

# At the crossroads of digital and emotional literacies: empowering EFL learners through mental fitness and student-produced media

**Armanda Stroia has developed lesson materials alongside her students to help encourage the development of more positive mindsets. In this article, Armanda outlines some of the activities that can be done in class to help achieve mental fitness.**

## Introduction

'The world is changing faster than ever before, and we are flooded by impossible amounts of data, of ideas, of promises and of threats.' (Harrari, 2015, p. 461)

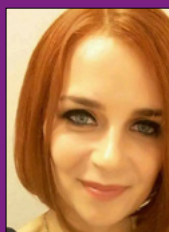
As our world continues to evolve at an unprecedented pace, with digitalisation, Artificial Intelligence, cutting-edge technology, and ongoing global challenges dominating and reshaping our lives, integrating emotional literacy into our language classes should be a priority. The recent pandemic has only heightened the anxiety and uncertainty surrounding these changes.

Even we, as adults, struggle with negative disempowering thoughts leading to anxiety and sometimes depression. What about our learners? Are they emotionally and mentally fit? Do they know how to cope with stress while riding their daily roller coaster of emotions?

Unfortunately, our students often lack essential life skills to effectively navigate their unpredictable inside world. As such, I believe that integrating life skill training into our language classes is essential for equipping students with the tools they need to thrive in a rapidly changing world. But how can we help our learners reach their mental fitness and language goals using the digital tools they love?

## What is mental fitness?

Although mental fitness may seem like a new trend, it has been around since the 1960s, when it was suggested by



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developmental psychologist Dorothea McCarthy as a positive term to avoid the stigma associated with mental health. Generally, it denotes a state of emotional and psychological wellness. Mentally fit individuals handle life's challenges with ease, showing increased resilience, emotional intelligence, cognitive skills, self-awareness and the ability to manage emotions and thoughts.

## A thought experiment

Let's start with an intriguing thought experiment. Have you recently had any **ANTs** persistently crawling around in your mind? Or is your mind home to adorable **PETs**? Of course, I'm not alluding to the obvious animal referents. These terms were employed from cognitive behavioural therapy and will be explored here from a pedagogical standpoint. We can understand better what these ANTs and PETs really are by delving into the

realm of cognitive processes to explore their potential impact on our learners' wellbeing.

To start, if we deconstruct these acronyms, we find out that ANT stands for an **automatic negative thought**, and PET refers to a **positive empowering thought**.

## Why do we have ANTs?

Language learners often struggle with negative thinking patterns, issues of low self-esteem, lack of confidence and fear of being judged by others. It is important to understand that a few ANTs are normal. In fact, negative thoughts are a natural human reaction to stress, but when they invade our minds, these thoughts can be overwhelming. They can activate unpleasant emotions, altering our thinking and sometimes leading to anxiety and even depression. Automatic negative thoughts are generally linked to negativity bias.

## What is negativity bias?

Why are we so hardwired to negativity? According to neuropsychologist Rick Hanson (2013), our negativity bias, which makes us pay more attention to negative information and experiences rather than positive or neutral ones, is a built-in adaptive evolutionary function that played a critical role in our early development. This bias proved

**STAY ALERT**

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INSIGHTS FROM  
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**AUTOMATIC NEGATIVE THOUGHTS**

**POSITIVE EMPOWERING THOUGHTS**

*Slide from Armanda's presentation at IATEFL Belfast 2022*

life-saving for our ancestors, helping them to pay attention to harmful stimuli, environmental threats and predators, but it is not as useful in modern society.

Countless studies have proven that we are more likely to recall negative remarks and insults rather than compliments. For instance, what do you remember more vividly – the compliments or a single negative comment made by a colleague? Do your learners struggle with negative thinking patterns? If so, how can we help them recognise and overcome negativity bias?

Teaching for empowerment: practical examples to integrate mental and emotional fitness activities into your EFL classes

Daniel Xerri (2021) argues that soft skills are essential for our learners living in a VUCA world (a world dominated by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity) and provides an insightful perspective while exploring soft skills from new angles. He distilled five of the most important categories into what he calls the DAIFA framework: Democratic leadership, Adaptability, Inquisitiveness, Factfulness, and Adaptability.

Emotional self-management, a key component of mental fitness, is a core part of adaptability. By prioritising emotional self-management, you can build your learners' resilience and thus, they can adapt more effectively to the ever-changing situations of life. But, despite knowing this, I wonder how often we try to embed in our EFL classes activities that systematically develop these key soft skills.

Identifying ANTs and PETs: the train of (un)happy thoughts

To help my young learners become aware of the automatic negative thoughts, I designed, together with some of my students, a worksheet on Canva: 'The train of (un)happy thoughts.' The aim of this worksheet was to challenge learners to identify their repetitive thoughts and reflect on their emotions. In a diary of their thoughts, learners were encouraged to analyse which type of repetitive thoughts had popped more often into their heads: ANTs or PETs?

According to my learners' feedback, this reflective exercise proved to be useful in training their mind to form positive thinking habits and become more aware of their thought patterns. I think what made this learning experience even more meaningful was the fact that I gave my students the freedom to use their digital skills to express



Worksheet co-created with students on Canva

their voice and contribute to this learning resource. It felt inspiring to observe their contagious excitement and boost of confidence stemming from an acute sense of owning their learning.

Reflective exercises to develop mental fitness

Obviously, overcoming negative thinking is not as simple as pushing negative thoughts away with a magic spell and switching them into positive ones. Yet, there are some useful reflective exercises I often use with my students and magic can happen when you are consistent in training their thinking habits.

A jar of ANTs

Motivating your students to use positive self-talk can boost their confidence and self-esteem. Why not teach them how to reframe automatic negative thoughts into positive empowering thoughts? To approach this in a more creative way, I designed an activity you might find useful and which you may be able to adapt to your own teaching context.

Encourage your learners to write down on pieces of paper as many ANTs as they have had during a day or before a test. Collect them in a jar and ask them to work in pairs, take turns to extract an ANT and try to reframe it into a PET. You can see some examples in Table 1 below.

| Go from ANTs to ...                              | PETs                                                                       |
|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Automatic Negative Thoughts                      | Positive Empowering Thoughts                                               |
| I will never be able to speak fluently.          | I can't speak fluently yet. I will get better and better if I keep trying. |
| I'm afraid of being judged when I make mistakes. | Everyone can make a mistake. How can I learn from this?                    |

Table 1: Examples of reframing ANTs into PETs

You can turn this into a fun game, awarding points for the most creative PETs. I can guarantee your learners will fall in love with this activity. Of course, you may give more examples with the target language or structures you are working on.

How to make your emotional first aid kit

Adapting an idea from Flipgrid, I employed my student-produced video approach to challenge my learners to create an emotional first aid kit video tutorial. Just as we know to use a plaster when we get hurt physically, we also need to take care of our emotional injuries. What can we do when we're feeling lonely, sad, demotivated, discouraged, depressed or anxious? Turn to our emotional first aid kit and take care of ourselves.

Guiding questions

Here are six prompts to help you create an emotional first aid kit:

- 1 What are six essential items you would include in your kit?
- 2 What songs or sounds help you feel relaxed or happy?
- 3 What images or sights bring you joy and peace of mind?
- 4 What scents or smells help you feel happy or relaxed?
- 5 Who are the people you can rely on for emotional support when needed?
- 6 What activities help you to distract your thoughts and act when feeling overwhelmed?

My learners were excited to collaborate on this project and to present their emotional first aid kit in a video tutorial. Here are some of the items included in their kit:

- Make a playlist of cheerful songs: create a playlist with your favourite uplifting songs that always put a smile on your face.

- Be a happy memories collector: keep a special photo album on your phone with images that remind you of happy times with friends, family holidays or cute moments with pets. When you look at these photos, they will instantly bring joy.
- Stay connected with friends and family: it is awesome to have people who care about you. Spend quality time with friends and family.
- Make a to-do list of activities you enjoy doing.
- Try a simple breathing technique to relax.
- Welcome PETS, go away ANTs! Stick colourful post-it notes in visible places with your favourite quotes and activities you can do to get rid of ANTs. When you see these notes, they will remind you to stay upbeat and keep any negative thoughts away. For example, our favourite ones are: 'I am not my thoughts!' and 'Don't believe everything you think!'

Remember, it is okay to have moments when you are not feeling your best. These tips are here to help you feel happier, even when things are a bit tough. These types of engaging activities challenge

students to use the target language while enhancing their digital skills to solve a problem integrated into a meaningful situation. Additionally, student-produced video projects bring added value benefits in soft skills development since they trigger creative and critical thinking and foster team building.

## Conclusions

This is what might happen when learners, instead of following a recipe, co-create the learning menu, as a result of having been empowered with the freedom to have a voice and choice. On the contrary, if learners feel that they are simply listening to instructions and following a script, they become passive recipients. This can lead to disengagement and a decrease in motivation over time. Last but not least, we should always remember that, 'sharing power does not mean a person has less. Instead, teachers maintain and gain power by sharing power, for power is more than a top-down form of control' (Foucault, 1980b, as cited in Broom, 2015, p. 81).

If you are committed to making a difference in your students' lives, you know that you can shape their future by developing transferable life-oriented

soft skills early. I deeply believe that our challenge as teachers is to design inspiring resources and activities for our students to feel empowered and take an active leading role in their learning while nurturing their wellbeing.

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