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BUILDING A WELLBEING-FOCUSED ESL WRITING CURRICULUM: FROM LEARNER NEEDS TO A FRAMEWORK FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Fathima Rawshan^{1*}, Suzanah Selamat², Fariza Puteh-Behak³, Sarifah Nurhanum Syed Sahuri⁴, Mohamed Mihar Abdul Muthaliff⁵


¹ Faculty of Major Language Studies, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), Malaysia

 fathimarawshanzain@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8438-4794>


² Faculty of Major Language Studies, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), Malaysia

 suzanah@usim.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1519-2773>

³ Faculty of Major Language Studies, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), Malaysia

 fariza@usim.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8247-8715>

⁴ Faculty of Major Language Studies, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), Malaysia

 sh.nurhanum@usim.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4318-6365>

⁵ Faculty of Leadership and Management, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), Malaysia

 mihlar@usim.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1197-4121>

*Corresponding Author

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Abstract:

This study explores the design of a wellbeing-integrated ESL writing curriculum, advancing beyond traditional needs assessment to propose a practical, theoretically grounded framework. The study is guided by the pre-reflection phase of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and informed by Saban's Curriculum Development for Action Research (CD-AR) model. It employs collaborative dialogue with ESL learners and curriculum experts to identify gaps between existing curricula and learners' cognitive, emotional, and social priorities. Thematic analysis of student reflections, expert feedback, and participatory textbook evaluations identified multidimensional needs encompassing mental wellbeing (e.g., anxiety management, positive relationships, and growth mindset) and writing skill preferences (e.g., interest-driven tasks, visual strategies, and scaffolded progression). These findings indicate a misalignment between existing textbook content and learner priorities, demonstrating the importance of curricula that integrate academic learning with psychosocial development. Drawing on these insights, the study proposes a PERMA+-aligned framework to guide curriculum co-design. By systematically linking learner perspectives with curriculum theory, this research proposes a replicable model for socially responsive

and transformative ESL writing instruction. Its relevance extends internationally by providing guidance for educators seeking to integrate Positive Psychology into ESL curriculum design through a co-constructed, theory-driven framework.

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Keywords:

Curriculum Design; ESL Writing; Mental Wellbeing; Needs Analysis; Participatory Action Research; PERMA+



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Introduction

Language education provides a fruitful platform to embed wellbeing concepts into the lessons, especially in English as a second language learning which is often found in educational institutes as a compulsory requirement. This opportunity can be utilized to serve the dual purpose of content integration and language learning as suggested by Mercer et al. (2018) in combining mental wellbeing education with language education. But integrating wellbeing through ESL writing into the formal curriculum is underexplored and the potential of writing in the Second Language as a structured wellbeing intervention is yet to be fully realised. At the same time, although language learning involves emotional labour (Daszkiewicz & Lenard, 2023), curricula often prioritise linguistic outcomes over affective needs. To address all these challenges, a holistic ESL writing lesson plan can be suggested through systematic research. In designing effective wellbeing curricula, capturing the nuances of the context and learners' needs is crucial as curriculum shouldn't undermine the learners' needs in achieving academic success (Merrick, 2021).

To add more, despite policy advances and more attention to wellbeing in education, there are still vast gaps in how wellbeing is addressed in the curriculum. Many current approaches are implicit, fragmented or lack clear definition and structure (Bannigan et al. 2025). Strambi et al. (2017) demonstrated the potential of integrating wellbeing into language learning through their 'Flourishing through Second Language (FL2) lessons. The FL2 project's encouraging results—despite its unconventional methods—suggest that sustained engagement with wellbeing resources fosters student receptiveness. However, apart from the limited evaluation data, their needs analysis relied primarily on observational data and literature reviews, limiting direct input from students and educators as co-designers. In contrast, this study, through Participatory Action Research (PAR) positions students as active participants and experts as collaborative

decision-makers, ensuring that wellbeing interventions are grounded in lived experiences and contextual relevance.

This study proposes a wellbeing-informed ESL writing curriculum framework grounded in both theoretical and empirical considerations. It draws on the pre-reflection phase of Participatory Action Research (PAR) conducted at a Malaysian university to systematically identify the need for a wellbeing-infused writing module for university students. By engaging key stakeholders—students, teachers, and administrators—PAR is employed as a democratic and cyclical process that ensures the curriculum is responsive to learners' actual experiences, expectations, and challenges. The insights generated from this phase provide a critical foundation for designing a writing module that aligns with both linguistic and wellbeing needs.

The study is guided by clearly defined objectives. It seeks to:

- (1) map learner-articulated needs related to mental wellbeing and writing skills.
- (2) evaluate the extent to which existing ESL materials address these needs; and
- (3) propose wellbeing-informed writing lessons that respond to identified gaps.

These objectives are situated within a broader effort to bridge the disconnect between conventional ESL instruction and students' holistic development. Theoretically, the study is anchored in Seligman's (2011) PERMA+ framework, which conceptualises wellbeing within Positive Psychology and offers a structured basis for integrating wellbeing into ESL writing pedagogy. Methodologically, the study adopts the cyclical PAR model proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), focusing on the initial reflection phase. In this phase, learner needs are analysed, gaps in existing instructional materials are identified, and insights from FL2 activities inform lesson adaptation. As such, this paper establishes a participatory and context-sensitive foundation for subsequent curriculum development.

Literature Review

This literature review addresses key interrelated areas that inform the conceptual and methodological framework of the study. It focuses on gaps in wellbeing interventions in education, the PERMA+ model in language learning, needs analysis for curriculum development, and participatory action research (PAR).

Challenges and Gaps in Wellbeing Interventions in Education

Systematic reviews of curriculum-embedded wellbeing interventions show inconsistent results, with most showing little impact on stress or anxiety in students (Upesha et al., 2022). There is a need for a structured, evidence-based wellbeing writing module that goes beyond ad hoc or one-size-fits-all interventions (Upesha et al., 2023). Existing scholarship also underscores the challenge of operationalising the subjective and relational benefits of wellbeing initiatives within sustainable curricular frameworks (Eardley et al., 2020). Students and educators often report a disconnect between the intended aims of wellbeing programs and their actual experience, with a need for more engaging, contextually relevant and participatory approaches (Soutter et al., 2012; Baik et al., 2019). Mental wellbeing approaches need to be nuanced for the specific contextual needs of each educational institute (Scholz et al. 2024). Traditional needs analysis models which often rely on top-down or expert-driven processes may not capture the nuanced, context-specific needs of diverse student populations (Baker & Hsu,

2022). These models can overlook the importance of stakeholder engagement, local context and the lived experiences of students and educators. As a result, wellbeing initiatives may not be relevant and would fail to engage students meaningfully (Eardley et al., 2020).

PERMA+ Wellbeing Model in Language Education

Martin Seligman (2011) proposed the PERMA model to explain the key elements of human flourishing, comprising Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. This framework was later extended to PERMA+ with the inclusion of health-related factors—physical exercise, sleep, diet, and optimism—which collectively interact with psychological processes to enhance overall wellbeing. Together, these components contribute to individuals' psychological, social, and emotional wellbeing, enabling flourishing.

Prior to the formalisation of PERMA+, Martin Seligman (2009) conducted an 18-month Positive Psychology (PP) intervention involving 347 Year 9 students. Participants were randomly assigned to either a Language Arts curriculum integrated with PP activities or a control group. The intervention included reflective writing tasks, such as documenting three positive experiences daily, as well as activities focused on identifying and applying character strengths. Findings indicated that students in the PP group demonstrated higher levels of happiness, engagement, and social skills compared to the control group. These outcomes align with key PERMA components, particularly Positive Emotion, Meaning, and Accomplishment, thereby providing empirical support for the effectiveness of PP-informed writing practices in promoting wellbeing.

Moreover, building on the PERMA+ wellbeing framework, the Flourishing through Second Language (FL2) curriculum for learners of Italian was constructed by Strambi et al. (2017). Their FL2 lessons were first developed by spotting gaps using ADDIE model. Although the limited data provided less insights, the results were encouraging. Another quasi-experimental, mixed-methods study investigated the effect of the PERMA+ wellbeing framework on ESL students' English listening and speaking competency in Chinese educational context. The methodology involved implementing PERMA+-informed interventions and measuring outcomes, revealing that students made progress in both their speaking competency and listening process (Cheng & Chen, 2021). A 2023 study found that mindfulness-based language task could boost some of the PERMA+ elements like Positive emotions and engagement reduced anxiety and improved engagement among learners, demonstrating the potential for dual-focused pedagogy (Wang & Mercer, 2023). These studies provide evidence for the possibility and effectiveness of embedding PERMA+ to ESL curriculum. However, this area of research needs more exploration.

Needs Analysis in Wellbeing Infused Curriculum Development in Language Education

Richards (2001) in his book *Curriculum Development in Language Teaching* outlines the needs analysis model with the focus on target needs, learner needs and constraints. Target needs refer to what learners need to do in the target situation, including necessities, lacks and wants. When initiating a wellbeing-infused curriculum, one of the primary target needs would be mental wellness needs, as the planning of the lessons would incorporate dual focus, one is enhancing mental wellbeing, the other is language skill. Learner needs are what learners need to do to learn effectively, including motivation, attitudes, learning styles, resources and constraints of the learning situation. The writing skill needs are identified through this inquiry. This focuses

on the process of learning rather than the end goals. However, the third element referred to as 'constraints' are non-pedagogic factors that limit course design and implementation, such as institutional policies, financial restrictions, time and other practical limitations. These constraints should be considered along with target and learner needs during needs analysis. They ensure language courses are tailored to both the learners' goals and the realities of the learning environment.

For a wellbeing-infused ESL curriculum to succeed, needs analysis should centre student input, empowering learners as partners in shaping an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Baik et al. (2019)'s study provides evidence to the importance of inviting and responding to students' input as it strengthens their sense of belonging and autonomy—a vital factor since promoting mental wellbeing in education depends on genuine cooperation between students and institutional stakeholders. A needs analysis in a wellbeing-infused curriculum involves identifying the specific requirements of students and educators to effectively integrate wellbeing into educational content and processes. Research highlights the importance of embedding wellbeing within curriculum design, teaching practices, and assessment methods, emphasizing the need for strong social connections, supportive teacher-student interactions, and appropriate academic challenges to foster student wellbeing (Upsher et al., 2022). Analyses of national curricula reveal that wellbeing is often framed through individual agency and skills, but may lack a socioecological or collective perspective, suggesting a need for broader approaches that connect wellbeing to real-world challenges and community belonging (Samnøy et al., 2024; Soutter et al., 2012). Effective needs analysis should therefore consider both individual and collective dimensions of wellbeing, ensuring alignment between curricular intentions and the lived experiences of students and teachers. Saban (2021) through his Curriculum Development through Action Research (CD-AR) model suggests that one phase of action research can be allocated for needs analysis in curriculum development. Here, qualitative methods can also be opted for a small sample if depth and contextual understanding, rather than generalizability is sought at this stage.

Participatory Action Research for Curriculum Development

Participatory Action Research (PAR) democratizes curriculum development. Several past research suggest that when students are involved in wellbeing programs, they participate more, feel more satisfied, and see better results (Edmonds et al., 2022). This also ensures that wellbeing education is tailored, relevant, and contextually grounded. Participatory action research phases can align with Saban's (2021) Curriculum Development-Action Research (CD-AR) model. This model focuses on the coproduction of a curriculum through cycles of inquiry, reflection, and action. The model's cyclical structure and participatory orientation is in line with the principles of PAR, offers a structured yet flexible approach to curriculum development that foregrounds practitioner reflection, stakeholder engagement and iterative improvement. It is composed of six stages: Identifying the Focus Area, Needs Analysis, Developing an Action Plan, Implementing the Action Plan, Evaluating the Process and Reflecting on the Process.

Utilizing the insights from initial reflection, this study will depict in the following sections. This study aims to bridge the gap by investigating how ESL writing instruction can be reimagined to address learners' wellbeing related to the classroom and general life, using Participatory Action Research (PAR) to iteratively align pedagogy with empirically and collaboratively identified needs.

Method

This section outlines the study's PAR and CD-AR qualitative design. It also includes the method of data collection, and data analysis and ethical compliance.

Research Design and Approach

Taking fully qualitative approach, Saban's (2021) CD-AR model for curriculum development through Action Research was employed as the primary Participatory Action Research framework for this research. This paper focuses on the initial Reflection Phase of this PAR study which corresponds to the first and second stage of Saban's CD-AR model as summarized in the Table 1.

Table 1 The Corresponding PAR Phase and CD-AR Model (Saban, 2021)

PAR	CD-AR model	Details
Reflection Phase	Stage 1: Identifying the Focus Area	Pinpointing a specific issue or goal
	Stage 2: Performing a Needs Analysis	Gathering data to understand gaps and learner needs.

In the initial reflection phase of this PAR study, the stage 1 involves identifying a specific issue or goal, while the second stage entails conducting a needs analysis to gather data and understand gaps or learner needs. This ensures lessons are practical, relevant and tailored to students' actual needs. This structured approach ensures targeted and data-driven improvements in curriculum design. For the stage 2, the direction for the needs analysis was guided by Richard's (2001) model but exclusively through qualitative approach.

Participants and Data Collection Tools

This PAR study benefited the Participation of eleven (11) ESL students, and 2 experts along with the researcher in identifying the focus and needs of this research through their feedback and suggestions. The ESL students from this Malaysian university setting (Pseudonym-UMIRI) were active participants in both stages, contributing through informal conversations in Stage 1 and a focus group interview in Stage 2. Expert 1 provided insights into local realities via informal conversations initially, followed by an in-depth interview, while Expert 2 offered critical input through informal conversations across both stages. The researcher was the content developer mainly, doing literature review, class material evaluation, and textbook analysis in Stage 1, and mapping learners' needs with textbook content while reflecting on the reflections collaboratively in Stage 2.

Data Analysis

Using multiple data elicitation tools enhanced the validity, reliability and depth of the findings. This triangulation of data sources allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the research context and strengthened the credibility of the analysis. Unlike traditional needs analyses that isolate researchers from participants, our design treated the ESL students as active

participants and expert 1 as co-researcher who provided insights on the context and local realities in thematic analysis and interpretation. Expert 2 who acted like a critical friend was also an important agent in decision making by providing critical feedback. Content analysis was used specifically for evaluating the textbook and course materials to identify patterns and alignments with learners' needs. All other data, including interviews, conversations were analysed using Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, which involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Ethical Considerations

This reflection phase, which aimed to lay the foundation for developing ESL lessons, considered the ethical aspects of the research process. Anonymity, informed consent, and cultural sensitivity with the participants were prioritized to ensure responsible engagement.

Results

This section delineates the findings from the stage 1 and 2, which this study adapted using CD-AR model. It begins by identifying the focus area and then captures learners' needs collaboratively.

Stage 1: Identifying the Focus Area

At this stage, according to Saban's (2021)'s model, problem situation that needs to be solved or a focus area needing improvement regarding the practical curriculum was identified. In this PAR project, the researcher along with the two experts brainstormed regarding the following matters related to this topic.

- Identifying the problem situation/focus area needing improvement,
- ESL Class selection,
- ESL skill selection, and
- Time frame

Identifying the Problem Situation/Focus Area Needing Improvement

The focus area usually keeps context specific features. From the deeper conversations and researcher's reflective journal, the problem situation that needs to be solved was creating awareness on mental wellbeing ideas based on PERMA+ principles. From literature related to mental wellbeing concerns of Malaysian university students (Maung et al., 2023; Arifin et al. 2023; Mohd Azlan et al, 2024; Soo et al., 2024) to the experts and researcher's personal experience and reflections were in support of this decision. The researcher and experts agreed unanimously that this context (UMIRI) has considerable problems related to mental wellbeing that needs urgent attention.

ESL Class Selection

There were several ESL classes offered that year when the researcher decided to conduct this study in UMIRI. Almost all the classes had potential for this research but based on the initial discussion with the two experts, one ESL class with 11 ESL students was purposefully selected because of the potential for effective integration of PERMA plus infused ESL lessons. The

class was more open to the integration of wellbeing ideas. They were more able to participate actively in the development of the lessons. And the students came from different educational and social backgrounds which would provide rich data.

ESL Skill Selection

The researcher and the experts also decided to select a specific ESL skill for the delivery of wellbeing education without compromising the core linguistic needs expected by an ESL class. Writing has been shown to support mental wellbeing in many ways (King, 2001; Baikie and Wilhelm, 2005; Pennebaker and Smyth, 2016; Eardley, Banister, and Fletcher, 2020; Zakaria & Sulaiman, 2024). Malaysian university students face recurring issues in English writing such as grammatical errors, limited vocabulary, difficulties in academic writing and challenges in proofreading and critical thinking. These problems are often linked to interference from their first language (L1), inadequate mastery of grammar and limited vocabulary knowledge (Shamsudin & Mahady, 2010; Kho et al., 2013; Azmar & Razali, 2024; Kassim & Maniam, 2025). With the insights gained from the literature and the discussions and critical input of the experts regarding the ESL students of this selected context and class gave insights on selecting writing skill as the linguistic skill for this research. Thus, the focus area needing improvement was finalised as improving the students' skills of writing paragraphs and essays.

Time Frame

Expert 2 provided critical input for the research and suggested a 7-week timeframe within the 14-week semester to accommodate the exam-oriented mindset of the students and their first-time exposure to the material. This cautious approach was recommended since the researcher, and experts were unsure how each one of the students in this study will receive and react to the new content. As Expert 2 has vast knowledge on the instructional and institutional policies, her advice was followed without objection.

Stage 2: Needs Analysis

At the next stage, a needs analysis related to the focus area was performed. The essential purpose of doing needs analysis was to develop strategic ideas to improve the existing problem situation. Richards' model (2001) offered guidelines to first understand what learners need (target needs), then how they can learn effectively (learning needs), while considering real-world limitations (constraints), but this research carried it out in a fully qualitative manner. This way would enable making the lessons practical, relevant and tailored to the students' actual needs.

Target Needs: Mental Wellbeing Needs

As this study uses the CLIL approach of dual focus on content and language learning, the target needs include mental wellbeing needs (The writing skill needs will be covered under the learning needs). The focus group interviews revealed several themes: Improvement Mindset, Need for Positive Emotions, Desire for Achievement, Coping with Anxiety, Positive Connection with people. The following table shows the themes with selected quotes from the pre focus group interviews.

Table 2 Mental Wellbeing Needs and Selected Quotes

Needs Related to Mental Wellbeing	Selected Interview Extracts
Improvement Mindset	I feel like I've not paid much attention to improving my mental well-being. It is something I need to do ...And I'm fine with small steps... (S4)
The Need for Positive Emotions	"...I just want to be happy, and being happy is important to my mood. When I'm sad my mood is low... (S11)
Desire for Accomplishment	I want to do something significant with my life, something positive, like serving people or bringing positive changes in my community." (S10)
Coping with anxiety	"I frequently become anxious when things don't go as planned. It's very difficult to remain calm and it impacts my entire day." (S11)
Positive connection with people	"I'd like to improve my relationship with friends, teachers and neighbours. And I think that if we have a good connection with them...Life will be more joyful". (S5)

Improvement Mindset.

Students see mental wellbeing as a critical but often neglected part of their lives; they prefer gradual progress over immediate results. For example, one student said they used to neglect their emotional health but now they take small steps towards self-improvement (S4). Another said mental wellbeing and academic success are equal, both are essential for overall growth (S9). This mindset reflects a broader shift towards valuing personal development as a lifelong journey where resilience and self-awareness is developed through patience. This allows students to navigate challenges in academics, relationships and personal goals without fixating on perfection.

The Need for Positive Emotions.

Happiness and emotional balance are key to students' mental wellbeing, many linked positive moods to overall life satisfaction. One student equated happiness with daily functioning, said sadness directly affects their motivation and energy (S11). Others find joy in simple restorative activities – like quiet time with tea – to counterbalance stress (S9). These quotes show the role of positive emotions in buffering against life's pressures, that cultivating joy whether through leisure or mindfulness is important for mental balance. Students' emphasis on emotional highs and lows also shows the need for strategies to maintain positivity during adversity.

Desire for Accomplishment.

Students want to find meaning in personal and societal achievements; they see purpose as part of mental wellbeing. For some this means driving community change or serving others (S10), for others it's being a good parent or responsible citizen (S3). These goals reflect the universal need to feel valued and important whether through big achievements or everyday contributions. Achievement in this sense is not just about external validation but about aligning actions with personal values, to feel fulfilled that combats existential doubt or apathy.

Coping with Anxiety.

Anxiety is a big challenge especially when students face uncertainty or disrupted plans. Participants described feeling overwhelmed when situations get out of control, one said "anxiety impacts my whole day" (S11). Another said uncertainty paralyses them, indecision makes them feel helpless (S8). These show a big gap in emotional regulation skills, students need adaptive coping mechanisms – like mindfulness or problem-solving strategies – to manage stressors in academics, social and personal life. Addressing anxiety is key to keeping students stable in an unpredictable life.

Positive Connection with People

Positive relationships are one of the core elements of PERMA plus wellbeing construct which brings joy and emotional support. Students wanted to deepen their connections with peers, mentors and community members and linked social connection to reduced loneliness (S4, S5). However, many admitted they didn't have the skills to nurture these relationships and highlighted the gap between intention and action (S4). Building interpersonal connections could reduce feelings of isolation and create networks of mutual support that increase resilience and overall life satisfaction. This theme highlights the interdependence of social health and individual wellbeing in students' daily lives.

Learning needs: Writing Skill Needs

Learning needs focus on the actions and strategies learners require to achieve successful learning rather than solely concentrating on the final outcomes. Based on the findings from the focus interviews of the ESL learners, the writing skill needs themes include Enjoyment in Writing, Visual Learning Preferences, Need for Confidence Building, Integrative Approaches, and Interest-Driven Activities. The following sub-sections will explain each theme with connected interview quotes.

Table 3 Writing Skill Needs And Selected Quotes

Needs Related to Writing skill learning	Selected Interview Extracts
Enjoyment in Writing	Student 7: "I enjoy writing when it's fun" Teacher: Like what activities? Student 7: Like...Like when we get to create stories or write about topics we care

	about. It feels like work less and more like playing.”
Visual Learning Preferences	“I prefer to write when I use diagrams or mind maps to organize my ideas.” This makes me understand the links my thoughts and plan writing better.” (S4)
Need for Confidence Building	I would like the writing assignments that are increasing step by step. It does not overwhelm me. It will help me to see my progress over time. (S6)
Integrative Approaches	When we speak about the topic and then write about the same topic it feels like everything is connected. It makes writing less scary and more natural (S11).
Interest-Driven Activities	“I do like writing better whenever I can choose what to write about, like my hobbies and so on or experiences. It’s more personal that way, and I think not as mechanical. (S10)

Enjoyment in Writing.

Students say that writing is enjoyable when it’s creative and personal. For example, Student 7 says it’s unlike a chore, but like playing when they write stories or topics they’re interested in. This shows the importance of intrinsic motivation by prioritising imaginative and self-directed writing which reduces stress and turns writing into a fun expressive outlet. When students connect to their writing they will persist and develop skills organically.

Visual Learning Preferences.

Visual tools like mind maps and diagrams are key to helping students organise and clarify their ideas. S4 says using these tools helps them visualize and connect their thoughts to plan and execute writing tasks more coherently. By structuring ideas spatially visual aids might reduce cognitive overload and anxiety so students can approach writing systematically. This shows we need to incorporate multimodal strategies into our teaching to cater for different learning styles and increase clarity and confidence in the writing process.

Need for Confidence Building

S6 say that scaffolded assignments that build skills incrementally are key. Gradual progression allows learners to “see their progress over time” and build self-efficacy and resilience. Confidence building practices like breaking tasks into manageable steps validate effort over perfection and reframe challenges as growth opportunities. This will help improve writing competence and growth mindset and allows students to take risks and persist when things go wrong.

Integrative Approaches

Linking writing to other skills like speaking would make it a connected experience. S11 says discussing topics before writing makes it feel “connected” and “less scary” and bridges oral expression with written communication. Integrative approaches mirror real life and reduce the isolation often associated with writing tasks. By contextualising writing within broader communication frameworks students become more fluent and adaptable and see the relevance of writing in everyday life.

Interest-Driven Activities

Autonomy in topic choice is key to engagement as S10 says. Writing about personal interests like hobbies or experiences feels “more personal” and less mechanical. Choice-driven tasks deepen emotional investment and allow learners to connect their identity to their work. This personal relevance makes writing feel authentic and prideful rather than a generic exercise. When students write about what matters to them motivation and ownership of learning increases.

Constrains

When brainstorming the contextual constraints collaboratively several factors were found. The institutional constraints – ethical guidelines, rigid course structures and time bound deliverables might hinder the achievement of well-being infused learning objectives. At the university level, pre-set course outlines limited flexibility to address emergent student needs especially around culturally sensitive topics like mental wellbeing. Time constraints further reduced opportunities for personalized interaction. So, the educators couldn’t identify or respond to unspoken student concerns. Cultural barriers made it worse: students from diverse backgrounds would hesitate to articulate needs due to stigma around mental health or norms that discourage help seeking behaviours. Institutional timelines also limited the adaptability of learning materials, and culturally responsive adjustments during the course. While study was ethical, the small sample size of the study also limited the generalizability of the findings, the tension between methodological rigor and inclusivity.

Reflecting On the Adequacy of Existing ESL Materials in Meeting the Emerged Needs

Through a systematic analysis of the alignment between emergent learner needs and the prescribed textbook ESL TB’s content, we intended to develop pedagogical strategies to ensure lessons are structured to address the ESL students’ multi-dimensional development – cognitive, social-emotional and linguistic.

The textbook covers the basics of mental wellbeing, and more writing skills needs, but the analysis reveals opportunities to integrate these more deeply. It does introduce basic ideas of mental wellbeing and step by step writing techniques like reflective exercises and structured writing prompts which partially address learner needs. But these are often isolated rather than synergized and so don’t fully leverage the potential to develop emotional awareness, systematic mental wellbeing constructs through writing skills.

Content analysis of the writing sections of the 8 units of ESL TB (except Unit 4 as it was not included in the syllabus) shows a pattern: each unit touches on some wellbeing elements through its themes but none of them really integrate wellbeing practices in a systematic way as

the existing textbook writing activities are academic, real-world passages which let students explore the world. Units 1 and 2—focusing on community and cultural exchange—establish the social foundations but need to build on those with relationship-building techniques. Units 3 to 5—on film, travel and dreams—engage creativity but miss out on opportunities to cultivate joy and build resilience. Units 6 to 8—problem-solving and education debates—develop critical thinking but overlook stress management, coping techniques and inculcating positivity. We see the same gaps across all of them: not enough progress tracking in terms of affective aspect of language learners and target needs expressed in the needs analysis. In fact, it comprises limited emotional regulation tools and underdeveloped social connections ideas.

Meanwhile, ESL TB has clear writing models which let students analyze the structures. It also has step-by-step approach to the writing process. Compared to the mental wellbeing ideas, writing skill development seem to be at a satisfactory level. But the writing activities can be enhanced more to cater the students need for enjoyment in writing, visual learning preferences, need for confidence building, integrative approaches, and interest-driven activities by providing more personal relevance. Enhancing activities that explicitly connect self-expression, and coping strategies could bridge this gap while building on the existing framework.

Selection of Adapted Lessons

In this study, to maximize impact within limited instructional time, selected activities from positive psychology resources and existing ESL materials were identified for adaptation in the first cycle of the study. These activities aim to address multiple PERMA+ components simultaneously while supporting writing skill development. The selected activities include exercises such as envisioning one's best possible future self, gratitude reflection, acts of kindness, shared identity activities, mindfulness practices, and structured time-management strategies such as the Pomodoro technique. In addition, selected topics from the ESL textbook—such as travel experiences or technology debates—can be adapted to incorporate reflective and meaningful writing tasks.

Discussion

Reflecting on the emergent themes from the needs analysis provides important curricular implications for wellbeing-infused writing instruction. The PERMA+ framework (Seligman, 2011) offers a useful theoretical lens for interpreting these needs and translating them into pedagogical practices. PERMA+ conceptualizes wellbeing through five pillars—Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment—while the “Plus” component incorporates additional elements such as resilience, health, and optimism. When viewed through this framework, the needs identified in the study align closely with key dimensions of student flourishing and therefore offer a strong foundation for designing writing activities that support both language development and psychological wellbeing.

Integrating wellbeing into language learning is increasingly supported in international scholarship. Research in positive psychology and second language acquisition suggests that emotional wellbeing and positive learning environments can enhance motivation, engagement, and language performance (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Oxford, 2016). In many educational contexts, including Malaysia, concerns about student mental health have prompted calls for holistic approaches that integrate socio-emotional development with academic learning.

Embedding wellbeing elements within existing classroom activities—such as writing instruction—offers a practical way to respond to these concerns without requiring separate interventions.

Improvement Mindset

The emphasis participants placed on gradual improvement and perseverance reflects the Achievement and resilience dimensions within PERMA+. Writing instruction can support this need by encouraging reflective tasks that focus on personal growth and learning progress. Activities such as reflective narratives about overcoming challenges or setting incremental learning goals can help students frame writing development as a continuous process rather than a fixed measure of ability.

This approach aligns with research on the growth mindset, which emphasizes that abilities can develop through effort, feedback, and persistence (Dweck, 2017). When learners view challenges as opportunities for improvement, they are more likely to sustain engagement and resilience. In writing classrooms, emphasizing progress, revision, and reflective learning may therefore help students build confidence while reducing fear of failure. Such practices are particularly relevant in ESL contexts where learners often experience anxiety about linguistic accuracy.

Positive Emotions in Learning

Students expressed desire for joy, balance, and emotional wellbeing corresponds to the Positive Emotion dimension of PERMA. Research in positive psychology demonstrates that positive emotions broaden cognitive processes and support learning, creativity, and problem-solving (Daszkiewickz & Dregana, 2023). Writing activities can therefore be designed to promote emotional awareness and positive reflection.

For example, prompts that invite students to describe meaningful experiences, moments of gratitude, or personal achievements may encourage students to connect writing with positive emotional expression. Expressive writing research also suggests that reflective writing about personal experiences can improve psychological wellbeing and emotional processing (Chambers, 2020). When integrated carefully into ESL writing tasks, such activities allow learners to practice language skills while simultaneously strengthening emotional literacy.

Meaning and Purpose in Writing

Participants' aspirations related to purpose and personal contribution reflect the Meaning and Achievement components of PERMA+. Writing tasks that encourage students to explore personal values, future aspirations, or societal issues can help learners connect academic work with broader life goals. When writing topics resonate with students' identities and experiences, learning becomes more personally meaningful and motivating.

Research in language education highlights the importance of meaningful communication in language learning. Tasks that connect language use with real-world contexts can enhance motivation and deepen engagement with the learning process (Ahmadova, 2025). For students in higher education, reflecting on their future roles in society through writing may strengthen their sense of agency and purpose, which are key components of psychological wellbeing.

Coping with Anxiety and Developing Resilience

Managing stress and anxiety emerged as another significant theme in the needs analysis. Within the PERMA+ framework, resilience forms part of the “Plus” dimension and is closely connected with Positive Emotion and Relationships. Writing instruction can support resilience by creating safe spaces for reflection and collaborative learning.

Reflective writing about academic challenges or stressors may help students process emotions and develop coping strategies. In addition, peer-based activities such as collaborative writing or peer feedback can foster supportive learning communities. Research in cooperative learning demonstrates that structured peer interaction can improve both academic outcomes and social relationships among students (Jaya et al., 2025).

Positive psychology exercises integrated into language learning may further support emotional regulation. Activities such as gratitude reflection or envisioning one’s “best possible future self” have been shown to promote optimism and wellbeing in educational settings (Strambi et al, 2017). When adapted as writing prompts, these exercises provide opportunities for language practice while encouraging positive cognitive reframing.

Positive Relationships and Social Connection

The need for meaningful interpersonal relationships corresponds directly with the Relationships component of PERMA+. Language classrooms naturally provide opportunities for social interaction, and collaborative writing tasks can strengthen interpersonal connections among learners.

Group writing projects, peer editing sessions, and reflective discussions about acts of kindness or community engagement can cultivate empathy and mutual support. Research in second language learning has shown that positive classroom relationships contribute to learner confidence, willingness to communicate, and overall wellbeing (Jaya et al, 2025). Encouraging students to explore themes of community, empathy, and shared identity in their writing may therefore reinforce both linguistic development and social connectedness.

Writing Skill Development within the PERMA+ Framework

The writing skill needs identified in the study also align well with the PERMA+ model. Enjoyment and creativity in writing can foster Positive Emotion, while interest-driven tasks promote Engagement (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). Collaborative learning supports Relationships, and personally meaningful topics strengthen Meaning. Incremental skill development contributes to Achievement and resilience.

When designing wellbeing-integrated writing tasks, however, core linguistic competencies must remain central. Effective writing instruction still requires attention to structure, coherence, grammar, and evidence-based argumentation. For example, paragraph writing activities can incorporate structured personal narratives that require clear topic sentences, supporting details, and concluding statements. Essay tasks can be scaffolded to include thesis development, logical argumentation, and appropriate citation practices.

Peer review sessions may help students refine organization and clarity while simultaneously strengthening interpersonal skills. Visual planning techniques such as outlines or mind maps can support learners who prefer structured preparation before drafting. Step-by-step revision processes can also reinforce confidence and encourage students to view writing improvement as a gradual and achievable process.

Overall, integrating wellbeing principles does not replace traditional writing instruction; rather, it complements linguistic development by addressing the psychological factors that influence learning motivation and persistence.

Addressing Institutional Constraints

Despite the potential benefits of wellbeing-integrated instruction, institutional constraints can limit flexibility in curriculum design. Examination-oriented systems and rigid course structures may restrict opportunities for innovative teaching approaches. These challenges highlight the broader tension between institutional requirements and the diverse needs of learners.

One possible response is to adopt culturally responsive and context-sensitive pedagogical strategies within existing curricular frameworks. Small adaptations—such as integrating reflective prompts into existing writing tasks or incorporating collaborative learning activities—may allow educators to support wellbeing without disrupting institutional expectations.

Because this study follows a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, student voices play a crucial role in shaping the learning process. PAR emphasizes collaborative reflection and continuous improvement, making it well suited for educational contexts where teaching strategies evolve in response to learner feedback.

Constructive dialogue among stakeholders—including teachers, administrators, and students—may also help identify practical ways to balance academic objectives with wellbeing considerations. Even within examination-oriented systems, thoughtful adaptation of learning activities can create more supportive and engaging learning environments.

Selecting Positive Psychology Lessons

By integrating the suitable Positive Psychology lessons as activities into writing instruction, learners are encouraged to reflect on personal experiences, relationships, and aspirations while practicing essential writing skills (Strabi et al. 2017; Upeshar et al. 2022). For example, gratitude journaling may simultaneously cultivate positive emotions, strengthen interpersonal appreciation, and provide meaningful content for paragraph writing tasks. Similarly, reflective writing on acts of kindness can deepen students' understanding of empathy and social responsibility while developing narrative and descriptive writing abilities.

Such integration allows educators to address multiple wellbeing dimensions without increasing instructional workload. Importantly, it also creates a replicable instructional model where language learning and wellbeing development reinforce one another. Overall, the findings suggest that integrating PERMA+ principles into writing instruction can transform writing tasks into opportunities for both linguistic development and personal growth. Through carefully designed activities that promote positive emotion, engagement, meaningful

reflection, supportive relationships, and achievement, writing classrooms can become spaces where learners develop not only language proficiency but also resilience, self-awareness, and social connection. This discussion therefore highlights the significance of the first reflection phase of the study's initial PAR cycle. The insights gained from the needs analysis will inform the subsequent planning phase, in which the selected activities will be adapted and implemented within writing lessons. By synthesizing learners' wellbeing needs with their linguistic development goals, the study aims to create a balanced instructional model that supports both academic achievement and student flourishing.

Proposing a Wellbeing-Informed ESL Writing Curriculum Framework

Traditional ESL writing curricula often prioritize grammatical accuracy, writing structure, syntax, and punctuation over emotional wellbeing. This inadvertently creates anxiety and disengagement (MacIntyre et al., 2016; Pasandeh, 2024). Research confirms both the potential for integrating wellbeing concepts and the importance of wellbeing in language acquisition (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014; Babic et al., 2022), but few programs systematically integrate evidence-based strategies. Moreover, integrating content related to enhancing learners' mental wellbeing in their daily life remains underexplored in a structured manner (Mercer et al., 2018). Based on the insights gained from the pre-reflection phase of this study, the following framework for a wellbeing-informed ESL writing Curriculum can be proposed. This framework fills the gaps highlighted above by embedding PERMA+ principles (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment) into writing instruction through three interconnected pillars:

- the PERMA+ model, where tasks like "My Best Possible Self" essays foster optimism while peer reviews build relationships.
- Participatory Action Research (PAR), using iterative Reflection-Action- Evaluation cycles to engage learners as co-designers of stress-management topics; and
- CLIL methodology, teaching language skills through wellbeing content like resilience narratives for paragraph practice or mindfulness reflections for grammar.

This tripartite approach ensures writing instruction develops both linguistic competence and emotional resilience, creating more meaningful and effective learning experiences.

Framework Pillars

The wellbeing-informed ESL writing curriculum framework is structured around four interdependent components. Table 5 summarizes these pillars.

Table 5 The Frameworks Used in The Well-Being Informed ESL Writing Curriculum

Pillar	Description	Example Application
Participatory Design	Co-created with learners via PAR cycles.	Learners propose specific needs for topics on wellbeing.
PERMA+ Integration	Writing tasks aligned with wellbeing domains.	"My Best Possible Self" essay (Positive Emotion, Accomplishments).

CLIL Methodology	Language skills taught through wellbeing themes.	Paragraph writing using students' reflection on keeping a gratitude journal.
Cyclical Adaptation	Needs reassessment (combining CD-AR model & Richards (2001)) before each PAR cycle's planning starts).	Revise tasks if coping with anxiety needs more attention.

Novelty and Contributions

This framework offers three key innovations:

- (1) **Holistic Pedagogy:** It combines writing instruction with wellbeing content and strategies, addressing the "whole learner."
- (2) **Empowerment Focus:** PAR methodologies turn students from passive recipients to active collaborators, increasing engagement.
- (3) **Scalability:** Adaptable for different contexts—academic preparation programs, migrant education or online platforms, teacher training—making wellbeing-informed writing instruction accessible to all.

Implementation Workflow

The framework follows a phased, evidence-based approach:

1. **Needs Analysis:** Using CD-AR and Richards' (2001) models to identify priorities (e.g., confidence-building).
2. **Task Design:** Pairing writing objectives (e.g., thesis statements) with PERMA+ strategies in learning writing skill and the content for wellbeing (e.g., mindfulness pre-writing, knowing mindfulness techniques).
3. **PAR Cycles:** Continuous feedback refines materials—e.g., adding peer mentoring if learners want stronger Relationships, experts' observations and suggestions.

Expected Outcomes

Expected outcomes will be academic gains such as improved writing proficiency through structured, scaffolded tasks and affective benefits like increased Emotional awareness (identifying one's own and others' feelings), self-regulation (managing anger, stress, sadness), empathy & compassion, resilience (coping with setbacks) and awareness, critical thinking & decision-making, self-awareness & identity formation, coping mechanisms & mental wellbeing, belief systems, values, and mindset shifts, and features related to social wellbeing Building relationships, understanding social norms & roles, cooperation, conflict resolution, and teamwork. This is a replicable Model which is a flexible template for teachers to balance academic rigor with wellbeing support.

In short, by integrating PERMA+ domains, participatory design, and CLIL, this framework redefines ESL writing instruction. Writing lessons become a tool for psychological, social, and emotional empowerment—helping learners grow into confident communicators and emotionally resilient individuals.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how the pre-reflection phase of PAR laid the foundation for a curriculum that integrates wellbeing and language learning. By employing Saban's (2021) Curriculum Development for Action Research (CD-AR) model for structured needs analysis through pre-reflection, and the PERMA+ framework for content enrichment, this paper moves beyond traditional methods by centering stakeholder collaboration. Unlike conventional linear and expert-driven models, which often neglect authentic engagement, action research and PAR emphasize iterative cycles of reflection, adaptation, and empowerment.

Additionally, the CD-AR model provided a roadmap for proposing curriculum development through action research. While Saban's (2021) model provides a strong theoretical foundation by relying solely on literature reviews. This study moves beyond theory by incorporating empirical data, expert feedback, and practical insights, thereby strengthening the model's robustness and real-world applicability. Future research will further refine this framework by progressing through the remaining PAR phases (Rawshan et al., 2023), embedding wellbeing authentically within language education to foster holistic learning.

The insights from the Reflection Phase pave the way for a wellbeing-infused writing curriculum, where writing transcends mere academic exercise, becoming a pathway for personal and communal growth. By merging technical proficiency with emotional resilience, this approach empowers students both inside and beyond the classroom. Stakeholder engagement ensures relevance, while continuous refinement will enhance effectiveness in subsequent cycles. Future research may extend the application of this model across diverse cultural contexts and educational levels. Such investigations would enhance its generalisability and contextual relevance. Nonetheless, the central premise remains that students' emotional wellbeing supports more effective learning without undermining linguistic or academic achievement. In this manner, education functions as a conduit for holistic development, enabling students to flourish not only as learners but also as individuals.

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