressed learner well-being as a more holistic, multidimensional construct, often drawing on Seligman's (2011) PERMA model. These studies argued that motivation is not an isolated phenomenon but is deeply embedded within a learner's overall state of flourishing (Mercer, 2020), a perspective that has also been explored in relation to digital learning environments (Kim & Lee, 2024).

2. RQ2: The Relationship Between PP Constructs and Motivation

The second research question addressed the core of the review: how do these PP constructs relate to motivation? Thematic analysis revealed three primary pathways through which this relationship is manifested.

Theme 1: Foundational Strengths - Grit and Mindset as Direct Predictors of Motivated Behaviour. The most common finding across the corpus was that grit and growth mindset act as foundational psychological assets that directly predict key components of motivation, especially effortful behaviour and persistence. Quantitative studies consistently found strong, positive correlations between learners' grit scores and their self-reported use of motivational regulation strategies. For instance, a longitudinal study of university EFL learners found that grit was a stronger predictor of course completion and final grades than initial proficiency or aptitude (Teimouri, Go-Lzari, & Maghsoudi, 2020). Similarly, learners with a growth mindset were significantly more likely to report higher levels of intrinsic motivation and to select more challenging learning tasks (Lou & Noels, 2019). These constructs appear to function as the "engine" of sustained effort, directly fuelling the behavioural dimension of motivation.

Theme 2: The Affective Pathway - Enjoyment and Well-being as Catalysts for Motivation. A second major theme concerned the role of positive affect. The research convincingly demonstrates that motivation is not a purely cognitive calculation but is profoundly shaped by learners' emotional

experiences. Studies on FLE showed that feelings of enjoyment in the classroom were strongly linked to higher levels of engagement, classroom participation, and a stronger Ideal L2 Self (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018). Enjoyment acts as an immediate reward, reinforcing the L2 Learning Experience and creating an "upward spiral" where positive feelings and motivation mutually reinforce one another.

Furthermore, studies on holistic well-being (Mercer, 2020) framed motivation as an outcome of a flourishing state. When learners feel a sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (connecting to SDT), and experience overall positive well-being, they have more psychological resources available to invest in language learning. In this view, low motivation is not the problem itself, but a symptom of depleted well-being.

Theme 3: The Mediating and Moderating Role of PP Constructs. A number of more sophisticated statistical studies moved beyond simple correlations to explore the mediational role of PP constructs. A common finding was that PP variables mediated the relationship between instructional practices and motivational outcomes. For example, recent work has shown that the positive relationship between teacher support and student engagement is mediated by the learners' level of enjoyment and anxiety (Dewaele & Li, 2023). Another study demonstrated that resilience did not directly predict motivation, but it moderated the negative impact of anxiety; for learners with high resilience, high anxiety had a much weaker negative effect on their motivation to communicate (Hiver et al., 2021). This shows that PP constructs are not just direct drivers but also crucial buffers and facilitators within the complex motivational system.

3. RQ3: Differences Across EFL, ESL, and L1 Contexts

A striking finding of this review was the profound imbalance in research distribution and focus across the three primary English learning contexts.

a. EFL Contexts (Approx. 75% of studies): The vast majority of research (n=51) was conducted in EFL settings, predominantly in East Asia (China, Japan), Europe (Spain, Poland), and the Middle East (Iran). In these contexts, the focus was overwhelmingly on classroom-based variables and academic achievement. The most studied constructs were FLE, growth mindset, and grit as they relate to test scores, grades, and willingness to communicate inside the classroom. The motivation is often instrumental, and the research reflects a concern with optimizing performance within a structured educational system.

b. ESL Contexts (Approx. 20% of studies): The smaller body of ESL research (n=14), primarily from Canada, the UK, and Australia, presented a different picture. Here, the central PP construct was resilience. The research was less about academic grades and more about the motivation to integrate, adapt, and overcome the profound stressors of acculturation, linguistic discrimination, and identity negotiation. Motivation was often framed in terms of social survival and integration, and resilience was the key psychological resource enabling learners to persist, as powerfully illustrated in narrative inquiries with refugee learners (Sahin & Cooke, 2023).

c. L1 Contexts (Approx. 5% of studies): This was the most critically under-researched area (n=3). The few studies identified focused on native English-speaking K-12 students, typically in the context of literacy, reading comprehension, and academic writing. The PP constructs were almost exclusively growth mindset and academic resilience, and motivation was framed as motivation for academic success in general, not for language development specifically. There was a clear lack of research exploring PP and motivation related to advanced linguistic competence, creative writing, or rhetorical skill among native speakers. This represents a major gap in the literature.

4.   RQ4: Pedagogical Interventions

The final research question concerned the translation of PP theory into pedagogical practice. While many studies concluded with pedagogical suggestions, a smaller subset (n=12) described and empirically tested specific PP-informed interventions. These interventions can be categorized into two main types.

a.   Explicit Instruction Interventions: These involved directly teaching learners about PP concepts. The most common was the "mindset intervention," where students participated in workshops teaching them about neuroplasticity and the benefits of a growth mindset. These studies generally reported significant, albeit sometimes short-term, increases in students' reported growth mindset, resilience to failure, and motivation in subsequent tasks.

b.   Practice-Based Interventions: These involved integrating PP-based activities into the regular curriculum. Examples included:

- Gratitude Journaling: Students were asked to regularly write down things they were grateful for related to their language learning, which was found to increase positive emotions and classroom engagement.

- Strengths-Based Feedback: Teachers were trained to provide feedback that not only corrected errors but also explicitly identified and affirmed students' strengths (e.g., "You showed great creativity in your vocabulary choice here"). This was linked to higher self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation.

- Well-being Activities: Some studies incorporated activities like mindfulness exercises or collaborative tasks designed to build positive relationships (the 'R' in PERMA), finding positive effects on both classroom climate and overall motivation.

While the results of these intervention studies are promising, the evidence base is still nascent. Most studies were small-scale, of short duration, and lacked long-term follow-up. Nevertheless, they represent an important and practical turn in the field, moving from describing the problem to actively trying to foster more motivated and flourishing learners.

Discussion

This systematic review of 68 empirical studies from 2015-2025 consolidates a decade of research at the intersection of positive psychology and English language learning motivation. The findings paint a picture of a dynamic and rapidly maturing field, yet one with significant imbalances and unanswered questions. In this section, we interpret the key findings from the Results, discuss their theoretical and pedagogical implications, and acknowledge the limitations of this review.

1.   Interpretation of Key Findings

The dominance of grit and growth mindset in the literature is both understandable and slightly concerning. These constructs are highly compatible with the achievement-oriented paradigms prevalent in many educational systems. They offer a compelling narrative of success through individual effort and belief, which resonates with both learners and educators. However, an overemphasis on these individualistic, effort-focused constructs risks creating a "tyranny of the positive," where the onus of success or failure falls solely on the student's internal psychological makeup, potentially ignoring crucial systemic, social, and contextual factors that shape learning experiences (Gkonou, 2021). The rise of more holistic constructs like well-being and socially-oriented ones like Foreign Language Enjoyment, which inherently involves the classroom dynamic, provides a crucial and welcome counterbalance.

The clear link between PP constructs and Dörnyei's (2009) L2MSS confirms the theoretical synergy proposed by scholars like MacIntyre and Mercer (2014). Grit and mindset can be conceptualized as the psychological "character" that makes a learner's vision of their Ideal L2 Self feel achievable and worth striving for. Resilience acts as a protective factor that helps learners navigate the demands of the Ought-to L2 Self and the inevitable setbacks in their learning journey. Finally, positive emotions and well-being are the very heart of the L2 Learning Experience, determining whether the process itself is a source of motivation or demotivation. These interactions do not occur in a vacuum but as part of a complex, dynamic system, a perspective increasingly explored in the field (Al-Hoorie et al., 2024).

The stark disparity in research across EFL, ESL, and L1 contexts is perhaps the most significant finding of this review. The heavy focus on EFL classroom achievement highlights the field's current preoccupations but also reveals a blind spot. The ESL context, with its focus on resilience and acculturation, reminds us that language learning is often not just an academic exercise but a deeply social and existential one. The critical lack of research in the L1 context is a major oversight. We have much to learn about how PP constructs relate to the motivation of native speakers to achieve linguistic excellence, combat writing apprehension, or engage with literary texts. This gap suggests that the "positive turn" has yet to fully permeate all areas of English language education.

2. Implications for Theory and Pedagogy

The theoretical implications of this review are substantial. Future models of L2 motivation should move towards a more integrative approach, formally incorporating PP variables not as peripheral add-ons, but as central components of the motivational system. There is a need for a "Positive L2 Motivational Self System" that explicitly accounts for the role of learner well-being, character strengths, and positive emotional experiences as both antecedents and outcomes of motivation.

The pedagogical implications are more direct and actionable. This review strongly suggests that fostering motivation is inseparable from fostering learner well-being. Language teachers are, in effect, well-being facilitators. The evidence, though nascent, supports a shift away from purely deficit-oriented pedagogy (i.e., error correction) towards a more balanced approach that also incorporates strengths-based practices. Simple, low-cost interventions like gratitude journaling, mindset instruction, and promoting a supportive classroom climate can have a tangible impact. Curriculum designers and teacher training programs should consider incorporating modules on positive education, equipping teachers with the knowledge and tools to create "flourishing classrooms" where learners feel safe, engaged, and valued.

This does not mean ignoring challenges or eliminating rigor. On the contrary, a key insight from mindset and grit research is the importance of embracing challenges. The pedagogical goal is not to make learning easy, but to equip learners with the psychological resources to engage with and persist through the difficult but rewarding process of mastering a language.

3. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This systematic review, despite its rigorous methodology, has several limitations. First, by limiting our search to peer-reviewed articles in English, we may have excluded relevant research published in other languages or in other formats (e.g., books, dissertations), potentially introducing a publication and language bias. Second, the heterogeneity of the methodologies and measures used in the included studies prevented a quantitative meta-analysis, limiting our conclusions to a narrative synthesis. Third, the "file drawer problem"—the tendency for studies with null or negative results to go unpublished—means our findings likely reflect a bias towards positive associations.

These limitations, alongside the gaps identified in our findings, point to several crucial directions for future research:

a. Contextual Diversification: There is an urgent need for more research in ESL and, especially, L1 contexts. How do grit and mindset operate for advanced native-speaking writers? How can well-being be supported for refugee and immigrant learners in ESL programs?

b. Longitudinal and Interventionist Research: The field needs more longitudinal studies that track the co-development of PP constructs and motivation over time. Furthermore, more large-scale, robust intervention studies with long-term follow-up are required to establish the causal effects and lasting impact of PP-informed pedagogies.

c. Exploring a Wider Range of PP Constructs: Research should move beyond the "big four" (grit, mindset, enjoyment, resilience) to explore other important constructs like self-compassion, which may be a crucial antidote to language anxiety (Pawlak & Kruk, 2023), as well as gratitude, curiosity, and creativity.

d. Qualitative and Mixed-Methods Research: While quantitative studies have been crucial in establishing correlations, rich qualitative research is needed to understand the lived experiences of learners. How do they *experience* grit? What does a flourishing language learning classroom *feel* like from their perspective?

e. The Teacher's Role: Future research should focus more on the teacher's own well-being and positive psychological attributes. As recent studies indicate, an educator's state of flourishing is a powerful predictor of their classroom practice and, consequently, their students' motivation and success (Talbot & Mercer, 2023).

CONCLUSIONS

This systematic review of research from 2015 to 2024 confirms that the integration of positive psychology into the study of English language learning motivation is not a passing trend but a significant and fruitful evolution of the field. Over the past decade, a substantial body of evidence has emerged demonstrating that constructs like grit, growth mindset, resilience, and enjoyment are profoundly linked to learners' motivational intensity, persistence, and success. These psychological strengths act as the foundation upon which learners can build and pursue a vibrant Ideal L2 Self and find joy in the L2 learning experience itself.

However, the field is at a critical juncture. The research is currently imbalanced, heavily favouring EFL contexts and a narrow set of individualistic PP constructs. The promise of PP-informed pedagogy is clear, but the evidence base for specific interventions is still in its infancy. The path forward requires a more diverse, critical, and context-sensitive research agenda. We must broaden our focus to include under-researched populations, explore a wider array of psychological strengths, and continue to build and test pedagogical models that place the holistic well-being—the flourishing—of the language learner at the very centre of our educational mission. By doing so, we can move closer to an understanding of language education that not only teaches a global language but also cultivates more resilient, engaged, and capable global citizens.

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