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# Using Personal Development Activities
# to Enhance Ecuadorian Student-Teachers' Wellbeing

Abstract

The Action Research report describes the carrying out of an exploration of student wellbeing combined with an intervention of personal development activities that were employed to enhance the mental and emotional wellbeing of 27 student teachers at an Ecuadorian teacher training university. While there are many studies exploring the factors that contribute to heightened levels of stress and anxiety among university students, looking for a better understanding of life in the classroom and improving it through introducing self-help methods is scarce. The findings of the report corroborate other accounts that wellbeing is an issue for tertiary level students in many contexts, and their challenges in the Global South are often multiplied. The researchers used pre- and post-intervention survey questionnaires as well as end-of-intervention and delayed student feedback to gauge changes in the participants' wellbeing. The findings show that the students' wellbeing has improved as a result of the personal development activities employed by the teacher researcher. The authors conclude that student wellbeing needs to be an institutional priority but individual teachers using a range of innovative and engaging activities can potentially achieve transformative and lasting effect when they treat their students as active practitioners of learning.

*Keywords*: student wellbeing, teacher wellbeing, understanding classroom life, personal development activities, delayed feedback

The present Action Research (AR) was carried out with the aim of exploring how a better understanding of life in the classroom (Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2019) and an intervention arising from that exploration could contribute to an improvement in student wellbeing.[1]

## Context and Rationale

In the first semester of the 2022/23 academic year, while delivering C1 level General English lessons to undergraduate student teachers on the English Language Teaching Degree Program at the National University of Education of Ecuador (UNAE), the teacher researcher (Agnes Orosz) and her teaching assistant, who acted as co-researcher (Andrea Chalco) noticed that many students struggled with various issues related to their mental, emotional and physical health, and that this sometimes affected their learning both inside and outside of the classroom.

In the previous semester, one student in another group had a panic attack in the teacher researcher's class, and when she asked the whole group about anxiety and depression, a startling number of students raised their hands. During conversations and through writing tasks in the group with whom the teacher researcher ultimately carried out the present AR project, she found out that many students struggled with various serious issues affecting their lives.

Based on her after-class notes, the teacher researcher was able to recall some of the long-term traumas, frequent incidents and daily struggles that the students faced:

> Some were left behind as their parents emigrated to the US, one student's father was dying of cancer, two were single mums, one of which lived with her brother who one day before class hit her son and when she tried to defend him, hit her too. One student suffered from an eating disorder, 4–5 suffered from depression and anxiety, another had just been dumped by her boyfriend of 5 years. Two students' mums had died when they were young. Some said they had lost their motivation by this point (three years into their four-year studies).

> Another student would fall asleep in class and when I asked her why she said that family circumstances meant that she was solely responsible for raising her two younger siblings and that she stayed up until midnight every night cooking for them and woke up at 5am every day to make them breakfast and drive them to school after which she would attend the practicum in the mornings and classes in the afternoons. By the time she got to my class

(4pm) she could barely keep her eyes open. Many struggled with money even more than previous cohorts because many of their families had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Personal Development Activities

In order to make an attempt to find solutions that might help students to cope better and improve their general wellbeing, during the semester of October 2022–February 2023 the teacher researcher decided to incorporate personal development materials and activities into her C1 PINE[2] English classes at UNAE to see whether such an intervention impacted students' lives and learning.

Serendipitously, the coursebook assigned for the course, Personal Best C1 (Scrivener, 2018) lent itself easily to the topics and activities the teacher researcher wanted to cover. With unit and chapter titles such as: What Matters, a Formula for Happiness, Live Better: Health Fact or Health Fiction, and many others focusing on wellbeing, it was easy to incorporate the teacher-designed materials seamlessly into the syllabus during the semester.

The teacher researcher's own interest in personal development began when she attended a free 5-day online seminar by Tony Robbins during the pandemic, which led her to obtain more of his programs. These had a positive effect on her life and mindset, and she thought it would be beneficial for her students to learn some strategies and techniques that she had learned from her Tony Robbins courses and other sources. The teacher researcher was hoping to impact her students' lives positively, improve their mental as well as physical health, increase their motivation and allow them to deal better with the challenges they faced in the post-pandemic period.

# An Overview of Relevant Literature

In order to find out if student wellbeing is a wider issue to which teachers and their educational institutions may wish to pay more attention, the authors carried out a review of academic research conducted in recent years with regard to the challenges affecting teacher and student wellbeing. In the brief literature review that follows we will be looking at four aspects: student wellbeing, teacher wellbeing, positive psychology and affective pedagogy, all of which have provided scholarly guidance for the present AR project. It needs to be underlined that even though student and teacher wellbeing are treated under

two separate headings below, we agree with those researchers who perceive them as "two sides of the same coin" (Mercer, 2021; Moskowitz, 2024; Roffey, 2012). Teachers with higher levels of wellbeing perform better in facilitating learning, and students with improved wellbeing become more engaged and perform better academically (Burić & Frenzel, 2020).

## Student Wellbeing

The webpage of the European Education Area (managed by the European Union) provides a detailed list of what student wellbeing implies. Wellbeing at an educational institution means for students to feel safe, valued and respected. The document emphasizes that students should have positive self-esteem and a sense of autonomy alongside "positive and supportive relationships with teachers and peers" as well as a sense of belonging to their school and satisfaction with their lives (European Education Area, n.d.).

Empirical research seems to suggest that university students have been dealing with increasingly higher levels of mental and emotional health difficulties globally (Baik et al., 2019; Bennett et al., 2021). Researchers often stress that it is important that university educators and administrators develop policies that can prevent or reduce psychological distress. In this regard, Upsher et al.'s research study (2022) on how student wellbeing can be improved by interventions embedded in the curriculum is especially pertinent. They draw attention to the "increasing prevalence of youth mental health problems" (p. 1) and highlight that research has, so far, been mainly conducted in highly developed countries (see, e.g., McManus, 2019; Taylor et al., 2019). Upsher et al. (2022) advocate a whole-university approach, "whereby all aspects of university life should be targeted to promote positive wellbeing" (p. 1). In this regard, our AR report describes a project conducted in a specific context hoping that the issues identified and the recommendations made will help improve policy making at the local institutional level.

Close to the specific context discussed below, a pertinent study on pre-service language teachers' (PSLTs) wellbeing was conducted by Sulis et al. (2021), who employed Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008) to investigate the personal and contextual stress factors that PSLTs are exposed to. They underline that student teachers are, by definition, *students* and *teachers* with limited teaching experience, who are required to teach in unfamiliar classrooms while carrying on with their university studies. These factors often lead to "stress, burnout and attrition" (Sulis et al., 2021, p. 1).

During the pandemic crisis, over and above the usual challenges, pre-service language teachers had to cope with switching from face-to-face classes to online instruction both for their taught courses and their practicum.

At least in the Global South, they were also burdened by "intermittent internet connection, non-availability of instructional materials at home, […] [and] no instant feedback about lesson planning from cooperating teachers" (Emia et al., 2022, p. 2). Having now returned to what is often termed as the "new normal," pre-service teachers face additional challenges: they need to adapt to changes in educational technology and, occasionally, need to switch back to remote teaching at short notice (Emia et al., 2022). In the countries of the Global South, such as Ecuador where the AR project was carried out, these challenges have been exacerbated by worsening socioeconomic conditions, including poor health care, leading to frequent flare-ups of social unrest (Grigera, 2022).

## Teacher Wellbeing

As we have stated above, student wellbeing cannot be separated from teacher wellbeing (Roffey, 2012). Students and teachers live and work in the same social space and are interconnected (Exploratory Practice Group, 2021). Consequently, wellbeing in education does not only relate to learners, it also encompasses other stakeholders, such as teachers, administrative staff and parents. In recent years, and especially in the wake of the COVID-19 epidemic, teachers have become more alert to the need for addressing the issues of their learners' and their own wellbeing (Ončevska Ager, 2024; Orosz, 2024).

In the field of language teaching, Mercer (2021) calls for an "ecological" perspective in the anniversary issue of *ELT Journal* emphasizing that "we need to be serious in defining and understanding well-being for research and teaching and get beyond superficial conceptualizations" (p. 14). Mercer's argument is that wellbeing is not a fluffy 'add-on' but a key element of effective learning and teaching—as well as a human right. She emphasizes that language teachers face specific challenges that teachers of other subject matter do not, such as "increased emotional labour, shifting identities, energy-intensive teaching methodologies, language anxiety and intercultural demands" (p. 18).

Teachers' mental and emotional wellbeing affects the amount of care and attention that they can devote to the challenges in their students' lives both in and away from the classroom (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). MacIntyre et al. (2020) looked at language teachers' coping mechanisms shortly after the onset of COVID-19. Acknowledging that "heavy workloads, time pressures, and difficulties juggling roles" (p. 1) make teaching a stressful profession to start with, the authors point out that during the pandemic "workloads that were once perceived as substantial have been complicated by a rapid conversion to online delivery for which many language teachers had not been prepared but whose effects seem likely to last for years to come" (p. 1). Teachers in the Global South, such as in Ecuador, face specific challenges owing to a range of socioeconomic

issues (Esteve, 2005). In their mixed-methods study, Hidalgo-Andrade et al. (2021) gathered data from 394 Ecuadorian teachers using a web-based survey. Beyond the assessment of the level of psychological distress experienced by teachers, the authors also identified some of the most often applied coping strategies, such as "seeking social support, exercising and participating in leisure activities" (p. 933).

Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that, among the coping mechanisms, teachers may also reach out for sources of self-help and personal development. Inspirational speakers, whose work can influence attitudes and behaviour, such as grit and resilience, have become influencers at global levels (Robbins, 1995, 2022). This was the personal experience of the teacher researcher of this report, which led directly to the AR project described in detail below.

## Positive Psychology

In order to fully utilize students' potential and reduce language anxiety (Gregersen, 2020), it is important to focus on aspects and personal traits or mindsets that may facilitate learning. Educators have been shifting to a positive, strengths-based approach to student development for a number of decades, but the use of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), which "emphasizes *thriving* as a key element in success" (Williams et al., 2018, p. 85), was only given a recognizable push after Seligman started to use the term widely in the late 1990s and then summarized his vision in *Flourish* (2011). Positive psychology research in language education with a special focus on wellbeing is a relatively new field of inquiry but has already produced valuable insights (Dewaele et al., 2019). MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012), for example, set out to explore the full range of emotional experiences by learners and teachers when they looked at the influence and interplay of both positive and negative emotions in language learning. With regard to wellbeing, such an approach implies a more balanced weighing up of factors that can protect and increase wellbeing on the one hand, and stressors and challenges on the other (Sulis et al., 2023). Nevertheless, Fredrickson's (2001) *broaden-and-build theory* draws attention to the fact that the role of positive emotional states should be given their due as they potentially create space for learning and allow the mind to open up to new experiences.

## Affective Pedagogy

There are several theoretical underpinnings for educational psychologists to believe that emotions in language learning play an important role in creating

the right conditions for memorable learning (Méndez López & Peña Aguilar, 2013; Tyng et al., 2017). Affective pedagogy (AP) acknowledges the profundity of emotional engagement and, with it, the primary role of the teacher. According to Clough (2007), alongside the increasing prominence of learner and teacher wellbeing, there has been an *affective turn*, which focuses on the affective experiences and states in learning. Zhao and Li (2021, p. 2) underline that affective pedagogy "foregrounds the development of psychopedagogies to increase students' inner states which are preconditions for their academic achievement" and, as such, merges emotions and learning outcomes. Interestingly, in more recent literature, an agenda of *loving pedagogy* has also emerged. Wang et al. (2022) claim that optimal academic outcomes cannot be achieved without positively caring for learners' and students' feelings and emotions. Their tentative model (Wang et al., 2022, p. 4) depicts a kaleidoscope of positive characteristics from among which, for the purposes of the present research study, *bonding*, *intimacy*, *passion*, *kindness*, *empathy* and *acceptance* appear to be the most relevant, because in the course of the AR project, stretching out to the students' delayed feedback, these were the aspects that stood out as prominent.

In Patience's (2008) view, the concept of loving pedagogy and affective pedagogy are closely related. He defines the driving force behind AP as *agape*, namely, "comradely or selfless love" (p. 57) adding that "affective pedagogy is as much about feelings and emotions as it is about learning outcomes. Indeed the feelings and emotions are inseparable from the learning outcomes" (p. 57). Patience emphasizes that it is only "self-aware, self-confident and selfless" teachers that are able to establish close and healthy 'relatings' with their students (p. 58) and stresses that his concern is that "utilitarian pedagogy focuses on outcomes of *performance* rather than on outcomes of *understanding*" (p. 62).

It is exactly the *understanding* element of classroom pedagogy that guided the researchers in the present AR project, which was further led by the principles of Exploratory Practice (Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2019). Their assumption was that personal development activities and related materials may improve students' wellbeing, and the reduction in stress levels as well as the heightened engagement with such materials may, hypothetically, contribute to enhanced language learning. This led the teacher researcher and the student researcher to phrase their research question as follows:
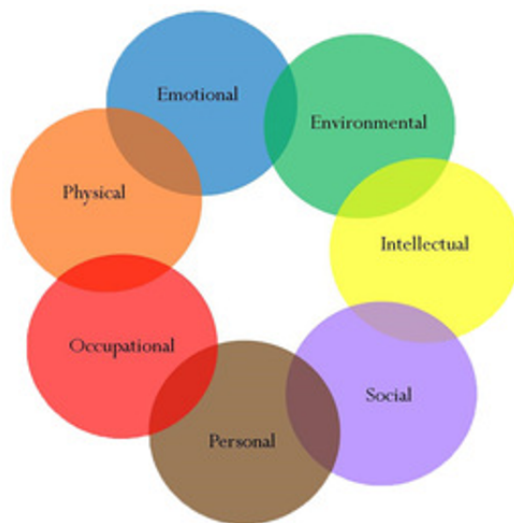
# Research Question

1. How far could incorporating personal development activities and materials into English lessons improve students' wellbeing?

## Understanding the Concept of Student Wellbeing

Student wellbeing can be conceptualized as a dynamic system of various interrelated factors. In this AR report, we follow Larsen-Freeman and Cameron's (2008) Complex Dynamic System Theory (CDST) and its adaptation by Sulis et al. (2021) to pre-service teacher wellbeing. The latter is described as "multifaceted, situated and dynamic" emerging "from the complex interaction of personal, professional and situated factors at specific points in time" (p. 2). Sulis et al. identify the following components: social connections, physical health, motivation, workload and the immediate physical environment. Turned into statements, all these domains appear as items in the Student Well-being Process Questionnaire designed by Williams et al. (2017), namely, the data gathering instrument that we used to quantify the participants' level of wellbeing.

**Figure 1**

*Dimensions of Student Wellbeing*



Source: https://www.education.nh.gov/who-we-are/division-of-learner-support/bureau-of-student-wellness/
dimensions-of-student-wellness

It has already been mentioned that the teacher researcher aimed not at *replacing* but *complementing* the set coursebook (Scrivener, 2018) by using or designing materials that could reinforce the 'message' as well as expand the given unit's scope. A detailed description of the treatment is contained in the section titled Intervention.

# Method

The AR project was conducted in the first semester of the 2022/2023 academic year by the teacher researcher (Agnes Orosz) and her teaching assistant acting as a student researcher (Andrea Chalco). While Agnes Orosz was delivering the sessions and carrying out the intervention, Andrea Chalco gained a full overview of the course, administered the survey questionnaires, gathered some of the qualitative data and accomplished the data analysis as well. The joint AR process, which involved 27 students that the teacher researcher taught, resulted in effective collaboration and the sharing of classroom research skills between the two authors (Allwright & Hanks, 2009).

## Ethical Issues

Students were informed that the teacher researcher was aiming to explore issues related to student wellbeing so that she might be able to address the emotional, mental and cognitive challenges that the students were facing. It was made clear that the data gathering process and the resulting intervention would not involve extra classwork or homework that could be perceived as unrelated to improving the students' C1 level General English language skills. The students took part voluntarily and anonymously in responding to the pre-intervention and post-intervention wellbeing questionnaires using invented pseudonyms that were neither their real names nor their known nicknames. The reflective essay task on how students perceived the course which involved the self-development activities was also anonymous and there was no effort made to link the above three datasets with the students' grades. These assignments were set not as classwork but homework for reasons of privacy, anonymity and in order to provide sufficient time (between four days and a whole week) to accomplish them. The delayed feedback was also given anonymously by students responding to a single question on a Google form (see Appendix 2) even though the teacher researcher was not teaching this group of students any more.

The guiding ethical principle was to use Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities (PEPAs) in order to avoid "getting in the way of the normal educational processes of teaching and learning" (Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2019, p. vi). Such an approach lay at the heart of the present project, which treated students as "active participants, as practitioners of learning" (Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2019, p. 7). This aspect is all the more important since the student participants of the study were teacher trainees of English, whose education necessarily involves both language skills development and language teaching pedagogy.

## The Action Research Process

To situate our AR project, we refer to some of the relevant implications arising from Exploratory Practice (EP), Exploratory Action Research and Action Research.

Exploratory Practice, as an approach, has become increasingly part of mainstream language teaching over the past decades (Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2019). There are two principles of EP that were particularly important with regard to the present project:

1.  'Quality of life' for language teachers and learners is the most important central concern for practitioner research in our field.

2.  Working primarily to understand the 'quality of life', as it is experienced by language learners and teachers, is more important than, and logically prior to, seeking in any way to improve it.

<div align="right">(Allwright & Hanks, 2009, pp. 149–154)</div>

Exploratory Practice does not exclude an attempt to improve the quality of life in the classroom, namely, an "intervention" in research methodology terms, but foregrounds the "exploratory" aspect (Hanks, 2017). Similarly, Exploratory Action Research (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018) emphasizes the importance of exploring the puzzles and issues encountered in the language classroom before starting any intervention. This exploratory phase entails the careful gathering of triangulated data from all the stakeholders in the language learning process. Action Research in general, and in language teaching in particular, "involves taking a self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach to your own teaching contexts" (Burns, 2010, p. 2).

The present project included the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. We employed non-random convenience sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2022), a standard procedure in EP where the focus of attention is a single class and their teacher. In line with EP principles, the data were gathered without the research process becoming "parasitic and time-wasting" (Slimani Rolls & Kiely, 2019, vi.),

When using extra materials during the *intervention* phase, care was taken to engage learners in what are called PEPAs. The latter can be defined as "classroom activities that integrate teaching practices and research purposes especially in collecting data" (Dikilitaş & Griffiths, 2017, p. 290). The ones employed in the present project included class discussions, brainstorming sessions, reflective essays and both end-of-intervention and delayed feedback. In this manner, the students became part of an "on-going dialogic feedback exchange" (Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2019, p. 41).

## Participants and Data Collection

Our non-random convenience sample consisted of 27 students with 24 replying voluntarily to the pre-intervention and the post-intervention Student Well-being Process Questionnaire constituting our quantitative dataset. The age range of the participants was between 20–23 years, with 5 male and 19 female students (non-respondents: 2 female and 1 male student).

Originally theorized by Ryff and Singer (1998), the Student Well-being Process Questionnaire (Student WPQ) was designed by Williams et al. (2017). It is a 44-item survey that has been used in several countries in recent years, such as the UK (Smith & Firman, 2020), Romania (Lustrea et al., 2018) and Kazakhstan (Umurkulova et al., 2022) to gauge the emotional and social well-being of students, often in slightly modified forms to accommodate translated versions. It employs a 10-point Likert-type scale with 1 denoting "disagree strongly" and 10 denoting "agree strongly" (see Appendix 1 for the full set of questions).

The participants were also asked to write an essay on their reflections regarding the personal development aspects of the course. This activity was set specifically in order to prepare students for the reflective essay included in the university-adapted version of the Cambridge C1 Advanced exam. The writing task was set as homework with a word count between 220 and 260 words following a model in the coursebook with the teacher providing formative feedback on the students' writing. Four months later (in early June 2023), students were once again asked if the personal development activities had any lasting effect on their lives. The response rate was lower, but still more than 50% (14 out of 27). The data were fully anonymized for both the quantitative and the qualitative research instruments by numbering the respondents and referring to them as "Students" (S1 to S24) for the questionnaires, "Reflective Students" (RS1 to RS27) for the reflective essays and "Participants" (P1 to P14) for the delayed feedback (see Appendix Table 1 and Appendix Table 2).

## Intervention

As mentioned above, during the semester the teacher implemented a range of self-development activities which complimented the units that were being covered in the textbook.

### *Vision Boards*

The very first activity was for students to create a Vision Board for their ideal future self. This activity drew upon and wove together several strands

(Waalkes et al., 2019) including Dörnyei's (2009) work on the importance of "vision" in learner motivation, as well as descriptions of the steps for creating Vision Boards by writers like Tony Robbins (2017).

First, the teacher took her students through Dörnyei's visualization process. This begins with asking students to imagine their ideal L2 learner self, and for the participants in the study, as pre-service EFL teachers, also their ideal L2 teacher self. The students were also asked to add other more personal elements here including their ideal state of mental and physical health. Students were invited to close their eyes, and imagine in as much vivid detail as possible, their ideal future life. They were asked guiding questions during the visualization such as:

- What would you like to become?
- Imagine your ideal academic/professional language learner/teacher self.
- What is your ideal identity?
- What will you be/do/achieve?
- Imagine your ideal English speaking self.
- What kind of English teacher will you be?
- Who will you inspire?
- Where will you travel?
- Who will you be able to have a conversation with?

Students then opened their eyes, and individually wrote down in note form what they saw in their ideal vision before speaking in pairs with their classmates about elements they were comfortable sharing of their vision. Then students were asked to close their eyes again and think about what they needed to do to achieve that vision. They were asked guiding questions such as:

- What do you need to do to achieve that vision?
- What do you need to do today? Every day? Every week? Regularly?
- How many hours do you need to spend studying?
- What do you need to give up?
- Who do you need to spend more time with? Less time with?
- What do you need to read? Research? Find out?
- Who can you ask for help?

When they opened their eyes, they each individually wrote an action plan of how to reach the objectives they set out in each area; in terms of professional success, mental and physical health as well as their personal goals, for example, relating to travel and family.

Students then used the information to create their Vision Boards for homework. This included cutting out pictures, phrases, quotes, photos that represented their goals and their action plan for reaching those goals. Students' Vision Boards included, for example, photos of the gym, healthy meals, airplanes, PhD caps, books, musical instruments, beaches, flags of countries they

wanted to visit or whose languages they wanted to learn and many pictures of happy, excited and engaged students in classrooms with enthusiastic teachers.

**Figure 2**

*A Vision Board by One of the Students*



**Figure 3**

*Another Student's Vision Board*

Students then brought their Vision Boards to class and put them on the walls in the classroom for a gallery walk, where students took turns to present their visions boards to their classmates. To avoid monotony and too much pressure on each student to speak in front of the whole class, 5–6 students presented their Vision Boards at the same time to the other members of the class in an open-house type set up.

**Figure 4**

*Gallery Walk: Looking at Each Other's Vision Boards*



### Biography Driven Instruction (BDI) Interviews

The second activity drew upon an approach developed by Herrera et al. (2012) at Kansas University, a university with special ties to Ecuador because many Ecuadorian EFL teachers were given scholarships by the Correa government between 2006 and 2016 to attend a special Master's program at Kansas University as part of the "Go Teacher" program. Participating teachers were then expected to "repay" their scholarship by a certain number of years' service in public schools or universities, such as UNAE.

The activity applied the principles of Biography Driven Instruction (Holmes, 2023) by asking students to work in pairs to perform a detailed one-to-one interview about anything and everything that might be affecting their studies. Questions ranged from family and economic circumstances to past L2 learning experiences as well as work or other obligations such as caring for children or other members of the family.

Students then wrote up the answers their partner gave them in a short essay in the same class. This served both as an EFL speaking and writing activity as well as a kind of diagnostic or needs analysis activity for the teacher, as the information provided was useful to begin to understand some of the difficulties that students faced and the way it may be affecting their academic performance.

### The Mood Meter, A Menu for Feeling Good, A Formula for Happiness

The first unit in the textbook is all about happiness. Unit 1A is entitled "A Formula for Happiness" and the target vocabulary is adjectives to describe mental states, emotions and moods. The class teacher saw this as the ideal opportunity to introduce students to an activity she had come across during a Tony Robbins seminar called the Mood Meter (Robbins, Measure your mood, n.d.). The Mood Meter includes 30 adjectives placed vertically from +15 (elated) to –15 (miserable), which is in itself a rich and ready-made cline of mood vocabulary.

The activity involves checking in with one's mood at various times of the day and noticing when one feels the most positive and what drives those positive emotions, as well as noticing when one is feeling down and what provokes those negative emotions. Linked to this is then creating a **Menu of Ways to Feel Good** based on the things going on inside and outside a person when they notice that their mood is good. For example, taking the dog for a walk, listening to upbeat music, meditation, yoga, and connecting with friends.

In the classroom, this was applied by asking students to use the Mood Meter to go through in their mind's eye some of the happiest moments from their previous week, and then some of their most negative states and to try to identify the emotions they felt on the Mood Meter and the cause of those emotions. Then, students were asked to write their Menu of Ways to Feel Good, which is essentially a list of all the things that make them happy. As homework, the teacher asked students to pull out this menu every time they felt a negative state in the following week to see if they could move up the scale on the Mood Meter by doing something from that menu. A week later, they reported on whether the menu worked to get out of negative states faster than before.

As a final step, students then created their own **Formula for Happiness**, which is a paragraph they wrote to serve as a personal and individual blueprint pinpointing consciously and concisely the things that make them happy.

## Gratitude Diary

Linked to this first unit, the teacher asked students to write a special type of diary for a week and encouraged them to keep writing it beyond the class requirements. A Gratitude Diary (Nortje, 2020) is a written list of all the things one can be grateful for in their life if they choose to be. These could be small things like the hot water in their shower, or their favorite duvet, or bigger things like being grateful for the most important people in their lives. It could also be things we tend to take for granted, like the use of our legs, or that we can use our eyes to see. It is a powerful exercise in shifting perspective (Froh et al., 2008), since often we humans are programmed to notice what is wrong, and to take for granted what is right (Robbins, Effective gratitude, n.d.). Oprah Winfrey also talks of the power of Gratitude in her life (Winfrey, n.d.) as a way to increase contentment and happiness, and decrease feeling of depression and anxiety. Students wrote the diary for homework daily over the course of seven days, and shared their thoughts in class with their classmates and teacher after that time.

## Your Most Valuable Possession

Unit 1D in the textbook was based around a listening activity where students watched a video of two roommates discussing their "burning building items" (If you could save one thing from a burning building, what would it be?). Related to this, students were asked to bring in three physical objects, one of true sentimental value and two others. They were asked to prepare a story about each of the items; the true story of the object of sentimental value and two made-up stories about the other two objects. They played Call my Bluff in groups; in other words, they had to sell all three objects as if they had true sentimental value and their classmates had to guess which story was real.

## You Are What You Eat

Unit 2A in the textbook is entitled "Live Better: Health Fact, Health Fiction" and the teacher used this as a springboard to draw students' attention to the effect that their nutrition might be having on their overall wellbeing.

First, students were asked to list absolutely everything they had consumed over the last week and then highlight all the foods that were high in sugar, salt and fat in one color and to highlight all the animal products in another. They were asked to look at their list to see what was left unhighlighted. Most students had not much if anything at all left.

The teacher then showed the students the documentary The Game Changers (Psihoyos, 2018), which follows various top athletes at the peak of their

performance who were on an exclusively plant-based (vegan) diet. After the showing, students took part in a debate about whether they were persuaded by the documentary that a plant-based diet is the healthiest (Souza et al., 2020). The following day the teacher brought in healthy snacks for students to eat during the 10-minute break halfway through the 2-hour class. She brought nuts, seeds, tangerines and bananas. Usually, students would snack on potato chips, chocolate bars, cupcakes and fizzy drinks during break time.

All these activities had as their objective to raise students' awareness of the importance of healthy nutrition and to help them understand some of the scientifically proven facts about nutrition and its link to overall wellbeing; not just physical health but also mental health.

### Priming

Unit 2B is entitled "My Quest for Quiet Time," and is about stress-relief. In this context, the teacher took students through a process called "Priming" which aims at setting the mind up for the day in the most positive and optimal way possible. For this she used a free video on YouTube (about 15 minutes) led by Tony Robbins and called "Priming" (2020). It begins by using breathwork to focus the mind, then invites participants to focus on three moments they can be truly grateful for in their lives, three dreams or goals they envision as fulfilled, and finishes with a (non-religious) prayer or blessing in which participants send love and good wishes out to their loved ones and others. The teacher played the video for the class and students followed along visualizing each moment in detail and then they shared their thoughts with their partner using the narrative tenses which were the language objective of the unit. The results were powerful, as many students were visibly moved to tears by the experience. The students discussed their feelings afterwards sitting in a circle as a whole class speaking activity.

### Meditation

During teaching of the same unit on stress-relief, the teacher introduced a guided meditation session to the students (Boho Beautiful, 2019). Meditation is not generally very common in Ecuador, and some students had never heard of it, and almost none of them had tried it. Given that many of them had initially reported high levels of stress and anxiety related both to their academic and home lives, the teacher felt this was an essential tool to introduce to them, so that they could add it to their Menu of Ways to Feel Good if they felt it was useful and helpful for them.

## Wheel of Life, New Year's resolutions, RPM

Finally, in order to supplement the material in Unit 4A of the textbook, which is entitled "Success and Failure," the teacher implemented three activities closely related to one another.

The first of these was the Wheel of Life (Swart, 2022), which later turned out to be the most memorable and favorite activity for the majority of the students. This activity involves students mapping on a circular wheel their perception of how well they are doing in each area of their lives, for example, academics, family, friends, finances, and health. They "grade" themselves out of ten in each area, and then color in the corresponding parts of the wheel. Low grades are represented by only a small area near the middle of the wheel being coloured in and high grades are represented by a whole segment reaching out to the perimeter of the wheel being shaded. At the end students have a "wheel" that is usually quite lopsided. This represents rather strikingly whether or not the various aspects of their lives are well balanced, and where they should possibly be putting more emphasis because that aspect of their lives is being neglected.

**Figure 5**
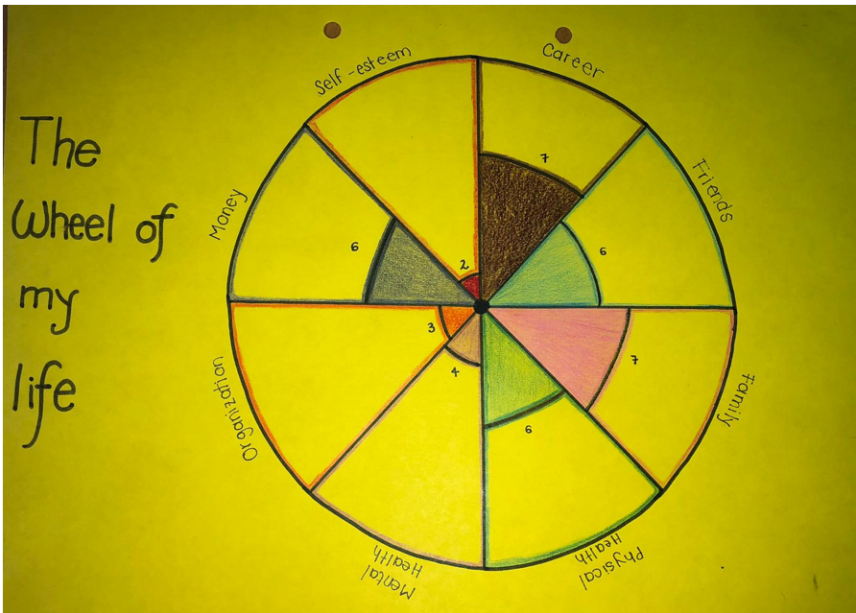
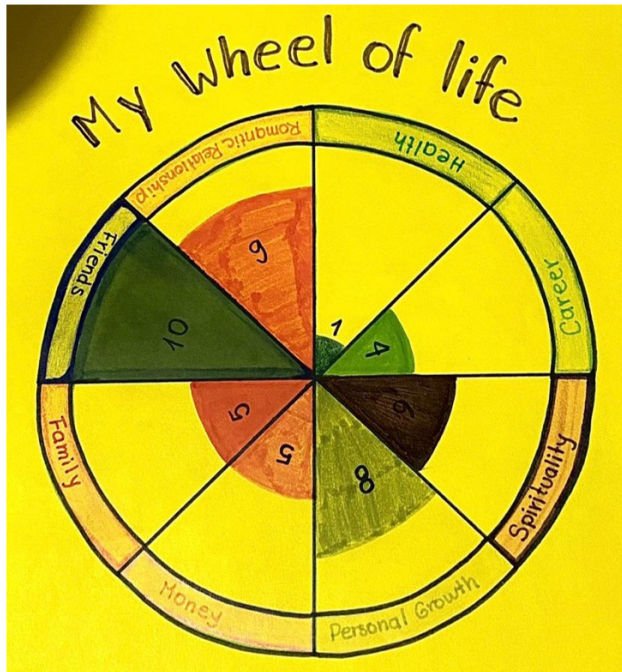*The Wheel of Life of One of the Students*

**Figure 6**

*Another Wheel of Life*



Based on the Wheel of Life activity, which served as a kind of diagnosis of where students stood at the time, they then began to set goals for each area of their life that received a low score and then to think of strategies and actions that would help them to achieve those goals. The teacher used two activities to guide students in this process. The first was asking students to set New Year's Resolution; as the timing of this unit coincided with the New Year, it was a natural activity to do.

And finally expanding on their New Year's Resolutions, the teacher used Tony Robbins's RPM method to encourage students to create a more detailed action plan for what they wanted to improve in their lives. RPM stands for Rapid Planning Method (Robbins, Workbook, n.d.), and the acronym also corresponds to the headings of the 3-part table it refers to—Result, Purpose, Massive Action Plan. Students filled out the table by setting an objective for each neglected area of their life under Result, defining why they wanted to achieve that result under Purpose, and then writing a list of every possible action that would help them achieve that result under Massive Action Plan.

Before moving on to the data analysis and the presentation of our findings, in the next section we summarize the teacher researcher's own reflection on the intervention and the effect she perceives they have had on her students.

## Reflection

This was the first time the teacher had used such deeply personal activities in class, and was unsure how the students would react, but she was often very pleasantly surprised and even touched by the high level of vulnerability displayed by the students. The students' willingness to truly open up and genuinely reflect on areas needing improvement in their wellbeing, was remarkable. Nearly all the students participated wholeheartedly, demonstrating genuine vulnerability and honesty in addressing their personal challenges. The shared experiences also fostered a visible sense of unity within the group and facilitated more relaxed collaboration during further language activities.

Students were often moved to tears by the activities. This happened in the Vision Board presentations, in the Priming activity, and the Most Valuable Possession activity. Feedback from some students seemed to suggest this was a positive reaction, for example, some students even described the topics covered as "transformative." However, it was also clear from some student feedback that there were students who felt uncomfortable with discussing deeply personal topics in class which elicited such intense emotions from some participants.

Reflecting on the whole experience, it is important to mention some valuable insights gleaned for the benefit of fellow educators considering a similar approach. It became evident that not all students were comfortable delving into personal matters. One student expressed feeling uncomfortable during certain discussions, suggesting that such tasks be assigned as optional homework rather than mandatory class activities. This feedback underscores the need for caution in integrating such exercises, especially considering that the course was initially designed as a General English class, not a self-development workshop. Moving forward, if the teacher should decide to engage in similar activities with a future group of students, she will emphasize the voluntary nature of sharing personal details, providing alternative, less intrusive tasks for those who prefer them. Furthermore, it is important to avoid potential triggers or re-traumatization, so issuing clear warnings about the nature of tasks and ensuring participation remains optional is significant.

Additionally, in order to avoid such potential pitfalls, it is beneficial to carefully curate self-development activities with a positive, forward-looking focus, such as Priming and Vision Boards. These activities encourage students to reflect on aspects of their lives for which they are already grateful and inspire them to envision a compelling future. By fostering a future-oriented mindset, such activities motivate students to pursue necessary changes to achieve their goals, creating a vision to strive towards.

The debate following the showing of the documentary advocating a plant-based diet, also needed a slightly different approach. Students noticed that the teacher was not neutral in this debate, but was clearly supporting a plant-based

lifestyle and thus saw the teacher's stance as too one-sided. In the future, it is important to remember running class debates with as little intervention from the teacher as possible, following a more Socratic Method such as the one used in P4C (Philosophy for Children), which allows students to explore topics through open debate without the teacher imposing their own view on the class.

Overall, the experience was a resoundingly positive one, both for the teacher and the students. The activities that students could include as habits in their lives if they chose to, such as priming, meditation, gratitude, a menu of ways to feel good, and healthy nutrition and so on clearly had a positive impact on the students beyond the classroom. Feedback from students mentioned increased happiness, excitement, and an improved overall quality of life, with some expressing feelings of flow and excitement in acquiring new knowledge. The data gathered confirmed the lasting changes observed in the students' lives. Responses indicated heightened focus, improved social relationships, enhanced self-reflection, and the development of self-awareness, motivation, confidence, and self-esteem. What follows here is a detailed description and analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data collected during and after the intervention.

# Data Analysis and Findings

## Responses to the Pre-Intervention and the Post-Intervention Wellbeing Questionnaires

To answer our research question and find out if personal development activities might positively influence students' wellbeing, in the next section the datasets that are related to the dimensions which are at the core of the Student WPQ are presented. These are: "purpose in life, personal growth, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, autonomy and positive relations" (Ryff & Singer, 1998, p. 119). For the purposes of the study, the 44 items were categorized into more easily identifiable domains (see Appendix Table 3).

Table 1 presents the individual changes between two points in time, namely, when the pre-intervention (October 2022) and post-intervention (February 2023) questionnaires were administered.

**Table 1**

*Individual Changes in the Pre- and Post-Intervention Questionnaires*

| Student No. | Positivity Index pre-intervention | Positivity Index post-intervention | Change in percentage rates % | Negativity Index pre-intervention | Negativity Index post-intervention | Change in percentage rates % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 138 | 157 | 13.8 | 120 | 96 | −20 |
| 2 | 124 | 157 | 26.6 | 137 | 112 | −18.2 |
| 3 | 154 | 174 | 13 | 128 | 124 | −3.1 |
| 4 | 65 | 90 | 38.5 | 150 | 136 | −9.3 |
| 5 | 125 | 174 | 39.2 | 146 | 135 | −7.5 |
| 6 | 131 | 145 | 10.7 | 145 | 132 | −9 |
| 7 | 125 | 124 | −0.8 | 107 | 121 | 13.1 |
| 8 | 111 | 116 | 4.5 | 149 | 154 | 3.4 |
| 9 | 97 | 123 | 26.8 | 146 | 158 | 8.2 |
| 10 | 169 | 173 | 2.4 | 88 | 59 | −33 |
| 11 | 113 | 148 | 31 | 117 | 129 | 10.3 |
| 12 | 120 | 93 | −22.5 | 119 | 150 | 26.1 |
| 13 | 182 | 154 | −15.4 | 116 | 100 | −13.8 |
| 14 | 142 | 128 | −9.9 | 132 | 138 | 4.5 |
| 15 | 192 | 187 | −2.6 | 76 | 194 | 155.3 |
| 16 | 119 | 128 | 7.6 | 130 | 134 | 3.1 |
| 17 | 191 | 179 | −6.3 | 80 | 84 | 5 |
| 18 | 109 | 114 | 4.6 | 167 | 141 | −15.6 |
| 19 | 85 | 169 | 98.8 | 155 | 93 | −40 |
| 20 | 128 | 164 | 28.1 | 116 | 96 | −17.2 |
| 21 | 173 | 192 | 11 | 100 | 75 | −25 |
| 22 | 136 | 152 | 11.8 | 128 | 108 | −15.6 |
| 23 | 122 | 139 | 13.9 | 124 | 121 | −2.4 |
| 24 | 124 | 178 | 43.5 | 119 | 74 | −37.8 |
| | | | 15.35 | | | −1.6 |

In order to interpret that data in Table 1, we need to remember that Appendix Table 3 shows that the 44 questions contained in the Student WPQ were put into two groups: 21 reflecting positivity and 23 reflecting negativity. Table 1 contains the individual scores given by the students to these two groups of questions and the percentage rate change between those scores. Except for six students (No. 7, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 17), whose positivity score was lower after the post-intervention by anything between –0.8 and –15.4%, the other 18 students' positivity rose within a range of 2.4 and 98.8%, the latter clearly being an outlier. The whole group's positivity score went up by a modest, but discernible 15.4%.

As for the negativity scores, it needs to be pointed out that the negativity percentage rates, when preceded by a minus sign, actually, imply an improvement (with negativity scores going down by that rate). Here again, we can observe a wide range. Eight students admitted that their negative thoughts and feelings were more intense at the time when they were filling in the second (post-intervention) questionnaire with a range between 3.1 and 26.1%. Student No. 15 (the ninth in this subgroup) is clearly in a crisis situation, as they declare that their negativity went up by 155.3%. The average change in the whole group is very close to zero (–1.6%), but if we were to add this improvement (lesser negativity) to the increase of positivity in the whole group, a noticeable figure of 17% is arrived at.

Figure 7 depicts the changes in positivity and negativity for the whole group.

**Figure 7**

*Group Changes in the Pre- and Post-Interventions Questionnaires*
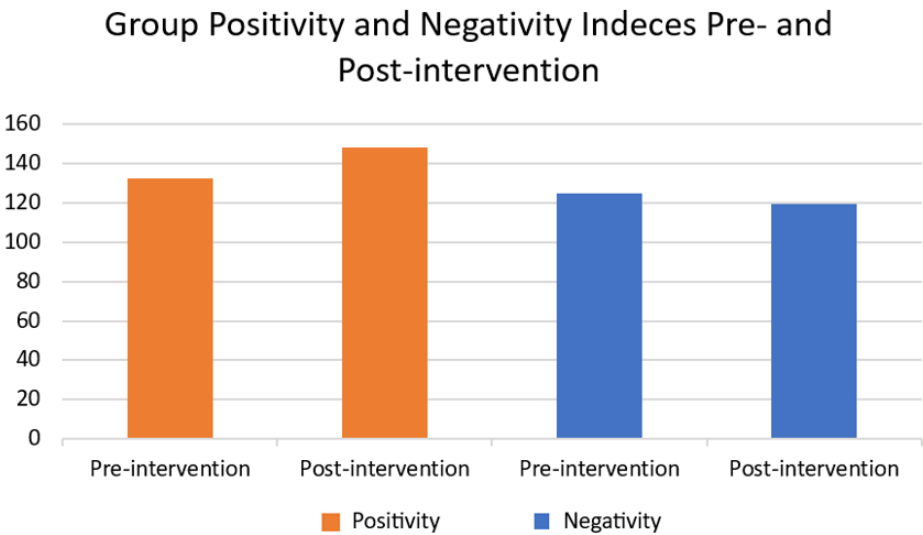
The bar chart shows in a visually more accessible manner that positivity overall increased from a combined 132 points to 148 points and negativity decreased from 125 to 119 points.

When looking at the data, we need to take into consideration that the two questionnaires were "snapshot" at a given point of time. Clearly, it is difficult to disentangle the various factors affecting wellbeing in the students' lives because alongside the classroom activities there is a myriad of influences affecting them every day. Altogether, however, the findings show that there was an improvement in the students' wellbeing, a contributing factor to which might have been their enhanced positive coping (Gustems-Carnicer & Calderón, 2013). That this assumption may be true is borne out by the qualitative data provided by the student teachers at the end of the semester and, then again, four months later. It is to these results that we are turning now in order to triangulate the results of the Student WPQ.

## C1 Writing Task for Gathering Qualitative Data

The qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework because it provides a useful six-phase guide for conducting this type of analysis. When evaluating the qualitative data gathered, the focus was on the themes that can be drawn out from the students' writing task (reflective essay) and the delayed written feedback (see also Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The two sets of qualitative data were treated separately because the point in time when they were gathered and the response rate were different and so was the focus of the data gathering exercise.

As highlighted before, the authors were looking for opportunities to include activities that constituted PEPAs as described in Dikilitaş and Hanks (2018). These are activities that are conducted as part of an ordinary lesson plan, but the results can also be used for the purposes of data collection. In the present case, the writing task served the aim of preparing student teachers for a specific task at C1 level (reflective writing; writing a report) but it also provided valuable qualitative data, namely, a detailed account of how students perceived the experience of personal development activities and the teacher researcher's role in introducing and managing those activities. Based on the students' essays, Figure 9 illustrates the relationship that evolved between the various key constituents of learning and teaching in this specific instance.

**Figure 8**

*The Mind Map of Memorable Learning*
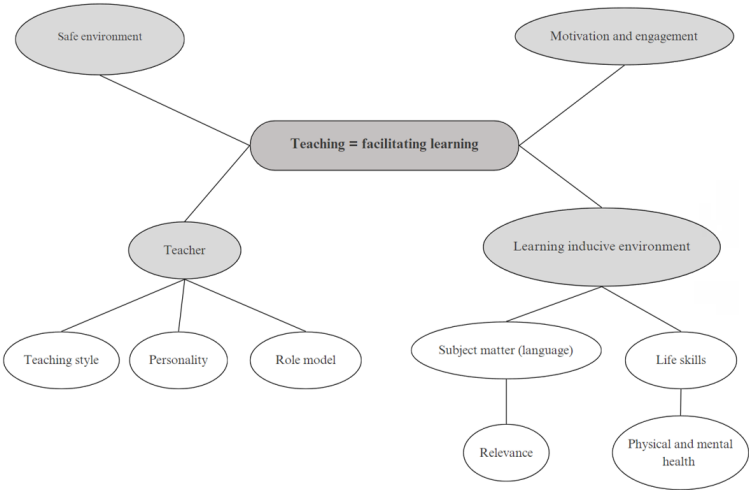


## How Teaching Facilitates Learning

The student teachers emphasized several aspects that had helped them during the semester. They felt the teacher was able to create a safe and learning-conducive environment and her classes led to high levels of motivation and engagement. Classes were described as "amazing," "ever more interesting," "memorable" and "outstanding." Several students emphasized that these were the best classes they had ever attended. One of them added: "I've never felt so excited to acquire new knowledge." The teacher created a "fun and safe environment," encouraged but did not force participation, while aimed at "involving all," so that students were able to "feel comfortable to develop their skills." Motivation was brought about by extra materials, fun activities and by "not only sticking to the book."

## Teaching Style

As student teachers, the respondents appear to have been very mindful of how they were being taught during the course. The teacher is praised for using "lots of strategies," "good class management," "paying attention to detail" and running well-planned and well-organized sessions. One student talked about receiving the "clearest, most detailed explanations," others mentioned how classes were "non-traditional" characterized by a "dynamic atmosphere."

### Personality

Several students mentioned the fact that the teacher was exceptionally kind and caring. "I've never had a teacher who cares about her students' mental health and well-being," said one, while others added that she was "passionate," emanating "contagious positive energy" and putting in a lot of effort so that "even at times when we are tired and unmotivated she tries to keep us busy and time flies."

### Role Model

Even though the C1 level course mainly had language development in its focus, the future language teachers looked to their teacher as a positive role model. "She has given me a new view of what teaching is" said one of the respondents, while another noticed "how a teacher can influence her students' lives." Statements such as "I will replicate how she teaches in my practicum" and "I have learned how to be a teacher through her example" show how someone whom one of the students calls a "pro master-educator" can make a lasting impression.

### Learning Inducive Environment—Subject Matter Relevance

The students reflected on why they found their classes useful. They mentioned that by taking into account their interests and relating the coursebook and grammar points to students' lives, the topics were "meaningful and life changing." This linkage was spelt out in different ways, such as: "We learn the subject and at the same time learn about ourselves" by "addressing personal development issues."

### Learning Inducive Environment—Physical and Mental Wellbeing

The "meaningful content for our lives" and the "personalized topics," many of which focused on self-development, had deep and memorable effect on the students. Some of the comments describe mental and emotional states in rather emotive terms: "Every time I leave the class I feel I can do this battle," "I ended up crying with joy" (after the Priming activity), "I can remember all the lessons if I close my eyes" and "Classes are deep and touch your heart, there is a link between emotions and learning so we learn more this way." All this has led to increased confidence and reduced levels of shyness. "Great learning and a big grin on my face" is how one of the students described their feelings after class, while others mentioned how they became "more courageous" and "more open-minded" as a result of their English classes.

### Feedback on Personal Development Activities—Positives

One of the interesting elements of the feedback given to the teacher researcher is the confirmation that she was able to introduce the concept of wellbeing to her students in a way that created a sense of wellbeing (happiness and excitement) in class, namely, it enhanced the "quality of life" for all those engaged in the activities which, for some, created a sense of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Some students used expressions such as "[the] classes blew my mind," "gripping lessons," and how it was "impossible to be distracted" during class.

### Feedback on Personal Development Activities—Negatives

Not all students were happy discussing private issues. One of the students said that there had been moments when they felt the conversations in class were too personal and, alongside with another student, suggested that such tasks should be given as homework and should not be made mandatory. Interestingly, there were four respondents who said that it was not them but their classmates who felt uncomfortable, one of them saying "don't involve feelings too much, I don't mind but others did."

### Feedback on Language Skills Development: Positives and Negatives

Less feedback came back from the students regarding the language skills development aspect of the course, but the student teachers appreciated the fact that learning was made easier by both the pedagogical approach (contextualized content) and the language teaching tools (activities) used:

We thought it would be really difficult but it hasn't been the linguistic hell we thought it would be. (RS10)

We were learning the language while learning about our daily lives like how to reduce stress or what to eat. (RS14)

It is easy for us to learn the difficult vocabulary and grammar because of the different strategies, creative, funny activities. (RS18)

On the negative spectrum, some students found that there was no sufficient reinforcement of grammar rules or that the rules were not explained fully, and the phonetics part of the course was "confusing and complicated." They also suggested that the teacher researcher should give more individual feedback because "students don't all make the same mistakes."

**Delayed Feedback**

The authors also wanted to find out if there might be any lasting effect of the intervention in the longer term, so the student participants were asked to reflect on what they took away from the self-development sessions after a lapse of four months. Altogether 14 students (out of 27) responded to the question: *Are there any changes you have made that have improved your life because of the English self-development lessons of last semester?*

The question is specifically asking about 'changes,' but many of the respondents described both the learning that had taken place and referred to their present (June 2023) mental and physical wellbeing.

## *General Remarks on Self-Reflection and Self-Awareness*

The students' responses reveal that there have indeed been lasting, positive changes in their lives. These refer to personal growth in both cognitive and social emotional skills. Several respondents described that they had become more focused and their social relationships have improved (P1, P2). Some of them felt that they were more self-reflective and were able to look at life from different perspectives (P2, P3). Self-awareness, increased motivation, growth in confidence and self-esteem (P7, P12, P13) were also mentioned. At least one student called the topics dealt with 'life-changing' (P5). The following excerpts highlight some of the major aspects of change that the self-development activities brought to the students' lives.

## *Healthier Lifestyle Choices*

More than half of the students (8) mentioned how they were now following a healthier diet, exercise more and spend less time on social media. This is confirmed by the concrete steps that they had taken in order to conduct a healthier lifestyle.

> I started eating healthier than before, and I eliminate some junk food. I have been more concerned about my body. Therefore, I'm a more active person. I try to work out every day. (P4)

> The discussions on veganism expanded my awareness and encouraged positive changes in my dietary choices because I started to eat healthier food. (P8)

> I have been able to find motivation to change some bad habits, for example, the habit of wasting too much time on social networks. Now I try to make the most of every minute to do things that help me to be a better person. (P10)

I rarely eat junk food. However, I don't eat less meat than before. I don't believe that eating meat is the cause of my problems, but now I am more aware of the food I should eat to take care of myself. (P14)

### Persisting Problems

This does not imply that all of the students' problems have been resolved. P1, P7, P13 and P14 made a mention of problems that they felt they had not managed to solve:

[…] lately I have a lot of anxiety and despair problems. (P1)

As for my mental health, I keep struggling with it, but that is because of outside factors. (P7)

Unfortunately, at this moment, I have lost all that motivation [that I had during the course] to keep going. (P13)

I keep struggling with my self-esteem and my social relationships. […] I am still overthinking recent and past events; I think I need professional help. (P14)

### Improved Language and Life Skills

The students' responses seem to suggest that the self-development sessions had a two-fold positive effect because beyond the personal development aspects, they contributed to language learning as well. The second excerpt also shows a shift in mindset.

The classes of the previous semester helped me a lot, not only to improve my level of English, but also in my personal growth. (P10)

Although I thought at the beginning that it is not necessary since I was only interested in learning English, I realized that as a student and a future teacher I should consider my well-being. (P13)

### Favourite Activities

The students mentioned several activities that had made an impression on them, such as the Vision Board but, apparently, it was the Wheel of Life that had affected them the most in the long run.

The student teachers described the many ways in which the Wheel of Life had actually become a guiding force in their lives:

I would say that the activity of the wheel of life made me establish specific objectives. (P2)

[…] the activity of the wheel of life made me realize what I am doing to full fill [sic] my goals. […] it inspired me to develop new habits. (P3)

I have my wheel of life in my bedroom, I always use it to motivate me to achieve the next step. (P4)

The Wheel of Life exercise guided me in creating a more balanced life, and I also could see how I was growing as a person in my personal and professional life. (P8)

It seems that the Wheel of Life is a powerful tool for taking stock of one's life and the balance between its various segments (Swart, 2022). The more out of line the circular shape is, the more there is an imbalance, which is visually easy to spot and appreciate. Working on it has proved to be a memorable activity and the expectation is that it will become a permanent feature in the language teaching toolkit of the student teachers who took part in the project.

In sum, the combination of an engaging coursebook, all the additional activities created for personal development as well as the teacher's inspiring attitude seem to have created the conditions for students to improve their overall language skills by a significant degree. The results are supported by recent studies which suggest that emotions can play a significant role in language learning motivation (Bown & White, 2010), and students can develop resilience towards negative emotions (Méndez López & Peña Aguilar, 2013).

A more detailed investigation of the correlation between student wellbeing and higher-level language skills would require the replication of this study with some modified elements and a data gathering process that is specifically oriented to this aspect—a plan that has been incorporated in the authors' future research activities.

# Discussion

Altogether, the findings of the AR project, which was carried out at a public university in Ecuador, seem to echo the results of other studies carried out in several other countries: it appears that tertiary students' mental and emotional wellbeing is a widespread problem, one that only deteriorated during and after

COVID-19 (Sulis et al., 2021; McManus, 2019). In accordance with the studies conducted by Baik et al. (2019) and Upsher et al. (2022), both our quantitative and qualitative datasets suggest that the group of 27 student teachers involved in the AR project struggled with the same challenges as their international peers: they had low self-esteem, negative feelings about the self and problem-avoidance strategies. It also transpired that tertiary level students in the Global South face additional challenges that arise from socioeconomic issues, and these have become aggravated under COVID-19 and in the post-pandemic period (Grigera, 2022).

What started as an individual language teacher's quest for self-help strategies under COVID-19 and online remote teaching, turned into a piece of (exploratory) classroom research (Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2019) which gauged the levels of wellbeing in a group of student teachers whose language skills and pedagogical tools needed to be enhanced. The semester-long project successfully applied the strengths-based approach promoted by positive psychology (Seligman, 2011) and affective pedagogy (Patience, 2008), which acknowledges the power of emotions in any kind of knowledge sharing.

Exploiting the coursebook, which accommodated the personal development activities that the teacher researcher decided to introduce, it was possible for half of the students in the group to improve three main factors that affect student wellbeing: the affective, the physical and the cognitive factors. The responses given to the post-intervention Student Well-Being Process Questionnaire (Williams et al., 2017) as well as the feedback after the elapse of four months suggest that the intervention had both deep and lasting effect, at least on the participants who responded to the single question posed to them on the Google Form document (see Appendix 2). It appears that these students have taken away learnings that they can use both in their personal lives and as future language teachers to help themselves and their prospective students.

The methodological considerations guiding the project were manifold. The teacher researcher aimed at sharing her personal experience that helped her through the challenges created by COVID-19 and the extraordinarily difficult circumstances at the time when students returned to face-to-face classes after the pandemic had subsided in Ecuador. Her own interest in her students' lives in and outside of the classroom made her realize that applying to her students what had helped her might be the way forward (Moskowitz, 2024). The extensive and creative use of authentic materials, often coaching tools, led to deeper levels of engagement and lasting learning for a considerable number of participants. Involving a student teacher (Chalco) as a co-researcher is also a novel feature, one that is fully aligned with the principles of Exploratory Practice as a collaborative and inclusive approach to classroom research.

# Research Question Answered

1.   How far could incorporating personal development activities and materials into English lessons improve students' wellbeing?

Incorporating personal development activities and materials into English lessons have resulted in positive changes in student wellbeing. This suggests that such activities can become part of a teacher's toolkit. While it is difficult to completely disentangle how far the improvement in students' wellbeing was related to the specific personality traits of the teacher, for example, an optimistic attitude, positive energy, enthusiasm, or the activities, such as the Wheel of Life, it appears to be the case that individual teachers can achieve a lot when the activities conducted in class are not only exciting, but have a deep connection with the students' lived experiences.

# Limitations and Recommendations

## Limitations

From a methodological point of view, the present study has several limitations with regard to the following aspects.

### Potential Gender Bias

Out of the 24 students that constituted the sample for the research study, there were 19 females (79%) and five males (21%). Research studies (Graves et al., 2021; Cabanach et al., 2013; Martínez et al., 2019) suggest that females and males self-declared stress levels and coping mechanisms are different and, consequently, the gender distribution in the group surveyed may have resulted in an over-representation of female coping strategies.

### The Use of a Written Task for Feedback Instead of Other Data Gathering Tools (e.g., Semi-Structured Interviews)

Semi-structured interviews can provide essential data that "allow us to better understand the singularity or the experience that individuals or groups of individuals have of their relations with others, with institutions, or more broadly of social phenomena" (Pin, 2023, p. 1). In our case, however, beyond class time and homework assignment limitations, the purpose was to use the

written task as a PEPA. Setting a writing task served as preparation for the written part of the C1 exam (reflective writing or writing a report) and, simultaneously, allowed the researchers to gather data on the effectiveness of personal development activities of students' wellbeing.

Beyond research methodology, one limitation that the researchers have identified is the fact that the Student Well-Being Process Questionnaire administered to the participants does not include any questions related to the students' economic situation, even though probably in many contexts, and especially in the Global South, this is a very real problem that has affected student wellbeing, particularly in the post-pandemic period. If the researchers were to replicate the present study, they would adapt the questionnaire to include this aspect.

## Recommendations

Suggestions for future projects include similar AR interventions in other ELT contexts, the use of refined and well-calibrated wellbeing questionnaires, and projects that might aim at discovering any potential links between not only wellbeing and performance and resilience, but wellbeing and improved language skills as well. One avenue could be exploring the active vocabulary use of students after they have been exposed to rich and varied teaching materials of high-level authenticity.

# Conclusion

The present AR report aimed at describing what one language teacher at a specific tertiary level institution was able to do in order to improve their students' wellbeing. By measuring the wellbeing index of a cohort of 27 student teachers both at the beginning and at the end of the first semester in 2022/2023, the researchers were able confirm that there is a beneficial effect of personal development activities on students' feelings of self-worth and positive outlook on life. While it should be the task of every educational institution to construct multiple levels of help for students dealing with emotional stress, there is a lot that teachers can do at classroom level. To succeed in this effort requires enthusiasm and positive energy from each and every teacher who understands that student wellbeing cannot be separated from teacher wellbeing, and is ready to work on their own self-development before starting to share the knowledge gained. The complex system of classroom dynamics requires that students and

teachers search together for better learning outcomes and become more resilient in the process whilst jointly aiming to improve the quality of life in the classroom. Even though the AR project did not intend to establish a direct relationship between student wellbeing and improved language skills, it might be assumed that a stress-free and trusting environment can only help overcome language and performance anxiety. With the literature on student and teacher wellbeing expanding, the hope is that future research projects will contribute to this academic area by providing new understandings that may create a pathway to enhanced cognitive performance and emotional equilibrium.

## Acknowledgements

## Endnotes

1 The word 'wellbeing' is either spelt as one word or is hyphenated. In this article it is spelt as one word unless our sources use the hyphenated form.

2 PINE is the Spanish acronym for Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros. Translated into English, it is the Department of Pedagogy for National and Foreign Languages.

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# Students' Well-Being Questionnaire (Williams et al., 2017)

**Name or pseudonym** ………………………………………………………
Avoid thinking too much about your answers, your first instinct is usually the best.

1) I have been feeling in good spirits. (For example: I feel optimistic about the future, feel good about myself and confident in my abilities.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

2) Overall, I feel that I have low self-esteem. (For example: At times, I feel that I am no good at all, at times I feel useless, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

3) On a scale of one to ten, how depressed would you say you are in general? (For example: feeling "down," no longer looking forward to things or enjoying things that you used to.)
Not at all depressed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Extremely depressed

4) I have been feeling good about my relationships with others. (For example: Getting along well with friends/colleagues, feeling loved by those close to me.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

5) I feel able to relax when I want to.
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

6) I feel energetic and interested when I need to be.
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

7) I don't really get on well with people. (For example: I tend to get jealous of others, I tend to get touchy, I often get moody.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

8) Thinking about myself and how I normally feel, in general, I mostly experience positive feelings. (For example: I feel alert, inspired, determined, attentive.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

9) In general, I feel optimistic about the future. (For example: I usually expect the best, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad, It's easy for me to relax.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

10) I am confident in my ability to solve problems that I might face in life. (For example: I can usually handle whatever comes my way, If I try hard enough I can overcome difficult problems, I can stick to my aims and accomplish my goals.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

11) I feel that I am laid-back about things. (For example: I do just enough to get by, I tend to not complete what I've started, I find it difficult to get down to work.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

12) I am not interested in new ideas. (For example: I tend to avoid philosophical discussions, I don't like to be creative, I don't try to come up with new perspectives on things.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

13) Overall, I feel that I have positive self-esteem. (For example: On the whole I am satisfied with myself, I am able to do things as well as most other people, I feel that I am a person of worth.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

14) I feel that I have the social support I need. (For example: There is someone who will listen to me when I need to talk, there is someone who will give me good advice, there is someone who shows me love and affection.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

15) Thinking about myself and how I normally feel, in general, I mostly experience negative feelings. (For example: I feel upset, hostile, ashamed, nervous.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

16) I feel that I have a disagreeable nature. (For example: I can be rude, harsh, unsympathetic.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

**Coping Style:**
**Problem Focused**
17) When I find myself in stressful situations, I take a problem-focused approach. (For example: I take one step at a time, I change things about the situation or myself to deal with the issue, I don't let my feelings interfere too much.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

**Seeks Social Support**
18) When I find myself in stressful situations, I look for social support. (For example: I talk to someone to get more information, I ask someone for advice, I talk to someone about how I'm feeling.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

**Blame Self**
19) When I find myself in stressful situations, I blame myself. (For example: I criticize or lecture myself, I realise I brought the problem on myself.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly.

**Wishful Thinking**
20) When I find myself in stressful situations, I wish for things to improve. (For example: I hope a miracle will happen, I wish I could change things about myself or circumstances, I daydream about a better situation.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

**Avoidance**
21) When I find myself in stressful situations, I try to avoid the problem. (For example: I keep things to myself, I go on as if nothing has happened, I try to make myself feel better by eating/drinking/smoking.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

22) I prefer to keep to myself. (For example: I don't talk much to other people, I feel withdrawn, I prefer not to draw attention to myself.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

23) I feel that I have an agreeable nature. (For example: I feel sympathy toward people in need, I like being kind to people, I'm co-operative.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

24) In general, I feel pessimistic about the future. (For example: If something can go wrong for me it will, I hardly ever expect things to go my way, I rarely count on good things happening to me.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

25) I feel that I am a conscientious person. (For example: I am always prepared, I make plans and stick to them, I pay attention to details.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

26) I feel that I can get on well with others. (For example: I'm usually relaxed around others, I tend not to get jealous, I accept people as they are.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

27) I feel that I am open to new ideas. (For example: I enjoy philosophical discussion, I like to be imaginative, I like to be creative.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

28) Overall, I feel that I am satisfied with my life. (For example: In most ways my life is close to my ideal, so far I have gotten the important things I want in life.)
Disagree strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Agree strongly

29) On a scale of one to ten, how happy would you say you are in general?
Extremely unhappy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Extremely happy

30) On a scale of one to ten, how anxious would you say you are in general? (For example: feeling tense or "wound up", unable to relax, feelings of worry or panic.)
Not at all anxious 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Extremely anxious

31) In general, how would you rate your physical health.
Extremely poor 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Extremely good

32) Overall, how stressful is your life?
Not at all stressful 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Stressful

Please consider the following elements of student life and indicate overall to what extent they have been a part of your life over the past 6 months. Remember to use the examples as guidance rather than trying to consider each of them specifically:

33) Challenges to your development. (For example: important decisions about your education and future career, dissatisfaction with your written or mathematical ability, struggling to meet your own or others' academic standards.)
Not at all part of my life 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very much part of my life

34) Time pressures. (For example: too many things to do at once, interruptions of your school work, a lot of responsibilities.)
Not at all part of my life 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very much part of my life

35) Academic dissatisfaction. (For example: disliking your studies, finding courses uninteresting, dissatisfaction with school.)
Not at all part of my life 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very much part of my life

36) Romantic problems. (For example: decisions about intimate relationships, conflicts with boyfriends'/girlfriends' family, conflicts with boyfriend/girl-friend.)
Not at all part of my life 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very much part of my life

37) Societal annoyances. (For example: getting ripped off or cheated in the purchase of services, social conflicts over smoking, disliking fellow students.)
Not at all part of my life 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very much part of my life

38) Social mistreatment. (For example: social rejection, loneliness, being taken advantage of.)
Not at all part of my life 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very much part of my life

39) Friendship problems. (For example: conflicts with friends, being let down or disappointed by friends, having your trust betrayed by friends.)
Not at all part of my life 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very much part of my life

Please state how much you agree or disagree with the following statements:

40) There is a person or people in my life who would provide tangible support for me when I need it. (For example: money for tuition or books, use of their car, furniture for a new apartment.)
Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Strongly Agree

41) There is a person or people in my life who would provide me with a sense of belonging. (For example: I could find someone to go to a movie with me, I often get invited to do things with other people, I regularly hang out with friends.)
Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Strongly Agree

42) There is a person or people in my life with whom I would feel perfectly comfortable discussing any problems I might have. (For example: difficulties with my social life, getting along with my parents, sexual problems.)
Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Strongly Agree

43) In the last two weeks did you find that you have problems of memory (e.g. forgetting where you put things), attention (e.g. failures of concentration), or action. (For example: doing the wrong thing)?

a) at university

| Not at all | Rarely | Occasionally | Quite frequently | Very frequently |
|------------|--------|--------------|------------------|-----------------|
| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

b) outside of university

| Not at all | Rarely | Occasionally | Quite frequently | Very frequently |
|------------|--------|--------------|------------------|-----------------|
| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

44) How frequently in the last two weeks did you find that you were not getting as much done as you would have liked?

a) at university

| Not at all | Rarely | Occasionally | Quite frequently | Very frequently |
|------------|--------|--------------|------------------|-----------------|
| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

b) outside of university

| Not at all | Rarely | Occasionally | Quite frequently | Very frequently |
|------------|--------|--------------|------------------|-----------------|
| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

Appendix 2

# Delayed Feedback Question

*Are there any changes you have made that have improved your life because of the English self-development lessons of last semester?*

**Table 1**

*Quantitative Data Gathering Tools*

| Quantitative | No. of students | No. of respondents | Coding |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-intervention wellbeing questionnaire | 27 | 24 | S1 to S24* |
| Post-intervention wellbeing questionnaire | 27 | 24 | S1 to S24* |

S = Student

*The same code corresponds to the same student in the two questionnaires.

**Table 2**

*Qualitative Data Gathering Tools*

| Qualitative | No. of students | No. of respondents | Coding |
|---|---|---|---|
| Reflective essay on course activities | 27 | 27 | RS1 to RS27* |
| Delayed feedback on course activities | 27 | 14 | P1 to P14* |

RS = Reflective Student

P = Participant

*The same code does not correspond to the same student in the RS and the P category.

**Table 3**

*Positive and Negative Items in the Student WPQ*

| Positive items | Negative items |
|---|---|
| Positive feelings about self, others and relationships, optimistic mindset, happiness level: Q1, Q4, Q8, Q9, Q13, Q14, Q23, Q26, Q28, Q29, Q40, Q41, Q42 | Negative feelings about self, others and relationships, pessimistic mindset, unhappiness level: Q2, Q7, Q15, Q16, Q19, Q24, Q30, Q36 Q37, Q38, Q39 |
| Positive coping: Q5, Q10, Q17, Q18 | Negative coping: Q20, Q21, Q22 |
| Mental and physical health: Q6, Q25, Q27, Q31 | Mental and physical health: Q3, Q11, Q12, Q32 |
| | Academic difficulties and cognitive problems: Q33, Q34, Q35, Q43, Q44 |