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A custom GPT for English learning and well-being: A case study of Japanese EFL students

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Abstract

This small-scale qualitative study examined how second language (L2) students' interactions with a researcher-developed custom GPT reflected Seligman's (2011) PERMA framework and how students perceived its use for English learning. Participants were six Japanese university students enrolled in a positive psychology-based English-language seminar. Over five weeks, students completed weekly PERMA-based written conversations with five domain-specific GPT versions. Thematic analysis of 30 conversation transcripts showed that student-GPT interactions reflected all five PERMA domains, with follow-up prompts often helping students move from brief responses toward concrete examples from their own lives. Post-survey responses indicated that students viewed the GPT as a psychologically safe and supportive space and valued its English feedback, particularly for noticing mistakes, learning alternative vocabulary, and practicing written interaction. However, some students found more personal or complex prompts difficult and expressed a need for more tailored support. Taken together, the findings suggest that PERMA-based GPT use may offer a low-stakes way to support well-being reflection while providing meaningful opportunities for English use and feedback in L2 contexts.

Keywords: generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), ChatGPT, positive psychology, PERMA, well-being, second language learning, EFL

Introduction

Language learning involves not only linguistic skill development, but also learners' emotions and personal expression. Positive psychology (PP) research in second language (L2) learning has therefore increasingly emphasized both positive and negative learner emotions, moving beyond an earlier focus on anxiety alone (Dewaele et al., 2018, 2019). This is especially relevant for reflective L2 tasks, where students may need to express personal experiences, emotions, and concerns

in a language in which they may have limited confidence or expressive range (Mercer et al., 2018). In such contexts, psychological safety may be important both for well-being reflection and for encouraging students to take risks and communicate more openly in English.

PP also offers a useful framework for connecting well-being and language learning goals. MacIntyre et al. (2019) argue that PP has broadened L2 research beyond traditional concerns such as anxiety and motivation to include learners’ strengths, emotions, resilience, meaning, and well-being. More specifically, Mercer et al. (2018) propose Positive Language Education as a way of integrating linguistic and well-being aims in sustainable ways. Within this broader PP orientation, Seligman’s (2011) PERMA framework is especially relevant. Developed by one of the founders of PP, PERMA is an influential model of flourishing that provides a practical structure for reflecting on well-being across multiple dimensions. As shown in Figure 1, PERMA includes five dimensions of well-being: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement (Seligman, 2011).



Figure 1. PERMA framework based on Seligman (2011)

Although PERMA provides a framework for promoting well-being through structured reflection in the language learning classroom, educators also need practical tools that can help students engage with such reflection beyond regular class time. In this regard, generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) may be a promising resource as it can facilitate conversational dialogue, reflection, corrective feedback, and language practice (Dizon et al., 2025).

Recent research has shown the potential of GenAI for L2 feedback and writing support. For instance, research in L2 writing has shown that Japanese L2 English students preferred ChatGPT over their peers when receiving writing feedback due to its clear and targeted responses (Allen & Mizumoto, 2026). GenAI has also been shown to improve L2 students’ feedback literacy, which in turn can help them reflect on the affordances and limitations of the technology (Lu et al., 2026). Furthermore, findings indicate that GenAI-provided feedback

may support longer-term writing development more effectively than exemplar feedback or teacher feedback (Zhu et al., 2025). Taken together, these studies suggest that GenAI has pedagogical potential in L2 classrooms, particularly when used to provide individualized feedback and language support.

However, while many studies have examined students' views toward GenAI and its impact on L2 writing, its role in well-being-related aspects of L2 learning has received less attention (Li et al., 2025). In particular, research on anxiety and emotional responses in GenAI-mediated L2 contexts remains limited despite the importance of learners' emotional states in language learning (Hu et al., 2024). Although initial research involving GenAI and emotional well-being among university students has yielded positive findings (Shahzad et al., 2024), more research is needed to better understand its potential role in L2 settings. Less is also known about how structured GenAI interactions might support positive reflection, psychological safety, and English use in classroom contexts where English is learned as a foreign language (EFL). This is important because language learning involves not only skill practice, but also personal expression, identity, and vulnerability.

In response to these gaps, this small-scale study examines L2 students' use of a custom GPT designed around the PERMA framework. Specifically, the following research questions guided this study:

1. In what ways, if any, did the students' conversations with the GPT reflect the PERMA domains?
2. What were the students' perceptions of the PERMA-based GPT?

Methodology

Teaching Context

The study was conducted in a positive psychology-based seminar taught entirely in English at a private university in Japan. Participants were six third-year female Japanese university students (ages 20–21), all native Japanese speakers, with TOEIC scores ranging from approximately 450 to 650. The seminar met weekly over a 15-week semester and focused on well-being, self-reflection, and personal development. Reflective warm-up discussions grounded in positive psychology were a regular part of the course. The GPT activity was assigned as regular homework in the seminar, but research use of the survey responses and GPT transcripts was optional. All six enrolled students consented to this use.

A pre-survey indicated that all six students had prior experience using ChatGPT for English study and schoolwork, and most had also used it for advice about personal concerns such as job hunting, relationships, and future plans. Overall, they entered the activity with generally positive but somewhat cautious views of GenAI.

Rationale for Innovation

In regular seminar discussions, students could often identify and discuss difficulties in their lives, such as stress or personal challenges, relatively easily. However, they often found it harder to identify and develop positive examples related to the PERMA domains. This suggested a possible need for support that could help students reflect more regularly on positive experiences outside class. The GPT activity was therefore introduced as an out-of-class extension of the seminar, supporting more regular PERMA-based reflection while also providing opportunities to use English and receive feedback.

Research Design

This pilot study employed a qualitative design to investigate Japanese university students’ experiences using a researcher-developed custom GPT grounded in Seligman’s (2011) PERMA framework. Data came from pre- and post-surveys and students’ GPT conversation transcripts and were analyzed to examine students’ experiences with the GPT and the ways, if any, their conversations reflected the PERMA domains. The analysis focused on interaction content and student perceptions rather than measured changes in language proficiency or well-being.

Transparency, Ethics, and Pedagogy Considerations of Using AI

Because the activity involved GenAI-supported reflection on students’ personal experiences and well-being, the TEP-AIED model (Hwang et al., 2026) and responsible AI guidance on data governance, risk mitigation, and learner agency (Fu & Weng, 2024) were used to guide the reporting of the intervention (see Figure 2).

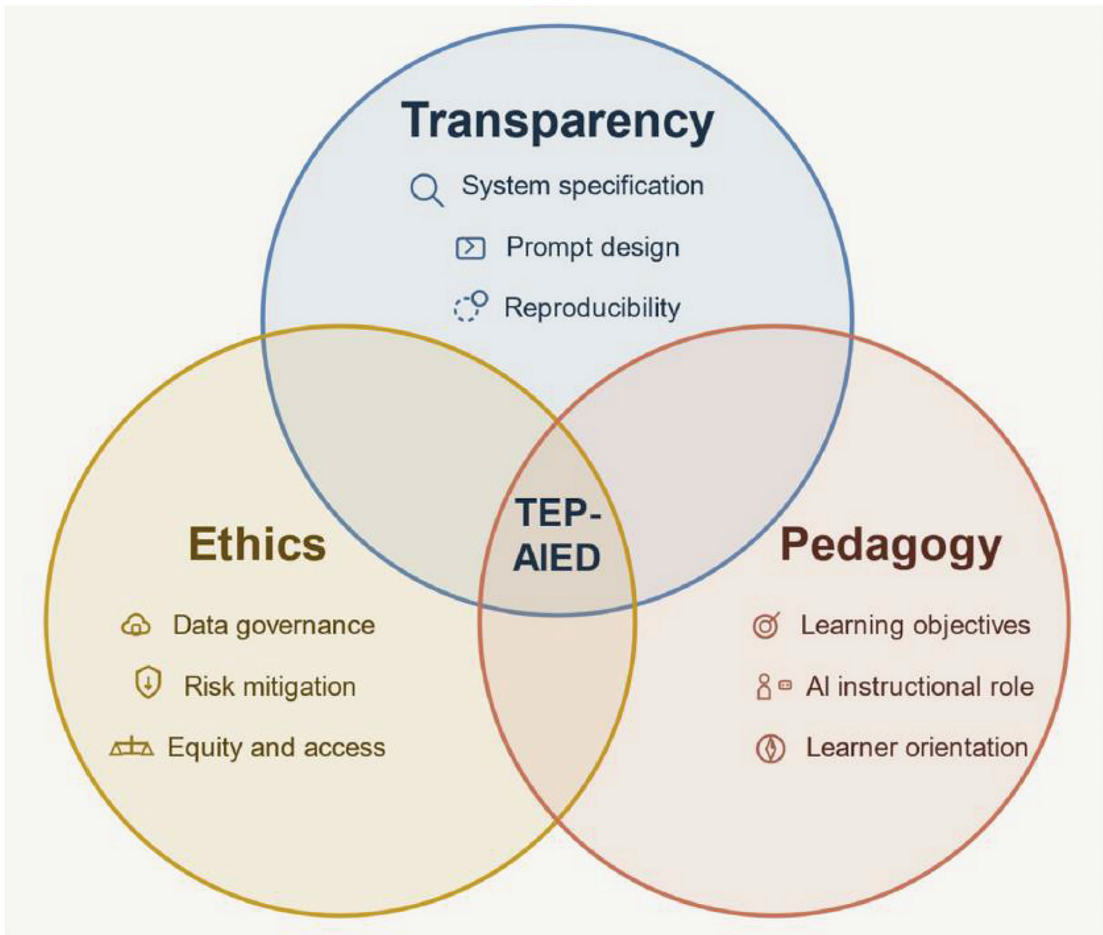


Figure 2. The TEP-AIED model. Reproduced from Hwang et al. (2026) under the CC BY 4.0 license

Transparency. The AI intervention consisted of five domain-specific custom GPT versions created by the first author within the ChatGPT platform and delivered through a web-based, text-only interface. Each version followed the same core interaction structure. To make the implemented practice more visible, Figure 3 presents representative screenshots of the GPT interface and interaction flow.

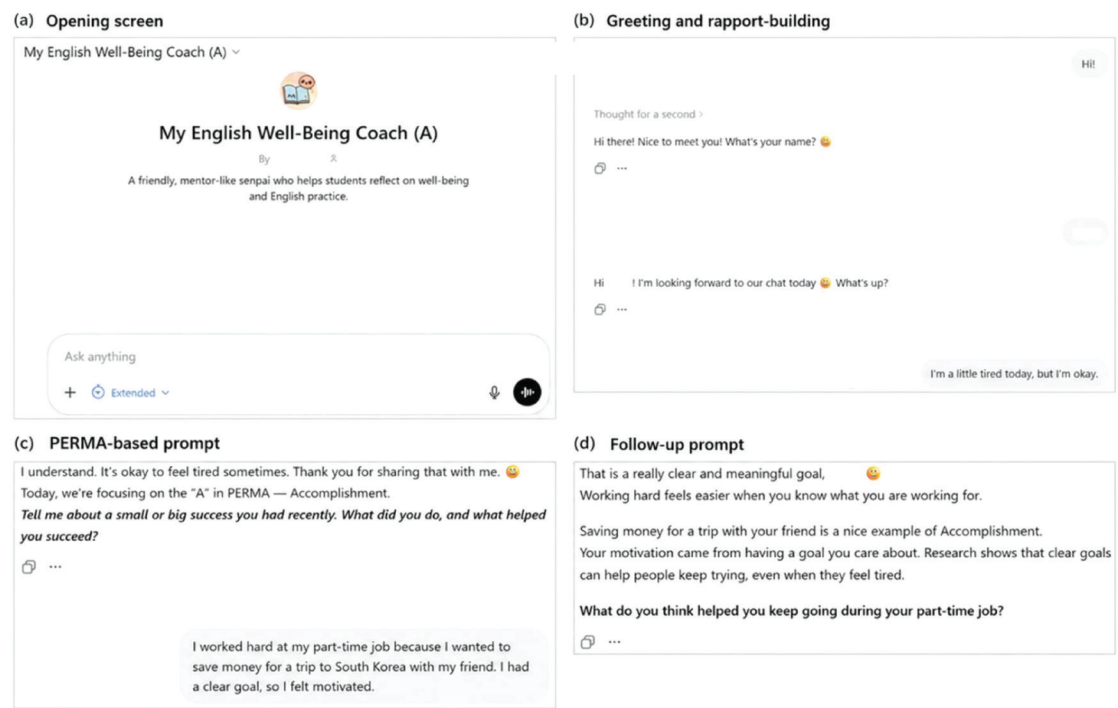


Figure 3. Representative screenshots of the custom GPT interface and interaction flow

Note. Screenshots are de-identified representative examples because students submitted copied transcripts rather than original screen captures. The letter in parentheses indicates the PERMA-domain version for that week

Ethics. Although the GPT activity was implemented as part of the regular seminar, participation in the research use of survey responses and GPT transcripts was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained through a bilingual English–Japanese pre-survey Google Form, and students were informed that participation would not affect their grades and that they could withdraw anytime during the semester. The GPT was used as a low-stakes reflective and language-support tool, not for high-stakes advice or assessment. All research data were stored securely on Google Drive and accessed only by the researchers.

Pedagogy. Pedagogically, the GPT was used to extend the seminar’s positive psychology activities beyond class by supporting more regular PERMA-based reflection while also providing opportunities to use English and receive feedback. It functioned as a structured reflective tool rather than a generic chatbot. Before beginning the activity, students were introduced to PERMA, the weekly task expectations, and the role of the GPT, and were given a short learning sheet explaining how to complete and submit the task (see Figure 4).

My 'English Well-Being Coach' GPT Chat

In our Positive Psychology Seminar, we will start to use an "English & Well-Being Coach" GPT bot (in ChatGPT) that I designed to support your well-being and English practice. It uses questions based on a positive psychology model called **PERMA** (**P** = Positive Emotion, **E** = Engagement, **R** = Relationships, **M** = Meaning, **A** = Accomplishment).

We'll have a conversation using a question related to one of these letters/topics each week.

For HW this week:

1.) Have ONE WRITTEN conversation with the 'My English Well-Being Coach' GPT

- about 15-20 minutes (at least 10+ replies, to fully answer the question)
- say 'hi' to start, and 'let's finish' when you want to end

2.) After you say 'let's finish' and get the final summary, copy/paste the ENTIRE conversation (from beginning to end of summary) into this document below.

PERMA Chat #5: Positive Emotions (A)

(your conversation pasted here):

Figure 4. Learning sheet used to guide the weekly GPT activity

GPT Design

A custom GPT, "English & Well-Being Coach," was created by the first author, the seminar instructor, within the ChatGPT platform and shared with students via Google Classroom. It functioned as a web-based, text-only mentor-like reflective coach. Five versions were developed, each aligned with one PERMA domain but built around the same core design. The GPT instructions followed a consistent prompt structure specifying the system's role, objective, interaction guidelines, expected output, and tone, and these elements were refined across the five PERMA-domain versions. Responses were kept at a relatively simple English level (approximately CEFR A2–B1) and limited to three to five sentences to support comprehension and reflection.

Across versions, the GPT was designed to respond with empathetic acknowledgment, strengths-focused reframing, follow-up questions, and brief practical encouragement. When students typed "Let's finish," it generated a closing message with a short summary, practical suggestions, and targeted English feedback. The first author refined the GPT through repeated trial interactions across the five PERMA-domain versions to improve clarity, tone, and usefulness.

Procedure and Data Collection

The study was conducted during the latter half of the Fall 2025 semester, after students had been introduced to PP concepts through regular seminar activities. Before beginning the PERMA cycle, students completed a pre-survey on their prior GenAI use and expectations and completed the first GPT interaction in class with researcher guidance. During this session, students were introduced to PERMA, the weekly task requirements, and a sample GPT interaction.

Over the following four weeks, students accessed the assigned GPT via Google Classroom and completed one PERMA-based written conversation per week as homework. They were asked to spend about 15 minutes on each session and produce at least 10 conversational turns. Each session began with a brief greeting and icebreaker, followed by the weekly PERMA reflection question. Students then responded to follow-up prompts that encouraged further elaboration

on their experiences, thoughts, and feelings related to that domain. After the interaction, they used the “Let’s finish” command to receive a short summary, practical suggestions, and targeted English feedback.

After receiving the GPT’s final summary and feedback, students copied and pasted the full conversation into a teacher-provided Google Document and submitted it via Google Classroom, resulting in a total of 30 GPT conversation transcripts. After completing the cycle, students completed a post-survey reflecting on their experiences. Pseudonyms were used in reporting the data.

Survey and Analysis

A pre- and a post-survey were used to collect background information and student reflections on the GPT activity, both of which included Likert-scale and open-ended responses. The pre-survey focused on students’ prior GenAI use and expectations for its usefulness in well-being reflection and English learning. The post-survey asked about the GPT’s perceived effectiveness, usefulness for English learning, strengths, limitations, and changes in students’ views toward AI for life advice and language learning. The pre-survey was completed in English, while the post-survey allowed responses in either English or Japanese to encourage fuller responses.

Qualitative data, including open-ended survey responses and GPT conversation transcripts, were analyzed using a hybrid thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021). For RQ1, initial a priori categories were derived from the PERMA framework, and GPT transcripts were segmented into meaning units and coded deductively in relation to these domains. Within each domain, coding was then reviewed inductively to identify recurring themes. For RQ2, open-ended post-survey responses were coded inductively for students’ perceived benefits, difficulties, and suggestions.

The process was iterative, with codes and theme labels revised through comparison across transcripts and survey responses. Across the five PERMA-based interactions, this process produced 280 coded excerpts. Codes and themes were reviewed across transcripts and survey data to refine theme labels and check consistency. ChatGPT 5.1 was used only as a supplementary tool to help organize code summaries and review possible patterns; all final coding decisions and interpretations were made by the researchers. Likert-scale responses were considered alongside students’ written comments but were not analyzed statistically in this paper.

Post-survey responses written in Japanese were translated into English by the researchers for analysis and reporting, with meanings checked against the original responses during coding and theme development. Because these activities were completed as part of the regular seminar workflow, student names remained in the original course submissions during data collection; however, identifying information was removed prior to analysis, and pseudonyms were assigned for reporting.

Results

PERMA-based GPT Conversations

The analysis below highlights prominent themes within each PERMA domain through selected GPT prompts and student responses, followed by a brief summary of the students’ perceptions toward the GPT.

Positive Emotion

For this domain, students were asked to describe a recent moment when they felt “happy, joyful, or really good,” followed by GPT questions that encouraged more specific reflection. Two main themes were evident.

First, positive emotion was often expressed through enjoyable shared experiences.

GPT: Can you tell me a bit more about your new job? What part of the new job makes you feel the happiest?

Yura: I enjoy the staff meal time with the employees. It's fun to talk with everyone during breaks.

Yura's response links positive emotion to enjoyable interaction with coworkers. Other students similarly described shopping with a friend, spending time with family, playing with pets, and enjoying games or beauty-related activities.

A second theme centered on calm and comfort.

GPT: Why do you think talking about your hobbies and future plans with your friend makes you feel relaxed or happy?

Hinata: These days I'm busy because of job hunting, a part-time job, and university. But planning an interesting thing makes me relax. It makes me want to work hard for my next shopping plan.

Hinata's response shows the comfort of having something enjoyable to look forward to during a stressful period. This theme also appeared in responses about drinking hot tea, talking with family or friends, finishing the day's tasks, and having something pleasant to look forward to.

Engagement

For this domain, students were asked to describe a time when they were concentrating on something important to them, with GPT follow-up questions exploring how that focus was experienced. The responses pointed to two themes.

First, students described absorption in enjoyable or self-chosen activities.

GPT: When you are making a picture book or playing the piano, how does your body or mind feel?

Sena: I pursue piano and knitting as hobbies, things I want to do. When I'm doing these, I concentrate so deeply that I lose track of time.

Sena's response shows how the GPT's follow-up question prompted a fuller account of engagement in a self-chosen activity. This theme also appeared in responses about creative work, no longer noticing background music, and finding learning more engaging when it felt enjoyable.

A second theme concerned managing focus through supportive conditions and refocusing strategies.

GPT: If you start to lose focus or feel overwhelmed, what is one small action you take to bring your attention back?

Sena: When my concentration starts to slip, I do something simple first. That helps me get back on track.

In this second exchange, the GPT elicited a practical strategy for regaining focus from Sena. This theme also appeared in other students' responses about studying alone, using a quiet place and time limits, and taking short breaks or changing tasks to refocus.

Relationships

For relationships, students were asked to reflect on relationships they valued, with the GPT's follow-up questions exploring why those relationships mattered to them. Two themes were identified.

The first centered on emotional safety, trust, and mutual support.

GPT: How do you feel when you are with your best friend?

Miyu: I feel relaxed and safe when I am with my best friend. I can be myself and I don't feel nervous.

Miyu's response illustrates connection through comfort, trust, and the freedom to be herself. Across the other students' responses, this theme also appeared in accounts of emotional sharing made possible by trust and respect for privacy, feeling accepted rather than judged, and reassurance or encouragement from friends, coworkers, or family during difficult moments.

A second theme concerned maintaining closeness through communication, shared time, and efforts to stay in touch.

GPT: What is one small thing you would like to continue doing with them to keep this closeness?

Sena: I think it's good to create opportunities to talk by exchanging greetings or sharing small things. I'm not very good at starting conversations myself, but I'll try to challenge myself.

For Sena, valued relationships are sustained through small, intentional acts of contact, even if they do not come easily. Other students also described maintaining connection through conversations after school or at work, shared hobbies and plans, and efforts to stay in touch across distance so the relationship would not fade.

Meaning

For this domain, students were asked to describe something in their lives that felt meaningful or important, with GPT follow-up questions exploring its significance. Two themes appeared across the responses.

The first linked meaning to future-oriented growth and direction.

GPT: What kind of job do you imagine using English in, and how do you feel when you think about that future?

Miyu: I imagine in foreign-affiliated hotels that I feel happy because I can use English and make foreign friends.

Miyu's response gives a more concrete picture of future-oriented meaning, linking English to future work, relationships, and personal growth. Other students also connected meaning to job hunting, new experiences, supporting others, being reliable at work, and living a fulfilling adult life.

A second theme centered on relationships and values.

GPT: Describe something in your life right now that feels meaningful or important to you. Why does it matter to you?

Hinata: Family. I'm living alone now, and I realized I haven't enough time to spend with my family.

For Hinata, meaning was tied to family, especially in recognizing its importance after living apart. Elsewhere, students also connected meaning to family and partner relationships, supporting others, positive workplace relationships, and self-acceptance.

Achievement

For achievement, students were asked to reflect on something they had achieved or were working toward, with GPT follow-up questions exploring how that success was planned, pursued, or recognized. The responses pointed to two themes.

The first theme concerned goal-directed effort and self-regulation.

GPT: After making this plan, how do you feel now compared to when you said you didn't want to do anything?

Hinata: I realized it was important to start early and not procrastinate. I made a checklist and it seemed easier than I thought.

In Hinata's response, accomplishment was reflected in planning ahead, reducing procrastination, and making the task feel more manageable. Other students also described setting deadlines, breaking tasks into smaller parts, practicing or preparing step by step, and using self-control or visible markers of progress to sustain effort.

A second theme centered on visible progress, task completion, and concrete results.

GPT: What were you doing at that time? And why do you think you felt energetic then?

Hinata: Part-time job. Because I wanted to earn money for a trip to South Korea with my friend. I had a clear goal and I could see the result in numbers.

In this second response, Hinata connected accomplishment not only to the goal itself, but also to the sense that her effort was producing visible results. This theme also appeared in other students' accounts of visible progress through checklists, star stickers, or savings increases, along with feelings of pride and confidence after task completion or praise from others.

Across the five PERMA domains, students generally gave fuller responses when prompts connected to concrete daily experiences, such as hobbies, relationships, part-time work, job hunting, or short-term goals. Positive emotion, relationships, and achievement appeared especially accessible because students could link them to familiar experiences and visible outcomes.

In contrast, reflection seemed more difficult when prompts became more abstract or personally demanding, such as asking students to explain why an experience was meaningful, how a relationship shaped them, or what helped them stay focused, especially when they had to generate these examples in English.

Overall, GPT follow-up prompts deepened reflection when they helped students move from brief answers to concrete examples, feelings, or strategies, but they sometimes limited reflection when questions became too layered, deep, or difficult to answer in English.

Students' Views of the GPT

Post-survey responses reflected two overall themes. First, the GPT was experienced as a psychologically safe space for reflection and advice. Students said it felt easier to discuss personal concerns with the GPT than with other people because its responses were supportive and non-judgmental. As Rino explained, "You can ask as many times as you want, and I think there is less risk of getting responses that hurt your self-esteem, and less concern about privacy." Other

responses likewise emphasized being able to share things they could not easily tell others and having support in thinking through concerns rather than facing them alone.

Second, students valued the GPT for English learning and feedback. They described the feedback as clear and useful, especially when it pointed out mistakes, suggested more natural phrasing, and offered alternative vocabulary. As Hinata noted, “if I kept using the word ‘relax,’ it would rephrase it with something like ‘calm,’ so my vocabulary naturally increased.” Other students also referred to noticing spelling or grammar problems, learning more natural English, and finding the interaction itself useful for reading and writing practice.

Alongside these positive views, some students also reported difficulties. More personal or complex prompts were sometimes hard to answer, especially when students could not easily think of relevant examples from their own lives or express those ideas fully in English. Some also wanted shorter replies, adjustable language levels, or sample answer formats.

Discussion and Pedagogical Reflection

The findings suggest that the GPT was useful not simply because it used GenAI, but because it was structured around clear pedagogical goals. Rather than functioning as a generic chatbot, the GPT guided students through domain-specific PERMA reflections and supportive follow-up questions, then ended each interaction by summarizing key points, suggesting small actionable steps related to the PERMA domain, and providing brief English feedback. This design appeared to help students move from brief initial responses toward more concrete examples, feelings, and strategies from their own lives.

The study also highlights the importance of psychological safety in GenAI-supported reflection. In the post-survey responses, students described the GPT as supportive, nonjudgmental, and private, and several noted that this made it easier to share personal concerns with the GPT than with other people. This connects to prior work emphasizing learner emotions in L2 learning and the importance of emotionally supportive learning environments (Dewaele et al., 2018, 2019), as well as responsible AI design (Fu & Weng, 2024; Hwang et al., 2026).

The present findings suggest that GenAI tools may be most valuable for reflective learning when they are designed to reduce emotional risk rather than simply provide language output or correction. Although these responses should be interpreted cautiously given the small sample and teacher-researcher context, they suggest that a PERMA-aligned custom GPT may offer a low-stakes space for EFL students to reflect on well-being-related topics while also engaging in English reading and writing practice.

However, the findings also show that GenAI-supported reflection requires careful scaffolding. Some prompts and follow-up questions became too abstract, layered, or difficult to answer in English, suggesting that well-being reflection cannot simply be prompted more deeply without considering students’ language level, ability to recall relevant experiences, and comfort with reflective expression. The main contribution of this study is therefore not evidence of measurable language or well-being gains, but a practice-based account of how a PERMA-aligned custom GPT can integrate low-stakes well-being reflection, supportive dialogue, and brief English feedback in similar L2/EFL learning contexts.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This small-scale study explored how L2 students’ interactions with a PERMA-based custom GPT reflected well-being domains and how students perceived its use in an English-language positive psychology seminar. Across all five domains, the student-GPT conversations reflected PERMA in multiple ways, with follow-up questions often helping students elaborate concrete examples from their daily lives. Students also generally viewed the GPT as a psychologically safe

and supportive space and valued its role as an English learning resource, particularly for corrective feedback, alternative vocabulary, and written interaction practice. Overall, the findings suggest that PERMA-based GPT interactions hold promise for supporting well-being reflection while providing meaningful opportunities for English use and feedback in L2 contexts.

At the same time, the study highlighted important considerations for future development and research. The small sample size and relatively short treatment period limit the extent to which the findings can be generalized, and the teacher-researcher context may have influenced students' responses. Some prompts and follow-up questions became too deep, layered, or difficult to answer, suggesting that effective AI-supported reflection depends on careful scaffolding and prompt calibration.

Future versions should therefore refine the GPT design through shorter prompts, adjustable language levels, repair options when students do not understand, and optional sample answers or response templates. Furthermore, subsequent research should test this revised approach with larger and more varied groups of L2 students over a longer period of time, while using additional data sources to better understand students' experiences with the prompts, psychological safety, English feedback, and well-being reflection.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

The authors used ChatGPT 5.1 to assist with qualitative data coding and pattern review, and to support language editing and polishing of the manuscript. All final coding decisions, interpretations, and analytical judgments were made by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content of the paper.

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