

Using personal development activities to improve learners' well-being

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During the semester of Oct 2022 to Feb 2023, I decided to incorporate personal development activities into my C1-level General English classes at an Ecuadorian teacher training university in the hope that it would positively impact my students' well-being both in the present and in preparation for their future careers and lives beyond the classroom. This was only the second face-to-face semester after the COVID pandemic had forced us into online learning for two years, and many students were struggling with a whole host of issues affecting their lives and learning. Throughout the 16-week semester, I supplemented the textbook with various activities focusing on mental and physical health that I had come across in my own self-development journey. This article hopes to point to a possible way to weave well-being competencies into the English language curriculum, which practitioners elsewhere may be interested in applying in their own classrooms.

Key words: personal development, well-being, mental health

How and why the project came about

My own interest in personal development began when I attended a free five-day online seminar by a leading well-being expert and motivational speaker during the pandemic. This led me to buy more of his programs, which had a positive effect on my life and mindset during COVID, and I wanted to share some of what I had learned with my students. As Mercer (2021: 17) points out, 'very few [teachers] explicitly teach well-being competencies such as how to care for themselves physically and mentally'.

One of the reasons I felt it important to incorporate these kinds of activities into my lessons was because I had noticed the previous semester that students were struggling with various mental health and other issues that they confided to me about. The most striking manifestation of this was when a student had a panic attack in my class, and when I subsequently asked the group about whether they had ever experienced panic attacks, depression, or anxiety, a startling number of students raised their hands.

So, I decided to try to get an overview of the type of well-being issues that my students were dealing with in my C1 General English class of 29 third-year university students on an English Teaching degree course. To do this, I incorporated a few initial needs-analysis type speaking and writing activities through which I found out that many students were experiencing a number of well-being challenges affecting their lives. To mention just a few from what they shared: abandonment by parents who emigrated to the US, bereavement, caring for seriously ill family members, domestic violence, single-parenting responsibilities, eating disorders, depression, anxiety, romantic disappointments, lack of motivation, lack of sleep, financial troubles, and physical health issues.

With all this in mind, I thought it would be beneficial for my student-teachers to learn some strategies and techniques that I had learned from the courses I took and other sources. I was hoping to impact their lives positively, improve their mental as well as physical health, improve their motivation and, therefore, allow them to learn and teach better, equipping them with competencies that would give them the resilience to deal more successfully with the challenges of being students and student-teachers now, and teachers in the future.

Procedure

As in many ELT contexts, at my university, English teachers have the freedom to choose how to adapt and complement the textbook. This may be by expanding on the topic from the textbook with material covering a related topic or by using the language objectives in a different context to discuss a different topic. During my project, I was able to do both. Looking at the syllabus for the C1 General English course, I found that the textbook prescribed, *Personal Best* (Scrivener 2018) lent itself very easily to the topics and activities I wanted to cover, as by coincidence, the textbook itself focuses on various aspects of well-being including happiness, physical and mental health, and finances, so it was easy to incorporate the material seamlessly into the syllabus throughout the semester.

During the 160-hour course, I implemented many activities focused on personal development with the group. Below I describe a small selection of them:

Priming

There is a free video on YouTube (about 15 minutes) led by Tony Robbins. It invites us to focus on three moments we can be truly grateful for in our lives and three dreams we envision as fulfilled. I played the video for the class and we followed along visualizing each moment in detail and then students shared their thoughts with their partner using the narrative tenses that were the language objective of the unit. The results were powerful, as many students were visibly moved to tears by the experience. We discussed their feelings afterwards in a circle whole-class speaking activity.

Vision boards	<p>Since a number of students had mentioned a lack of motivation as one of their challenges, for the unit on future tenses, I used Dörnyei and Kubanyiova's (2013) technique of envisioning their Ideal L2 self. As Dörnyei points out, setting goals and objectives for one's life (knowing where you are going and why) helps to significantly increase and maintain motivation. Students visualized their ideal English learner/teacher self in great detail, shared the vision with their partner and then, for homework, created a colourful vision board of their ideal professional future which they then presented orally to their peers using the future tenses in a gallery walk.</p>
Measuring impact	<p>The students were asked to fill in the same student well-being questionnaire at the beginning and at the end of the 16-week semester. Participation in the questionnaire was voluntary and was set as homework for privacy reasons. They used pseudonyms (the same one both times, so we could potentially track improvement).</p> <p>In week 10, the students were asked to write a review about the personal development aspects of the course where they could express their opinions and reflections (writing a review is also a pertinent task for preparation for the CAE exam). Three months later (in May 2023), they were asked once again, through an online survey, whether they felt that the personal development activities had any lasting effect on their lives.</p>
Results	<p>I was pleasantly surprised and often moved by how engaged the students were in these activities. I got goosebumps at how beautifully students opened up and reflected on changes they needed to make to improve their well-being. With only one or two exceptions, they really participated in the activities completely, often being genuinely vulnerable, incredibly honest and open about the issues they were facing. In her work on well-being, Ončevska Ager (2024) noticed that this kind of 'enthusiasm [...] often translated in improved and freer engagement in academic work too' (Ončevska Ager 2024: 3). I found the same with my students. The experiences they shared in class through these activities visibly bonded the group and allowed them to collaborate in a more relaxed way during pair and group language activities.</p> <p>Students gave resoundingly positive feedback in both the essay and the online survey. The reviews confirmed that these activities helped to create a sense of well-being (happiness and excitement) in class, and enhanced the 'quality of life' for the learners, including, for some, a sense of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 2008). Some students used expressions such as '[the] classes blew my mind', 'gripping lessons', 'I've never felt so excited to acquire new knowledge'.</p> <p>The results of the online survey were also very encouraging. The students' responses revealed that they felt that there had indeed been lasting, positive changes in their lives. Several respondents described that they had become more focused and their social relationships had improved. Some of them felt that they were now more self-reflective and able to look at life from different perspectives. Self-awareness, increased motivation, growth in confidence and self-esteem were also mentioned. At least one student called the topics covered 'life-changing'.</p>
Lessons learnt	<p>Having taught this course once, I want to share some lessons learned so that other teachers can benefit from my experiences if they wish to take such an approach. It is important to note that not all students were</p>

happy discussing private issues. One of the students said that there had been moments when they felt the conversations were too personal and, along with another student, suggested that such tasks should be given as homework and should not be made mandatory. This is understandable and something I need to take into account when implementing such activities in the future; after all, the students had signed up for a General English course, not a self-development workshop. In the future, I will always add a caveat that sharing personal details is completely optional and voluntary and if they don't feel like sharing their most pressing issues, they can focus on something less raw. Of course, we need to be very careful to avoid triggering or retraumatizing students, so, in the future, I will also warn students about the nature of tasks and I will ensure participation is optional, preparing alternative versions of tasks that are less personal for those who prefer that kind of content. Other options could be to allow students to write their thoughts for homework or even just listen to their peers and not share at all.

I also learned that carefully selecting self-development activities that have a positive and future-facing focus, such as Priming and the Vision Boards, is also important. This way, students are encouraged to focus on aspects of their life they can already feel grateful for and are empowered to envision a compelling future that can drive them to make any changes necessary to reach those goals. Such a future-orientation is motivating and can create a vision to aspire to and work towards.

Conclusions and wider implications

I believe this approach can benefit English learners in most contexts. As well as being C1-level English language learners, my students also happened to be training to be English teachers, and as [Mercer \(2021\)](#) points out, teacher well-being is critical in the whole 'ELT ecology'. Therefore, promoting pre-service language teacher well-being is especially important for the creation of future classrooms where the teachers know how to protect their own well-being and understand how to promote the well-being of their learners. While cultural differences around the world may affect how willing students are to be vulnerable and share personal stories in their classrooms, I believe focusing sensitively on students' well-being in class through the types of personal development activities I describe above can benefit participants anywhere in a profound and lasting way.

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