

# A “positive” turn in heritage language education: Multilingual children’s voices on language learner well-being

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents the first empirical attempt to understand language learner well-being in the context of heritage language (HL) learning. Adopting a positive psychology perspective, the research investigates the well-being experiences of Chinese heritage language (CHL) children to explore what flourishing means in HL learning. Data were collected from multimodal focus groups with 40 young CHL learners in the UK, involving a well-being exercise, a drawing activity, and semi-structured discussions. Following an appreciative inquiry approach, the findings indicate that HL learners’ well-being revolves around “feeling good,” “doing well,” and “being connected,” including six essential components: positive emotions, affirmative self, perceived competence, active engagement, supportive relations, and diasporic connections. By centring young learners’ perspectives, we propose a multidimensional framework representing different aspects of their flourishing in the journey of HL development, which informs further theorisation of HL learner well-being as multifaceted, interconnected, and contextual. By shifting the emphasis from linguistic achievement to a more holistic approach that prioritises the socio-emotional wellness of HL learners, we also seek to instigate a “positive” turn in HL education which provides an intellectual basis for the design, implementation, and evaluation of future HL interventions with significant policy implications.

## 1. Introduction

With the emergence of Positive Psychology (PP) in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), there has been a growing interest in optimising learning processes in ways that foster not only linguistic proficiency but also happiness and flourishing among language learners (Dewaele et al., 2019; MacIntyre et al., 2019; Oxford, 2016c). Despite the recent efforts to promote well-being within language learning, the concept of well-being itself — a fundamental aspect of PP — remains under-researched (Wang et al., 2021). Among a few pioneering studies, Oxford (2016a, 2016b) has made initial attempts towards the EMPATHICS model to capture key factors contributing to learners’ well-being. However, this body of research is still in its infancy and there remains a gap in knowledge regarding learners’ own experiences and perceptions of well-being in language learning. What is further missing are the voices of multilingual heritage language (HL) children, for whom the journey of language development is interlaced with their daily existence, rendering their well-being as HL learners an integral aspect of their overall flourishing and growth.

While defining heritage learners is a complex matter, in this paper, they are generally described as individuals who have a familial or cultural connection to a non-dominant language and learn that language within a migration context (Fishman, 2006; He, 2008;

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Kondo-Brown, 2006). Existing research has revealed that HL learning often involves more conflicting situations than traditional second language (L2) contexts (Krashen, 2000; Sevinç, 2016). Although learning an HL is often viewed as a positive asset, it also presents various socio-psychological and emotional challenges, such as linguistic insecurity, poor self-image, emotional vulnerability, and acculturation stress (Pavlenko, 2006; Sevinç & Dewaele, 2018; Zhou & Liu, 2023). The unique emotional landscapes of HL learners, including negative emotions and distinct stressors (e.g., shame, trauma, discomfort, frustration), have also been documented (Driver & Prada, 2024). As such, to foster a healthy and flourishing HL learning journey, it is crucial to explore the well-being experiences of this specific group and understand their learning process from a PP perspective. However, research into language learner well-being has predominantly focused on L2 contexts, leaving HL learners' well-being underexplored.

This study is dedicated to advancing the emerging concept of language learner well-being by focusing on a relatively understudied population of young Chinese heritage language (CHL) learners in the UK. Taking a PP perspective and utilising appreciative inquiry, we seek to explore how multilingual CHL children describe their well-being experiences and, based on their voices, propose a conceptual framework for understanding what flourishing<sup>1</sup> means in HL learning. We posit that this is the essential first step towards identifying ways to support their well-being. In doing so, the study also hopes to catalyse a paradigm shift in HL education, moving the focus from linguistic achievements to a more holistic perspective that prioritises the socio-emotional wellness of HL learners.

## 2. Literature Review

In the following sections, we first review the concept of well-being from PP and children's perspectives, explaining how these inform our investigation of language learner well-being among young HL learners. Given the lack of research on this specific learner group, we then explore well-being literature in general L2 contexts before arguing for the importance of understanding well-being among multilingual HL children, which leads to our current study.

### 2.1. A positive psychology approach to well-being

PP, a relatively new subfield of psychology, has played a significant role in the current theoretical advancements concerning well-being (McLellan & Steward, 2015). A key feature of PP is its recognition that well-being involves not only the absence of mental illness but also the presence of positive experiences and traits (Keyes, 2006; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In contrast to traditional psychological approaches, which predominantly centre on addressing pathologies like depression and anxiety, PP calls for a more holistic exploration of the human psyche. Seligman, a leading advocate of PP, has emphasised the need for psychology to move beyond "repairing the worst things in life" to also "building positive qualities" (Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). This approach to conceptualising well-being, therefore, represents a shift away from the deficit model, which primarily concentrates on the prevention of negative emotions or "surviving," towards a more positive approach that actively fosters "thriving" (Keyes, 2002, 2006).

The distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being is central to the conceptualisation of well-being in PP (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The hedonic approach focuses on happiness, defining well-being through pleasure, enjoyment, and satisfaction with life (Kahneman et al., 1999). Conversely, the eudaimonic approach argues that true well-being not only involves feeling good but also functioning effectively (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Rooted in Aristotelian philosophy, it focuses on meaning and self-realisation, viewing well-being as "developing as a person, being fulfilled, and making a contribution to the community" (Marks & Shah, 2004, p. 2). More recently, prominent positive psychologists such as Diener et al. (2011), Keyes (2006), and Seligman (2011) have acknowledged the importance of integrating both hedonic and eudaimonic aspects, contributing to a comprehensive conceptualisation of well-being known as "flourishing." Seligman (2011), for example, proposes that human flourishing rests on five pillars, represented by the acronym PERMA (P: positive emotion, E: engagement, R: relationships, M: meaning, A: accomplishment). Within the model, positive emotion is identified as the hedonic aspect, whereas other components as the eudaimonic aspects, collectively reflecting the multi-faceted nature of well-being.

Despite criticism for overlooking social contexts, recent developments in PP increasingly recognise the social facet of well-being, extending its scope beyond individual internal functioning to encompass broader social interactions and environments (Huppert et al., 2009; Su et al., 2014). For instance, in developing well-being indicators for the European Social Survey, Huppert et al. (2009) include social aspects such as interpersonal feeling (e.g., supportive relationships) and interpersonal functioning (e.g., social engagement, caring, and altruism). Keyes (2002, 2006) also emphasises the importance of incorporating a social dimension, proposing that flourishing requires a blend of high emotional, psychological, and social well-being — a holistic approach that encompasses feeling good (i.e., hedonia) and functioning effectively both psychologically and socially (i.e., eudaimonia). Therefore, to understand HL learners' well-being experiences, we follow this holistic conceptualisation of well-being that comprises both hedonic and eudaimonic aspects across emotional, psychological, and social dimensions.

### 2.2. Children and young people's voices on well-being

In this study, we seek to amplify the voices of young CHL learners, enabling them to express their well-being experiences in their own words and explore what flourishing means to them as HL learners. Traditional well-being research has often been adult-centric, relying on adult interpretations of a "good life" for young people, which is increasingly seen as problematic since children are distinct individuals, not just "adults-in-the-making" (Ebrahim, 2011, p. 121). Ben-Arieh (2008) argues that children, being reflexive experts in their lives, hold unique concerns and priorities that can shape their views of well-being differently from those of adults. Recent studies have begun to adopt a grounded approach, prioritising children's own definitions and experiences of well-being across different

countries and settings (e.g., Blaskova & McLellan, 2018; Kostenius & Öhrling, 2006; Newland et al., 2019; Powell et al., 2018; Vujčić et al., 2019). These studies position children as “actors and knowers, able to speak for themselves” (Fattore et al., 2007, p. 13). The principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) further support this perspective, advocating for children’s active participation in decisions impacting their lives (United Nations High Commission on Human Rights, 1989). As such, to foster a flourishing HL learning journey, we believe that understanding HL children’s own interpretations of well-being experiences is essential.

### 2.3. Language learner well-being in SLA

Parallel to the development of general well-being research from PP and children’s perspectives, studies on well-being within language learning contexts have also evolved following the introduction of PP in SLA. While most research has focused on the well-being of language teachers (e.g., Gregersen et al., 2020; Jin et al., 2021; Sulis et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2023), a few quantitative studies have adopted a PP framework and explored the well-being of language learners, investigating its relationship with psychological constructs such as foreign language enjoyment, grit, and perceived stress (Chen et al., 2022; Li, 2022; Proietti Ergün & Ersöz Demirdağ, 2022; Yang, 2021). For instance, Proietti Ergün and Ersöz Demirdağ (2022) found that the general levels of well-being and stress were correlated with students’ enjoyment when learning an additional language in Turkey. Similarly, Yang (2021) identified grit as a significant predictor of well-being and classroom enjoyment among university English language learners in China. Exploring the well-being of bilingual adults in the US, Chen et al. (2022) also found that higher positive emotions were associated with higher levels of flourishing.

Nevertheless, these studies explored general well-being among language learners, focusing on their overall life evaluation rather than their language learning experiences specifically. Since well-being can vary across life domains (Oishi & Diener, 2001), it is necessary to investigate language learners’ well-being experiences at a domain-specific level. Similar to how SLA research examines constructs like foreign language enjoyment, classroom anxiety, L2 grit, and L2 boredom — rather than their general life enjoyment, anxiety, grit, or boredom — we believe that it is important to understand what constitutes well-being specifically in language learning to capture its nuances.

Oxford has been a leading figure in the limited research explicitly focused on well-being within language learning contexts. Drawing from her extensive work, Oxford (2016a, 2016b, 2016c) introduces the EMPHATICS model of language learner well-being. The acronym stands for “Emotion and empathy, Meaning and motivation, Perseverance, including resilience, hope and optimism, Agency and autonomy, Time, Hardiness and habits of mind, Intelligences, Character strengths, Self factors (self-efficacy, self-concept, self-esteem, self-verification)” (p. 11). With the addition of identity, imagination, and investment, the model outlines 21 elements crucial for the well-being and success specifically in language learning (Oxford, 2016c). However, the development of EMPHATICS was not based on empirical data directly capturing learners’ views on well-being, raising concerns about whether the model truly reflects aspects of well-being valued by language learners, and whether other elements might more accurately represent this construct. Arabai and Dewaele (2023) also critique that some EMPATHICS components might be more “acronym-driven” rather than conceptually grounded (p. 1). This highlights the need for a more learner-centred approach to understanding well-being, one that accurately mirrors language learners’ own perspectives and experiences.

### 2.4. Setting an agenda for research on heritage language learner well-being

Emerging PP research has primarily focused on traditional L2 learning paradigms, with little attention given to the well-being and PP of HL learners. However, HL learners possess distinct characteristics and face unique joys and challenges (Valdés et al., 2001), making them worthy of exploration in their own right.

Previous research has indicated that the maintenance and development of HLs can be demanding and emotionally taxing, as learners often grapple with the dual pressure of integrating into mainstream society and managing language-related intergenerational tensions within immigrant families (De Houwer, 2015; Sevinç, 2016, 2020). Specific stressors include familial conflict (Little, 2020) and feelings of incompetence or insecurity due to inadequate HL proficiency (Tseng, 2020, 2021). Additionally, navigating the dominant language and culture often leads to ambiguities between their family and other social domains (Lee & Wright, 2014; Tse, 1998). As Krashen (2000) notes, HL learners frequently face a “no-win” situation, where performing well is expected, but if they fail, “the experience is especially painful” (p. 441). This complexity is also evident among CHL learners, with studies indicating their challenges such as HL anxiety (Xiao & Wong, 2014), negative experiences in Chinese schools (Archer et al., 2009), and the stress of conforming to social expectations as CHL learners (Zhou & Liu, 2023). Moreover, the shift away from HLs continues to be a struggle, marked by aspirations and endeavours on the one hand, and disappointments and setbacks on the other (Duff et al., 2017).

Considering these complexities, it becomes imperative to explore ways to mitigate the emotional and socio-psychological challenges faced by multilingual HL learners, and to transform HL learning into a more positive and enriching experience. The application of PP offers a promising avenue for this endeavour. By focusing on the well-being of HL learners, PP opens up avenues to investigating what constitutes flourishing in HL learning. We argue that understanding what language learner well-being truly entails, as illustrated by the HL learners themselves, is a fundamental first step to identifying ways to support them and optimise their HL learning experience.

### 3. Research questions

The present study is the first empirical attempt to investigate language learner well-being in HL learning contexts, with a particular focus on learners' own well-being experiences. Inspired by research that foregrounds children and young people's voices, we assert that the most credible insights are sourced directly from those who are indeed the most informed about their lives: the young learners themselves. This study is also motivated by the recognition that the existing models of language learner well-being (e.g., EMPATHICS) have not adequately incorporated learners' views, and by the lack of research on multilingual HL children. Taking a PP approach and emphasising learners' perspectives, the study seeks to answer the following questions.

**RQ1.** How do young CHL learners describe their well-being experience in the context of HL learning?

**RQ2.** In what way do their perspectives reveal the key components of language learner well-being in HL learning? What are these components?

### 4. Methodology

#### 4.1. An appreciative inquiry into language learner well-being

In this study, the philosophical stance underpinning the methodology is that of appreciative inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). AI is a strength-based, positive approach, prioritising the exploration of human strengths, successes, aspirations, and potentials (Hammond, 2013). Cooperrider and Avital (2004) describe appreciation in AI as the process of identifying experiences that individuals find valuable and that have constructively influenced their personal growth and daily positivity. In contrast to a deficit-based mindset, which asks "what problem needs to be solved," AI aims to highlight "what works." It focuses on documenting "the best characteristics and traits of people and their organisations" (Preston, 2017, p. 236).

Therefore, AI aligns well with the PP approach to well-being adopted in this research. Recent studies in SLA have explored language teachers' experiences through an AI lens, focusing on their strengths to foster growth and empowerment (see details in Gregersen et al., 2022; Gregersen & Mercer, 2022). Inspired by these studies, we aim to use AI to explicitly explore aspects of flourishing in the CHL learning journey. This method does not invalidate the negative aspects of participants' experiences. Rather, it adopts an anti-deficit perspective, aiming for a more balanced comprehension, especially given the prior emphasis on problems and challenges. Moreover, as highlighted by Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2010), the act of engaging in positive dialogues can be transformative in itself. By pinpointing the aspects most valued by CHL learners for their language learner well-being, this inquiry not only brings these elements into focus but also unveils a vision of potential and ways to capitalise on them in the future.

#### 4.2. Participants

The focus of this study is on young CHL learners in the UK. To reach this group, recruitment was conducted through Chinese complementary schools (also known as "heritage language," "community language," or "supplementary" schools). These schools serve as the primary educational setting for learners attending weekend Chinese language lessons, thereby providing a more concentrated and accessible channel to approach the target population (Francis et al., 2010). Initially, we reached out to various schools, and two schools granted their approval for recruitment. With the support of the headteachers, recruitment details were circulated within the school community. Finally, 40 young CHL learners participated in the study, including 24 females and 16 males. Their ages ranged from 8 to 15 years at the time of the study. Most participants came from Mandarin-speaking families, while 11 had exposure to non-Mandarin Chinese dialects at home. In most cases, both parents were of Chinese heritage, while four participants were of mixed heritage.

#### 4.3. Data collection

Data collection was conducted online via Zoom through what we called "multimodal focus group (FG) interviews," which incorporated various modes of communication, including virtual collages, drawings, and verbal discussions. This FG design was inspired by the growing use of diverse methods and modes in child-focused research to explore well-being (Crivello et al., 2009; Fattore et al., 2007; Powell et al., 2018). As Fattore et al. (2007) suggest, it enables children to contribute in different ways, capturing their voices more effectively and minimising linguistic and conceptual barriers to discuss complex topics like well-being. Additionally, recognising the power imbalance between adults and children in knowledge development, the multimodal FGs also aimed to encourage active participation and open dialogue (Søndergaard & Reventlow, 2019). Compared to traditional FGs, where children might find it difficult to verbalise memories spontaneously, activities like collages and drawings helped them reflect on and convey their thoughts, alleviating the immediacy often present in interviews alone (Punch, 2002).

During the focus group, we began with a well-being exercise where participants co-created a virtual collage, framed as an "Experience Tree," to reflect their shared perceptions of flourishing. They were prompted to "reflect on their Chinese learning journey growing up in the UK" and then "describe their experience of learning or using Chinese in five words/phrases." Participants often chose words that reflected their emotions (e.g., exciting) or highlighted valued aspects of their HL learning experiences (e.g., family, friends, identity). This activity facilitated reflection on their HL learning experiences and helped us capture key elements related to their sense of flourishing. Subsequently, the drawing activity was carried out. The prompt, "what's your happiest moment when learning or using

Chinese,” was employed to delve further into the participants’ experiences, eliciting specific instances of well-being experiences in HL learning. This was followed by semi-structured discussions, where children were asked to present and explain their drawings within the group. Further questions were posed, such as “why do people look so happy in your drawing,” and “what else makes you feel good about learning Chinese.” This provided the young learners with an opportunity to articulate their experience laden with meaning in a more detailed perspective.

While the FG design effectively elicited HL children’s well-being experiences, it had limitations, particularly the risk of conformity where certain voices may be privileged while others are silenced (Kitzinger, 2006). Given that, several preventative actions were taken both before and during the FGs. For example, to minimise age differences and create a welcoming environment, participants were grouped by grade and gender (Gibson, 2007). During discussions, I encouraged specific children who had not yet spoken to share their views. The range of activities was also designed to promote inclusivity and equity, reducing the potential privilege of more articulate or confident voices (Powell et al., 2018). Furthermore, despite well-being experiences being personal, FG discussions allowed us to gain “a common discourse about well-being” among HL children (Soutter, 2011, p. 16). In this sense, it helped address the research aim of mapping well-being experiences in HL learning and identifying key components for a proposed conceptual framework. A total of 10 FGs were conducted, each with three to five participants, and each session lasted between 60 and 90 min, including a brief mid-session break. Participants were encouraged to communicate in their preferred language(s), leading to predominantly English usage, supplemented by occasional use of Chinese.

#### 4.4. Data analysis

The recordings of FG interviews were transcribed and imported into Nvivo for analysis. A combination of deductive, “theory-driven” methods, and inductive, “data-driven” methods were adopted to uncover the prominent themes in children’s language learner well-being experiences. Taking this integrated approach, the analysis was two-fold. Firstly, established theories of general well-being from PP, which view well-being as both hedonic and eudaimonic, served as a guiding framework. This was crucial for operationalising the understanding of well-being in the context of our study and determining what constituted a “mention” of well-being in the data. For example, it enabled us to identify not only explicit references to positive emotions but also instances where participants discussed aspects of their experiences that aligned with broader notions of well-being (e.g., positive functioning).

Concurrently, thematic analysis was utilised to allow for the natural emergence of a domain-specific understanding of well-being, driven by the children’s unique perspectives. The six-step systematic method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed, starting from familiarisation with the data, through generating initial codes and developing potential themes, to reviewing, naming, and defining these themes. Appendix A presents the process of each step with examples from the analysis. Importantly, while these steps were presented sequentially, the actual process was not strictly linear but rather “iterative and recursive” (Terry et al., 2017, p. 11). This continuous process of reflection and refinement led to the final themes, which represented the key components of language learner well-being as constructed by young CHL learners from the interview data. Identified themes with illustrative examples can be found in Appendix B.

#### 4.5. Ethics

This study received approval from the Institutional Review Board. Consent from parents and assent from children were both secured for the study. Interested children were provided with an information sheet and a consent form for their parents, detailing participant rights, voluntary nature, confidentiality, and anonymity. Following Ebrahim’s (2010) recommendation, while parental consent was a prerequisite for participation, ongoing verbal assent from the children was sought throughout the research process. The study was explained to the children in age-appropriate language before the FGs.

Conducting ethical research, especially with young participants, involves not only “procedural ethics” but also “ethics in practice” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 262). Given the sensitivity of well-being, efforts were made to mitigate unnecessary emotional strain on child participants by carefully phrasing prompts and selecting appropriate wording. Before the start of the FGs, ground rules for respectful listening and sharing were conveyed to participants, emphasising that they should only share what they felt comfortable discussing. Ice-breaker activities were used to help participants get to know each other and create a more comfortable space. Considering the potential discomfort in discussing personal well-being in a group setting, participants’ body language and facial expressions were closely monitored to identify and address any unwanted interactions. Respecting children’s autonomy was paramount; for example, in cases where parents wished their children to participate in the drawing activity, the children’s reluctance was respected. Furthermore, as participants were recruited from Chinese complementary schools, safeguarding personnel were informed about the study and the measures in place. Participants were provided with contact details for school safeguarding personnel and information on mental health resources in case they felt distressed or needed additional support.

### 5. Findings

The findings revealed that young CHL learners’ well-being experiences revolve around three interrelated themes: “feeling good,” “doing well,” and “being connected.” Within each theme, distinct sub-themes emerged. In the following sections, each theme will be presented individually, guiding us towards a holistic understanding of how young learners perceive and experience well-being in HL learning.

### 5.1. Well-being as feeling good

Central to young learners' well-being lies the theme of "feeling good," marked by their experience of positive emotions and a strong, affirmative sense of self. In other words, it is how they "feel" on an emotional level and "feel" about themselves.

#### 5.1.1. Positive emotions

The presence of positive hedonic states is a salient aspect notable across the data. Almost all participants indicated that having positive emotions while learning Chinese was important to them. The language mostly used to describe their positive emotions included "feeling happy," "feeling excited," and "having a lot of fun." Additionally, some students added nuances such as feeling "joyful," "loved," "safe," "energetic," and "hyper" when learning or using Chinese.

Interestingly, when children described their well-being experiences, the hedonic (i.e., feeling good) and eudaimonic (i.e., functioning well) aspects often intertwined and underpinned their discussions. For example, although children often started with simple, one-word emotional adjectives to depict their well-being experiences (e.g., "I feel happy"), when prompted to elaborate on what evoked their positive feelings, children typically described their happiness in concrete terms. They reported on the circumstances, activities, and relationships that contributed to their hedonic states. For instance, Qianqian, a 12-year-old, associated her well-being with moments when "everyone is happy." Upon further exploration, she recalled a specific experience of singing Chinese songs and having a great time with her classmates:

"We are happy because we are singing a Chinese song and everyone's celebrating together in the Chinese school. I like to see everyone ... we meet good friends and I think I'm just happy."

Qianqian's account exemplified the connection between her positive emotional states and engaging in fulfilling activities and relationships, highlighting the interrelated nature of children's well-being. Throughout the data, such happiness-inducing experiences can range from participating in fun and intrinsically motivated activities, to having warm and supportive relationships, or feeling a sense of competence or meaning in their HL learning journey — reflecting various eudaimonic aspects of well-being. Thus, as we proceed to discuss other key themes that have emerged, we will also observe these states of positive emotions manifested in their experiences, serving as both indicators and outcomes of positive functioning.

#### 5.1.2. Affirmative self

Young CHL learners also appeared to articulate their well-being experiences in terms of feeling good about themselves and consequently an affirmative self-identity. In the context of HL learning, this positive sense of self is first concerned with the learners' pride in their HL skills. Indeed, many participants reported feeling "proud," "unique," and "special" as HL learners, because "you can do something that other people can't do" (Angela, aged 10) and "that's something really proud to have" (Qiuyu, aged 15). Recognising that many of their peers are monolingual, Emma, aged 14, viewed growing up speaking Chinese as "cool." This positive attitude towards their HL identities reflects young learners' self-acceptance and self-worth, which become vital components of their flourishing as CHL learners. Ziqing, aged 11, exemplified how she saw Chinese as her HL in a positive way, embracing the difference compared to her peers and expressing pride in her ability to speak Chinese:

"Compared to everyone else in my English school, I know one more language than them, and I'm also going out on a Saturday for Chinese lessons. So, I feel very different and like unique sort of, because you know another language. I feel proud to be able to ... knowing Chinese."

For HL learners, flourishing often goes beyond taking pride in their HL abilities; it also closely intersects with their ethnic and cultural identities. As revealed in the discussions, young learners emphasised the significance of "feeling proud of your ethnic and cultural heritage" and "being able to express your culture through language" (Roni, aged 12). Yet, this sense of self is greatly influenced by external recognition and acceptance. As many participants pointed out, feeling accepted by others plays a crucial role in shaping how they perceive themselves. For instance, several of them stressed the importance of heritage culture and language being "respected" (Alice, aged 11) or "admired" (Ziqing, aged 11) by those around them, especially their peers and teachers in mainstream schools. This suggests that while young learners associate their well-being with a positive internal state, this positive feeling is not confined to an isolated, internal process. Instead, it is intricately linked with how they perceive themselves in their social interactions and the challenges they face as part of a broader community.

### 5.2. Well-being as doing well

Despite the emotional states, young learners have also identified several functional, or eudaimonic, aspects of well-being as essential, framing well-being not just as "feeling good" but also as "doing well." For them, this is particularly associated with their perceived competence and active engagement in HL learning.

#### 5.2.1. Perceived competence

One aspect that emerged from the data is the perceived competence in HL learning. In general terms, competence refers to the need of individuals to feel capable in their lives and is assumed to be one of the three fundamental psychological needs according to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012; White, 1959). In the case of HL learning, the experiences of feeling capable and confident in learning and using Chinese were frequently mentioned and highlighted as extremely important by the children. Some typical examples

included being able to “type what I want to say using a Chinese keyboard on WeChat” (Zoey, aged 10), “read Chinese without pinyin” (Huiyi, aged 8), and “watch Chinese TV shows and understand what they mean” (Emma, aged 14). For instance, Tong, an 8-year-old, associated his happiest moment with “[being] able to write Chinese,” explaining:

“I feel good when I’m able to write Chinese words down on paper and to use them in sentences. That’s my happy moment because I feel great being able to do it.”

This feeling of competence can occur particularly when HL learners visit their ancestral homeland and have the opportunity to use their HL in real-life situations. Participants frequently mentioned experiences such as being able to “have conversations with relatives” (Qianqian, aged 12), “order food without the help of parents” (Lele, aged 8), and “read the road signs” (Roni, aged 12) during visits to China. This is exemplified in the following excerpt from Roni:

“I felt pretty good [learning Chinese], because when you go back to China, before you might not be able to speak it, but now you can actually make conversations or understand what other people said. It’s not just about the speaking, but also being able to read, especially when most of the signs are in Chinese obviously, and then you can say ‘oh, I can read that sign ... so I know I’m going that way.’”

The above extract highlights Roni’s sense of flourishing, which stemmed from her feelings of being capable of using the HL. It should be noted that, for CHL learners, language learner well-being comprises both competence in the present and expectations of gaining greater mastery of Chinese in the future. Students discussed getting more confidence and having increased capacity as contributing to their well-being, as Haoyang (aged 9) stated, “the thing I like the most is that you get more confident as you learn more words ... like some very hard words, when you learn them, you feel more confident.” Leela, aged 8, also echoed this sentiment, saying, “my favourite part is learning new characters, because as I learn more I know more and I can get better.” These examples all suggest that language learner well-being is experienced not only when students feel competent but also in their process of achieving competence.

### 5.2.2. Active engagement

Another prominent aspect identified in young CHL learners’ well-being experiences is their active engagement in HL learning. Engagement generally refers to one’s “psychological connection to activities,” and more specifically, the ability to get absorbed in and concentrate on what one is doing, as well as interest and participation in life events and tasks (Kern et al., 2015, p. 263; Seligman, 2011). In the context of HL learning, young CHL learners emphasised the importance of feeling engaged in activities that are interesting, enjoyable, and intrinsically driven while learning Chinese. This specifically touched upon students’ experiences of being absorbed and interested within their HL classrooms, along with their active participation in a range of activities held beyond the classrooms in HL schools.

Most students place a high value on actively engaging in enjoyable learning activities, which can be interpreted as those fostering a sense of flow (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). While the specific activities that captured students’ engagement varied individually, children in this study commonly referred to two main categories: learner-oriented classroom activities and activities integrated with broader aspects of Chinese culture. According to them, the former category included classroom activities such as games (e.g., flashcards, role-plays), competitions, and collaborative group work, which they often described as “fun” and “interesting.” The significance of such engaging activities was particularly emphasised by Isabelle, a fourteen-year-old CHL learner, who viewed them as a means to ensure engagement and happiness among students, as opposed to monotonous textbook lessons which can lead to disinterest and lack of focus:

“I think it’s important to make learning Chinese into like a game or something fun and relatable for everyone, and then make the students happy and engaged ... not just like a boring textbook lesson, because most students they would just zone out and not really concentrate. They won’t learn if it’s a boring lesson.”

Another category of activities that young learners felt particularly engaged in was those that integrated within wider aspects of Chinese culture, traditions, and history. This emerged frequently in the interview data, with examples including “discuss [ing] about culture during Chinese New Year” (Leo, aged 12), “learning the stories behind the Chinese characters” (Michelle, aged 14), “history and myths” (Zoey, aged 10), and “watching documentaries about different parts of China” (Poppy, aged 15). This culture-rich approach to learning, as reported by many participants, helped them engage in their HL learning and made their learning more enjoyable.

Apart from the classroom activities mentioned above, many students actively participated in extra-curricular activities held by their Chinese schools, which fostered their HL school engagement. These activities were typically held during big festivals (e.g., Chinese New Year), ranging from Lion Dance, dumpling making, dramas, or singing and dancing performances. It should be noted that young learners valued these school activities not only because they were “interesting and fun,” but also because they provided a meaningful way to engage with their cultural heritage and language. As Qiuyu (aged 15) further explained:

“The most interesting part is participating in activities related to my cultural heritage ... like we learned Lion dance and Chinese drums during the Chinese New Year. That is quite fun, because we are not just learning them from the pictures in the textbook ... we are actually experiencing them ourselves.”

### 5.3. Well-being as being connected

Beyond the concepts of “feeling good” and “doing well,” young CHL learners’ perspectives on language learner well-being were also closely linked to social aspects, that is, well-being as “being connected.”

#### 5.3.1. Supportive relations

In line with established well-being models in PP that include relationships as a key component (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Seligman, 2011), participants in this study also brought up the importance of supportive relations for their flourishing. “Family” emerged as a keyword frequently mentioned, which is unsurprising since for HL learners, their HL is often intertwined with family interactions and bonds (Valdés et al., 2001). Almost all expressed the significance of “staying connected with family speaking Chinese” (Zoey, aged 10). Many associated their happiest moments as CHL learners with conversations in Chinese with family members who may not be proficient in English. For example, Qianqian, aged 12, shared, “after I learned it [Chinese] I can talk better with my family ... that makes me feel good.” She further elaborated on the importance of these connections:

“I think it’s important to stay connected, because the rest of my family, they all live in China, so sometimes we Facetime them, and sometimes maybe when they come over here, I can speak Chinese with them ... and I think that’s an aspect of my well-being as well.”

In addition to family connections, the positive relationships established within HL school settings emerged as another theme from the data. Young learners valued the support and encouragement from those around them, be it teachers or peers, whom they could confide in and receive support from throughout their HL learning journey. Importantly, friendships with other young people at HL schools are deemed essential for their well-being. To some, making friends has been “one of the favourite parts of Chinese school” and even the driving force behind their attendance, as Sihan (aged 12) said, “I had two childhood friends who also went to Chinese Sunday school and that was my main motivation to go.” The social function of HL schooling — where peer interactions act as both a motivator and an integral part of the educational experience — was underscored as a pivotal aspect of CHL learners’ sense of flourishing. This is further exemplified in the following excerpt from Andrew (aged 14):

“When learning Chinese, my happiest moment was by meeting new people and obviously making new friends, and just like being able to see the people that’s been with you for many years, like learning Chinese throughout the years and seeing each other improve. And yeah, I think it’s just a really happy moment being able to just see all of these familiar faces every week.”

#### 5.3.2. Diasporic connections

When young learners talked about their well-being experiences around the notion of connectedness, they perceived it not only in terms of how well they connected within their immediate social circles (e.g., family, friends) but also in relation to the wider community. For HL learners, this sense of connectedness appeared to be specifically tied to their diasporic community, reflecting an individual’s ability to function effectively within the larger social fabric.

Throughout the data, participants highlighted the significance of experiencing a sense of belonging within their diasporic community. As Keyes (1998, 2006) suggests, healthy individuals feel that they are part of society; they share commonalities with others who constitute their social reality and feel that they belong to their communities. For young learners in the study, this typically manifests as feeling belonging to their Chinese school, which is their most immediate HL community. Being ethnic minorities in mainstream education, CHL learners particularly valued the inclusive environment of Chinese schools. There, shared heritage and language foster an atmosphere “like a family” and a safe learning space crucial for their well-being (Michelle, aged 14). Tian, an 11-year-old, captured this sentiment, saying, “we can share a bit more things in common,” highlighting the value of shared experiences that are less common in mainstream settings. Similarly, Qiuyu (aged 15) contrasted this with a sense of otherness felt in mainstream school, explaining that at Chinese school “you won’t really feel like the odd one out”:

“Because in English school [there are] just a few Chinese people. So, when I’m at Chinese school I feel belonged, because you won’t really feel left out, because you’re doing the same thing. For example, you all celebrate the Chinese New Year and then you all do the same thing together. You won’t really feel like the odd one out.”

Notably, the ability to contribute to the community and help others was found to be just as important as receiving support for “being connected.” Young CHL learners appreciated opportunities to contribute to their HL school and, at times, to the broader Chinese community. Many older students described the rewarding experience of volunteering as teaching assistants for younger classes. This act of “giving back” was a source of happiness, as Isabelle (aged 14) recalled, “I felt very happy helping others” because “everything that I’ve learned, I can help pass it on.” Indeed, several participants were actively involved in the local Chinese community, cherishing opportunities to exercise social responsibility and feeling that they were making a meaningful impact on others. Annabel (aged 14), for example, expressed how her involvement in annual Chinatown performances, Chinese culture workshops at local primary schools, and fundraising for a new HL school library significantly enriched her HL learning experiences. Likewise, Qiuyu (aged 15) found joy and fulfilment in her contributions to the community, remarking on the happiness derived from engaging in charitable activities with her peers, which allowed her to “donate things in the name of the Chinese school [to] give help to those in need.”

## 6. Discussion

This study presents the first exploratory investigation into mapping the well-being experiences of young CHL learners. Drawing from their voices, we seek to propose a conceptual framework for understanding the key aspects of flourishing in HL learning (Fig. 1). As indicated by the findings, HL learners' well-being centres around three interrelated themes: "feeling good," "doing well," and "being connected," which reflect both hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives across emotional, psychological, and social dimensions. Despite the lack of universal consensus on the definition of well-being in existing research (La Placa et al., 2013), young learners' narratives revealed six components essential to their HL learning journey: positive emotions, affirmative self, perceived competence, active engagement, supportive relations, and diasporic connections. This has effectively responded to a call in the literature for identifying domains that are intelligible and can be acted upon (Fattore et al., 2007; Soutter et al., 2014). In this regard, the study has also contributed to the operationalisation of the components of language learner well-being (refer to Table 1), providing a starting point for future measurement and intervention studies.

The findings confirm that young learners are indeed valid, competent, and insightful informants regarding their well-being experiences. Their views have provided a clear and accessible foundation for understanding and supporting language learner well-being. For instance, the significance of "feeling good" emerged prominently from their discussions, aligning with the increasing focus on positive emotions in SLA research, particularly studies on foreign language enjoyment (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2019; Jin & Zhang, 2021). This suggests the necessity of extending similar attention to HL learning contexts. Additionally, the importance of positive self-concept was evident, characterised by pride in their multilingualism and identities as CHL learners. This aspect is closely associated with the level of recognition these learners receive from the wider educational system and British society, where biases, stereotypes, and prejudices frequently prevail (Lee & Wright, 2014; Zhou & Liu, 2023). In line with eudaimonic traditions (Ryff & Singer, 2008), the learners' perspectives also reveal that flourishing extends beyond hedonic enjoyment to include "doing well." This includes the emphasis on perceived competence, not only in their current capacity to learn and use their HL but also in their aspirations to attain greater proficiency. Engagement in the learning process is also highlighted as crucial, particularly when facilitated by learner-centred and culturally enriched classroom activities, along with extracurricular activities in HL schools.

More importantly, the findings highlight the need to integrate a social dimension into well-being, a facet largely neglected in prior research (Huppert et al., 2009), to reflect HL children's positive social health. Even in Oxford's (2016c) comprehensive EMPATHICS model, which identifies 21 well-being components, none explicitly addresses the social aspects. Young learners' voices thus enrich our understanding of well-being by underscoring the significance of "being connected," including both positive relations with immediate circles — families, peers, and teachers — and a broader sense of belonging, value, and contribution within wider society. The role of HL schools, as the most immediate diaspora communities for many CHL learners, emerged as particularly crucial. As the findings suggest, these schools not only provide robust social support networks as a protective buffer for well-being (Hobfoll, 2002), but also play a vital role in fostering learners' sense of belonging and offering them avenues to fulfil social responsibilities. Echoing previous studies on children's HL schooling experiences (Archer et al., 2009; Ganassin, 2020; Kim, 2011), these insights advocate maximising the potential of community-based HL schools in promoting both language development and the well-being of HL learners, within HL classrooms and in various aspects of their lives.

Furthermore, HL children's well-being experiences also enhance our understanding of the nature of well-being, highlighting it as a complex, multidimensional, and interconnected concept. While six components of well-being were identified through the discussions, these should not be viewed as isolated; rather, they interweave to form the holistic well-being experiences of multilingual HL learners. Therefore, flourishing in HL learning is not solely about "feeling" good emotionally or about oneself, "doing" well with a sense of competence and engagement, or "being" in supportive relationships and connected as members of a community. Rather, it is a harmonious integration of all these aspects. This multifaceted and interconnected nature calls for a comprehensive approach to supporting learners' well-being.

The inherent contextual and situated aspects of language learner well-being were also evident in the young learners' narratives. Participants in the study shared their flourishing experiences across different settings, including home, HL school, mainstream school, and diaspora community. Their well-being is deeply intertwined with the broader social structures they navigate. Mercer and

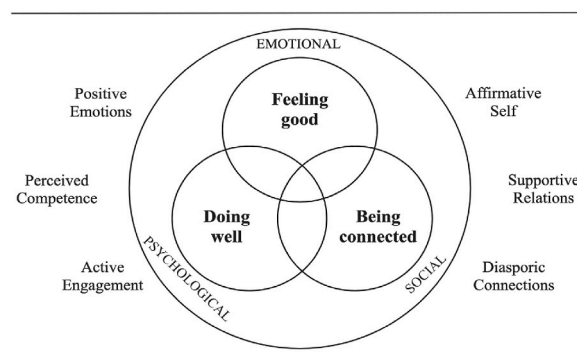


Fig. 1. A multidimensional framework of language learner well-being in HL learning.

**Table 1**  
Operationalisation of the components of language learner well-being.

	Component	Operational Definition
<i>Feeling good</i>	Positive emotions	It refers to the presence of positive feelings when learning the HL, such as being happy, excited, or having fun.
	Affirmative self	It refers to learners' affirmative identity, such as being happy with themselves and feeling proud of their heritage language and culture.
<i>Doing well</i>	Perceived competence	It refers to learners' perceived competence. In other words, do they feel confident and capable as HL learners?
<i>Being connected</i>	Active engagement	It refers to the extent to which learners feel engaged and interested in the HL learning process.
	Supportive relations	It refers to learners' positive interpersonal relationships, such as those with families, peers, and teachers.
	Diasporic connections	It refers to a broader sense of belonging to the diaspora community and the contribution to wider society as HL learners.

Gregersen (2023) have expanded a critical perspective into the PP framework within SLA, emphasising the need for a transformative PP that acknowledges the influence of social structures on fostering well-being, particularly for learners from marginalised backgrounds. This study serves as an initial exploration into how learners' perceptions of flourishing, viewed as a catalyst for positive change, are shaped within these contexts. Additionally, in light of the complex nature of well-being, this research also aligns with the emerging interest in treating learner psychology as a complex dynamic system (Dörnyei, 2014; Larsen-Freeman, 2015; Oxford, 2018). The conceptual framework emerging from this study offers the potential for viewing well-being as an integral part of this intricate system, paving the way for a more nuanced understanding of learner psychology.

## 7. Conclusions

For multilingual HL children, the process of learning and maintaining their HLs is rarely simple or effortless. While much research has focused on the challenges and negative emotions associated with this process, this study adopts a PP approach, shifting the focus to understanding what brings about well-being and flourishing in HL learning from learners' perspectives. Noddings (2003) states that "Happiness and education are, properly, intimately related: Happiness should be an aim of education, and a good education should contribute significantly to personal and collective happiness" (p. 1). In line with this, we argue that happiness and well-being should similarly be core objectives of HL education. This highlights the need for increased attention from HL researchers, practitioners, and institutions, focusing not only on language development but also on the holistic flourishing of multilingual young learners. Specifically, building on the multidimensional framework and operational definitions of well-being in terms of "feeling," "doing," and "connecting" across six key components, evidence-based interventions can be designed, evaluated, and refined, driving meaningful change in HL education.

This study also addresses methodological critiques levelled at PP for overlooking the nuances and intricacies of human experience (Lazarus, 2003) by providing an in-depth account of young learners' viewpoints. In doing so, it challenges the dominant paradigms in well-being research that have historically marginalised children's voices, and instead advances a more participatory and inclusive methodological approach. Furthermore, the study highlights the value of appreciative inquiry as a methodological approach, which allows us to explicitly focus on the flourishing aspects of HL learning and identify "what works," in order to promote language learner well-being. As Preston (2017) noted, "The main purpose of appreciative inquiry is its potential for transformational change" (p. 245).

We recognise that the concept of well-being can be culturally sensitive; thus, learners from diverse linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds may have different understandings of what constitutes their well-being. It is our hope that our attempt in this paper will spark further research into PP and the well-being experiences of different language learner groups. Through collective efforts, we aspire to cultivate positive HL education and positive multilingualism, transforming language learning into an experience filled with joy, pride, and connection, and promoting flourishing both within and outside the HL classroom.

## Notes

1. For this study, we follow the recent definitions of flourishing from PP, which represent a comprehensive view of well-being that includes both hedonic and eudaimonic aspects (Diener et al., 2011; Keyes, 2006; Seligman, 2011). Flourishing refers to high levels of well-being, and as Seligman (2011) argues, "the goal of positive psychology is to increase flourishing" (p. 13). A detailed review of the concept of well-being and flourishing is presented in the Literature Review.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Yue Zhou:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Yongcan Liu:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization.

## Appendices.

### Appendix A. Phases of Data Analysis and Examples

Phase	Description of the process	Example from the analysis
1. <b>Familiarising yourself with your data:</b>	Transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial reflections.	Reflections: participants' illustrations of well-being experiences reflect the multi-dimensional nature of it; the feeling and functioning aspects often intertwined; helping others were described as part of the well-being experience (unexpectedly), etc.
2. <b>Generating initial codes:</b>	Applying initial codes across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.	Initial codes such as "feeling happy," "excited," "sense of accomplishment," "having fun activities," "being capable (learning/using Chinese)," "belonging in school," etc.
3. <b>Searching for themes:</b>	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.	Potential themes such as "functioning well socially." Examples of codes under this theme included "belonging in school," "connected with another Chinese," "supportive teacher," "friendship," "enjoy helping others," etc.
4. <b>Reviewing themes:</b>	Checking if the sub-themes and themes work in relation to their codes and to all relevant data.	Decisions were made, such as dividing the theme "functioning well socially" into two sub-themes: "supportive relations" (focusing on positive relations with immediate surroundings) and "diaspora connections" (positive relations with wider communities).
5. <b>Defining and naming themes:</b>	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.	Refining and renaming themes through team consensus resulted in three overarching themes: "feeling good" (subthemes: positive emotions, affirmative self), "doing well" (perceived competence, active engagement), and "being connected" (supportive relations, diasporic connections).
6. <b>Producing the report:</b>	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.	Quotes were added to demonstrate how the data, subthemes, and themes align when writing up.

Appendix B. Identified Themes and Examples from Data

Theme	Illustration	Example from data
<b>Positive emotions</b>	Participants expressed various positive emotions experienced in CHL learning. Examples of codes included "feeling happy," "feeling excited," "having fun," etc.	"I feel excited and joyful." "The experience is like I'm really happy and good."
<b>Affirmative self</b>	Participants expressed feeling positive and proud about themselves in relation to CHL learning. Examples of codes included "pride in Chinese ability," "CHL as part of identity," etc.	"I'm the only Chinese person, so I feel like I'm special ... you kind of feel more proud knowing your language." "Proud to know Chinese, cuz you can do something that other people can't do."
<b>Perceived competence</b>	Participants described being capable and confident in CHL learning. Examples of codes included "being capable," "capable in future learning/use," "sense of accomplishment," etc.	"I feel good when I'm able to write Chinese words down on paper and to use them in sentences." "The thing I like the most is that you get more confident as you learn more words."
<b>Active engagement</b>	Participants described experiences of active engagement and participation in CHL learning. Examples of codes included "engaging in classroom activities," "participating in school activities," etc.	"I like when it's not just a teacher who is teaching. It's when students actually coop and do something together, like students can engage more ..."
<b>Supportive relations</b>	Participants described experiences of supportive relationships with family, teachers, and peers. Examples of codes included "supportive teachers," "friendship," "parental support and encouragement," "family connection," etc.	"It's like ... loved and part of family." "Teachers and classrooms are nice." "They are the people who encourage and support me."
<b>Diasporic connections</b>	Participants described a sense of belonging and connection with the Chinese school and diaspora community. Examples of codes included "belonging in school," "helping others," "feeling fit in," etc.	"When I'm at Chinese school I feel belonged, because you won't really feel left out." "I feel good helping others."

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