

### *Love and enjoyment in context: Four case studies of adolescent EFL learners*

Liana Maria Pavelescu  
Guildford College, UK  
[lpavelescu@guildford.ac.uk](mailto:lpavelescu@guildford.ac.uk)

Bojana Petrić  
Birkbeck, University of London  
[b.petric@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:b.petric@bbk.ac.uk)

#### Abstract

This study explores the foreign language learning emotions of four EFL adolescent students in Romania and the ways in which their emotions emerge in their sociocultural context. Multiple qualitative methods were employed over a school semester, including a written task, semi-structured interviews with the learners and their teachers, lesson observations and English-related events outside the classroom. It was found that, while all four participants reported experiencing positive emotions in language learning, a distinction was identified in the intensity and stability of their emotions. Two participants expressed a strong and stable emotion of love towards English, while the other two participants experienced enjoyment in their English language learning without an intense emotional attachment to English. Unlike enjoyment, love was found to be the driving force in the learning process, creating effective coping mechanisms when there was a lack of enjoyment in certain classroom situations and motivating learners to invest greater effort into language learning in and out of the classroom. The findings thus revealed that, unlike enjoyment, love broadened cognition and maintained engagement in learning. The study emphasizes the role of strong, enduring positive emotions in teenage students' language learning process.

*Keywords:* adolescent learners; EFL, enjoyment; love; positive emotions

## 1. Introduction

Emotions, defined as “socially constituted syndromes (transitory social roles) which include an individual’s appraisal of the situation and which are interpreted as passions rather than as actions” (Averill, 1982, p. 6), play a crucial role in language learning (e.g., Dewaele, 2011; Dewaele, 2015; Garrett & Young, 2009; Murphy & Dörnyei, 2010; Swain, 2013; Imai, 2010). Garrett and Young (2009), for instance, showed how emotional responses to a language course “were the most salient feature of [Garrett’s] learning endeavor” (p. 221), while Swain (2013), in an analysis of language learner narratives and collaborative dialogue, found that language learning was not only a cognitive, but also an emotional process. While there is an established body of research on negative emotions such as language learning anxiety (e.g., Gkonou, Daubney, & Dewaele, 2017; Gregersen, 2005; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Marcos-Llinás & Juan Garau, 2009; Oxford, 1999; Tóth, 2011), it is only recently that SLA research, inspired by positive psychology, has shifted its focus to positive emotions, shown to facilitate and enhance the language learning process (e.g., Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012a; MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014; Murphey, 2014; Oxford, 2014). However, positive emotions are still under-researched. As Oxford (2016) pointed out, studies focusing on positive emotions in language learning tended to lack contextualization. The contextual dimension is important since “the self cannot be conceptualized as being abstracted and separated from contexts” (Mercer & Williams, 2014, p. 179); rather, it shapes and is shaped by broader social realities (Pitkänen-Huhta & Nikula, 2013). Recent research in psychology (e.g., Boiger & Mesquita, 2012; Mesquita, 2010) similarly stressed the social, contextualized nature of emotion, and Pavlenko (2005) argued that emotions were not only inner states but also relational processes.

Thus, this study addresses the gap in research on positive emotions in language learning by investigating them as they emerge in individual learners’ experiences taking into account the complex interplay between the individual and the social. More specifically, given the power of school to create the context for various emotional experiences which can influence learning (Schutz & DeCuir, 2002), the aim of the present study is to gain insights into adolescent students’ English language learning emotions and into the ways in which positive emotions arise in the learners’ sociocultural context. The research questions are the following:

1. Do high school students experience positive emotions in their English language learning? If so, which emotions are the most salient?
2. How do these emotions emerge in relation to the learners’ sociocultural context?

## 2. Literature review

The study draws on sociocultural theory, which views emotions as being socially mediated, and on previous research which has shown the relational nature of emotions (e.g., Imai, 2010; Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002; Swain, 2013). For instance, Swain's (2013) study of L2 learners' collaborative dialogue shows that emotions are not an individual's inner, private reactions but rather interpersonal events, whose meanings are socially and culturally derived, internalized from interactions with others. Similarly focusing on emotions in a collaborative task, Imai's (2010) study on the ways in which Japanese university EFL learners construct and share emotions during such a task reveals that the meaning and value of emotions are "locally situated" (p. 288): It is through their social construction that emotions can mediate development and learning. While studies such as Imai's (2010) and Swain's (2013) provide valuable insights into how emotions emerge in collaborative learning, and several positive emotions are identified, such as empathy (Imai), or excitement and joy (Swain), they do not specifically focus on positive emotions and their role in the students' language learning experiences.

Of particular relevance to this study is MacIntyre and Gregersen's work on positive and negative emotions in SLA (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012a; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014), which describes positive emotions as broadening an individual's perspective or focus, drawing on Fredrickson's (2001, p. 219) broaden-and-build theory, according to which "certain discrete positive emotions . . . all share the ability to broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources, ranging from physical and intellectual resources to social and psychological resources." Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014, 2016) highlighted the role of the positive emotion of enjoyment by showing that anxiety can be experienced together with enjoyment in the foreign language classroom. Some classroom activities mentioned by the bi- and multilingual learners in Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) were enjoyable to some, yet anxiety-provoking to others. In some cases, enjoyment emerged from a potentially negative, anxiety-arousing situation. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2016) identified two dimensions of foreign language enjoyment: a *social dimension*, linked to a good classroom atmosphere and encouraging and supportive peers and teachers, leading to positive feelings and satisfaction; and a *private dimension*, linked to the cognition that accompanies enjoyment and to a sense of accomplishment. With regard to the social dimension of emotions, in a pseudo-longitudinal investigation of the dynamic interactions between enjoyment and anxiety in the foreign language classroom in 12 to 18 year-old learners, Dewaele and Dewaele (2017) found that, over time, the teacher's effect became a strong predictor of the positive emotion of enjoyment, but not of the negative emotion of anxiety.

The presence of other positive emotions in language learning, such as love, passion and empathy, has recently also been acknowledged in the literature. For instance, Oxford's (2016) EMPHATICS framework of dimensions contributing to language learners' well-being and progress includes emotion, together with empathy, as the first dimension of the system. She includes love as part of the virtues and character strengths of language learners with high levels of well-being. As she noted, such language learners sometimes experience love towards their teachers and other people involved in their learning process. Oxford's account of love in language learning is in line with Fredrickson's (2013) definition of love as interpersonal connection:

First, a sharing of one or more positive emotions between you and another; second, a synchrony between your and the other person's biochemistry and behaviors; and third, a reflected motive to invest in each other's well-being that brings mutual care. (p. 17)

Thus, unlike enjoyment, which includes both social and private dimensions (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016), love is defined as primarily social and relational. This complex, multidimensional nature of emotions as subjective feelings and social phenomena has also been highlighted in psychology by Reeve (2009).

Drawing on definitions of love in education and the social sciences, Barcelos and Coelho (2016) argued that love represents one of the most important emotions that can be cultivated and nurtured in the language classroom: "love unfolds and reveals itself in the space between teachers and learners in the language classroom. It resides within connections and relationships that are (or should be) at the basis of all the interaction that occurs in language learning environments, especially in the language classroom" (p. 137). A loving classroom environment is described as a space where students learn to trust themselves and their classmates and discover their potential for growth. Focusing on the perspective of the teacher, Barcelos and Coelho (2016) pointed out that love involves noticing each learner, with their interests and anxieties, and seeing the potential in all students. They further argued that love, being a fundamental part of language learning and teaching (e.g., Aiazzi, 2007, cited in Barcelos & Coelho, 2016; Moskowitz, 1978, cited in Barcelos & Coelho, 2016), should be a more commonly researched emotion in applied linguistics. Focusing on positive emotions as experienced by the learner, Lake (2016) discussed "passion" for L2 learning, defined it as "a strong inclination toward activities that are liked or loved" (p. 241), and argued that it was one of the three elements of the positive L2 self, together with interest and mastery goals. However, while Barcelos and Coelho (2016), and Lake (2016) addressed the importance of love and passion in the L2 classroom, empirical studies of positive emotions in foreign language learning are scarce.

As this brief review shows, positive emotions in language learning represent an emerging research theme, raising numerous questions for further research. Are positive emotions experienced by all or only some language learners? In what particular situations and in relation to what factors do they arise? The need for research in this area is particularly acute with regard to adolescents, who go through a life stage characterized by emotional intensity and turmoil. The present study will start filling this gap in the literature through an in-depth exploration of four Romanian adolescents' emotions in their English language learning over a school semester.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants

The study focused on four adolescent learners attending a state high school in a town in the south of Romania, which offers bilingual instruction in four languages, including English, in addition to regular classes in Romanian. The participants' background information is shown in Table 1. As can be seen, Kim was in an English bilingual classroom, attending subject classes in Romanian and English, with additional five English language classes per week, while Ann, Andrea and Addison attended the philology strand, where all subject classes were in Romanian, with three English classes a week. Two were high-achieving EFL learners: Kim had the highest mark in class tests (10) and Ann had marks of 9 and 10; they were described by their teachers as the best in class (Kim) and one of the best (Ann). The other two participants, Andrea and Addison, were described by their teacher as being average learners.

Table 1 Participants' background information

Participant	Pseudonym	Age	Foreign languages known	Grade/Type of class
1	Kim	17	English, French, Korean	Eleventh/English Bilingual
2	Ann	16	English, French	Tenth/Philology
3	Andrea	16	English, French	Tenth/Philology
4	Addison	16	English, French	Tenth/Philology

The students' English teachers, Mrs. Mitchell and Mrs. Vaughn (pseudonyms), also participated in the study. Both were experienced EFL teachers with 28 and 24 years teaching experience respectively.

#### 3.2. Data collection

The overall methodological approach used is a multiple case study, which has been defined as several cases that "may be studied jointly in order to investigate

a phenomenon, population, or general condition" (Stake, 2005, p. 445). The study used multiple qualitative methods to elicit data on the participants' emotional experiences of learning English over a period of one school semester, that is, written tasks in the form of language learning histories, repeated semi-structured interviews with students and teachers, field notes based on informal conversations with students and teachers, lesson observations, and observations of English-related events outside the classroom.

In terms of participant recruitment, the teachers were approached first. With their help, the participating learners were recruited by going to these teachers' classrooms and talking to their students. The learners who had agreed to participate in the study gave their e-mail addresses to the first author, and they received the written task as an e-mail attachment. Once completed, the tasks were sent back to the first author by e-mail. At the end of the written task, the students were invited to participate in interviews which would explore the issue of English learning emotions and motivation in more depth. With the participants' verbal permission, the interviews were audio-recorded.

### 3.3. The written language learning history task

Language learning histories were included in the study since "writing language learning histories gives learners the opportunity to describe their own language learning experiences and express their feelings about those experiences" (Oxford, 1995, p. 581). The first author wrote her own language learning history as an EFL learner in Romania, from which several guiding questions emerged. These questions were used in task instructions as general prompts to give the participants a sense of direction (Murray, 2009), although they were encouraged to write freely and in as much detail as possible (see task instructions in Appendix A). By having the students tell their language learning stories, it was believed that valuable insights would be gained into the participants' English learning trajectories, including "past emotions and memories of these emotions" (Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2011, p. 82) from past to present. The written language learning histories were elicited in English.

### 3.4. Interviews

To obtain an insight into the participants' own, that is, emic perspective on their English language learning experiences, the interview was chosen as a method offering an opportunity for "a conversation that has . . . a purpose" (Kvale, 2007, p. 7). Three semi-structured interviews with each participant were conducted throughout the school semester. The main areas covered in the first interview were: an exploration of the language learning history, feelings towards learning English, autonomy and

contextual factors, and motivation (see Appendix B for the interview guide). The second and third interviews were mainly focused on the lesson observations, being conducted in order to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' classroom behavior and richer insights into their English learning experiences. The topics discussed in the second interview were therefore related to what had been observed in the classroom and to English-related activities observed outside the classroom. The third interview additionally explored issues related to future plans for learning English.

All the interviews with the students were conducted in English, but the interviewees were made aware that they could resort to their first language whenever they felt like doing so. The decision to have the student interviews in English was motivated by both ethical and pragmatic concerns, that is, the belief that the interviewees should benefit from the research not only by becoming more self-aware as language learners but also by having an additional opportunity for speaking practice in communicative interaction outside the classroom in a context where such speaking opportunities are rather limited. Moreover, the participating students' levels of proficiency in English were high enough for the learners to be able to express themselves in English. Specifically, the teachers described the participating learners as being at the intermediate and advanced levels.

The participating students' English teachers were also interviewed to gather more data on the learners by adding the teachers' viewpoints and to obtain data on these adolescent learners from a different perspective. The interviews were guided by three key questions, focusing on a description of the participants as English learners, what they liked in the English class and what motivated them in learning English. Interviews with the teachers were conducted in Romanian to avoid any judgment of their English and hence any threat to their professional image.

### 3.5. Lesson observations

Lesson observations were used since "for the majority of foreign language learners, the classroom is the primary site for learning" (Lamb, 2013, p. 38), and "researchers may be able to gain an understanding of some behaviors only through observation: . . . participants themselves may not be aware of some of their behaviors" (Richards & Morse, 2007, pp. 115-116). The focus of the lesson observations was on the participating students' classroom behavior: the ways in which they participated in the lessons and how they interacted with their teachers and peers.

### 3.6. Data coding

Coding was guided by the research questions and informed by sociocultural theory in that attention was paid to the ways in which emotion was mediated by

artifacts and social relationships in the learners' context. At the same time, given the exploratory nature of the study, coding was data-driven. Although the focus was on positive emotions, it was not decided a priori which specific emotions to investigate in depth. Rather, emotions were identified based on their salience in the participants' reports on their learning experiences. The initial major code "Core Positive Emotions" was subsequently divided into three codes: Love, Liking and Enjoyment (see Pavelescu, 2017, for the full code list). As described in the literature review, love is a multifaceted, complex emotion. In the context of this study, Love is understood more narrowly as a strong positive feeling about the language being studied, in this case English. The specific criteria used to distinguish between Love, Liking and Enjoyment are the following (see also Table 2): the relative intensity of the emotion expressed (differentiating between the strong emotion of Love and the less intense, pleasant feeling of Enjoyment), its relative duration and stability (with Love and Liking being stable in contrast to more transient Enjoyment), and the presence of specific contextual factors (i.e., artefacts and individuals) mediating the positive emotion towards English (with Liking being linked to contextual factors, in contrast to the overall positive emotion of Love about English).

Table 2 Coding positive emotions

Positive Emotion	Reported intensity of emotion	Duration/stability of emotion	Contextual factors mediating the emotion
Love	High	High	No specific factors; overall positive emotion about English /learning English
Liking	Medium-High	High	Emotion tied to specific contextual factors constituting and supporting the prevalent emotion of love
Enjoyment	Low-Medium	Low	Overall pleasant feeling about English; emotion tied to specific contextual factors

It is important to note that since much of the data comes from the participants' self-reports, care was taken not to code verbal expressions of emotion mechanically based on the language the participant used (e.g., the use of the verbs *love* or *like*), but rather by taking into consideration the criteria above as well as the co-text and other data segments pertaining to the same participant. Thus, the use of the verb *like* in the statement "I like English more than Romanian" (Kim) was coded as the expression of Love since liking a foreign language more than one's mother tongue means the person conveys a strong emotion. In contrast, the following segment, also containing the verb *like* was coded as 'Liking' since the emotion is less intense, though relatively stable, and the positive emotion about English is mediated via positive emotions about British and American musicians: ". . . I have a lot of favorite singers including a British band,

Muse, it's called, Muse, and I like Lana del Rey, she's an American singer, and Leona Lewis and Lorde." Liking thus refers to contextual connotations of the overall love of English, supporting it by contributing to its stability and depth. Finally, the following segment, where the participant described an English language learning activity from the previous school year that she remembered as a positive experience, was coded as Enjoyment given the lower intensity and duration of the emotion: "Last year we learned about Shakespeare, about Hamlet, about Romeo and Juliet, and I like that" (Addison). To identify the contextual factors mediating the positive emotions towards English language learning, the codes were further subdivided; for instance, the "Liking" segment above was coded as "Liking – Pastime activities."

Coding was done in NVivo. A portion of the dataset was independently coded by two coders. An inter-rater reliability test showed that the level of agreement between the coders was acceptable ( $K = .78, p < .0005$ ).

#### 4. Findings

The following sections report on the core positive emotion identified in each learner's language learning experience. "Core emotion" is used with the meaning of the emotion that is at the center of the students' English learning selves, which powerfully stands out as being the most salient emotion in the participating students' accounts of their language learning experiences. Focusing on the core emotion does not imply that other positive emotions were not present in these adolescent learners' English language learning experiences. Rather, while all positive emotions identified in each case were reported, it was felt that, by exploring the participants' core emotion in depth, rich insight would be gained into the emotional dynamics of their language learning process. Core emotions towards English essentially emerged in the learners' interactions with family members, teachers and classmates. Their accounts thus uncovered the highly important role of interactions and social relationships in constructing and shaping emotions and the ways in which such interactions mediated learning. Love arose as the prevalent emotion experienced by two of the learners in their English language learning, Kim and Ann, while enjoyment was found to be the core emotion in Andrea's and Addison's language learning experiences.

##### 4.1. Ann's core emotion: Love

Love was the emotion that prevailed in Ann's English learning. Ann began to learn English when she started school, and one of her first English-related memories with positive emotional connotations was her textbook:

*When I was little, the English book had some adorable, funny comics with a dog, a puppy and a cat. I think this is the first thing I remember about learning English; I loved it.*

As she stated in her written language history, her love of English increased over the years: “. . . during these 10 years I fell in love with it more and more.”

When asked what had made her fall in love with English, Ann firstly reported her belief that English was important. Such awareness seemed to have initially emerged in Ann’s interactions with her uncle, who lived in the Netherlands and had travelled widely. Ann’s uncle had been the first person who had encouraged her to learn English when she was only five years old. As she reported, he always encouraged her to keep practicing English. Ann’s awareness of the importance of English was also linked to her parents, who had been telling her ever since she was a child that English was an important language to learn. When asked what she loved the most about English, Ann mentioned the opportunities English offered:

*I guess the opportunities it gives (sic), it gives you, like you can go anywhere in the world and talk to anyone and basically you can do everything you want.*

In addition to family members who shaped her love of English while she was very young, Ann’s love of the language appears to have been strongly shaped in interactions with a teacher she had in the seventh grade, who had only taught her English for two months. Ann vividly remembered that time in her life. She described the teacher as “awesome in every possible way,” a person who always encouraged her to pursue her dreams. She placed emphasis mainly on the emotional support provided by that teacher rather than on the ways in which the teacher taught English. Ann felt that she had learnt most English during that year. As she reported, it had been such a special learning experience that it had changed her life. It was after this teacher had left that Ann made the decision to learn English by herself. This teacher’s interest in and concern for her students mediated Ann’s love for the language, which in turn mediated Ann’s learning since she became an autonomous learner.

Her love of English was also linked to her emotions towards her high school teacher. When asked about the role her teacher played in her English learning, Ann reported:

*She is such a sweet person. I love her. She is very nice and . . . I love the way she teaches.*

Ann’s love of English was also supported by her liking of the various English-related classroom and out-of-class activities she engaged in. In particular, reading novels in English strongly mediated her love of the language during the semester when the study took place. As she described it: “Right now, I am so in

love with them." Her response to the question about whether she would change anything in her textbook further emphasized her liking of reading. She reported that she and her classmates needed literature, expressing her belief that, first and foremost, they needed to read in the English classroom. Moreover, when asked what she would like her classroom activities to focus on, she mentioned reading among such activities. She also implied that she sometimes felt rather bored by the texts in her textbook.

When faced with boring texts or features of classroom life she disliked, such as noisy classmates, it was love of English that helped her to focus on language learning:

*I love English, so . . . easier for me to pay attention to the class rather than listening to the others making noise.*

In another interview, she described a similar situation when her peers were noisy, once again stating that focusing on language learning was easy and natural for her because of her love of English.

That love was the prevalent emotion in her learning was also evident from an episode in her language learning history, which described her efforts to learn "over 100 irregular verbs" during the summer holiday before the 4th grade. Despite this being a "challenge," learning the verbs gave her a pleasant sense of achievement: "it made me feel good," further reinforcing her positive emotions about learning English.

This strong emotional connection to English was apparent throughout the interviews with Ann. To her, everything sounded better in English. She reported thinking in English. Even when doing her homework for her French class, she sometimes thought in English. Ann's positive emotions towards English were also acknowledged by her teacher, who reported that "she puts her heart and soul into everything she does [in the English class]," describing Ann's connection to English as deeply emotional:

*She does it [learning English] because she needs it but also because she likes it very much and she does it with passion and love and that can be seen.*

Ann's love for the language also appeared to be linked to her fascination with London. Throughout her account, she expressed a strong attraction towards the UK. She mentioned a lesson about London that she particularly enjoyed during high school, in the ninth grade:

*It was about London, and I already had an obsession with it, and it was very interesting.*

In her written language learning history, Ann stated that she had gone on a trip to London with her English teacher during the summer holiday, at the end of the

ninth grade. She referred to the trip as “a great experience,” and her use of adjectives such as “breathtaking,” “stunning” and “amazing” in her written and oral accounts attests to the positive emotions experienced. Ann also reported her excitement and the intensity of her emotions at seeing London:

- A.: *The first thing I did as I got, got off the autocar [coach] it was crying because I was so excited.*  
I.: *Crying?*  
A.: *Yes. I was so excited and I, I saw, I saw the Thames and . . . the Tower Bridge.*  
I.: *Yes.*  
A.: *And I was so in love with it.*

Her strong desire to visit London is evident in another episode. Before going on the trip to the UK, Ann had painted a landscape of London on canvas, revealing her eagerness and excitement. Interestingly, the same episode was told by Ann’s teacher when she mentioned how talented Ann was at painting:

- T.: *Last year, she went on a trip to England with me and*  
I.: *Yes.*  
T.: *before going on the trip she was so excited and she found a picture of Houses of Parliament at dusk. (. . .)*  
(...)  
T.: *(...) she made a painting in oil of The Houses of Parliament (. . .)*

Liking of, and interest in, other cultures also shaped Ann’s love towards English. One of her pastime activities was writing a blog in English about bands, which offered her the opportunity to make friends with people from all over the world and communicate with them regularly. Thus, her love of the language was also linked to blog writing in English and the ability to communicate with others.

In sum, Ann’s love for the language was strongly shaped by positive experiences outside the classroom, such as reading English language novels or travelling to London, but also by interactions in and out of the classroom, such as a close relationship with teachers and enjoyable computer-mediated communication with other English language users.

#### 4.2. Kim’s core emotion: Love

Kim’s love of English was initially revealed in her written language learning history, where she described that “by 5th grade I was already in love with this beautiful language.” The intensity of her emotions was reflected by the statement that she loved English more than she loved her mother tongue. Kim mentioned that she liked English so much that, to her, it sounded more beautiful than her native

language. She also loved the English culture. When asked if there was a specific part of the English culture that she particularly liked, she stated:

*I like the fact they are a bit, um, superior. They feel superior um towards, um, other... countries. And . . . there's a royal feeling about England, Great Britain that I like.*

When reflecting on her emotions towards English and the reasons why she loved it, Kim mentioned her aunt, who lived in the UK, as the essential influence:

- K.: Maybe because my aunt was very passionate about English as well when she was a teenager. Now she is in um England. She is a doctor there.*
- I.: Oh, so she lives in England now.*
- K.: Yes, yes, with her family, family. And . . . um, since I spent a lot of time with her when I was really young, I think some . . . something of her passion for English has brushed off on me. [Laughs]*

Her aunt had translated the cartoons Kim was watching from English into Romanian when Kim was three or four years old. Kim's mother, who was an English teacher at the time, also translated the cartoons. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that her mother had also played a significant role in shaping her emotions towards English although the fact that her aunt lived in England seems to have made a particularly strong impression on Kim.

Kim's strong positive emotion towards English also appeared to have been shaped by her Internet-based communication with other English speakers, whom she had "met" online by playing computer games. She stated:

- K.: I . . . Back when I used to play a lot of video games, even online games, I used to have a lot of foreign friends, like, um . . . and I even talk to them now, but not that often anymore.*
- I.: So, you still keep in touch with some of them.*
- K.: Yeah, I still keep in touch with some of them. For example, a couple from Portugal and a guy from the Netherlands.*
- I.: Yes.*
- (...)*
- K.: Whenever they would log on, log in the game, we would chat for hours on end and . . . I felt that my English was in a very good state. [Laughs]*
- I.: Yes. Was the conversation restricted to the game that you were playing or not necessarily?*
- K.: No, we would talk about other things and about life and what we would do daily and stuff like that.*

The emotion of love also appeared to be linked to the caring support offered to Kim by her teacher. In Kim's own words:

*I am extremely grateful to my . . . English teacher who always supported me and helped me exceed my limits - she definitely played the most important role in my English learning process.*

However, the interviews revealed that Kim experienced a lack of interest in the English class that semester. In her own words:

*K.: Yes, I was more enthusiastic about learning English the past years, but ahm this semester I didn't feel anything . . . .*

*I.: Why do you think that that was the case?*

*K.: I wasn't really interested in the writing tasks, except for a few . . . .*

Love was revealed as being lasting and was thus still experienced despite this reported lack of interest in and liking of the majority of her classroom writing tasks that semester, such as essays and, particularly, reports, which provoked a feeling of constraint, of being bound by rules and a certain type of language. The stability of Kim's love of English was highlighted by the following comment:

*I.: I remember that, in the language learning history, you mentioned among other things that you loved English more than Romanian.*

*K.: Yeah.*

*I.: And I was just wondering if you feel the same way now.*

*K.: Of course I feel the same way.*

Her account implied that it was the emotion of love that kept her engaged in the language learning process even when the lessons focused on tasks which she disliked. Therefore, a discrepancy existed between Kim's core emotion towards English – love – and her emotions towards learning English in the classroom that semester – lack of enjoyment of the majority of the writing tasks. Kim contrasted this to her liking of narrative and descriptive essays in the tenth grade:

*K.: . . . in the past years we had you know narrative essay and descriptive essay and I was really good at writing them and I, they really tested my creativity.*

*I.: Mhm.*

*K.: That's why I liked them more and I, I feel like I've learned so many things in the tenth grade when I, we learnt the descriptive essay, so many words. And I enriched my vocabulary in that year so much. And I, I used to think that I couldn't write any better than in ninth grade, but I proved myself that in the tenth grade that I could learn even more and write even better ah essays but only narrative and descriptive essays because the other essays I don't, I don't really like them.*

Kim's reported liking of writing tasks such as book and film reviews of the learners' choice, assigned towards the end of the semester, seems to point to an increase

in her liking of English learning in the classroom towards the end of the school year. The opportunity to use her creativity and express herself without any constraints was linked to Kim's liking of review writing, which she listed among her favorite writing tasks that semester.

This learner's emotion of love thus appeared to be shaped by interactions with significant others such as aunt, mother and teacher, by classroom-related experiences such as narrative/descriptive essay writing and book/film review writing, and by a positive mental image of British culture/society.

#### 4.3. Andrea's core emotion: Enjoyment

Enjoyment in relation to English was the core emotion reflected in Andrea's account. A reference to English as a "beautiful language" in her written language learning history, as well as her interview reports that her main reason for learning English was that English was "pretty," reveal enjoyment and aesthetic appreciation. In her written language learning history, Andrea vividly remembered her first day of learning English at nursery school. She described her teacher as a beautiful, young lady whose voice and accent made her want to learn English. Furthermore, she remembered the lesson when she learnt the word *Hello* and how nice it sounded, pointing to her enjoyment of the sounds of the language. The significant role Andrea's kindergarten teacher had played in her life was emphasized in her account during the first interview, when Andrea mentioned that it was that teacher who had made her like English and that she wanted to become a person like her. This strong emotional connection to that teacher was confirmed once again in Andrea's interview account that she had once gone to her former nursery school to look for her: "I really want to see her and, I don't know, talk to her."

Her positive feelings about English<sup>1</sup> were also linked to her high school English teacher. When asked what she liked about learning English in the classroom, Andrea mentioned her teacher:

A.: *Well, she is not like the others, like the other teachers, and she's different. She's so charismatic and she's nice and she, her way to make us to know Eng... to, yeah, to learn English is different. I don't know. She makes us write stories and stuff*

I.: *Yes.*

A.: *and in this way, you know, you prove your words and your imagination*

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<sup>1</sup> The positive emotions were not always possible to completely delineate due to their somewhat fuzzy boundaries and their fluid nature. However, if enjoyment arose as the prevalent emotion in a particular student's reported learning experiences, the other instances revealing positive feelings were treated as constitutive elements of that emotion.

As we can see, Andrea liked her teacher not only because she was “charismatic” but also because she engaged students in creative writing tasks, which stimulated students’ imagination in the English class, activities Andrea enjoyed. Thus, positive emotions about the teacher and the enjoyable activities in the classroom were closely intertwined.

However, a discrepancy was found between Andrea’s self-reported enjoyment and her classroom behavior. When observed in class, Andrea usually seemed preoccupied by something other than the English lesson. For instance, she was seen talking to her classmates or not knowing the page number in the textbook when the teacher called on her. During the majority of the classes observed, Andrea seemed absent-minded, somewhat disconnected from the lesson and the classroom activities. This behavior was also revealed in her teacher’s account, which stressed Andrea’s lack of attention to the class:

*. . . Her mind is always elsewhere.*

*. . . So, if she has a preoccupation at that time, that is her universe, everything revolves around that.*

Andrea’s case highlights the contrast between a self-reported positive emotion – enjoyment of English, linked to interactions with her nursery school teacher and to a perception of the language as being beautiful – and the lack of this emotion manifested in her classroom behavior, mainly through her lack of attention to the lessons.

#### 4.4. Addison’s core emotion: Enjoyment

Positive emotions in English language learning were also revealed by Addison, whose written language learning history highlighted how her enjoyment of English was constructed in interactions with her teacher and classmates before high school. Addison began learning English in kindergarten and mentioned her excitement at seeing an English book for the first time. However, it was not until the sixth grade that she became truly interested in English and started to like the language. She mentioned a classroom episode in the sixth grade, when her English teacher involved Addison and her classmates in a play based on *Alice in Wonderland*. This episode seemed to have been the most memorable in her written language learning narrative. The teacher assigned a role to every pupil, and their task was to read the part, identify the character, put their parts together, imagine a name for the play and learn their assigned roles. Addison played the part of the malefic queen and remembered that her lines were full of arrogance. She reported:

*The game made us curious, interested in discovering English language meanings, new words, where we are on the learning curve, beside this was a exciting situation, we had a lot of fun, it made us actors and made us more familiar with English.*

When asked about this episode during the first interview, Addison stated that she liked theatre and drama, and that she enjoyed acting, especially the role of the villain. Addison's positive emotion towards English appeared to have been essentially mediated by her playful interaction with her classmates when acting in the role-play and by her interaction with her teacher, who had designed an entertaining classroom activity. Further interviews with Addison confirmed her enjoyment of plays, particularly by Shakespeare, whose *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* she enjoyed studying in the ninth grade, and of role-plays in the English classroom, which she described as an essential element of her ideal English classroom.

In Addison's case, then, the positive emotion of enjoyment in the English language classroom seemed to have been essentially shaped by her interactions with her peers during role-play activities and by classroom-related artifacts such as plays by Shakespeare.

#### 4.5. A cross-case analysis

As can be seen from these accounts, the learners' core positive emotions towards English arose in, and were shaped by, their relationships in their sociocultural context, but also by their interactions with different artifacts, such as classroom and leisure activities (see Table 3). Although all four students experienced positive emotions in their language learning, the core emotion differed in that Ann and Kim felt a deep emotional connection to English, while Andrea and Addison's emotions were less intense. The intensity of Ann and Kim's emotion of love of English was revealed in these learners' comments that they loved English more than Romanian (Kim) and that, over the years, they loved English more and more (Ann). Furthermore, love emerged as being enduring over time and as having the power to help the learners overcome barriers in their learning process, such as a lack of interest in certain classroom tasks (Kim) and a noisy, disruptive classroom atmosphere (Ann). In contrast, Andrea and Addison, who experienced the dominant positive emotion of enjoyment, did not express or imply a high intensity of their prevalent emotion towards English. Moreover, their accounts did not point to stability of the emotion over time, nor was the positive emotion strong enough to help maintain interest in and focus on language learning (Andrea).

In terms of the contextual factors contributing to the positive emotions the participants experienced, it was shown that factors both within and outside of the classroom played a role. There were various types of activities and tasks

that mediated the emotions of love and enjoyment within the classroom, such as literature-based lessons, writing reviews and narrative/descriptive essays and writing stories. Activities and situations outside of the classroom, such as reading English language novels, travelling to the UK and blog writing in English also seemed to enhance the prevalent emotions experienced towards English.

The findings also show that some of the contextual factors were present in all four learners' accounts, while others were learner-specific (see Table 3). Both love and enjoyment were linked to an emotional attachment to English teachers, who seemed to have played an important role in shaping these four students' positive emotions towards English. Learner-specific factors included preferred classroom and pastime activities, which varied across the four learners, as well as specific perceptions and beliefs about the English language and English-speaking society and culture, which mediated their positive emotions towards the language. For instance, Ann held the belief that English was important and that it offered countless opportunities in life, which mediated her love for English. As for Kim, she believed that British people felt superior, and she liked this imagined aspect of British culture and society. With regard to Andrea, she perceived English to be a beautiful language, and this perception mediated her enjoyment of English.

Table 3 Contextual factors mediating positive emotions towards English language learning

	English teachers	Classroom activities and artefacts	Family members	Out of school activities/experiences	Perceptions and beliefs of English
Kim	High school teacher	Writing reviews of books and films of students' own choice	Aunt living in the UK, English teacher, and her mother (watching cartoons in English)	Internet-based communication with other English users	English "is superior," "there's a royal feeling about England"
Ann	Teacher in the 7th grade ('changed her life') High school teacher	Textbook reading about London	Uncle living abroad	Reading books in English, trip to London, blog writing about music, thinking in English, and painting a landscape of London	With English "you can do everything you want"
Andrea	Nursery school teacher and High school teacher	Writing stories in English			English is "pretty," a "beautiful language"
Addison	Teacher before high school	Role-plays and plays by Shakespeare			

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Positive emotions in English language learning

This exploratory study investigated four Romanian high school students' emotions in their English language learning experiences over a school semester. In response to the first research question, which focused on whether the students experienced positive emotions towards English in their language learning process, this study has found ample evidence of positive emotions, with the most salient ones being love and enjoyment. While all four participants reported experiencing positive emotions in language learning, a distinction was identified in the intensity and stability of their emotions. Two participants expressed a strong and stable emotion of love towards English, while the other two participants experienced enjoyment in their English language learning without an intense emotional attachment to English. Unlike the prevalent emotion of enjoyment, the core emotion of love was found to be the driving force in the learning process of the students who experienced it through its intensity and stability, creating effective coping mechanisms when there was a lack of enjoyment in certain classroom situations as well as motivating learners to invest greater effort in language learning. The difference between love and enjoyment is evident in the ways in which Ann and Addison reported engaging in their favorite English-related activities, reading English novels and participating in role-plays, respectively. While Ann was mobilized by her emotion of love to read books in English outside the classroom, falling in love with such books and being an active agent in engaging with learning English outside school, Addison enjoyed a literature-based activity that her teacher asked her to engage in. Such findings about love and enjoyment foreground the importance of strong, enduring positive emotions towards the foreign language.

However, studying emotions in isolation has its limitations, the main one being that they do not emerge in a vacuum but are context-dependent. In response to the second research question, which focused on emotions in relation to the participants' sociocultural context, the findings have shown that positive emotions arose in relation to various contextual factors, both individuals, such as family members and the teacher, and artefacts, such as classroom and out-of-class activities. The learners' accounts revealed the existence of an emotional bond between them and their teachers, which converges with Mahn and John-Steiner's (2002) and MacIntyre and Gregersen's (2012b) arguments on the importance of community-building and close interpersonal relationships in students' emotional experience in the classroom. All the participating students expressed positive emotions towards their high school teachers, which shows that

their core positive emotions towards English were also linked to their close relationship with their teachers. These findings are in line with Dewaele and MacIntyre's (2016) social dimension of foreign language enjoyment, which was also linked to encouraging and supportive teachers, and with Dewaele and Dewaele's (2017) results concerning the effect of the teacher on learners' positive emotions in the foreign language classroom. In addition to teachers, it is interesting to note the important role of family members living abroad in shaping a positive orientation to English and to English language learning in the cases of Ann and Kim. Both students were exposed to English and encouraged to learn it from an early age in their families, and both later developed a strong emotional attachment to English. In sum, then, the findings have revealed the social construction of positive emotions in language learning, confirming previous research such as Imai's (2010), which has emphasized that "emotions . . . are socially constructed through people's intersubjective encounters" (p. 283).

The findings also provide evidence of the private dimension of positive emotions, linked to cognition and a sense of accomplishment, which Dewaele and MacIntyre (2016) identified in the case of enjoyment. Kim's enjoyment of narrative and descriptive essays, which stimulated her creativity and were memorable learning experiences, and Ann's ability to think in English and her pleasant sense of challenge experienced while learning irregular verbs are instances of the private dimension of positive emotion. Cognition and a sense of achievement seem to be enhancers of Ann and Kim's prevalent emotion of love of English, contributing to the development of inner resources that sustained their engagement in learning. In contrast, despite the fact that Addison enjoyed acting in role-plays, the emotion of enjoyment was closely related to interacting with peers; similarly, Andrea's enjoyment of the beauty of English seemed to be part of her enjoyment of her teacher's pronunciation of English sounds. Thus, in both students' cases, the social dimension was essential to the experience of the positive emotion of enjoyment. Although the private dimension of the emotional experience of English learning may have existed, it was not made salient by these two students' accounts.

The study further provides an empirical description, through the cases of Ann and Kim, of how love of English may have a "positive-broadening" effect (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012a; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). Although both students reported experiencing obstacles in their learning, such as unappealing texts in the textbook and classmates making noise in the case of Ann and demotivating classroom activities causing lack of enjoyment in the case of Kim, it was love of English that broadened the students' perspective and sustained their engagement in learning. The positive emotion of love thus appeared to have been the driving force in this process (see Dewaele, 2011). These findings highlight

the importance of love in the foreign language classroom and its link to cognition. Love has thus emerged from these students' accounts as a strong emotion which is enduring over time and broadens cognition, empowering learners to overcome obstacles in their learning context and maintaining learners' engagement in language learning in the long term. The different contextual factors linked to the emotion of love did not emerge as short-term passions but rather as crucial elements which constituted and supported this positive emotion during the language learning process over time.

Although the findings about the role of love in L2 learning are in line with Reschly, Huebner, Appleton, and Antaramian (2008), who found a link between positive emotions and engagement in the learning process, in the cases of Andrea and Addison, who experienced positive emotions of a more fleeting and less intensive kind, such link between emotions and engagement was not identified. This points to the need for further research on the role of different types of positive emotions in foreign language learning.

One of the intriguing findings is the fact that Ann and Kim developed a strong emotional bond to English while Andrea and Addison did not, leading to the question of how this difference can be accounted for. The comparison of the "love" and "enjoyment" cases in this exploratory study provides some possible answers, such as the encouragement to learn English provided by family members and student-initiated engagement in out-of-class English-related activities, both of which were present in the "love" cases but absent in the "enjoyment" ones; however, why some students form strong and lasting emotions towards the language they study remains to be explored in future research.

## 6. Limitations and suggestions for further research

One of the limitations of this study results from the self-selection effect, that is, that only students who have positive emotions towards learning English are likely to participate in a study about their learning experiences. Nevertheless, the findings provide insights into how such emotions arise and how they interact with contextual factors and thus provide a useful point of comparison for future studies on this topic, particularly studies involving students who experience mostly negative emotions.

It is also important to acknowledge that there were only female participants in this study. The views presented should thus be understood as "teenage girl" perspectives, which may differ from teenage boys' views. Studies such as Dewaele and MacIntyre's (2014) and Dewaele, Boudreau, and Dewaele's (2016) have shown that there are gender differences regarding emotions in the foreign language classroom: The foreign language was more emotionally loaded for female participants, something worth investigating in further research.

Finally, while this study took into account the factors in the learners' immediate context (e.g., family members, the classroom), a discussion of the equally relevant factors in the wider social context was beyond the scope of this paper. However, their presence was clear in the data. For instance, the participants' love of English was encouraged by family members who had emigrated from Romania to work abroad. The intersection of social, economic and political realities with teenagers' language learning experiences is a worthy topic for future research.

## 7. Implications for practice

The findings of the study point to the need for teachers to view their adolescent learners as complex social beings, whose worlds are not confined to the classroom, or the school, walls. This study has foregrounded the view of learners as sentient beings, whose emotions towards the target language need to be engaged in the process of learning. The findings have emphasized the "positive-broadening" (see MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012a; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014) power of love in teenagers' language learning process, namely its power to facilitate learning when there was a perceived lack of enjoyment of certain classroom tasks or to broaden cognitive resources in a noisy classroom. They suggest that close attention must be paid to the process of creating positive emotions in language learners (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012b) and of nurturing such emotions during the learning process. As Oxford (2016) pointed out, we could depict positive emotions as skills that can be developed. Given that teenagers' attitudes towards their English learning are linked to their interests, teachers should find effective ways to bridge the gap between students' in-school and out-of-school learning (see Pitkänen-Huhta & Nikula, 2013) to enhance learners' positive emotions and what Oxford (2014) calls "meaningful engagement" in the learning process. For instance, some of the English-related activities the participating students particularly liked, which were linked to their lives outside the classroom, were book/film review writing and reading books in English. Teachers should therefore turn the classroom into a space which allows for a link between out-of-school contact with English and in-class activities (see Legutke, 2012). This implies that they should teach "*the whole student*, bringing together *mind and heart* in the classroom" (Goleman, 1996, p. xiv; emphasis added). There is thus an interplay between cognition and emotion which needs to be acknowledged and addressed by teachers in the foreign language classroom for students' learning experience to be enhanced.

## 8. Conclusion

The present study explored Romanian high school students' positive emotions in their English language learning experiences and how such emotions emerged in their surrounding environment. Although there were several emotions identified, two core emotions powerfully emerged in the data, namely love and enjoyment. These two emotions were mediated by the participants' interactions with family members, teachers and English speakers and by artifacts, such as classroom activities and tasks, trips abroad, and books. A particularly interesting finding is that the emotion of love acted as the driving force in the learning process, maintaining engagement in learning even when there were obstacles in the classroom, such as a lack of enjoyment of certain tasks or noisy peers, while such capability to sustain learning efforts was not identified in the case of students who experienced a less intense and less durable positive emotion. The study has emphasized language learners' complexity and uniqueness, pointing to the importance of viewing students as sociocultural beings who shape and are shaped by their surrounding environment in intricate, idiosyncratic and perhaps even unpredictable ways. The study has shown that learners are holistic individuals whose emotional universes are highly rich and complex, raising awareness that "what we see are fragments and only a partial description of the bigger picture" (Mercer, 2011, p. 74). The findings of the present study suggest that the language learning self is like a jigsaw puzzle and that understanding the self involves understanding how the pieces fit together (Mercer & Williams, 2014). By closely looking at teenagers' English language learning emotions in their sociocultural context, the present research has revealed richer insights into the complexity of the emotional pieces of adolescent students' language learning puzzle.

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## APPENDIX A

### Instruction sheet for the language learning history task

#### Language Learning History

Write your own story about your English learning experiences from the moment you began learning English until now. Focus on what you consider to be more important and try to give as many details as possible. When reflecting upon your experiences, make sure you include answers to the following questions:

When and where did you start learning English?

How have you learned English?

What is your most vivid memory regarding your English learning experiences?

What opportunities have you had to use English until now?

Who played a particularly important role in your English learning process? In what way(s)?

Keep in mind that your language learning history should look like a story (the story of your English learning experiences) rather than like answers to a questionnaire.

## APPENDIX B

### Interview guide – first Interview

#### Explore the language learning history

In your language learning history, you said that ... . Can you tell me more about that?

#### Feelings towards learning English:

The metaphor you used was: "Learning English is ...". Why is learning English ... for you?

What do you like about learning English in the classroom?

Can you tell me about a specific lesson that you enjoyed very much?

What do you dislike about learning English in the classroom?

If you could have more of something in the English classroom, what would it be?

If you could have less of something in the English classroom, what would it be?

What makes you feel nervous in the English class?

#### Autonomy and contextual factors

How would you describe yourself as a learner of English?

How do your parents support you in learning English?

What role do films, music and the Internet play in your English learning outside the classroom?

What opportunities do you have to use English outside the classroom?

#### Motivation

##### *Overall motivation*

What are your reasons for learning English?

What obstacles are there in your way when it comes to learning English? How do you overcome them?

##### *Vision for the future*

How important is it for your future to be a successful learner of English? Why?

Where do you see yourself in three years (university)? Why?

Where do you see yourself in ten years (work)? Why?