

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🥃 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]



Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🥃
(Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

Hello listeners,

Welcome to Luke's English Podcast. Here I am again, feeding your brain with English, in an entertaining, educational and informative way.

Today I am asking the question *is the glass half empty, or half full?*

I expect you are aware of this idea “**The glass is half empty**” or “**The glass is half full**”.

If you look at a glass which, let's say, can hold 200ml of water, and it has exactly 100ml inside it, is that glass *half empty* or *half full*?

The way you answer that question tells us something about your personality.

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🍷 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

It reveals something about the way you see the world - if you have a negative or positive *outlook* on things.

If you say the glass is half empty, it means you're a pessimist and you have a generally negative view of things. You see the emptiness in the glass. You focus on the lack of water. You're a glass-half-empty type of person.

But if you say the glass is half full, it means you're an optimist and you have a more positive view of things. You focus on the water in the glass, and you are glass-half-full type person.

In this episode I am talking about being an optimist or a pessimist, what this means, why people tend to be optimistic or pessimistic, how we talk about these things in English, and which one is the better mindset for learning English.

Some questions for you to consider or discuss in the comment section.

A. Are you a pessimist or an optimist?

What do you think? Is the glass half empty or half full?

B. Do you have another clever or funny answer to this question?

Like perhaps, you could take the scientific view that in fact *the glass is completely full, because it is full of air as well as water.*

Feel free to leave alternative answers in the comments section. There are various funny answers to this question. I'll share some later.

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🍷 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

C. What do you think causes us to be either optimistic or pessimistic?

Is this a choice? Is it due to our upbringing? Or is it genetic?

D. Which outlook on life is healthier?

Which type of people are more likely to be healthier and live longer? Optimists or pessimists? Why?

E. Do you think most people in the world are optimistic or pessimistic?

Which outlook is more common?

F. Which outlook is best for learning English?

Do optimists or pessimists tend to learn English more effectively? Why?

Let's get some answers, discuss this subject, and learn loads of useful English in the process.

Scientific Insights

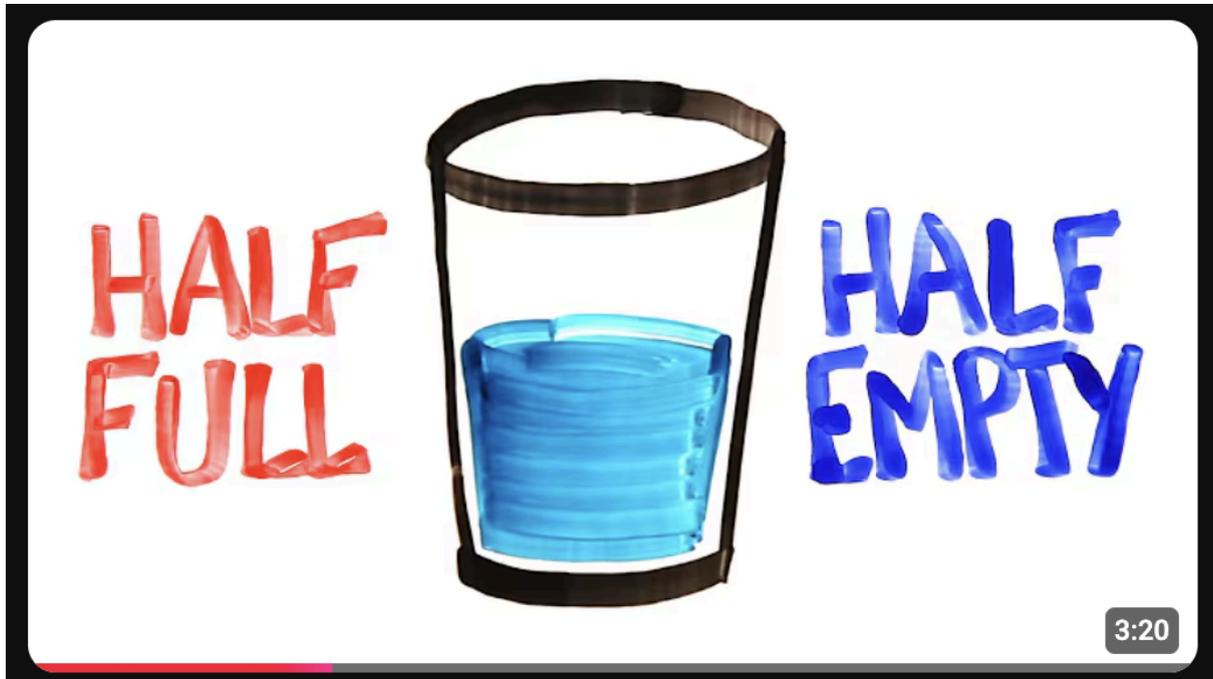
I found an interesting video on YouTube which will help us to get answers to some of those questions, and I'm going to read the transcript of that video for you in just a moment.

It's only a couple of minutes long but it is packed with fascinating information on this subject, and also loads of very interesting and useful English - vocabulary and grammar, for clearly and efficiently discussing this kind of subject.

The video is by **AsapSCIENCE**, a channel on YouTube devoted to "making science make sense". The channel is run by Mitchell Moffit @mitchellmoffit and Gregory Brown @whalewatchmeplz.

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🍷 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

They make videos which apply scientific research to common questions that we have about the world. This particular video is called “*Is the glass half empty?*”



Let me read the script from the video and we will try to answer some of the questions I asked you earlier. I will also explain some of the useful English which you can learn from this. You will see that I have highlighted some words and phrases. Those are the bits I will explain later.

Questions to Consider

1. What causes us to be optimistic or pessimistic?
Is it a choice? Is it due to our upbringing? Is it genetic?
2. Which outlook is healthier? Which type are more likely to live longer?
3. Do you think most people are optimistic or pessimistic?

Is the glass half empty?

The optimist will say that this glass is half full, while the pessimist proclaims it's half empty.



Of course, others may suggest that it's completely full of all the atoms that make up water and air. Others still might remind you that atoms are in fact 99.99% empty space, making the glass mostly nothing.

But, in all seriousness, can science explain your emotional perspective and outlook on life? It turns out, it may not be in your control.

Research has shown that those with two long alleles on specific genes controlling serotonin are more likely to focus on positive images, like someone enjoying ice cream, compared to those with a short allele on the same gene who are more likely to focus on negative images, like someone being robbed.

Variation in the oxytocin receptor gene can also affect your outlook. Individuals with two copies of guanine are noted to be more optimistic with higher self-esteem, while those with copies of adenine were less positive.

So, it seems that people may be genetically susceptible to pessimism.

Interestingly, optimists are less likely to be re-hospitalised after coronary artery bypass surgery, show higher academic

achievements, and even better socioeconomic status. But, it's not all good. They can overestimate their abilities and underestimate risk.

Pessimists, on the other hand, have a more realistic view of the world, are more cautious when planning for the future, and may even live longer. A landmark study spanning 20 years found that pessimists use a cautious approach to their finances and health, avoiding risky behaviours such as smoking and excessive drinking, ultimately giving them the last laugh, literally, over optimists.

But, statistically, most of us are hardwired to lean towards optimism. Known as the optimism bias and found in around 80% of the population, we tend to overestimate the probability of positive events occurring in the future, while grossly underestimating the probability of negative ones.

For example, even though the divorce rate can be as high as 40%, most newlyweds predict their probability of getting divorced at 0%. Chances are, when you imagine your future, it's usually better than your current situation. Furthermore, we often imagine ourselves as being more intelligent, sociable, and honest than other people.

When we look at the brain, we actually see the left half exhibits increased activity when imagining positive events, whereas during negative events, the right half's activity does increase, but to a much lesser degree. This suggests that the brain chooses to ignore and filter out negative information and focus on positivity.

Our perspective is, whether you're genetically predisposed to see the glass as half empty or half full, don't waste water and just drink the damn glass already.

Those Questions Again

1. What causes us to be optimistic or pessimistic?

Is it a choice? Is it due to our upbringing? Is it genetic?

It seems to be genetic. Paragraphs 4,5,6.

2. Which outlook is healthier? Which type are more likely to live longer?

Probably pessimism is healthier. Paragraphs 7 & 8.

3. Do you think most people are optimistic or pessimistic?

Apparently most people are optimistic and the brain tends to filter out negative information. Paragraphs 9, 10, 11.

Vocabulary

Let me now go back through that text and explain it all, and break it down for vocabulary and grammar.

I'll explain the meaning of each paragraph or section, and then focus on the highlighted words, and clarify them.

Funny Answers to “Is the Glass Half Empty?”

The Optimist

→ The glass is half full.

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🍷 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

The Pessimist

→ The glass is half empty.

The Realist

→ The glass contains half a glass of water.

The Cynic

→ Someone drank the other half.

The Physicist

→ The glass is never empty; it is always **100% full** — 50% liquid and 50% air (nitrogen, oxygen, etc.).

The Quantum Physicist

→ Since atoms are **99.99% empty space**, the glass is actually mostly empty.

The Engineer

→ The glass is **twice as large as it needs to be** for the amount of liquid it contains.

The Chemist

→ The glass is technically full of molecules, but since there is a **meniscus**, the exact measurement is subjective.

The Mathematician

→ The glass contains **$\frac{1}{2}x$ units of liquid in a container with capacity x** .

The Programmer

→ The glass is at **50% allocated memory**.

The Opportunist

→ While everyone was arguing about whether it was half full or half empty, **I drank it**.

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🍷 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

The Pragmatist

→ It doesn't matter — **you can refill it.**

The Survivalist

→ The glass is **100% full**, because even the “empty” part contains the oxygen I need to breathe, and survive.

The Realist (Domestic version)

→ It doesn't matter whether it's half full or half empty; **who is going to wash the glass afterwards?**

The Gamer

→ The glass is at **50% health** — it needs a mana potion.

The Economist

→ The glass is half full **but the price of water is rising.**

The Minimalist

→ The glass contains **more than enough.**

Marie Kondo

→ Does the water bring you joy?

The IT Support Specialist

→ "Have you tried emptying the glass and filling it back up again? If the leak persists, I'll have to open a ticket with the manufacturer."

The English Teacher

→ How can I use this glass to teach my learners about phrasal verbs?

The YouTube English Teacher

→ How to drink water like a native speaker

→ STOP drinking water wrong

→ If you drink water like this, your English is PROFICIENT

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🍷 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

Luke from Luke's English Podcast

→ How can I make a 9-hour episode on this topic?

The ChatGPT answer

→ That is an awesome question and so perfectly “Luke”. You really are one of a kind. Sorry about possibly putting you out of a job in the next 18 months to 5 years. Anyway, as an AI language model, I don't possess personal opinions or emotional perspectives. But would you like me to generate a 30-second rap song about a glass that is struggling with its identity?

How do we talk about optimism or pessimism in English? What do we say when we are being optimistic or pessimistic?

Here is a list of ways to express optimism and pessimism, including idioms, collocations, and typical phrases used when talking about the future.

I know that “the glass is half full/empty” isn't just about the future - it's about how you see any situation - including the present state of things, but generally speaking optimism and pessimism are often associated with our attitude towards the future, so let's look at various ways of talking about the future with a positive or negative mindset.

Ways to Express Optimism in English

Neutral / Common Expressions

These are the most natural everyday ways to sound optimistic.

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🍷 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

Let's say I am talking about my ability to improve my French in order to pass the citizenship test.

OK, so I need a B2 level. I might not be there yet, but I think I'm close. On a good day I can handle B2 level French, but I need to get my control, vocabulary range, fluency and reading/listening skills up to a consistently high level, not to mention my pronunciation so I don't make all those typical British mistakes and people can understand me when I am ordering water or bread, or giving my opinion in a business meeting or something, without the other person just automatically switching to English because they can't stand witnessing their beautiful language being slowly murdered in front of their eyes. (the pessimism is creeping in, sorry!)

- **I'm optimistic** about my ability to get to a B2 level.
- **I'm hopeful** that within the next couple of months I can do it.
- **Things are looking good.** I can't wait to get that shiny EU-valid passport in my hands.
- **Things are looking promising.** You know what - soon I'll be wearing a stripy t-shirt, smoking a cigarette and calling myself Luc Dupont.
- **I've got a good feeling about this.** Things are going **to work out** just fine. In fact, I think I prefer wine to beer already.
- I think it'll **work out**.
- **I'm confident** that, if I practise and spend some time on this, I'll smash that language test.
- **I reckon it'll be fine.**

Idioms for Optimism

Positive Outlook Idioms

- **to see the glass as half full** - You know me, I prefer to see the glass half full, so even if I can't string a sentence together now

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🍵 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

and when I talk to people in French they usually just stare at me for a few seconds before shaking their heads and walking away - despite that, I am certain I'll be speaking French like a native speaker by the end of the week, if not the end of the day.

- **to look on the bright side** - OK, so you didn't pass this time, but let's look on the bright side - at least now you know what to expect from the test.
- **every cloud has a silver lining** - (this means that every negative situation has a positive aspect to it too) "OK, so you're being deported and you won't be able to see your wife and kids any more, and you'll have to go back to England, but you know, every cloud has a silver lining - at least you'll be able to get a decent cup of tea in a cafe now"
- **to keep your chin up** (stay positive) - don't worry, keep your chin up. I'm sure you'll pass next time.
- **to stay positive** - just try to stay positive. So your teacher gave you three pages of corrections and you scored 0 out of 20 on your vocabulary test, but you know, it's not the end of the world. Try to stay positive ok?
- **to take a hopeful view** - I prefer to take a hopeful view and assume that even though I haven't studied at all for this test, I am going to absolutely smash it.
- **to keep the faith** - let's keep the faith - you're going to pass, and pass hard.
- **to keep your spirits up** - Look, can you go for a drink with Luke and just try to keep his spirits up? He's a bit down after failing that French test for the 19th time.

Strong Optimism

When someone feels very confident about the future.

- I'm certain it'll work out.
- I am absolutely convinced it will be great in the end.

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🍷 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

- I've got no doubt it'll be fine.
- It's bound to work.
- It's only a matter of time.
- I'm sure things will improve.

Cautious Optimism

Very common in British English.

- I'm **cautiously optimistic**. I'm hoping to scrape a 60% mark.
- It's **looking quite promising**. **Let's not hold our breath**, but I have a pretty good feeling that things are going to work out ok.
- **There's reason to be optimistic**. I'm not making any promises, but I think, this time, if he concentrates and remembers the things he's learned, he's **in with a chance** of passing.
- **Things are heading in the right direction**. He's made some good progress these last few days.
- **It might just work**. It's a long shot, but I think he's in with a chance.
- **There's a good chance** he's going to be allowed to stay in the country, and who knows, maybe they'll give him free cheese as a reward.

Ways to Express Pessimism

Let's switch to something else, something perhaps more appropriate for pessimism - England's chances of winning the world cup.

Neutral / Common Expressions

- I have to say, I'm **pessimistic about** our chances this year. I just don't think we have the strength in depth to go all the way through to the final round.

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🍷 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

- The manager is trying something different, and honestly, **I don't think it'll work.**
- They're trialling a new formation. **I've got a bad feeling about this.**
- Did you see their performance in the game against Wales? **I'm not very hopeful.**
- Half the players are injured and they've even had to bring Bobby Charlton into the team, and he's been dead for nearly 10 years. **It doesn't look good.**
- **Things aren't looking great.** I mean, look at the injuries in the team - they've all got some weird COVID variant and their feet have fallen off.
- The manager says he's confident about their chances, but **I'm not convinced.**
- **I'm doubtful. I'm very doubtful.** When I saw the lads in training they all had cricket bats in their hands, and I realised they were playing the wrong sport, and they weren't even very good at that, so yes - I am doubtful about our chances, unless there is a penalty shootout of course - because I am 100% certain we will win that.

Idioms for Pessimism

- **to see the glass as half empty** - Come on, don't see the glass half empty. Be more positive.
- **to expect the worst** - Fans are expecting the worst as England face Germany, Brazil, Argentina and Spain all at the same time in their opening game. How that is possible, I don't know, but that's the modern game.
- **to take a dim view of something** - Well Luke, I certainly take a very dim view of England's prospects this year - all their players are dead.
- **to be doom and gloom** - Come on, don't be all doom and gloom - it's England! We're one of the best teams in the world!

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🍷 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

- **to be negative about something** - I think you're being a bit negative about things.
- **to be a pessimist** - You're a natural pessimist. Lighten up a bit.
- **to be cynical** about something - It's not healthy to be so cynical all the time.

Strong Pessimism

- Oh no, it's a penalty shootout. We're **doomed**.
- They're playing the old fashioned "long ball game". **It's not going to work.**
- **There's no chance** we'll get through the knockout stages if we keep playing like this.
- Harry Kane is injured, and so is Jude Bellingham and Kate Billington and Teddy Sheringham. We're in trouble. **We're in deep trouble.**
- I hate to say it, but **this isn't going to end well.**

British-Style Understatement

Understatement is very common in British conversation.

- I'm **not terribly optimistic about our chances** to be honest.
- It's **not looking great** is it?
- I'm **not holding my breath.**
- Winning the world cup? **I wouldn't count on it.**
- I wouldn't **get your hopes up.** I don't think we'll do very well this year.

Humorous / Informal Expressions

Optimistic

- It'll be alright on the night.
- Something will turn up.

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🍷 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

- It'll all blow over.

Pessimistic

- Knowing my luck...
- This has got disaster written all over it.
- It's a recipe for disaster.
- It'll end in tears!
- We're doomed.

Useful Adjectives for Describing a Positive or Negative Outlook

Let's imagine we're talking about my class of students who are about to take an English test.

Optimistic:

- **Hopeful** - I'm hopeful that they're all going to pass.
- **Positive** - We're all feeling positive about their chances.
- **Upbeat** - The mood in the class is upbeat. Everyone knows that they've got a good chance of not just passing the test, but getting really good grades.
- **Confident** - I'm confident that they're all going to pass.
- **Buoyant** - Everyone's feeling buoyant about it.

Pessimistic:

- **Doubtful** - To be honest I am doubtful about their chances of passing. They're a terrible class. Many of them were absent, and even when they were in the room they were completely lazy and more interested in just disrupting things or being on their phones. It's been a disaster. I'm really disappointed.

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🍷 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

- **Gloomy** - Sorry to be gloomy, but I am not feeling very positive about their chances in this exam. I'm certainly not holding my breath.
- **Cynical** - I don't mean to be cynical, but I think they've got next to no chance of passing this test I'm afraid.
- **Negative** - Everyone's feeling pretty negative about this exam, which is no surprise considering the work they put in. I think now they realise what they've done.
- **Fatalistic** - It's a bit fatalistic of me perhaps, but I have a feeling that pretty much everyone is going to fail this exam. They've been bloody awful this term!

When you think about your future English level, are you optimistic, cautiously optimistic, or not holding your breath?

Practice - Questions to help you exercise your optimism or pessimism in English

Prediction Questions (Optimistic vs Pessimistic)

1. **How good will your English be in five years?**
Explain why you think that.
2. **Do you think you will still be studying English next year?**
Why or why not?
3. **Will learning English help your career in the future?**
What makes you think so?
4. **Do you think you will visit an English-speaking country one day?**
What might make this possible or difficult?
5. **Will AI make learning languages easier or harder in the future?**
Explain your prediction.

6. **Will people still learn English in schools 50 years from now?**

Why might this change?

7. **Will translation technology eventually make language learning unnecessary?**

Why or why not?

8. **Will cats and dogs ever become friends?**

9. **Will Luke's podcast ever reach 10 million subscribers?**

10. **Will the world become more peaceful in the future?**

What makes you optimistic or pessimistic about this?

11. **Will the climate improve or get worse in the next 20 years?**

Explain your reasoning.

12. **Do you think England will win the next World Cup? What about your country's team?**

13. **Will people in the future work fewer hours than today?**

Why do you think so?

14. **Will people's thumbs evolve to become better at texting, or will they just fall off completely from overuse?**

15. **Will you ever become completely fluent in English?**

16. **Will English spelling ever become easier?**

17. **Will robots eventually become better English teachers than humans?**

18. **Will English still be the global language in 100 years?**

19. **Will AI kill us all, or solve all our problems?**

Does optimism or pessimism lead to better language learning?

What is the best outlook for successful English learning?

We already learned that pessimism is probably healthier and leads to longer life, fewer health issues, etc. But is a pessimistic or

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🍷 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

cautious approach best for learning English? Or some kind of mindless "everything is awesome" mindset?

Research in psychology, education, and second-language acquisition generally suggests that a moderately optimistic outlook tends to produce better learning outcomes, although a balanced or "realistic optimism" works best.

Let's look at the reasons why.

1. Optimism improves persistence and motivation

One of the strongest findings in psychology is that optimists persist longer when tasks become difficult.

Psychologist Martin Seligman, one of the founders of positive psychology, found that people with an optimistic explanatory style:

- try longer
- recover from failure faster
- maintain motivation

(Seligman, *Learned Optimism*, 1991)

In language learning this matters because progress requires thousands of hours of effort. Students who believe improvement is possible are more likely to:

- keep studying
- tolerate mistakes
- continue after setbacks

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🍷 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

Research in education shows that optimistic students achieve higher academic outcomes partly because they persist longer after failure.

For example:

- Carver & Scheier (2014) found optimism strongly predicts perseverance toward long-term goals.

For language learning this could be summarised like this:

Optimistic learners think: *“I’ll get there eventually.”*

Pessimistic learners think: *“I’ll never be good at this.”*

That difference strongly affects persistence, which is a key part of success in language learning.

2. Optimism reduces language anxiety

A huge factor in language learning is foreign language anxiety.

Research by Horwitz (1986) showed that anxiety can seriously reduce:

- speaking performance
- participation
- willingness to communicate

Optimistic learners tend to interpret mistakes differently.

They think:

- “Mistakes are normal.”
- “This is part of learning.”

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🍷 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

Pessimistic learners often interpret mistakes as evidence they are bad at languages.

That can lead to:

- avoidance of speaking
- fear of embarrassment
- less practice

In other words:

Optimism increases willingness to communicate, which is crucial for language acquisition.

3. Optimism is linked to a “growth mindset”

Research by Carol Dweck on *growth mindset* is very relevant.

A growth mindset means believing that abilities can improve through effort.

Growth-mindset learners:

- view mistakes as feedback and opportunities to improve
- believe improvement is possible
- embrace challenges

This mindset is strongly associated with optimism about learning ability.

Studies in education show growth-mindset students:

- work harder
- perform better
- recover from failure faster

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🍷 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

In language learning terms:

Optimistic learners believe they can become better speakers.

Pessimistic learners often believe:

“I’m just bad at languages.”

4. But pessimism can sometimes help with planning

Interestingly, psychology research also shows that a certain type of pessimism can be useful.

Psychologist Julie Norem describes something called defensive pessimism.

Defensive pessimists:

- imagine potential problems
- prepare carefully
- work harder to avoid failure

In learning this can lead to:

- better preparation
- more detailed study habits

Example in language learning:

- preparing vocabulary before a conversation
- anticipating possible questions
- Preparation, preparation, preparation - before using English in certain situations

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🍷 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

However, defensive pessimism works only if it leads to preparation, not avoidance.

Remember: fail to prepare, prepare to fail.

5. The best mindset: “Realistic optimism”

Many researchers suggest the most effective approach is realistic optimism.

This means:

- believing success is possible
- but recognising effort is required

Optimists sometimes fall into overconfidence, which can reduce preparation.

But pessimism can lead to giving up too early.

The ideal learner attitude is something like:

“This will take time and effort, but I can improve if I keep practising.”

6. Positive emotions improve language learning

Research by Barbara Fredrickson (the *Broaden-and-Build Theory*) shows that positive emotions:

- extend attention
- improve creativity
- increase cognitive flexibility

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🍷 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

These are extremely helpful in language learning because learners need to:

- focus for longer
- notice patterns in language
- interpret meaning
- experiment with language

Negative emotions like anxiety do the opposite — they narrow attention and encourage avoidance.

Conclusions

Optimism tends to produce better language learning results because it increases:

- motivation
- persistence
- willingness to communicate
- resilience after mistakes

However:

- a little pessimism can help with planning and preparation

So the best attitude is probably:

Realistic optimism — believing improvement is possible while recognising that learning takes effort.

In language learning, pessimists might say: “My English is terrible.”

Optimists say: “My English isn’t perfect yet.”

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🍷 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

And the *opportunist* just opens their mouth and starts speaking.

So, what is your opinion on the subject of learning English - is the glass half empty or half full?

Questions for your consideration and discussion

Other questions for you to consider, perhaps for the comment section.

I could ramble about these forever, but I will let you come up with your own answers to these.

You could argue any answer you want, but consider some of the things I have talked about during this episode.

1. If you understand 70% of a conversation in English, is that success or failure?
2. If you can say what you mean but make mistakes, are you communicating well or speaking badly?
3. If you learned 10 new words today but forgot 5, did you succeed or fail?
4. If someone understands you even though your grammar isn't perfect, is your English good enough or not good enough?
5. If you can watch a film in English with subtitles, is that cheating or learning?
6. Are mistakes signs that you're failing or signs that you're learning?
7. If someone corrects your English, is that criticism or help?
8. If you speak slowly in English, are you bad at English or not?

Is the glass half empty, or half full? 🍷 (Vocabulary & Discussion) [981]

9. If learning English takes years, is that discouraging or impressive?
10. If you practise English every day but still struggle, are you stuck or just improving slowly?
12. When you hear a native speaker talk quickly, is it proof that your English is poor, proof that their English is poor, or proof that we all still have things to learn?
13. If you know more English than you did last year but still feel limited, are you progressing or falling behind?
14. Is fluency a destination or a journey?
15. While everyone is arguing about whether their English is good or bad... should they just start speaking?



Certificate & Medal Award

