

Focus on

STUDENT WELLBEING

1. What is it?

Wellbeing has traditionally been defined in two ways. The first definition tends to focus on feeling positive, having pleasant experiences, and being happy in the moment. The second definition takes a more long-term perspective and suggests that wellbeing stems from a life with purpose, meaning, and positive social relationships. In reality, wellbeing emerges from both feeling happy and living a satisfying, meaningful life.

One useful way to explain wellbeing is the PERMA model developed by the psychologist Martin Seligman. This sees wellbeing as emerging from the combination of five key dimensions:

- Positive emotions (for example, joy, contentment, happiness)
- Engagement (being happily absorbed in satisfying tasks)
- Relationships (having positive and healthy social connection)
- Meaning (having a sense of purpose in your life and actions)
- Accomplishment (achieving personally meaningful goals)

In recent adaptations of the model, the dimension of 'physical health' has been added. Its inclusion highlights the close connection between physical and mental health.

An important feature of wellbeing is that it changes over time depending on what a person thinks, feels, and experiences. The good news for educators is that everyone can improve their sense of wellbeing through conscious actions. There are two main pathways to changing wellbeing:

- 1 Adapting the environment and social context (for example, family situation, network of friendships, access to leisure activities, sense of belonging in school, opportunities for social connection).
- 2 Developing individual character strengths (for example, resilience, optimism, confidence).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Mercer is Professor of Foreign Language Teaching at the University of Graz, Austria, where she is Head of ELT Methodology. Her research interests include all aspects of the psychology surrounding the foreign language learning experience.

2. What does it mean for the ELT classroom?

Learner outcomes

There is growing recognition that one purpose of education is to prepare students to lead fulfilled and happy lives, which requires teaching skills for wellbeing. Subsequently, wellbeing has been introduced into a number of curricula around the world as a global skill that teachers of all subjects are expected to include in their teaching.

Attending to wellbeing has immediate benefits, as students who have higher levels of wellbeing tend to perform better in school, have higher motivation, and obtain better achievement scores. Wellbeing also promises future benefits, as it equips students with the skills and competences they need to lead happy, fulfilled lives beyond the classroom. In other words, strengthening their wellbeing can help students with language learning and other subjects and enable them to flourish in life more broadly in the future.

Making wellbeing explicit

Widely used in ELT classrooms, the communicative approach to language teaching tends to provide numerous opportunities to engage explicitly with a range of topics, including wellbeing. Teachers could address the topic of wellbeing and health explicitly as part of a lesson or series of lessons. Alternatively, wellbeing could be integrated with work on other topics: if the topic is climate change, for example, teachers could discuss the importance of connecting with nature for wellbeing; if the topic is jobs and professions, work-life balance could be addressed.

ELT already has experience of combining two teaching objectives simultaneously in content and language integrated learning (CLIL) approaches. Methodologies from CLIL offer concrete ideas on how to combine two goals such as English language and wellbeing in sustainable ways.



3. What are the challenges?

Teacher skills

Some teachers may be concerned that they do not know how to address wellbeing issues. In fact, many teachers are already teaching for wellbeing, even if they are not conscious of doing so. For example, when you teach in a way to reduce learner anxiety, promote learner self-esteem, or enhance learner motivation, you are already finding ways to teach for student wellbeing. In addition, many coursebooks now include texts, tasks, and activities focusing on aspects of student wellbeing, which teachers can use and build on.

The approach advocated in this paper expands what good language teachers often already do and makes the importance of wellbeing more explicit.

Time and opportunity

Teachers may feel that they cannot incorporate any new teaching objectives into their busy programmes of work. However, it is possible to teach in a way that enhances student wellbeing with only minor adjustments to your regular approach to English language teaching. Essentially, teaching for student wellbeing can be seen as reflecting a continuum from integrating a set of wellbeing-centred values into your regular practice to including a more conscious set of tasks and projects focusing explicitly on the topic of wellbeing.

4. How can this be implemented?

The PERMA + health model outlined on page 1 can be used as a guide to reflect on concrete actions to support student wellbeing.

Positive emotions

An important part of wellbeing competences is understanding both positive and negative emotions: recognizing them, naming them, and having strategies for managing them. For example, students could keep an emotions diary, in which they reflect on what experiences tend to trigger certain emotions, how they were feeling in specific situations, how they responded, and what alternative responses they might have. The diary could focus on their language classes or on critical incidents outside class. Strategies for addressing specific emotions could also be discussed. For example, if students say they feel anxious before a test, you could teach them basic meditation techniques, such as focusing and counting their breaths, to help calm them down.

You can also seek to boost positive emotions. One way to do this is to focus students' attention more consciously on the positives in their lives. For example, they could keep a gratitude journal, in which they write down three things each day that they are grateful for and why they are grateful for them. This could cover any aspect of their lives, in school or outside it. Before starting the journal, teachers could brainstorm ideas with the whole class to help them become aware of the many small things each day that they can learn to appreciate more consciously. An alternative format is to have students write the things they are grateful for on strips of paper and create a gratitude jar or box. Students can revisit their gratitude collections when they need a positivity boost. This idea can be

expanded to a positivity portfolio, in which students document their positive experiences or memories with notes, realia, and pictures in or about English.

The key is to find ways throughout your teaching to allow students to consciously reflect on positive feelings, experiences, memories, and people.

Engagement

Having things we get fully absorbed in and enjoy so much we do not notice the passing of time can give an enormous boost to wellbeing. Using engaging teaching formats which maximize student activity and involvement can be one way of achieving engagement in the classroom. In particular, project work or tasks where students have some degree of choice about topics, ways of working, or forms of output can be motivating. Students flourish when they feel that they can influence their own learning, even in part, and when they can direct some of the content of their learning to meet their personal needs and interests.

In addition, you can provide students with the opportunity to bring their hobbies or leisure activities into classwork by including relevant topics, peer teaching sessions, or show-and-tell activities. Because engagement in hobbies can reduce stress levels and anxiety, students could also try out and learn new hobbies through English. They could teach each other about their hobbies in class, such as how to play chess or other games, knit, build models, enact drama, create music, draw or paint, dance, or do yoga. Even just getting students to remember and talk about their favourite activities can help to alleviate stress in school and boost positive emotions. In this context, students can also explicitly discuss time management strategies to ensure they regularly set aside enough time to recharge by doing things they enjoy. Engaging in acts of self-care, no matter how small, is an important competence to teach students to value throughout their lives.

Relationships

Positive relationships are central to wellbeing. This is one reason why ensuring positive group dynamics and a safe classroom atmosphere are so important for student wellbeing. Ice-breaker activities and tasks where students get to know each other more personally can be one way to encourage this.

As part of their interpersonal skills, you can teach students explicitly about active listening skills and how to show interest in and curiosity about other people, including, for example, paying attention and being a good listener during speaking tasks with classmates.

Students can also be encouraged to express what they like and appreciate about each other through compliment circles or posters of peer praise. These activities can help students learn how to give and receive compliments, which helps to create a positive atmosphere in the classroom. Every learner should feel respected, valued, and accepted in the group, which means that bullying and mockery must be addressed immediately.

Empathy is a key element of positive relationships. It means being able to imagine how another person thinks and feels, and then using that understanding to support and connect with them. Empathy can be developed through activities such

as reflecting on characters in novels, stories, films, and plays, and by enacting diverse characters in role-play or simulations. Learning to switch perspectives and imagine how and why somebody else feels something contributes to the ability of students to respect others and accept diversity both in class and beyond.

Another useful activity involves discussing learners' multiple identities, appreciating uniqueness but also reflecting consciously on commonalities rather than differences. For example, students can find out what they have in common with each other, moving from more obvious things such as age, gender, and school to more personal aspects such as family, interests, past travel experiences, favourite books or films, and values. More advanced learners could also critically examine coursebook images or advertisements and reflect on how inclusive they are.

Meaning

A long-term sense of wellbeing stems from finding meaning and purpose in what we do. In English classes, students benefit when they can connect emotionally to the language and see the value of learning it. It can also be helpful to discuss the opportunities that speaking English creates. Students could describe positive scenarios of themselves using the language in their future lives, imagining how English can help them achieve other life goals. Writing, drawing, digitally constructing, or acting out a positive story about their imagined future self using English can be inspiring.

A sense of meaning can also come from contributing to a local or global cause that matters to students. They can be given the opportunity to reflect on various issues in their school, local community, or in the wider world to discover what they feel strongly about. Examples might be seeking to make wellbeing a whole school issue, working with the local community to combat loneliness among the elderly, or tackling environmental issues. This could lead to a project in English on their chosen topic.

Student advocacy can play an important role in helping learners to feel a sense of agency and empowerment. Their actions could take the form of writing and awareness-raising activities, such as writing for a local journal or online blog, setting up an



information stand or giving a performance at school, or taking part in an interview or podcast. Students could also document their own personal action on an issue, in a blog, vlog, or photo diary. At higher levels, they may wish to carry out some basic research on a topic and share their findings with others.

It is also possible to gain meaning and positivity through acts of kindness, no matter how small. Students can brainstorm what kindness means and what this can involve, such as holding a door open for someone, baking a cake for a friend, calling a relative to check how they are doing, putting a surprise compliment on a peer's desk, or cleaning up someone else's rubbish. Students can keep a kindness journal reporting on their own acts of kindness or those they have witnessed. They can also identify people in their local community who stand out for their acts of kindness. They could write a note expressing their gratitude for their inspiring kindness or prepare a presentation to share with others about these local heroes.

Accomplishment

Everyone needs to feel a sense of accomplishment in their lives. Students can be encouraged to positively recall and savour all the things they have achieved in the past week, month, or year – for example, when they managed to stay calm before a test, helped a classmate with a project, repaired their bike, or spent time with a lonely neighbour. This gives all students a chance to focus on their strengths and achievements. In their English class, students can chart their progress in portfolios to help them become more consciously aware of how they are improving and moving forward. You can also adopt a deliberate strengths-based approach to teaching and feedback. For example, you could set a homework task in which you only give feedback on the positive aspects of what students have done.

An important dimension to accomplishment is feeling empowered and capable of achieving. To do this, it is important to teach students to hold a growth mindset about their learning, which means they believe that they are capable of developing the skills they need to be successful in learning English. One way to work on mindsets is to openly discuss learner beliefs about language learning ability and success. For example, they could discuss the extent to which they agree or disagree with statements such as 'My ability as a language learner is fixed and cannot be changed', 'Some people just have a natural talent for languages', or 'Mistakes are always a chance to improve your language skills'.

Students can examine the factors which contribute to success in learning a language and which of these factors they can influence and control. They can consciously reflect on how much they can already do in the language, focusing on their strengths and successes. A scavenger hunt can be conducted to look for positive examples of famous people or characters in novels or films who display a growth mindset.

Alongside a growth mindset, it is important to ensure that students know strategies which will help them to learn and improve. The whole class could brainstorm and discuss various strategies for different skill areas, tasks, or activities. Each learner can then experiment with different learning strategies over a two-week period, reporting back to the group on whether they found them effective or not and why.

Believing you can improve is the foundation of accomplishment, but it needs to be accompanied by concrete pathways of how to improve.

Health and wellbeing

Helping students to understand the connection between mental and physical health can contribute to their wellbeing. It is vital to provide the space to openly discuss these topics and facilitate conversations which can help to reduce any taboos and stigma surrounding them. Learners will need to draw on their skills of empathy to be sensitive and non-judgemental when dealing with this topic.

With regard to physical wellbeing, students can research the three core components of health: sleep habits, nutrition, and exercise. Sensitive discussions can be prompted using agree/disagree statements or with ranking or sorting activities about whether something is perceived as good or not good for physical or mental health. Students can engage in imaginative tasks, such as listing what actions you can do now that your future self will thank you for. More advanced learners could work on projects to critically examine factors affecting lifestyle choices in their local communities or in national advertising, such as how or where sweets and chocolate bars are advertised and who their target audience appears to be.

The key is to enable conversations about physical and mental wellbeing so that both become topics that schools, teachers, students, parents, and communities think seriously and proactively about.



5. Over to you

Nelson Mandela famously said that 'education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world'. As educators, we are in a privileged position to be able to support students in achieving their language goals. We can also incorporate powerful tools in our language classes to help them flourish both in the classroom and beyond.

Wellbeing is a basic human right, and we can all take steps, however small or large, to enhance the wellbeing of those around us. The classroom climate we create, the relationships we build, and the attitudes we convey and foster among students are all ways in which we can promote their wellbeing, along with more explicit strategies for managing emotions, strengthening resilience, and becoming conscious of the value of mental and physical health. Every one of us has the potential to be that special teacher who makes a difference to their students' wellbeing in their lives now and in the future.

Talking points

- 💬 To what extent does your school promote student wellbeing? How could you encourage the school to do more?
- 💬 Which aspects of school life do your students find stressful? How can you help reduce these stressors or strengthen your students' resilience to cope with them?
- 💬 What do you already do as part of your regular practice to boost student wellbeing?
- 💬 What aspects of PERMA + health are covered by your school curriculum or the syllabus you follow?
- 💬 With a colleague, discuss ideas for making student wellbeing a more explicit goal in your teaching context.
- 💬 Choose one aspect of PERMA + health that you would like to explore further. Think of concrete ways you could implement it in your classes.

6. Further reading

Ball, P., Kelly, K., & Clegg, J. (2015). *Putting CLIL into practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Greater Good in Action: Science-based Practices for a Meaningful Life. <https://ggia.berkeley.edu/>

Mercer, S., McIntyre, P., Gregersen, T., & Talbot, K. (2018). Positive language education: Combining positive education and language education. *Theory and Practice of Second Language Acquisition*, 4(2), 11–31. Retrieved from <https://www.journals.us.edu.pl/index.php/TAPSLA/article/view/7011/5721>

Morris, I. (2015). *Teaching happiness and wellbeing in schools* (2nd ed.). London: Bloomsbury.

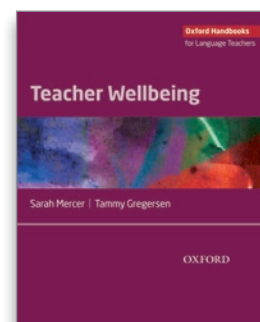
Seligman, M. (2011). *Flourish*. New York: Atria Books.

UNESCO (2017, May). *Promoting learner happiness and well-being*. UNESCO Asia-Pacific Education Thematic Brief. Retrieved from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000248948>

Williams, M., Puchta, H., & Mercer, S. (2021). *Positive psychology in practice*. Rum: Helbling.



www.oup.com/elt/expert



ISBN: 978 0 19 440563 8

Acknowledgements

The publisher would like to thank the following for permission to reproduce photographs: Alamy Stock Photo (Hero Images Inc., Tetra Images, LLC); Shutterstock (Monkey Business Images, Tanor), (abstract background/Tanor).