



Fostering Mental Well-being Awareness and Enactment through ESL Writing: Insights from Participatory Action Research

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ABSTRACT

This participatory action research (PAR) study explores how mental well-being awareness and enactment can be fostered through ESL writing instruction at a Malaysian university. Addressing affective barriers, stigma, and limited access to mental-wellbeing support, the study co-designed well-being-infused ESL writing lessons using PERMA+ principles. Eleven undergraduates and two expert collaborators participated across two PAR cycles over seven weeks. Qualitative data from focus groups, reflective journals, observations, and classroom artefacts were thematically analysed. Findings indicate enhanced emotional awareness, reduced writing anxiety, improved engagement, and reported transfer of well-being practices beyond the classroom. The study demonstrates that embedding well-being within language instruction offers a sustainable, culturally responsive model for supporting student flourishing through everyday pedagogy.

Keywords: Mental Wellbeing; ESL; Participatory Action Research; PERMA Plus; Positive Psychology

INTRODUCTION

This study was ignited by two converging influences: sustained observations from my own experience in ESL classrooms and growing concerns regarding student mental wellbeing in higher education. Over time, it became increasingly evident that many students who demonstrated adequate grammatical knowledge and structural

competence nevertheless struggled to write expressively and meaningfully. These challenges were not purely linguistic in nature. Students frequently articulated feelings of anxiety, fear of evaluation, and emotional disengagement during ESL writing tasks. Conventional instructional responses—such as additional practice exercises, model essays, and corrective feedback—proved insufficient in addressing these affective barriers, as they focused primarily on linguistic form rather than learners' emotional experiences. Concurrently, broader concerns surrounding youth mental wellbeing were gaining prominence within educational discourse. The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these concerns, amplifying psychological distress, social isolation, and academic uncertainty among university students. This period foregrounded the urgent need for accessible, stigma-free forms of psychological support embedded within everyday educational environments rather than confined solely to specialised counselling services. Together, these classroom realities and contextual pressures prompted a critical inquiry: Could the ESL writing classroom function not only as a site of language development but also as a pedagogical space for cultivating mental wellbeing awareness and practical coping strategies? This question formed the foundation of the present study.

Despite increased policy attention to student well-being, language classrooms continue to prioritise technical competence over affective dimensions of learning (Richards, 2020). Research in second language acquisition demonstrates that anxiety and low motivation constrain learners' capacity to process and produce language (Krashen, 1982). In Malaysian higher education, stigma surrounding mental health and limited access to formal support services further exacerbate these challenges (Ariffin et al., 2021; Loong et al., 2024).

Existing well-being interventions are often implemented as standalone programmes rather than embedded within disciplinary instruction (Upeshar et al., 2022). Moreover, many Positive Psychology-informed interventions originate in Western contexts, raising concerns about cultural relevance and sustainability when applied elsewhere. There remains a clear gap in research on how mental well-being awareness can be integrated into ESL writing instruction through participatory, context-responsive approaches.

Guided by Participatory Action Research (PAR), this study aimed to design, implement, and refine ESL writing lessons that intentionally foster mental well-being awareness and learner enactment of well-being practices.

The study sought to:

- Co-design well-being-infused ESL writing lessons through PAR;
- Examine how these lessons shape students' mental well-being awareness and writing experiences across two PAR cycles;
- Explore students' reported enactment of well-being practices within and beyond the classroom.

Accordingly, the study addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: How can mental well-being awareness be embedded into ESL writing instruction through PAR?

RQ2: What impacts does this integration have on students' mental well-being awareness and ESL writing experiences?

RQ3: How do students report enacting well-being practices developed through ESL writing activities?

BACKGROUND/ LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review situates the present study within broader scholarship on (a) mental well-being in higher education and ESL contexts, (b) Positive Psychology–informed language pedagogy, and (c) PAR and Content-Integrated Language Learning (CLIL) approaches to curriculum design. Together, these strands illuminate why fostering mental well-being awareness and enactment through ESL writing—via Participatory Action Research (PAR)—addresses an important theoretical and practical gap.

Mental Well-being and Language Learning in Higher Education

University students globally report increasing levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion, often linked to academic pressure, transition challenges, and uncertainty about future employability. In second language learning contexts, these pressures are magnified, as language proficiency is frequently tied to academic success and social legitimacy (Richards, 2020). Research in second language acquisition consistently demonstrates that affective variables—such as anxiety, motivation, and self-efficacy—play a decisive role in learners' ability to process input and produce output (Krashen, 1982).

In Malaysian higher education, recent studies indicate persistently high levels of psychological distress among undergraduates, even in the post–COVID-19 period (Ariffin et al., 2023). In fact, Malaysian undergraduates experience sub-optimal psychological functioning and symptoms of depression, highlighting the need for effective intervention strategies within higher education institutions to enhance students' well-being (Kunjiapu & Kunasegaran, 2021). Contributing factors include academic workload, financial strain, family expectations, and social adjustment. Importantly, stigma surrounding mental health and help-seeking remains prevalent, limiting students' willingness to access formal counselling services (Ariffin et al., 2021). These conditions highlight the need for indirect, curriculum-embedded approaches that can support mental well-being without labelling or pathologising students. A systematic review by Upeshar et al. (2022) reported that there is currently limited strong evidence supporting the effectiveness of curriculum-embedded interventions in improving university students' mental health and wellbeing. The review further emphasised the need for more rigorous and high-quality research in this area.

Language classrooms offer a particularly promising site for such interventions. Writing, in particular, is an emotionally demanding skill that requires sustained cognitive effort, self-disclosure, and tolerance of ambiguity. Brown and Lee (2025) emphasise that L2 writing is highly sensitive to affective states, with anxiety and fear of evaluation often

constraining fluency and idea development. However, despite this sensitivity, writing instruction in many ESL programmes remains largely skills-driven, focusing on structure, accuracy, and assessment outcomes rather than emotional engagement or learner well-being.

Positive Psychology in Education and ESL Contexts.

Positive Psychology (PP) emerged as a response to deficit-oriented models of mental health, advocating a complementary focus on strengths, resilience, and human flourishing (Seligman, 2011). In fact, PP is reported to foster mental wellbeing among individuals (Koter & Ting, 2021; Leow et al. 2024). Within educational contexts, PP-informed interventions aim to cultivate positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment—dimensions captured in the PERMA framework. An expanded PERMA+ model further incorporates elements such as physical health and optimism, offering a holistic scaffold for well-being development (Strambi et al. 2017). In recent years, scholars have increasingly explored the application of Positive Psychology in language education. Mercer et al. (2018) argue that language learning is inseparable from learners' emotional and motivational experiences and call for systematic integration of well-being into pedagogy. Strambi et al. (2017) operationalised this call by embedding PERMA-informed activities into L2 classrooms, reporting improvements in student motivation and reduced stress. Subsequent studies have documented similar benefits in speaking, listening, and intensive English programmes (Cheng et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, several limitations are evident in the existing literature. First, many studies adopt quantitative or quasi-experimental designs that measure outcomes without examining learners' lived experiences or processes of change. Second, Positive Psychology interventions are often implemented as discrete activities rather than embedded within core disciplinary tasks. Third, much of the research originates in Western contexts, raising concerns about cultural transferability when applied in non-Western educational settings (Hendriks et al., 2018; Lomas et al., 2020).

The present study responds to these limitations by embedding Positive Psychology practices directly into ESL writing instruction and examining how students develop awareness and enactment of well-being strategies through iterative, participatory processes.

Participatory Action Research as a Pedagogical and Methodological Framework

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is grounded in the principles of collaboration, critical reflection, and transformative action (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Unlike conventional research approaches that position participants as passive subjects, PAR emphasises active participant involvement in identifying issues, implementing actions, and reflecting on outcomes. Within educational contexts, PAR has been associated with enhanced learner agency, contextual relevance, and the sustainability of pedagogical innovations (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

The literature further suggests that PAR is particularly relevant to wellbeing-oriented educational research due to its emphasis on contextual sensitivity, participant voice, and ethical responsiveness (Sobhanmanesh, 2025). Its cyclical and iterative nature

enables continuous refinement of pedagogical practices based on participants' lived experiences and feedback rather than relying on fixed or prescriptive interventions. Kandel and Kandel (2023) demonstrated how PAR could be used to transform academic writing instruction by engaging students in the co-construction of writing tasks, resulting in increased autonomy and engagement. Similarly, PAR enables iterative refinement, allowing interventions to evolve in response to participants' feedback rather than remaining fixed or prescriptive.

Scholars have also positioned PAR not merely as a methodological approach, but as a pedagogical and epistemological stance that supports collaborative knowledge construction and reflective practice in educational settings (Halliday et al, 2018; Rocha et al.2023; Sobhanmanesh, 2025) . In ESL contexts, such an orientation is especially significant when interventions aim to foster both language development and learner wellbeing. Accordingly, in the present study, PAR provides the conceptual and pedagogical foundation through which wellbeing practices are integrated into ESL writing instruction and progressively refined through cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) as a Bridge

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) offers a pedagogical bridge for embedding well-being into language instruction. CLIL emphasises dual-focused learning, where meaningful content serves as the vehicle for language development (Coyle et al., 2010). Rather than treating language as an end in itself, CLIL situates language use within cognitively and emotionally engaging subject matter.

Scholars have argued that well-being concepts—such as gratitude, resilience, and purpose—are particularly well suited to CLIL-based language instruction, as they invite reflection, discussion, and extended writing (Mercer et al., 2018; Lee, 2024). By framing well-being as content, ESL writing tasks can move beyond mechanical practice to become spaces for meaning-making and personal expression. This approach aligns with research showing that learners produce richer and more sustained writing when tasks are personally relevant and emotionally resonant.

In this study, CLIL principles support the integration of Positive Psychology into ESL writing by ensuring that well-being content is not an add-on but an integral part of lesson objectives and assessment practices.

Integrating Awareness and Enactment: Addressing the Research Gap

Across these bodies of literature, a clear gap emerges. While Positive Psychology and well-being have gained traction in language education, few studies examine how learners move from awareness to enactment of well-being practices, particularly through writing. Moreover, the role of participatory processes in shaping this movement remains underexplored.

Existing research tends to measure outcomes at fixed points, offering limited insight into how learners negotiate, adapt, and apply well-being strategies over time. There is also limited qualitative evidence documenting how students transfer such practices beyond classroom boundaries. By combining PAR, Positive Psychology, and CLIL within

ESL writing instruction, the present study addresses this gap and contributes a process-oriented, context-sensitive account of how mental well-being awareness and enactment can be fostered through everyday pedagogical practice. This theoretical and empirical grounding informs the methodology of the study, which is detailed in the following section.

METHODOLOGY

This section delineates the methodological framework of the study, including the Action Research design, participants and study context, data collection and analysis methods, and the overall research procedures. It also outlines the project's action plan, specifying the number of iterative cycles conducted to implement and refine the writing lessons.

Action Research Design

This study employed Participatory Action Research (PAR) as its overarching action research design. The PAR model adopted was informed by the classical cyclical frameworks proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart, comprising pre-reflection (reconnaissance), planning, action, observation, and reflection. This model was selected because it foregrounds participation, collaboration, and iterative improvement, aligning closely with the study's aim of fostering mental well-being awareness and practice through ESL writing.

Within this model, action research was not treated as a linear intervention but as a recursive and responsive process, allowing teaching practices and research focus to evolve based on participants' feedback and lived experiences. Students were positioned as active contributors in identifying challenges related to ESL writing and well-being, co-designing learning activities, and reflecting on their impact. Thus, PAR functioned simultaneously as a research methodology and a pedagogical approach.

Participants and Location of the Study

The study was conducted in an undergraduate ESL writing course at a Malaysian higher education institution. Participants consisted of eleven undergraduate students enrolled in an academic writing module and two experts (academic and local) along with the researcher (content expert).

The institutional context reflects a multilingual ESL environment where English is used primarily for academic purposes. This context is significant, as students are often assessed heavily on writing performance while receiving limited support for emotional and psychological aspects of learning. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. We maintained participant confidentiality and upheld the right to withdraw throughout the study.

Data Collection and Data Analysis Methods

Multiple qualitative data collection methods were employed to capture students' experiences, perceptions, and practices within the PAR framework. These methods included:

- Student reflective journals, which documented learners' emotional responses to writing tasks, emerging awareness of mental well-being, and reported application of strategies.
- Focus group discussions, conducted at the end of each PAR cycle to gather collective reflections, feedback on activities, and suggestions for improvement.
- Informal Conversation with students and experts captured spontaneous expression and rich elaborated feedback.
- Classroom observations, recorded through field notes, capturing levels of engagement, interaction patterns, and behavioural changes during writing activities.
- Researcher reflective journal, used to document pedagogical decisions, reflections, and adjustments across cycles.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was employed to analyse the data through a process of continuous reflection and interpretation. This approach enabled the researcher to critically examine how personal assumptions, values, and experiences influenced the coding process, theme development, and interpretation of findings. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the study by documenting analytical decisions and reflections to ensure transparency, trustworthiness, and ethical representation of participants' experiences. Triangulation across data sources enhanced credibility and depth of interpretation.

Research Procedures

The project was implemented across two Participatory action research cycles, each structured around the stages of pre-reflection, planning, action, observation, and reflection.

Pre-reflection (Reconnaissance): Initial classroom observations, informal discussions, and a needs analysis were conducted to identify students' challenges related to ESL writing and mental well-being.

Planning: Based on insights from pre-reflection, well-being-infused writing activities grounded in PERMA Plus principles were collaboratively planned. Students' input informed the selection and adaptation of activities.

Action: Planned activities were implemented during ESL writing lessons. These included reflective writing, strengths-based tasks, goal-setting exercises, and structured writing routines.

Observation: During implementation, the researcher documented student engagement, interactions, and responses through field notes and observations.

Reflection: Reflection occurred through student journals, focus group discussions, and researcher reflexive journaling. Insights from reflection informed modifications for the subsequent cycle.

The second cycle followed the same structure but incorporated refinements based on reflections from Cycle One, placing greater emphasis on learner agency and independent application of strategies.

Action Plan

The action plan centred on embedding mental well-being awareness into ESL writing instruction through structured yet flexible pedagogical components. The main components of the action plan included:

1. **Awareness-building activities:** Introducing concepts related to emotional regulation, strengths, and positive learning habits through guided reflective writing that were built around PERMA Plus components.
2. **Co-designed writing tasks:** Involving students in shaping writing prompts and activities that resonated with their academic and personal experiences.
3. **Reflective practices:** Regular journaling and peer-sharing sessions to encourage metacognitive and emotional reflection.
4. **Iterative refinement:** Systematic modification of the module across two PAR cycles, incorporating student feedback and observed classroom needs, with the second cycle embedding Islamic insights alongside PERMA+ components to enhance cultural relevance and pedagogical depth.
5. **Encouraging enactment beyond the classroom:** Providing opportunities for students to discuss and report how strategies were applied in independent writing tasks and daily academic practices.

Through this action plan, the study sought to create a supportive learning environment where mental well-being awareness was not only developed but gradually enacted by learners, forming the foundation for the findings and discussion that follow.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and critically discusses the key findings of the study in relation to the research questions and the Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework underpinning the inquiry. The themes reported here emerged through iterative thematic analysis and reflect both the collaborative processes and the developmental outcomes of the Writing for Wellness (WfW) module across two PAR cycles.

Theme 1, *Co-designing Well-being–Infused Writing through PAR (RQ1)*, examines how participatory planning and shared decision-making shaped the integration of PERMA+ components within ESL writing lessons. Theme 2, *Iterative Refinement and Its Impact across PAR Cycles (RQ2)*, explores how reflection and action across the two cycles informed pedagogical adjustments—particularly the embedding of Islamic insights—and influenced student engagement and learning experiences. Theme 3, *From Awareness to Enactment: Learner Practices Beyond the Classroom (RQ3)*, considers how students translated classroom-based wellbeing awareness into personal practices and sustained behaviours beyond the formal learning context.

Together, these themes illuminate both the processes and outcomes of embedding Positive Psychology within ESL writing through a culturally responsive, participatory approach.

Theme 1: Co-designing Well-being–Infused Writing through PAR (RQ1)

The first cycle of this Participatory Action Research (PAR) project emphasised student active participation and experts as co-researchers as a central mechanism for designing well-being-infused ESL writing lessons. The initial pre-reflection stage revealed a recurring set of challenges faced by learners. These included the needs related to both mental wellbeing and ESL writing such as the improvement mindset, positive connection with people, writing anxiety, limited self-confidence. One student captured this sentiment:

"I can do activities related to vocabulary, grammar exercises well, but when it comes to essay writing, I feel nervous. (S3, interview-1).

While S3 talked about his writing anxiety, S5 highlighted his need for forming positive connections 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)

These insights provided the foundation for the co-design process. Students actively articulated their learning needs and preferences in their general life, contributing to the creation of tasks that were both academically relevant and psychologically supportive. For example, writing prompts that capture PERMA Plus components Positive emotion, positive relationship and Accomplishment such as "My Best Possible Future" and "Acts of Gratitude in Daily Life" emerged directly from student input, ensuring authenticity and personal relevance.

The integration of principles, including gratitude, reflection, strengths recognition, and goal-setting, was carefully aligned with the ESL writing objectives. I as the Content Expert and my co-researcher, the Local Expert collaboratively decided practical ways to embed these activities, such as starting writing sessions with a short gratitude reflection or sharing successes with peers, demonstrating students role as active participants rather than passive subjects. The Academic Expert time to time provided her constructive feedback in shaping the process. This approach exemplifies PAR's principle of participation, highlighting how learners and co-researchers actively shape instructional design rather than simply responding to it (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

First post interview revealed the students appreciation towards the integration of PERMA Plus with ESL writing:

"This is new knowledge to me. Usually in English classes, I just heard the rules and the writing. This one focused also on mental well-being. It's very different and useful." (S4, Post Interview 1) .

They also expressed how it benefitted their ESL writing by increased learner motivation and confidence, heightened engagement. Participants also noted that the study benefitted their ESL writing by increasing motivation and confidence, heightening engagement, and reducing language learning anxiety. Observational data confirmed improved engagement during these co-designed tasks compared to conventional writing

lessons. Students displayed more sustained attention, verbalized ideas confidently, and collaborated spontaneously. One student noted how the writing activities gave him a positive mindset:

"When we started writing about things we are grateful for, I felt calmer. I could focus on what I write instead of worrying about mistakes I would make." (S5, Focus Group).

Overall, the findings under Theme 1 illustrate how the co-design process within the PAR framework facilitated active participation, collaborative planning, and shared ownership of the wellbeing-infused writing activities. By engaging students alongside local and academic experts, the module was shaped not only to address linguistic objectives but also to integrate affective and motivational dimensions, laying a strong foundation for student-centred learning. These insights highlight the value of participatory curriculum design in aligning pedagogical practices with learners' needs and contextual realities, setting the stage for examining how iterative refinements in subsequent cycles further influenced engagement, learning experiences, and the enactment of wellbeing principles in the classroom.

Theme 2: Iterative Refinement and Its Impact across PAR Cycles (RQ2)

The second theme reflects the iterative and cyclical nature of PAR, demonstrating how reflection-informed refinements strengthened pedagogical relevance and effectiveness. Findings from Cycle One indicated that both expert collaborators and several students suggested that, to make the PERMA+-embedded activities more holistic and personally meaningful, it would be beneficial to incorporate perspectives aligned with students' religious worldview. Analysis of interview data, informal conversations, student reflective journals, and classroom observations revealed a need for more cultural and spiritual resonance within the module. These insights prompted contextual refinements in Cycle Two. Accordingly, I, as the Content Expert, together with the local expert as co-researcher and the academic expert as critical friend, collaboratively decided to embed Islamic perspectives within the PERMA+ components of the wellbeing-infused writing activities during the subsequent planning phase. This adjustment aimed to enhance cultural relevance, deepen learner engagement, and strengthen the contextual responsiveness of the module.

A significant refinement was the incorporation of Islamic perspectives within the writing prompts. Concepts such as *shukr* (gratitude), *sabr* (patience), and *tawakkul* (trust in God) were introduced to align reflective exercises with students' cultural and spiritual worldviews. The analysed data and classroom observations indicate that the refined writing activities contributed meaningfully to the development of students' spiritual and emotional resilience, while also fostering a stronger sense of purpose in life. Participants demonstrated an increased capacity to navigate personal and academic challenges with greater composure and reflective depth. The integration of culturally grounded perspectives within the writing tasks appeared to support not only emotional regulation but also purposeful meaning-making, suggesting that the

pedagogical refinements had impacts extending beyond linguistic development. A student reflected:

When I thought deeper about the lessons we learned in the class, I was able to reconnect with my beliefs and values. Whenever I feel anxious, I remind myself that there is a deeper purpose in our life, we are here for that. It gives me peaceful feeling (S2, informal conversation).

By implementing these culturally aligned modifications, the research team demonstrated responsiveness to participant feedback, illustrating the PAR principles of reflection and co-construction (Bradbury-Huang, 2010; Ubaidillah et al., 2024). The iterative process allowed the curriculum to evolve based on authentic needs, increasing engagement and perceived relevance. Observational and reflective data revealed that students who had been hesitant during Cycle One became more confident participants in Cycle Two. Students reported enhanced emotional regulation, increased motivation, and reduced writing anxiety. For example:

"The lessons taught me to question my own assumptions. I started thinking 'why', what is the reason? and 'how something happens etc. Instead of just writing the facts, I think more. I feel my arguments in essays are stronger now (S10, informal Conversation).

Another student had to say the following about the 2nd cycle:

"After the the second cycle started, I felt it became very close to our views. Although we had to write long essays, we did without getting stressed out." (S9, Reflective Journal).

In summary, Theme 2 demonstrates how the iterative refinement process across the two PAR cycles was instrumental in enhancing both the design and effectiveness of the Writing for Wellness module. Adjustments informed by student feedback, classroom observations, and reflective discussions—particularly the embedding of Islamic perspectives alongside PERMA+ components—strengthened the cultural relevance, emotional engagement, and pedagogical impact of the activities. These refinements not only improved students' immediate classroom experiences but also laid the groundwork for exploring how wellbeing awareness and skills were enacted beyond the learning environment, which is further examined in Theme 3.

Theme 3: From Awareness to Enactment: Learner Practices Beyond the Classroom (RQ3)

The final theme captures the transformation from awareness to enactment, illustrating how students applied well-being strategies in contexts beyond the ESL classroom. Students reported practical transfer of skills such as gratitude journaling, goal-setting, mindfulness, and Pomodoro time management to their daily life, with people around

them and other academic tasks in other subjects. For example, one student that this new knowledge can be transferred to others around him:

"This is new knowledge to me. I can share with others and help them". (S5, interview 2). While S5 appreciating it as new knowledge, is prepared to utilize it for the betterment of people around him which is the depth of impact this module has created on some students. At the same time, another student specified which activity he already started practicing:

"I used the Pomodoro method in my faculty assignments now. It helped me feel positive even when I was nearing deadlines." (S2, Reflective Journal).

Adding on to this conversation when another student, S6 affirmed that he also started practising Pomodoro technique for effective time management , I asked for example instances for further understanding of his utterance. The student replied as follows:

"...like...When there is so much cleaning to do, when too many assignments and tasks are given." (S6, informal conversation).

These quotes showed their attempt to keep themselves engaged in their day to day tasks effectively. Meanwhile, another student noted that how he would like to practise gratitude exercise he learned in class with nephews and nieces:

"I will practice the gratitude tree with my nephews and niece in future. It will be fun for them. Also, they will learn to say thank you for what they have." (S11, Interview 2).

The above instances are evidences for the students readiness for enacting what they learned. Without being passive consumers of wellbeing knowledge, they actually invested their time to apply them in their lives and others.

Theme 3 highlighted how students translated classroom-based wellbeing knowledge into practical actions beyond the formal learning environment, demonstrating the enactment of praxis. Several students reported adopting strategies introduced in the Writing for Wellness module, such as the Pomodoro technique for focused study and the Gratitude Tree exercise to cultivate appreciation and reflection in daily life. These practices indicate that learners were not only internalizing PERMA+ principles but also actively integrating them into their routines, supporting both personal wellbeing and academic engagement. Furthermore, students expressed intentions to share these strategies with peers and family members, suggesting the ripple effect of the intervention and its potential to extend the benefits of wellbeing practices beyond the immediate classroom context. Collectively, these findings illustrate that the module fostered meaningful behavioural change, reinforcing the dual impact of wellbeing-focused instruction on both learner development and social engagement.

DISCUSSION

This section discusses the key findings presented in the previous section of the study in relation to the research questions, theoretical frameworks, and existing literature. It

provides an interpretation of how the writing lessons facilitated the integration of Positive Psychology principles like PERMA Plus within ESL writing instruction through a participatory action research (PAR) approach. The discussion is organized around the three emergent themes identified in the findings: (1) co-designing well-being–infused writing through PAR, (2) iterative refinement and its impact across PAR cycles, and (3) the enactment of wellbeing strategies beyond the classroom. Each theme is examined with reference to PERMA+ principles, PAR processes, affective factors in ESL, and relevant literature, highlighting the theoretical, pedagogical, and cultural implications of the study.

Co-designing Well-being–Infused Writing through PAR

The first theme illustrates how participatory curriculum design fostered student agency, engagement, and ownership. The co-design process allowed students to actively select writing topics, identify meaningful activities, and negotiate strategies to manage anxiety and sustain attention. These mirror findings from prior studies indicating that student involvement in lesson design enhances motivation and engagement in ESL contexts (Sobhanmanesh, 2025). The co-construction process observed in this study aligns with PAR literature, which emphasizes that participation, collaboration, and shared decision-making can transform the learning experience, creating conditions for reflection, praxis, and democratic knowledge construction (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Hendriks et al., 2018).

The integration of PERMA+ elements into the co-design process supported multiple affective and cognitive dimensions of learning. Positive emotions, as emphasized in the framework, helped reduce students' affective filters—a principle central to Krashen's (1982) theory—thereby facilitating more fluent and expressive writing. Engagement, a second PERMA+ component, was nurtured through autonomy and topic choice, enhancing learners' intrinsic motivation and sustained attention (Ahmed & Hossain, 2024; Srinivasen, 2024). Similarly, relationships and peer collaboration were strengthened through group planning and classroom discussions, supporting social dimensions of well-being while reinforcing language practice. In effect, the co-design process operationalized Seligman's PERMA+ principles within an ESL writing context, demonstrating that well-being interventions can be meaningfully embedded alongside academic objectives.

From an ESL pedagogical perspective, this study supports Brown's (2007) emphasis on learner-centered instruction and communicative competence. By involving students in the co-design of writing tasks, the module promoted authentic use of language, reflective thinking, and learner autonomy. These findings also resonate with CLIL principles (Coyle et al., 2010), illustrating how content—here, Positive Psychology and well-being practices—can be integrated with language learning in meaningful and contextually relevant ways. Observational data confirmed that the collaborative planning enhanced classroom culture, fostering psychological safety, mutual respect, and collective responsibility for learning. These cultural and relational dimensions are critical in ESL classrooms, where affective factors such as anxiety, self-confidence, and

enjoyment significantly influence performance and learning outcomes (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

Iterative Refinement and Its Impact across PAR Cycles

The second theme highlights how iterative cycles of reflection and action strengthened both the design and effectiveness of the WfW module. The two-cycle PAR process allowed the research team to modify activities based on student feedback, observations, and reflective journals. Cycle Two, in particular, integrated Islamic perspectives alongside PERMA+ components, enhancing cultural relevance and student engagement. This approach aligns with literature emphasizing the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in promoting engagement and meaningful learning (Hendriks et al., 2018; Ubaidillah et al., 2024). Embedding spiritual and cultural dimensions into Positive Psychology interventions demonstrates how affective and identity-based considerations can enhance both motivation and emotional resonance in language classrooms.

Iterative refinement also allowed for the deepening of reflective practice and meta-cognition among students. By comparing experiences across cycles, learners were able to evaluate the effectiveness of strategies, notice personal growth, and adapt behaviors to suit individual learning preferences. These processes exemplify the praxis central to PAR, whereby reflective awareness is transformed into actionable behaviors (Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Strambi et al., 2017). Importantly, the refinement process supported the dual goals of language learning and well-being. Students reported enhanced motivation, increased self-confidence, enjoyment of learning, and reduced anxiety during writing tasks, reflecting the integrated impact of affective and academic interventions. These findings align with Mercer et al. (2018) and White and Kern (2018), who note that fostering positive emotions and engagement in language classrooms improves both affective outcomes and learning effectiveness.

Positive Psychology literature further supports these findings. The PERMA+ framework emphasizes that well-being is multidimensional, encompassing positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment, and optimism (Seligman, 2011). The iterative adjustments in this study—especially the addition of culturally responsive elements—enhanced multiple PERMA+ domains simultaneously. Spiritual perspectives, for instance, strengthened meaning and purpose, while collaborative activities enhanced relationships and engagement. These results also resonate with affective filter theory (Krashen, 1982), which suggests that reducing anxiety and creating supportive learning environments facilitates second language acquisition. By explicitly linking cultural, spiritual, and psychological dimensions, the module illustrates how well-being can be operationalized in a holistic, context-sensitive manner within ESL instruction.

Moreover, the iterative design confirms findings from contemporary research on participatory interventions. Studies by Haliiday et al. (2018) and Rocha et al. (2023) indicate that participant-informed, cyclical interventions are more effective in promoting sustained behavioral and affective change compared with top-down

instructional approaches. In this study, reflection-driven refinement allowed the module to remain responsive to learners' evolving needs, reinforcing both pedagogical efficacy and student-centeredness. These findings underscore that sustainable educational innovation requires iterative, contextually responsive processes rather than static curriculum designs.

From Awareness to Enactment: Learner Practices Beyond the Classroom

The third theme explores how students enacted the well-being strategies learned in the classroom into their personal and academic lives. Evidence from student journals, interviews, and informal discussions indicated that learners adopted practices such as the Pomodoro technique, gratitude exercises, and intentional reflection, demonstrating that classroom learning translated into actionable habits. This process exemplifies the notion of praxis central to PAR, where reflective understanding is transformed into meaningful behavior (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). The adoption of these strategies not only enhanced time management and focus but also fostered emotional resilience and positive re-framing, highlighting the dual impact on personal development and language learning.

Furthermore, students reported intentions to share these strategies with peers and family, indicating the potential ripple effect of the intervention and reinforcing the social dimension of well-being (Seligman, 2011). These findings resonate with prior literature on learner autonomy and affective factors in ESL contexts (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Brown, 2007), showing that affective skill-building can enhance motivation, self-efficacy, and sustained engagement. The integration of PERMA+ components—particularly positive emotion, engagement, meaning, and accomplishment—provided a structured framework for students to enact strategies in authentic contexts, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. In addition, the culturally responsive embedding of Islamic perspectives enhanced personal relevance, aligning with research advocating for context-sensitive adaptation of Positive Psychology interventions (Hendriks et al., 2018; Ubaidillah et al., 2024).

This theme further illustrates the value of combining PAR, Positive Psychology, and culturally responsive pedagogy in ESL classrooms. By emphasizing student agency, reflection, and actionable learning, the study demonstrates that well-being and language learning can be mutually reinforcing. Classroom activities thus functioned as scaffolds for behavior change, promoting resilience, reflective thinking, and purposeful engagement beyond the immediate learning environment. The findings extend Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, showing that reduced anxiety and increased motivation correspond with higher language output and engagement in authentic writing tasks.

Cross-Theme Discussion

Across all three themes, the findings demonstrate the interrelatedness of PAR processes, PERMA+ principles, and ESL pedagogical considerations. Theme 1

emphasized participation, co-design, and autonomy, laying the foundation for engagement and agency. Theme 2 highlighted iterative refinement, reflective practice, and the integration of cultural and spiritual insights, deepening both affective and academic outcomes. Theme 3 illustrated the enactment of strategies beyond the classroom, evidencing praxis, sustained motivation, and the internalization of well-being principles.

The integration of PERMA+ across these themes shows that Positive Psychology can be operationalized in language classrooms to support cognitive, emotional, and social development simultaneously. Positive emotions reduced affective filters, engagement enhanced focus and learning persistence, and meaning and accomplishment fostered a sense of purpose and self-efficacy (Seligman, 2011; White and Kern, 2018). These outcomes align with ESL literature emphasizing the role of affective factors in second language acquisition, including motivation, anxiety, and learner autonomy (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Brown, 2007).

The use of PAR as a methodology proved instrumental in achieving these outcomes. The cycles of reflection, action, and refinement allowed both learners and instructors to collaboratively shape content, tasks, and classroom culture. The study confirms prior research indicating that participatory, iterative approaches promote not only academic competence but also affective growth, resilience, and self-regulation (Strambi et al., 2017; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Moreover, the culturally responsive integration of Islamic perspectives demonstrates that embedding students' cultural and spiritual frameworks enhances the salience, relevance, and sustainability of well-being interventions (Hendriks et al., 2018; Ubaidillah et al., 2024).

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings have important implications for ESL instruction. Embedding well-being principles does not require sacrificing linguistic rigor; rather, it can enhance learning outcomes by creating emotionally supportive, engaging, and meaningful tasks. The study shows that holistic interventions can simultaneously target cognitive, affective, and social dimensions, contributing to sustainable skill development and personal growth. Additionally, the transfer of strategies beyond the classroom suggests potential long-term benefits, with students enacting reflective, self-regulatory, and socially aware behaviors in broader contexts.

Summary of Discussion

In conclusion, the discussion demonstrates that a participatory, culturally responsive, and Positive Psychology-informed approach to ESL writing can simultaneously advance academic competence and holistic student well-being. Co-design, iterative refinement, and praxis collectively created a learning environment in which students were active agents, reflecting on, applying, and sharing knowledge. The integration of PERMA+ principles, Islamic perspectives, and reflective practices highlights the potential of context-sensitive interventions to address affective, cognitive, and social dimensions of language learning. Collectively, these findings contribute to theoretical understanding, inform curriculum design, and provide a scalable model for embedding

well-being in higher education language classrooms, offering implications for educators, researchers, and policymakers alike.

CONCLUSION

This Participatory Action Research (PAR) project demonstrates that well-being and ESL writing can be synergistically integrated to foster both academic and psychological growth. Across the two cycles, the study revealed three key outcomes:

Co-designing Well-being–Infused Writing empowered students to participate as co-creators in lesson planning, ensuring that activities were relevant, engaging, and aligned with their lived experiences. Participation fostered agency, motivation, and a shared sense of ownership over learning. Iterative Refinement Across PAR Cycles highlighted the importance of reflection-informed modifications. Adjustments between Cycle One and Cycle Two, particularly the integration of Islamic perspectives, enhanced cultural relevance, emotional resonance, and engagement. The cyclical process demonstrated that iterative reflection and responsive adaptation strengthen both pedagogical and affective outcomes. From Awareness to Enactment Beyond the Classroom illustrated that students internalized well-being strategies and applied them in academic and personal contexts. Practices such as gratitude journaling, mindfulness, Pomodoro techniques, and reflective writing were enacted outside ESL sessions, demonstrating the transformative potential of praxis in PAR.

Together, these findings indicate that ESL writing can serve as a vehicle for holistic student development, enabling learners to simultaneously enhance language proficiency, emotional regulation, and psychological resilience. The study confirms the effectiveness of embedding Positive Psychology and culturally relevant perspectives into content-based language instruction, while adhering to PAR principles of participation, cycles, reflection, co-construction, and praxis.

Final Reflections

This section examines the theoretical, pedagogical, and practical implications of the study, showing how the findings can inform ESL curriculum design and wellbeing-focused teaching. It also acknowledges research limitations, including contextual and methodological constraints, and suggests directions for future studies to further explore the integration of Positive Psychology principles and culturally responsive approaches in diverse language learning contexts.

Implications of the Study

The study offers several significant implications for language education and well-being integration. It implies pedagogical innovation with the idea of embedding well-being practices into ESL writing. This notion offers a scalable, sustainable, and stigma-free approach to support students' mental health while improving language skills. This

research also highlights the cultural responsiveness: Incorporating local cultural and spiritual frameworks, such as Islamic values, enhances student engagement, relevance, and acceptance of interventions, emphasizing the need for contextually sensitive approaches in diverse educational settings. Furthermore it provided evidence for student agency and co-creation: PAR-informed co-design empowers learners, fostering autonomy, motivation, and reflective capacities, which are critical for lifelong learning and the enactment of well-being strategies. Finally, this study offers implications for transferable skills: The enactment of well-being practices beyond the classroom underscores the practical, cross-context benefits of integrating Positive Psychology principles into curriculum design.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations such as small sample size and specific context, short duration and subjectivity in data. The study involved a small cohort of eleven students at a single Malaysian university, which may limit the generalizability of findings. Conducted over seven weeks, the study captures immediate impacts but does not examine long-term sustainability of well-being practices or writing skill development. As a qualitative PAR study, findings rely on self-reported reflections, journals, and observations, which may be influenced by social desirability or researcher-participant dynamics. These limitations suggest caution in extrapolating results to different populations or settings without adaptation and further research.

Suggestions for Future Studies

To build on this study, future research could expand sample and context by conducting similar PAR interventions with larger and more diverse groups across different universities, age ranges, or ESL proficiency levels to enhance external validity. Longitudinal Studies could examine the long-term effects of well-being-infused ESL writing on language proficiency, psychological resilience, and transferable skills. Comparative designs can also be employed to explore the efficacy of different cultural adaptations or frameworks (e.g., other religious or secular values) to evaluate how context shapes engagement and outcomes. Mixed-Methods Approaches can be utilized to incorporate quantitative measures of language performance, well-being, and behavioral enactment to complement qualitative insights and provide more robust evidence. Finally by integrating digital platforms for embedding well-being practices in blended or online ESL learning environments, particularly in post-pandemic educational contexts would be another potential lead for future research. As Closing Reflection, ultimately, this study underscores the transformative potential of PAR in education, demonstrating that learners who are actively involved in shaping their learning experiences can simultaneously enhance academic skills and well-being. By co-designing, reflecting, and enacting strategies grounded in Positive Psychology and culturally relevant perspectives, students evolve not only as language learners but also as resilient, self-aware, and proactive individuals. This research offers a practical

and theoretically grounded model for educators seeking to integrate mental well-being into disciplinary instruction, contributing to the growing scholarship on holistic, student-centered, and culturally responsive education.

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AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

Fathima Rawshan: (Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Collection, Resources, Formal Analysis, Writing)

Suzanah Selamat: (Supervision, Review)

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Mohamed Mihlar Abdul Muthaliff: (Data collection resources)

Siti Nurbaiin Che Harun: (Data Collection)

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This research adhered to the ethical standards approved by the Malaysian university (name kept anonymous) where the study was conducted.

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