

[Articles (論説)]

# The Role of Optimism in Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Developing Foreign Language Fluency

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## Abstract

A previous quantitative and qualitative study carried out by the author demonstrated that many of the personality traits that facilitate cultural adaptation or adjustment (the ability to function at a high level in cross-cultural environments) also facilitate gaining fluency in foreign languages (Keeley, 2014; Keeley, 2013; Keeley, 2012). The study employed Kozai Group's Global Competencies Inventory (GCI), a validated instrument for expatriate selection focusing on the psychological factors demonstrated to facilitate functioning in cross-cultural environments. Optimism is one of the GCI competencies that demonstrated a strong relationship with the development of oral fluency in foreign languages. The objective of this paper is to explore optimism in detail and how it facilitates cross-cultural adjustment and foreign language fluency.

## KOZAI GROUP'S OPTIMISM COMPETENCY IN THE GCI

This dimension measures the extent to which one maintains a positive outlook toward people, events and outcomes generally, and view challenges as learning opportunities. New intercultural environments are almost always stressful, so facing such situations with a positive outlook naturally improves your ability to cope and adjust.

5-point Likert scale anchored with 1 = "Strongly Disagree" and 5 = "Strongly Agree"

Overall Scale Reliability = 0.74 – Cronbach's Alpha

Sample Questions:

- ◇ I can always find something good in any situation.
- ◇ My friends would say I always look on the bright side of things.
- ◇ If I were lost, someone would probably stop and help me.

(Note that some questions are reversed-coded in calculating the dimension score.)

### *Kozai Group's Description of the Optimism (OP) Competency*

**Optimism** refers to the extent to which people maintain a positive, buoyant outlook toward other people, events, situations and outcomes. People high in optimism view problems as solvable challenges and as exciting

learning opportunities. Thus, individuals who are high in optimism exhibit such tendencies as being persistent, viewing setbacks as opportunities for learning, and believing that putting forth effort will ultimately payoff in positive outcomes. Optimism and its derivative benefits are found both in the global leadership and expatriate literatures.<sup>1</sup>

Caligiuri (2004), in a study of 256 global leaders, found that they were significantly higher in the realm of conscientiousness and significantly lower on the dimension of neuroticism in terms of their Big Five personality scores than less effective global leaders. Some of the lexical markers of *Conscientiousness* are being purposeful, strong-willed, and determined (Ones & Viswesvaran, 1997), all manifestations of optimism. In his 1996 review of the literature, one of the skills that Kealey derived from the literature was that of *Positive Attitudes*, what we term in the GCI as *Optimism*. Kealey (1996) observed, "One of the best predictors of professional effectiveness overseas is positive attitudes on the part of the expatriate. Feelings of being positive, excited, strong, and determined about undertaking the collaborative venture are indicators of potential to succeed (p. 86)."

High scorers report generally having a highly positive outlook toward people, events, and outcomes. Low scorers nearly always have a difficult time seeing the positive side of people, things, or events and tend to dwell on the negative.

#### *Kozai Group's SMART Goals for Improving Optimism Scores*

Read the book *Learned Optimism* by Martin Seligman. Identify three things you can apply from that book to your own life and practice them for at least two months. Report to someone you are comfortable with on your experience and whether it has changed your perspective or not, and why you think that might be the case.

Think about someone you're involved with (work colleague, family member, friend, etc.) and that you are not confident will be willing to do something you propose. Think of all the good reasons to be involved, especially considering their hesitation/fears. Propose the activity to that person with all the enthusiasm you can generate and tell them about all the good things that will happen. See what their reaction is and consider the effect your enthusiasm did or did not have on the person. Determine whether your enthusiasm had any positive effect at all - even in the slightest way.

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur & Bennett (1995, 1997); Caligiuri (2004); Gersten (1990); Jokinen (2005); Kealey (1996); Kühlmann & Stahl (1996, 1998); McCall & Hollenbeck (2002); Ronen (1989).

Think of someone who is an optimist and someone who is a pessimist. Pay attention to how they behave, what they are able to accomplish, and how others react to them. Note the differences you see and think about which one you would rather be like and why. Then take something you want to see happen but don't believe it's likely. Note all the good reasons why it would be good if it happened. Decide on a strategy that would increase the probability of that. What would have to change? Who would have to do what? As you think about these, note your natural thoughts, which might be why it won't work (i.e., why this person won't want to do that; why you think things will not change). Now pretend you are that optimistic person you know. Note how you think they would approach the situation differently from you - what they would think, how they would approach the people involved - their enthusiasm, the words they would choose, etc. Practice those new behaviors.

Ask a trusted friend or family member to signal when they hear you make pessimistic comments. Don't argue with their judgment of what constitutes a pessimistic statement or they'll stop helping you. Just write them down and reflect on them at a later time. What types of comments are they identifying? Can you take their perspective and see how others might interpret them as pessimistic? How do such statements impact those around you? Remember that even if statements are true and realistic, there are moments when optimism and hope are more helpful to a group. This is why optimism is one of the key characteristics of leaders. If you become more conscious of a tendency toward pessimism, you might be able to recognize pessimistic statements and their impact. Set a goal to decrease the number of pessimistic comments you make in a day and consciously try to transform such thoughts and attitudes into positive ones.

### **Optimism & Foreign Language Acquisition**

*"It is not God's will merely that we should be happy, but that we should make ourselves happy."* – Immanuel Kant

*"The pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees the opportunity of every difficulty."* – Winston Churchill

*"There's nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so."* – William Shakespeare (Hamlet)

## Results for the GCI Self-Management Variable Optimism

In a quantitative study carried out using Kozai Group’s Global Competencies Inventory (Keeley, 2014; Keeley, 2013; Keeley, 2012), 86 Chinese students studying at a Japanese university in various disciplines were separated into 5 groups according to their relative performance ratings in ‘Japanese Ability’ (oral/aural communication).<sup>2</sup> The participants filled out a Chinese version of the GCI. Thereafter, their scores on the GCI were examined in relation to their ratings in ‘Japanese Ability’. The results of the ANOVA for Optimism yielded an F Value of 23.447 (Sig. = 0.000) between the ‘Top 17’ and ‘Bottom 17’. Furthermore, the F Value for all five groups was 8.444 (Sig. = 0.000). These high F Values confirm the validity of the correlation and difference of means analyses. Table 1 shows that the correlation between *Optimism* scores and ‘Japanese Ability’ are significant for the ‘Top 17’ and ‘Bottom 17’ as well as for all 86 participants.

**Table 1: Optimism & ‘Japanese Ability’ Correlation**

Scale	Pearson Correlation	Significance (2-Tailed)	Subjects
Optimism	0.659/0.521	0.000/0.000	34/86

Additionally, there is a significant difference between the mean of the ‘Top 17’ subgroup’s scores for *Optimism* and that of the ‘Bottom 17’ subgroup as can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2: Differences of Means for Optimism Scores**

Optimism	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig. 2-tailed	Mean Difference	Interval 95% Conf.
‘Top 17’	17	3.4748	0.5119	0.1242	0.000	0.7059	0.4089 to
‘Bottom 17’	17	2.7689	0.3149	0.0764			1.0028

### *Neurobiology of Optimism*

If we equate optimism with Davidson’s (2012) concept of ‘Outlook in Emotional Style’ the following neurobiological observations apply. When we anticipate receiving something rewarding or pleasurable, a cluster of neurons within the ventral striatum called the nucleus accumbens becomes active. This

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<sup>2</sup> See Keeley (2013) for the method used to rate the students’ ‘Japanese Ability’.

region is critical for motivation and generating a sense of reward. It is also packed with neurons that either release or capture the neurotransmitter dopamine (which plays a role in positive emotion, motivation, and desire) as well as endogenous opiates (which provide a high such as we feel after strenuous exercise). In experimental conditions, when stimulated with pictures depicting happy situations, levels of activity in nucleus accumbens are the same for people with a positive outlook and people with a negative outlook. However, when instructed to try to maintain the positive feelings, people with a positive outlook are able to sustain the activity longer than people with a negative outlook. Under these conditions, the nucleus accumbens receives signals from the prefrontal cortex instructing it to maintain the happy feeling. Positive outlook subjects (or healthy volunteers) are able to sustain these signals from the prefrontal cortex. In negative outlook subjects (volunteers with depression), the signals are not sustained to the same extent and the activity of the nucleus accumbens declines.

If we think of optimism in terms of optimistic bias as proposed by Sharot (2014, 2012) the focus will be on a different aspect of neurobiology. In particular, the rostral anterior cingulate cortex (RACC) and the right amygdala are strongly activated when thoughts of happy future events flood our minds. The higher people score on optimism, the more strongly the RACC is activated. The RACC may function to help us imagine future events by assessing our emotions of similar past events. More importantly, the RACC may work hand-in-hand with the amygdala to actually downplay negative emotional responses.

### ***Some Historical Background of Optimism***

The image of optimism as a serious subject of inquiry has had its ups and downs throughout history. It is a long and complicated history but lets take a look at a few illustrations in relatively recent Western philosophy and literature. Leibniz, the German mathematician and philosopher, is most noted in philosophy for his optimism; he concludes that our universe is, in a restricted sense, the best possible one that God could have created. Here the word 'optimism' is understood in the classical sense of optimal and not in the sense of being positively hopeful. Optimism was front and center in the Enlightenment utopian literature. During the Renaissance, there was certainly unbridled optimism and a sense of humanity's great unfulfilled potential. The Enlightenment was believed to be the realization of the tools and strategies necessary to achieve that potential. The Renaissance was the seed, while the Enlightenment was the blossom. The

Enlightenment was a revolt that swept across Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century against inherited intellectual authority stemming from either classical or religious authority. The seeds for the Enlightenment were planted around the middle and later part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century by the founders of the so-called Scientific Revolution such as Galileo Galilei, William Harvey, and Isaac Newton, and by philosophers such as René Descartes, Benedict de Spinoza, and Gottfried Leibniz, as well as by the theorists of 'natural rights' such as Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke.

However, Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau were disappointed with the results of the optimism promoted by the philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment. Rousseau was a strong advocate for social reform of all kinds. Rousseau was an optimist concerning human nature, but a pessimist regarding civilization's potential to bring out these positive characteristics in us. Voltaire also sought social reforms and was likewise disillusioned when they were not realized under Frederick the Great. Voltaire was closely identified with the Enlightenment, which arrived at a fundamental belief in 'progress' – a fundamental optimism about the capacity of modern Europeans to reshape the social and political world for the better. Nevertheless, due to his dissatisfaction with the lack of social change Voltaire attacked the passivity inspired by Leibniz's philosophy of optimism in his 1759 satire *Candide*, which featured the philosopher and tutor Dr. Pangloss who believed that in spite of what happens in life all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Voltaire's novel led to the use of 'Pangloss' as a term ranging in meaning from 'one who is optimistic regardless of the circumstances' to 'blindly or unreasonably optimistic'. Later in history, Pollyanna, the protagonist Eleanor Porter's (1913) best-selling children's book, fell to the same ill fate. In psychology, Pollyanna Syndrome is the psychological phenomenon wherein a person becomes blindly or foolishly optimistic to a point that it's almost delusional. Furthermore, the Pollyanna Principle is the tendency for people to agree with positive statements describing them – it is considered to be a case of subconscious level optimism even in the face of a conscious-level tendency to focus on the negative.

### ***The Rise of Positive Psychology***

Pangloss and Pollyanna represent a social/cultural legacy in literature engendering connotations of a certain naiveté and denial that is often associated with optimism in the minds of thoughtful people. We also see this view in Freud's

psychoanalytical theorizing in which optimism is considered illusory denial. However, over the past 20-30 years we have seen the pendulum swinging in the opposite direction with more emphasis on the personal benefits of optimism in contrast to optimism inherent in the construction of a utopian society. The first wave of research focused on defining optimism and creating questionnaires for measuring it. Thereafter, research has sought to illuminate how optimism and pessimism affect people's well-being and outcomes. It has become quite clear that a person's level of optimism not only impacts his/her personal life, but there is also firm evidence that a person's level of optimism can actually predict his/her performance on the job. For example, Isen (2001) reviewed evidence indicating that, in most circumstances, positive affect enhances problem solving and decision-making, leading to cognitive processing that is not only more flexible, innovative, and creative but also thorough and efficient.

Scheier and Carver (1987) studied optimism as a personality variable and labeled it dispositional optimism, which is understood as a global expectation that good things will be plentiful in the future and that bad things will be scarce. Their perspective is how people pursue goals, defined as desirable values. According to their position, virtually all areas of human activity can be viewed in terms of goals. People's behavior entails the identification and adoption of goals and regulation of actions vis-à-vis these goals. In this sense, their approach is a self-regulatory model in which people explore the impediments to achieving the goals they have adopted. People are considered optimistic if they believe they can achieve these goals in the face of difficulties and pessimistic if they believe they cannot. Thus, optimism leads to sustained efforts while pessimism leads to cessation of efforts. Their research results, as well as those of others, have demonstrated that dispositional optimism is linked to desirable outcomes and, in particular, to active and effective coping. These observations support the integration of *Optimism* in the GCI in relation to cross-cultural adjustment as well as a psychological component facilitating foreign language acquisition.

Seligman introduced an explanatory style approach to optimism with his book *Learned Optimism* (1991) and took up the subject again later in his book *The Optimistic Child* (1996). Explanatory style optimism arose from his research work with 'learned helplessness' in the 1970s and 1980s. In other words, it served as an alternative to the reaction of giving up when faced with the belief that whatever you do does not matter. His explanatory style of optimism developed from the pattern of how people explained events that happened to them. Seligman (1991:15) claimed, "An optimistic explanatory style stops helplessness, whereas pessimistic



explanatory style spreads helplessness.” Those who explain away bad events with internal (caused by themselves: personal, internal vs. external), stable (will continue to occur: permanent stable vs. unstable) and global (will happen in other spheres of life: global vs. local/specific) causes are described as pessimistic while those who favor external, unstable, and specific causes are described as optimistic.

Seligman’s explanatory style is derived from Bernard Weiner’s attribution theory<sup>3</sup>, which concerns the way people attribute a cause or explanation to an unpleasant event. People explaining how the cause of an event arises may perceive they are the cause of the event and in such a case they are internalizing rather than externalizing the event. In explaining the extent of the cause, people may view the situation as unchangeable, thus they see it as stable versus unstable. Finally, in explaining the extent of the effects, people may view it as a situation affecting all aspects of life, thus they see it as global rather than local. According Seligman, people who make permanent and universal explanations for their troubles tend to collapse when under pressure for a long time and across situations. People prone to depression tend to take much more responsibility for bad events than is realistic. Young adults and middle-aged parents with a Pessimistic Explanatory Style are likely to suffer from depression.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, people with a Pessimistic Explanatory Style tend to be poor at problem-solving and cognitive restructuring, and also tend to demonstrate poor job satisfaction and poor interpersonal relationships in the workplace.<sup>5</sup> They also tend to have weakened immune systems, and not only have increased vulnerability to minor ailments (e.g. cold, fever) and major illness (e.g. heart attack, cancers), but also a have less effective recovery from health problems.<sup>6</sup>

Seligman, in his 1998 American Psychological Association (APA) Presidential Address, is said to have introduced positive psychology to the APA. However, Froh (2004) argues that there is overwhelming evidence suggesting that the principle components of positive psychology date back at least to William James. More recently, Abraham Maslow, famous for his theory of motivation, spoke of a psychology in which attention should be given not only to what is, but also to what could be. Maslow even used ‘positive psychology’ as the title for a chapter in his book *Motivation and Personality* published in 1954. Though Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (famous for his book *Flow: The Psychology of*

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<sup>3</sup> Weiner, B. (1986).

<sup>4</sup> Chang & Sanna (2007).

<sup>5</sup> Welbourne et al. (2007)

<sup>6</sup> Bennett & Elliott (2005)



*Optimal Experience*) have been the leading proponents of positive psychology in recent years, they have been accused of not giving enough credit to 'humanistic psychology' for the origins of positive psychology. Many psychologists were unhappy with the disease model that drives much of psychology and wanted to put more focus on the innate tendency of humans to strive for perpetual growth. Humanistic psychology has been largely concerned with the quality of the human experience and included such topics as love, creativity, growth, self-actualization, peak experience, courage, etc. Froh argues that the pillars of positive psychology proposed by Seligman mimic those of James, Maslow, and other humanists. At any rate, what is clear is that positive psychology and the study of optimism have been on the rise.

### ***Optimism Bias as a Human Adaptive Trait***

Sharot (2012) points out that the ability to anticipate is a hallmark of cognition and inferences about what will occur in the future are critical to decision making, enabling us to prepare our actions so as to avoid harm and gain reward. Nevertheless, humans exhibit a pervasive and surprising bias towards optimism: we overestimate the likelihood of positive events and underestimate the likelihood of negative events. For example, we underrate our chances of getting divorced, being in a car accident, or suffering from cancer. In spite of the fact that a positively biased perspective can potentially have unwanted negative outcomes due to insufficient cognition of risks, Sharot (2012) views the bias towards optimism as a human adaptive trait. Optimism bias protects us from accurately perceiving and dwelling upon the pain and difficulty that may be inherent in the future and thus it may also protect us from ruling out options and creating an overly limited life. The result of these functions is a reduction of stress and anxiety, improvement of physical and mental health, and the enhancement of the motivation to act and be productive. We need to be able to imagine better alternative realities and believe that it is possible to bring these realities into being. Sharot argues that the mind has a tendency to try to transform predictions into reality. In other words, the brain is organized in way that enables optimistic beliefs to change the way we view and interact with the world around us, making optimism a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The optimism bias has been observed in many different countries among all age groups and both genders. Some people argue that optimism bias is not positive; that the secret to happiness is low expectations. The logic is if we have

low expectations in life then we will not be disappointed when desired outcomes do not come to fruition and when they do happen we will be pleasantly surprised and thus happy. However, Sharot points out there are three reasons why this is false. The first reason is that whether we experience success or failure, people with high expectations always feel better. The source of this phenomenon is found in interpretation of events. This is the same concept as the internal vs. external explanation style of attribution theory. Successes are viewed as internal causes and failures as external causes by optimists while the opposite is true of pessimists.

The second reason is that anticipation is an important aspect in creating positive states or happiness. Anticipation allows for fantasizing or imagining an event or outcome. In cultures where Saturday and Sundays are usually days off from work people tend to prefer Friday to Sunday even though Sunday is a day off and Friday is a workday. On Friday we can anticipate two full days off from work and construct scenarios about how to spend the free time, on Sunday we can only anticipate another week of work. Anticipation is also the focus of Loewenstein's research on the role of emotions in economic behavior. In one experiment, Loewenstein and Elster (1992) asked students to imagine getting a kiss from a celebrity; and then asked how much they would be willing to pay if the kiss was delivered immediately, in three hours, in 24 hours, in three days, in one year, in ten years. He found that the students were willing to pay more to wait a moderate length of time, and in this case they were willing to pay the most for three days. It seems that three days represents the optimal choice among the alternatives since it allows sufficient time for the thrill of anticipation – constructing or imagining the event – without having to wait too long. I find that the same type of anticipation effect is involved when I am studying a language before I visit the country where it is spoken. I look forward to the pleasure of actually using the language with native speaker in every day situations. This increases my motivation to practice and imagine practice conversations in the target language.

The third reason is that optimism changes subjective reality: the ways we expect the world to be changes the way we see it – it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you expect to do well, you will put more effort into making it so. That is why lowering your expectations will not lead to happiness. Low expectations do not enhance motivation and constructive goal-oriented behavior. What if Martin Luther King had said, "I had a nightmare" instead of "I had a dream" and focused on what would happen if social change in regards to racism did not occur? There

might have been social upheaval and violence rather than peaceful resistance styled after the movement created by Mahatma Gandhi in India to overthrow British colonial rule.

If expectations are better than reality, the bias is optimistic; if reality is better than expected, the bias is pessimistic. The extent of the optimism bias is thus measured empirically by recording an individual's expectations before an event unfolds and contrasting those with the outcomes that transpire. Research studies on optimism consistently report that a large majority of the population (about 80%) displays an optimism bias across gender, race, nationality and age. Without optimism bias people become slightly depressed. Individuals with severe depression have a pessimistic bias. Strunk et al. (2006) have shown that people with mild depression show no bias when predicting future events, and people with severe depression tend to expect things to be worse than they turn out.

Sharot and her colleagues investigated how people maintain optimism bias in the face of disconfirming evidence. They found that people update their beliefs more in response to positive information about the future than to negative information about the future. They asked participants to estimate their likelihood of encountering different aversive events in their lifetime (such as Alzheimer's disease and burglary) and then presented them with the average frequency of encountering those events. Next they asked them to estimate their likelihoods once again in order to test whether they used the information provided to update their beliefs. They found that when individuals received information that was worse than their estimate they did not update their estimate much the second time around. However, if a person initially provided an estimate that was more pessimistic than the information they were subsequently given, they substantially updated their estimate to more closely match the average probability. Selectively updating beliefs in response to positive information but not substantially changing beliefs in the face of negative information produces optimism that is resistant to change (Sharot et al., 2011).

They also demonstrated that this selectivity is mediated by how the brain processes the positive and negative information. When optimistic people are confronted with unexpected statistics about the likelihood of a negative event, their right inferior frontal gyrus (one area of the brain involved in processing such negative input) exhibits reduced coding of the information that requires a negative update of their beliefs. That is to say that individuals with high trait optimism have a weaker correlation between activity in this region of the brain and the extent of negative errors in estimation embedded in their beliefs.

However, when presented with information that is better than expectations embedded in beliefs both highly optimistic and less optimistic individuals code the information efficiently in the prefrontal cortex (one area of the brain involved in processing such positive input). In other words, while coding for positive information is intact for both types of individuals, optimism is tied to the limited updating from (and diminished neural coding of) undesirable information regarding the future. Such selective updating is observed in healthy populations but the pattern appears to be abolished, and even reversed in the case of depression. Healthy individuals 'approach' positive future scenarios and distance themselves from negative ones.

Optimism can lead to unrealistic expectations and insufficient cautionary measures to avoid risk so the key is how to protect ourselves from this pitfalls while enjoying the fruits of optimism. Underestimating risk may lead to a reduction in precautionary behavior such as safe sex. The first step is the realization that optimism can be illusionary and so we must also play the devil's advocate at times. When comparing risk estimates with actual objective outcome, it appears that people are realistic (that is, relatively accurate) about their own risk (Shepperd, 2000). Understanding the illusionary aspects of optimism (it-won't-happen-to-me syndrome and ignoring statistical reality) does not necessarily destroy the optimism bias or negate its benefits. McKay and Dennett (2009) conclude that optimistic beliefs are the only group of misbeliefs that are adaptive.

### ***Optimism & Positive Emotional States***

There is a direct link between the developed optimism and happiness. Both of these states can be categorized as positive emotions that increase overall emotional energy. When you have a general feeling of being unhappy it is hard to feel optimistic about your abilities to realize your goals. On the other hand, when you experience strong feelings of happiness you tend to be much more optimistic about what you are capable of doing and the outcomes of your efforts. When blissfully experiencing love there is a great increase in the feeling of empowerment. Psychological research finds that people's happiness levels are remarkably stable over the long-term.<sup>7</sup> Whether you win the lottery or are paralyzed from the neck down, after about three to six months you'll have returned to your usual level of happiness.

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<sup>7</sup> Emmons & McCullough (2003).

The assumption that our external world is predictive of our happiness levels is far from the reality of the situation. Fame and fortune is not an automatic ticket to happiness, perhaps it even makes being happy more difficult. Achor (2010) claims that even with all the pertinent information about your external world it would only be possible to predict 10% of your happiness since 90% of your happiness is predicted by how your brain processes the world. Furthermore, he asserts that only 25% of job performance is predicted by intelligence, while optimism levels, social support, and the ability to see stress as a challenge instead of as a threat predict 75% of job performance. Success is not the source of happiness since success usually breeds the desire for more success in a never-ending cycle leaving happiness just beyond the horizon in the future. Achor maintains that if you can raise the level of people's positivity in the present then their brain experiences what he calls a happiness advantage. The brain in positive states (and optimistic states) performs considerably better than it does in negative, neutral, or stressed states. Intelligence, creativity, and energy levels rise.

Dopamine floods into your system when you are positive and the research of Sharot et al. (2012) shows that as dopamine levels increase, prediction bias increases in an optimistic direction – people are more likely to have an optimistic outlook. Happy (positive) and optimistic states can enhance learning and general mental functions. Dopamine is the chemical neurotransmitter most closely associated with attention, memory storage, comprehension, and executive function. The brain is believed to make associations between specific cues and these desirable states or goals. Dopamine activity can be evaluated through neuroimaging and it has been found that dopamine release is increased in brain centers associated with learning and memory in response to rewards and positive experiences. Research has found that the brain released more dopamine into these learning circuits when the individual was playing, laughing, exercising, and receiving acknowledgement for achievement (Salamone & Correa, 2002).

Emmons and Shelton (2002) suggest that expressing gratitude for life's blessings (a sense of wonder, thankfulness and appreciation) is likely to elevate positive affect for a number of reasons. Gratitude thinking creates extended moments of enjoying positive experiences and allows for gaining the maximum possible satisfaction and enjoyment from positive circumstances. When people take things for granted they no longer appreciate their blessings or positive things in their lives and thus fail to get a continuous positive emotional boost from them. Practicing gratitude can also be an adaptive coping strategy by which people positively interpret problematic experiences: for example, just being

happy that you and your loved-ones survived a natural disaster even though you suffer significant material losses. Furthermore, Achor (2010) claims that people who practice thinking of three new things to be grateful for each day for 21 days start to create a pattern of scanning the world not for the negative but for the positive first.

Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2006) investigated the effects of expressing gratitude and visualizing best possible selves as a way to increase and sustain positive emotion. They carried out a 4-week experimental study examining the motivational predictors and positive emotion outcomes of regularly practicing two mental exercises: counting one's blessings ('gratitude') and visualizing best possible selves ('BPSs'). In a control exercise, participants attended to the details of their day. Following previous theory and research, the practices of gratitude and BPSs were expected to boost immediate positive affect, relative to the control condition. In addition, they hypothesized that continuing effortful performance of these exercises would be necessary to maintain the increase in positive affect. Finally, initial self-concordant motivation to perform the exercise was expected to predict actual performance and to moderate the effects of performance on increased mood.

The results generally supported these hypotheses, and suggested that the BPSs exercise may be most beneficial for raising and maintaining positive mood. Possible selves have been defined as idiographic representations of goals, encompassing all of the futures that people can imagine for themselves. Writing about one's possible selves is thus likely to improve self-regulation because it allows an opportunity to learn about oneself, to illuminate and restructure one's priorities, and to better gain insight into one's motives and emotions. In this sense it is also a practice of increasing self-awareness. Carver et al. (1994) investigated possible-selves in relation to studying dispositional optimism. They emphasized that these possible-selves refer to future rather than current self-states and they represent the individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming. The BPSs in the context of becoming a fluent in a foreign language represent the optimistic perspective of possible-selves approximating a native speaker of the target language. The exercises of envisioning BPSs may serve to increase motivation and emotional energy and in doing so increase the likelihood of success.

There are also numerous other ways to increase the positive affect associated with optimistic states of mind. Keeping a journal about one good thing that happens to each day allows your brain to re-experience the event leading to

prolonged positive states. All things that your brain rests upon create stable neural networks associated with those experiences, in other words they shape your brain and the direction of your overall mental states. Exercise reduces stress and improves moods as well as yields positive long-term effects more conducive to long-term happiness. Exercise is a beneficial antidepressant both immediately and over the long term (Babyak et. al, 2000). Practicing random acts of kindness can make you feel more positive, more in control and increase your general level of optimism. According to Lyubomirsky (2007), performing acts of kindness leads us to see others in a better light, creates a stronger sense of community, diminishes negative feelings of guilt or distress, encourages a sense of appreciation for your own circumstances, causes you to view yourself as ‘an altruistic and compassionate person’, and starts a cascade of positive social consequences.

### ***Optimism as a Self-Amplifying Feedback Loop***

Filmmaker and Futurist Jason Silva promotes the concept of optimism as a self-amplifying feedback loop. At the core of his faith in human agency is the idea that optimism can be an active self-reinforcing practice. We become the designers of our own fate. In other words, by practicing optimism, he believes we create circumstances that amplify that optimism and make external challenges weaker and easier to overcome. You can decide to be optimistic and to look for the positive and the beautiful aspects of every experience and in doing so you will create experiences that further amplify your optimism and sense of the beautiful, which encourages you to keep cultivating your sense of it, which leads to more awareness of the positive and beautiful aspects of experiences, and so on. Our mental environments do not just happen to us, we create them. The point is that we should recognize our power to exercise what Silva calls ‘editorial control’ in our lives. This is not a novel concept. Cognitive scientists have long spoken of the power to create your own joy or misery by how you manage or deal with your thoughts and perceptions.

Silva was fascinated by Rich Doyle’s discussion of feedback loops in his book *Darwin’s Pharmacy*. Doyle wrote about finding ways to become aware of the feedback loops between our creative and linguistic choices and our consciousness and our experience. The implication is that we have an extraordinary capacity to sculpt and mold our lives, the spaces we inhabit, and the people we surround ourselves with. Essentially we coauthor our experience, which represents a



perception of internal locus of control. Research exists linking locus of control and optimism. For example, Guarnera and Williams (1987) studied optimism and locus of control for health and affiliation among elderly adults and hypothesized that optimism would correlate positively with internal locus of control measures and correlate negatively with external locus of control measures. Five of nine comparisons between optimism and locus of control measures yielded significant relationships. Other studies report a positive relationship between perceptions of control and optimistic bias such that the greater the perceived control over the outcome of an event, the greater the optimistic bias for that event (Harris, 1996). Thus, it is most likely a two-way street between perception of locus of control and optimism. We are more likely to be optimistic about outcomes when we perceive greater locus of control and likewise more likely to perceive ability to affect outcomes if we are optimistic.

### ***Overcoming Self-Imposed Limits with Optimism***

The limits we face in life are often the limits we impose upon ourselves. Henry Ford once said, "If you think you can, or you think you can't you're right." There are so-called 'real limits' in many instances in life, but the majority of the limits that actually hold us back are only in our minds in the form of attitudes and false assumptions. Fear of failure and the perceived consequences of failure represent the most common hindrances to success and achievement. Fear and pessimism actually do affect your abilities when you give into them. These observations are especially true in the case of speaking foreign languages since there is not doubt that debilitating anxiety destroys performance. Optimism and pessimism may appear to be simple opposites in attitude or state of mind such as being happy or sad. However, the ramifications of dispositional optimism and dispositional pessimism are extremely important in determining success and failure, health and sickness, etc. It is almost universally true that optimists tend to thrive in multiple domains while pessimists languish. Optimists live longer lives, earn more money, succeed more often in school, enjoy happier marriages, experience better health, and have greater resilience in the face of obstacles (Seligman, 2006). Pessimists, on the other hand, tend to have shorter life spans, lower earning caps, and lower overall achievement (Puri and Robinson, 2007).

As discussed above, dispositional optimism–pessimism can be defined in terms of generalized expectancies concerning important future positive (optimism) and negative outcomes (pessimism) (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Personal

optimism correlates strongly with self-esteem, with psychological well-being, and with personal health. Studies have also shown that optimism/pessimism have implications for the manner in which people cope with stressful experiences, and the success with which they cope in their lives. For example, Chang (2002) demonstrated that higher scores on optimism have been associated with less psychological maladjustment, including higher perceived stress, and greater life satisfaction. In contrast, Chang et al. (1997) indicated that there is significant evidence that links pessimism to lower life satisfaction, greater perceived stress and higher depressive symptoms. These observations indicate the important role optimism can play in adjusting to cross-cultural environments.

### ***Emotional Intelligence, Optimism, and Foreign Language Acquisition***

Optimism is an important component of emotional intelligence (EI) since it helps us maintain the balance we need to stay emotionally, psychologically and even physically fit in challenging situations. There is a direct link between emotional, psychological, and physical states. As previously discussed, optimism plays an important role in successfully adjusting to a new cultural setting. Likewise, it is also important to adjusting to functioning in a foreign language. Acquiring a foreign language to a high level of oral proficiency requires maintaining a positive attitude, persistence, and a certain level of excitement that fuels the great effort involved. A healthy dose of optimism helps the learner face challenges and maintain a positive attitude in the process.

A great deal of effort is required in becoming highly functional in a foreign language, particularly if it is your first additional language. Goal setting greatly assists in monitoring your progress and can have a motivating effect when you reach your goals. The goals should be specific, measurable and obtainable. A learning goal orientation has positive relationships with optimism and the desire to work hard (VandeWalle, 1996, 1997). Individuals with learning orientations exhibit behaviors that are consistent with people who possess high levels of emotional stability. Being undaunted, not appearing to believe that they are failing, and maintaining a flagging optimism in the face of challenges characterizes the behaviors of individuals with a learning orientation (Lawson, 1999).

There will always be obstacles and setbacks in your progress to becoming fluent in foreign languages. Overcoming these obstacles and setbacks is facilitated by maintaining optimism, which is an essential aspect of emotional intelligence in relation to the ability to limit affective hindrances such as loss of confidence and

feelings of inadequacy in the process of acquiring fluency in a foreign language. Goleman (1996) popularized the idea of EI in his best selling book on the subject. Goleman saw EI as an idea or theme that emerged from a large set of research findings on the role of the emotions in human life. These findings pointed to different ways in which competencies such as empathy, learned optimism, and self-control contributed to important outcomes in the family, the workplace and other life arenas. Goleman shows that factors at work when people with high IQ flounder and those with modest IQ do surprising well. I have a friend whom I helped get through graduate school in business by tutoring him before all the tests. He was not great at the schoolwork but he had a great deal optimism and emotional intelligence in dealing with people. He surely was not a financial wiz, but now 30 years later he is a high level executive in a financial corporation!

One of the most widely used self-report measures for EI is the Trait Meta-Mood Scale. It evaluates three facets of the reflective processes that accompany mood states termed the meta-mood experience (Salovey et al., 1995). First, there is 'attention', which refers to the perceived ability to attend to moods and emotions. Second, there is 'clarity', which refers to the perceived ability to discriminate clearly among feelings. The third is 'repair', which refers to an individual's perceived ability to repair negative moods. In the course of interacting in a foreign language, it is important to monitor moods and emotions that may affect performance. One such emotion is fear or anxiety – for example the fear of making mistakes or sounding incompetent in the language. Clarity assists in understanding what exactly the feeling is and where it is coming from. Repair is then the process of learning how to the overcome particular fear or anxiety. Catanzaro et al. (2000) have demonstrated that expectancies about one's ability to terminate a negative mood state were moderately related to more global and generalized expectancies such as optimism/pessimism.

There can be emotional highs experienced when learning a foreign language as well as emotional lows. The highs are usually prevalent in the first stage of learning a foreign language when you find you can actually communicate with native speakers on a limited basis. The lows tend to come as you try to overcome persistent errors or lack of understanding fluent native speech in certain contexts. EI is conceptualized as the capacity to perceive, assimilate, understand, and manage your emotions and those of people with whom you interact. Optimism can be seen as a mechanism for maintaining a healthy level of emotional energy. When involved in a conversation in a foreign language self-doubt and fear of making mistakes can quickly derail fluent speech. With an optimistic attitude

poor performance in the language learning process is viewed as a temporary setback isolated to the circumstances at the time and viewed as something that can be overcome with greater effort. On the other hand, a pessimistic attitude may result in viewing such an incidence as indicative of the inability to become fluent in the language and reinforce any attitude that suggests the person is 'poor at languages'.

Foreign language learners who use their emotional intelligence skills such as optimism and emotional self-awareness to their advantage feel more controlled when under stress than others do because of their ability to view a stress-generating situation as a challenge rather than a threat. Optimism is a critical skill that plays a significant role in separating the top performers from the low performers. The mindset of rational optimism allows learners to focus on the possibilities of success rather than the consequences of poor performance or failure. If you are optimistic you can more easily create an image of yourself in your mind as a competent speaker of the target language. For a pessimist such an image does not come easy, rather it seems to be purely imagination with no base in reality when you are struggling with the language.

### ***The Optimism of Polyglots***

Benny the Irish Polyglot publishes about his language learning experience on-line. He is always making his language learning challenges public, such as learning Czech in two months, learning to speak Portuguese like a Brazilian in three months, etc. Personally I understand his mindset because I often set similar goals for myself. After learning Spanish, Portuguese, French, German, and Serbo-Croatian between the ages of 18 and 22 I decided I wanted to learn all the major languages of the world (36 years later I am well on my way to achieving this goal with a lot of minor languages thrown in the pot). Another interesting parallel between Benny and me is that we both had to go to a speech therapist for English when we were young. Additionally he says he has a hard time imitating an American accent and I have a hard time imitating an Irish accent but we both find mimicking native speakers of other languages quite easy. We both think that anyone can learn foreign languages and that age and genes are not very important factors. Most importantly we are both very optimistic about our language learning goals.

In his blog he argues that having a pessimistic perspective is by far one of the biggest issues people have that hold them back from learning languages. Benny

says his accomplishments in meeting his language learning goals are much less thanks to genetics and natural talent, and much more down to an efficient approach and a great deal of optimism throughout the task. Benny claims, “optimism isn’t just having a smile on your face despite setbacks, it can dramatically alter the course of your personal missions.” In his blog, Benny focuses on how to develop and maintain a positive attitude and avoid the pitfalls of negativity. It is important to remember that Seligman (2006) speaks of ‘learned optimism’ in the sense that we can change our mind and thus change our behavior and the results of our efforts.

When I think back about my journey in life that has focused on experiencing new cultures and languages I realize that I was optimistic in more than just believing I could continue to add languages to my linguistic repertoire. I was optimistic that I could get by with limited financial resources while travelling around the world with my never-ending thirst for new cultures and languages. After my first extended stay abroad while studying at Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia, I set out on a journey around South America with just \$900 in 1976. I was able to go down the Amazon, make my way through most of Brazil’s states, head on through Paraguay, Uruguay, and Argentina until I reached the end of South America at Tierra del Fuego and then make my way back through Chile, Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador. After studying in Switzerland I spent a summer travelling the Adriatic coast of the former Yugoslavia on a bicycle sleeping outside most of the time and meeting wonderful people from all over Europe, practicing languages I knew and learning new ones. During my two years in Poland I went to North Africa one summer on a cheap Jawa 350 cc motorcycle, which I had purchased brand new in Poland for \$350 U.S. during the socialist years. I was optimistic that I could find work in Germany during my holidays. After Poland I was optimistic that I would make it to Japan on \$1,000 after travelling all around South East Asia. Once in Japan studying at university, work came easy with my language and cultural skills. More than 34 years has past since I first stepped foot in Japan. I have continued to study new languages and learn about new cultures supported by my optimism that has been strengthen by success in my endeavors.

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