



Fostering resilience in higher education: exploring trauma-informed pedagogy through expressive writing practices

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Abstract

Amidst the adversity of conflict, the educational landscape is severely disrupted, causing students to face profound emotional and psychological challenges. Traumatic experiences jeopardise students' ability to succeed in their academic pursuits, regulate their emotions, and create meaningful social relationships.

This paper delves into the transformative potential of expressive writing in a second language (L2) as a therapeutic tool for fostering resilience among Ukrainian English language students affected by the ongoing war. Pennebaker and Beall's (1986) Written Emotional Disclosure (WED) Paradigm and Carello's (2020) Principles of Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning (TITL) are employed as frameworks to facilitate the intervention of expressive writing practices.

Drawing on the exploratory research conducted with 30 Ukrainian university students, this study presents empirical insights into the impact of L2 expressive writing on emotional regulation and resilience. The study incorporated trauma-informed pedagogy principles to create a culturally-sensitive, compassionate learning environment for research participants.

Intervention sessions featured various forms of expression, including poetry, reflective writing, narrative writing, free writing, and journaling, which also incorporated mindfulness exercises. Samples of the writing journals are presented to demonstrate students' progress and provide qualitative insights into how these practices have contributed to their resilience and coping strategies during times of conflict. Thematic analysis of participants'

feedback revealed central themes of emotional management, resilience, gratitude, self-awareness, and personal growth.

By providing empirical evidence and methodological insights tailored to the Ukrainian context, this research contributes to the development of a resilience-oriented curriculum and L2 therapeutic intervention for supporting Ukrainian students in their healing journey.

Keywords: resilience; trauma-informed pedagogy; expressive writing.

Introduction

In times of global crises, the educational paradigm has shifted towards prioritising the cultivation of life skills, vital for thriving not only in academic pursuits, but also within broader social contexts, fostering a holistic education (Broekaert et al., 2011). In Ukraine, this shift has become crucial as the Russian invasion and subsequent full-scale war has significantly disrupted the educational landscape, leaving a substantial impact on both students and educators, causing trauma.

According to SAMHSA (2014, p.7), 'trauma results from an event, series of events, or a set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening. It has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being'. Rice and Groves (2005, p.3) emphasise that trauma is 'an exceptional experience in which powerful and dangerous events overwhelm a person's capacity to cope'.

The three 'Es' of trauma include event(s), experience of event(s), and effect (SAMHSA, 2014, p.8). Events encompass the actual threat of physical or psychological harm, which can occur either singularly or repeatedly. The individual's encounter with these events serves as the gauge for defining how traumatic the event is. However, the interpretation of trauma and its effect is subjective: what may deeply affect one person may not have the same impact on another. Scholars and practitioners acknowledge that individuals may perceive the same event(s) in different ways, influenced by a multitude of cultural, social, and psychological factors, specific to each person and community (Elliott and Urquiza, 2006).

Trauma can be 'both an individual and collective response to life-threatening events, harmful conditions, or a prolonged dangerous or stressful environment' (Venet, 2021, p.6). It is the aftermath of such events that truly defines trauma. Trauma causes short-term and long-term challenges, such as struggles with managing daily stress, regulating emotions, and building meaningful relations.

A wealth of research recognises the detrimental effect trauma has on cognitive development and overall performance. As a result, trauma affects brain development (Williams, 2020), emotional regulation (Carvalho Fernando et al., 2014), and challenges cognitive skills (Imad, 2020). Furthermore, long-term trauma interferes with students' academic and social performance (Oehlberg, 2012), and impacts executive functioning (McEwen et al., 2015).

Therefore, addressing the needs of war-traumatised students through trauma-informed pedagogy within the Ukrainian educational system is of utmost importance in the current context. A trauma-informed approach to teaching and learning refers to implementing a set of trauma-informed principles in educational policies and procedures. This approach involves creating supportive learning environments for students who have experienced adversities and trauma. The key principles that underpin trauma-informed teaching and learning (Carello, 2020) include:

- 1) Physical, emotional, and social safety.
- 2) Support and connection.
- 3) Collaboration and mutuality.
- 4) Empowerment, voice, and choice.
- 5) Change, growth, and resilience.

An educational organisation that is trauma-informed *realises* the profound impact of trauma and seeks potential paths for recovery; *recognises* symptoms of trauma in everyone involved with the organization; and *responds* by implementing knowledge about trauma into policies, practices, and curriculum, and aims to actively prevent *re-traumatisation* (SAMHSA, 2014, p.9).

Ukrainians have been experiencing conflict-based trauma which usually endures for an extended period and cause feelings of anxiety, guilt, loss of faith, or destabilized worldviews. Trauma recovery requires a multifaceted approach, where personal agency, access to mental health support, and resilience play vital roles (Rowell and Thomley, 2013).

Resilience has become a widely embraced term across various disciplines. It has gained numerous applications in practical and academic contexts. Resilience is a multifaceted concept that has been approached and defined from different perspectives. The American Psychological Association (2014, p.1) defines resilience as ‘the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress’. It is also viewed as ‘the combination of serious risk experiences and a relatively positive psychological outcome despite those experiences’ (Rutter, 2006, p.2) , as well as ‘a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation with the context of significant adversity’ (Luthar et al., 2000, p.453). Emphasising the recovery aspect, Ledesma (2014, p.1) defines resilience as ‘the ability to bounce back from adversity, frustration, and misfortune’. Resilience can also help harness resources to sustain well-being (Panter-Brick and Leckman, 2013).

In times of global crisis, there has been an increasing call to design a trauma-informed resilience-oriented curriculum that supports students' emotional and psychological well-being alongside academic growth. According to Carello and Thompson (2021, p.3), who focused on trauma-informed approaches to teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need for ‘evidence-based approaches to curriculum and policy in higher education that redress the impact of trauma and increase individual and collective resilience’. Addressing the need to develop a trauma-informed syllabus, Carello and Thompson (2022) also argue that adapting trauma-informed approaches to college teaching and learning involves re-assessing teaching policies and practices to make learning accessible for students who have experienced trauma, adversity, or crisis.

Using a trauma-informed lens, this paper advocates for integrating expressive writing practices as a supportive tool to help vulnerable individuals combat trauma within the compassionate academic environment.

It has been argued that not only verbal, but also expressive written disclosure of negative experiences and life challenges improves mental health and contributes to resilience. The benefits of expressive writing in promoting emotional well-being are underscored in Emotional Processing Theory, developed by Foa and Kozak (1986). Expressive writing can help individuals regulate their emotions, gain new insights and perspectives, and promote emotional relief and healing. This framework was further developed by Pennebaker and Beall (1986), who introduced the Written Emotional Disclosure (WED) paradigm, commonly known as expressive writing. WED is a therapeutic technique that involves writing about one's deepest emotions and thoughts regarding a traumatic or stressful experience. Drawing on his research conducted with university students who had experienced trauma, Pennebaker and Beall (1986) concluded that expressive writing produced positive outcomes for both physical and mental health.

WED interventions have been widely applied in academic settings. It has been reported that expressive writing enhances stress management and academic performance (Lumley and Provenzano, 2003), boosts test performance (Ramirez and Beilock, 2011; Frattaroli et al., 2011), improves working memory capacity (Klein and Boals, 2001), and lowers rumination and depression of vulnerable college students (Gortner et al., 2006).

In their book 'Expressive writing: Words that Heal' (2014) Pennebaker and Beall also highlight that repressing experiences of trauma and the inability to find language to express emotions in a written form are connected to chronic conditions. On the contrary, expressive writing helps individuals overcome traumas and emotional upheavals, improve well-being and build resilience. Building on these ideas, De Muijnck (2022) examined autobiographical trauma narration within the life-writing paradigm. She suggested that structuring traumatising memories into a non-fictional, autobiographical story could lower feelings of contingency, reduce post-traumatic stress disorder, and increase sense of agency.

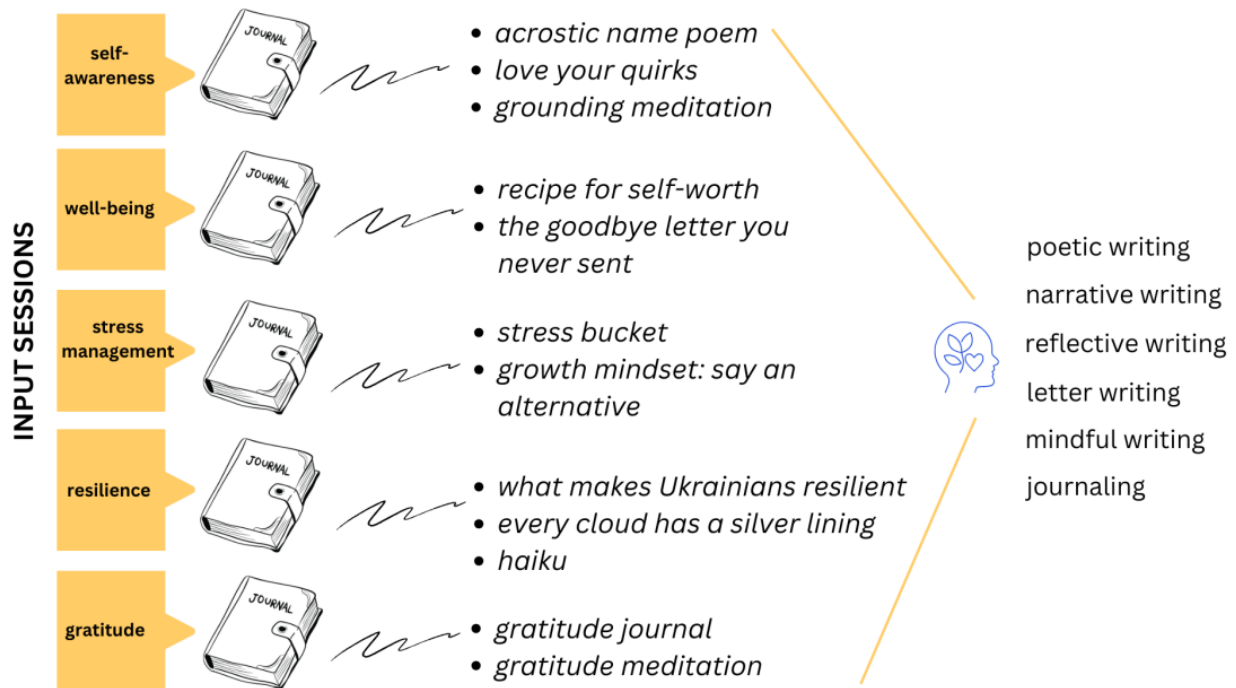
Recent research on expressive writing in the EFL classroom underscores its dual role in improving language skills and contributing to emotional well-being. Research by Golzar and Miri (2022) explores the impact of expressive writing in second language learning during the global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. They expand on the concept of meaningful literacy, arguing that L2 poetry writing not only leverages language learning, but also improves students' mental well-being. Hanauer (2012) made a significant

contribution to understanding identity and agency within expressive writing, particularly in second language classrooms. His research explored how students' personal identity and agency are shaped through expressive writing, especially in trauma-informed, resilience-oriented settings where language learning and self-expression intersect. Hanauer (2012, p.108) introduced the 'meaningful literacy' framework to humanise language learning and position a learner at the centre of the language learning process. He redefined language learning as 'an emotional and embodied experience in addition to being a cognitive process'. This approach highlights how personal narratives in language learning context foster the synergy of language skills, self-expression, and cultural identity.

Methods

Research question: How can expressive writing in a second language enhance students' resilience?

This research employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative analyses to assess the impact of L2 expressive writing on students' resilience and well-being. The data collected for the research are the pre- and post-intervention questionnaires, as well as students' reflective journal entries. During five online intervention sessions, research participants explored topics of self-awareness, stress management, gratitude, resilience, and well-being. Those sessions aimed to offer valuable insights and unlock students' potential for self-awareness and emotional growth, fostering a deeper understanding of their personal development and coping strategies. Additionally, the intervention sessions were designed to enrich students' second language vocabulary related to these topics, which they could further employ in their reflective journals. Due to the ongoing war and missile strikes in Ukraine, input sessions were conducted online to prioritise students' safety. Each input session was accompanied by assignments in a reflective writing journal which incorporated a multimodal approach, providing multiple avenues for expression. These included poetry, journaling, reflective writing, narrative writing, letter writing, and free writing, all complemented by mindfulness exercises. Reflective journals were assigned as homework to give students a secure personal space for mindful engagement with their thoughts and emotions, encouraging deeper reflection despite the challenging environment. The intervention design is presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. The intervention design.

The expressive writing intervention project applied principles of Pennebaker's and Beall's WED paradigm and trauma-informed pedagogy. Firstly, drawing on the paradigm, the expressive writing prompts were designed to encourage participants to delve into personal experiences and emotions related to topics discussed during the input sessions. These prompts aimed to facilitate emotional disclosure and reflection, aligning with Pennebaker and Beall's emphasis on the therapeutic benefits of expressing one's thoughts and feelings through writing. Secondly, sticking to the emotional disclosure paradigm, the 'flip-out rule' (Pennebaker and Evans, 2014, p.32) was introduced. This rule allows individuals to skip a writing exercise if they feel it pushes them over the edge and is overwhelming. Students were encouraged to engage with reflections they felt capable of handling, ensuring the emotional well-being of research participants. Thirdly, adhering to the trauma-informed pedagogy approach, expressive writing interventions were conducted in an environment that prioritised safety, empowerment and acknowledged trauma. Students were provided with clear guidelines of how to access mental health support in case they experience emotional distress. This case study also employs thematic analysis (Patton, 2014) of students' feedback questionnaires to identify shared central themes regarding the impact of expressive writing intervention on their resilience and well-being.

Thus, the research aims to produce empirical evidence of impact of expressive writing interventions on student resilience, personal growth, and well-being, which could be implemented in the Ukrainian EFL curriculum.

Participants and recruitment

The research participants included 30 third-year students of the English Philology Department of Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University majoring in English and translation studies. Third-year students were chosen due to their advanced language proficiency, which enables them to engage more deeply in expressive writing practices in their second language. The ethical approval was obtained from Cardiff University. The head of the English Philology Department acted as a gatekeeper and granted permission to conduct an email campaign to recruit participants. The intervention was not part of the curriculum, and was conducted on a voluntary basis. All participants provided informed consent before data collection. The research participants completed pre- and post-training questionnaires and submitted five digital reflective journal entries. Research participants' writing pieces presented in the article are anonymised with pseudonyms.

Results

Pre-intervention testing

The Nicholson McBride Resilience Questionnaire (NMRQ) is one of the most common tools to measure resilience (McBride, 2020). It is a psychological assessment tool designed to measure an individual's resilience. The questionnaire consists of a series of statements to which respondents indicate their level of agreement. The questionnaire assesses such aspects of resilience as emotional regulation, self-awareness, problem-solving skills and stress management.

To objectively measure participants' level of resilience before the intervention, they completed the NMRQ. The pre-intervention results indicated that 37% (n = 11) of participants exhibited a developing level of resilience, 30% (9) demonstrated an established level, 23% (7) had a strong level, and 10% (3) possessed an exceptional level of resilience.

In a pre-intervention questionnaire, students were asked whether they had previously engaged in expressive writing, either in their first or second language). 60% (18) of students indicated they had never practised expressive writing in their L2.

The impact of L2 expressive writing activities on resilience

Given the participants' varied prior experience with expressive writing and their level of resilience, the research intervention design was tailored to help students endure trauma and increase their resilience in the face of ongoing challenges. The post-intervention questionnaire included multiple-choice questions, open-ended questions, and Likert scale questions. After the intervention, students' resilience was evaluated by their own feedback to capture their subjective perceptions and personal experiences. By providing answers to the question, 'How would you rate the impact of L2 expressive writing activities during the research project on your overall resilience?' with the options 'no impact', 'poor impact', 'moderate impact', and 'great impact', students expressed their perspectives on the effectiveness of the intervention. The data collected from the questionnaire revealed that all research participants acknowledged a positive impact of expressive writing on their resilience to varying degrees; 56.7% (17) of students reported that the expressive writing interventions had a great impact on their resilience, while 43.3% (13) indicated a moderate impact on their resilience.

Personal growth or development

To analyse the participants' feedback on the impact of the expressive writing interventions on their personal growth and development, they responded to the question, 'Did you experience any personal growth or development during your participation in this research project? If yes, please explain.' The thematic analysis was carried out by generating codes, identifying common themes and defining them. As a result, the thematic analysis revealed the following central themes and their associated keywords.

Emotional Management appeared to be as a prominent theme, showcasing participants' aspirations to effectively 'manage my emotions', 'regulate my emotions', and 'control different emotions' through the practice of expressive writing. These responses indicate a contribution of expressive writing to emotional self-regulation.

Self-Awareness emerged as another key theme, where participants emphasised the importance of 'self-reflection', 'self-awareness', and 'understanding my mental state'. These outcomes prove the potential impact of expressive writing interventions on the students' self-perception and self-reflection.

Resilience as another central theme highlighted the participants' ability to 'bounce back' from adversity and 'overcome' challenges and improve 'stress management'. This underscores how expressive writing could serve as a tool for developing coping mechanism during difficult times.

The theme of **gratitude** theme indicated participants' appreciation of positive aspects of their lives expressed with phrases like 'gratitude', 'grateful', and 'appreciate'. These sentiments prove that expressive writing can empower students to have a positive outlook and foster a sense of gratitude.

The theme of **personal growth** reflects the participants' journey of self-improvement and discovery through phrases such as 'personal growth', 'learned a lot', 'growth mindset' and 'expanded my outlook'. This underscores participants' commitment to gain new life skills to cope with wartime challenges through expressive writing practices.

Writing techniques and strategies to benefit well-being and resilience

To identify the most effective writing prompts and techniques for enhancing resilience, students were asked to rate them by responding to the question 'Which specific writing techniques or strategies did you find most interesting and beneficial for your well-being and resilience during the research project? Choose 3 options'.

Since students identified gratitude journal, 'every cloud has a silver lining', haiku, and 'recipe for self-worth' as the most impactful techniques for building resilience, this paper will examine these four writing practices in detail.

Gratitude journal

The research into the impact of gratitude indicates that it contributes to happiness, optimism and life satisfaction. It is also known to be an antidote or neutraliser to negative emotions (Smith, 2019, p.46). The regular practice of grateful thinking leads to enhanced psychological and social functioning (Emmons and McCullough, 2003). Gratitude journaling and writing gratitude letters also significantly boost well-being (Sheldon and Lyubomirsky, 2006; Toepfer and Walker; 2009).

Research participants were encouraged to keep a five-day gratitude journal. Reflecting on daily moments of gratitude, students were expected to develop a more optimistic outlook and improve their overall resilience. Lana's (a participant's) gratitude piece showcases her appreciation of friendship, academic achievements, and spiritual values. She has managed to develop a grateful outlook on life despite negative life circumstances. Overall, keeping a gratitude journal could be a simple yet powerful tool that can have a huge impact on Ukrainian students' lives, contributing to greater self-esteem, personal and social relationships and enhancing their mental health in wartime.

Day 1: Today I am grateful for having people who cheered me up. And for getting up early, because I love the morning at 4-7 am. And I'm also grateful for snowing. Snow creates such a warm and cozy atmosphere!

Day 2: Today I am grateful for having faith. My religion gives me peace and happiness. Everything is reasonable. It answers all my questions. This is something I can't live without.

Day 3: Today I am grateful for the reaction of my classmates to my creative presentation. I wanted to make it witty and funny and special. And yeah, everything worked out. I'm grateful for being appreciated.

Day 4: Today I am grateful for having a good test result. It was a little stressful, but we've managed it. And I'm grateful for the delicious dinner. Everything was so tasty and the atmosphere was pleasant. Also, grateful for the time spent in the circle of close friends after that dinner.

Day 5: Today I am grateful for having my roommate. She is insane. So nice, kind and caring. Her presence makes me feel better. I'm incredibly lucky to have her. It's destiny. I could write all the things in her for which I am grateful, but it would turn out to be a 1000-page book. There are some examples, I'm grateful for having long and interesting conversations with her for hours and hours. I'm grateful that she cooks so deliciously. Yummy yummy! I'm grateful for our friendship. Sometimes we literally read each other's thoughts. She knows what I want to say even before I can say it. Kinda soulmates. I'm super grateful!

Every cloud has a silver lining

The ability to extract silver linings from an challenging situation requires an optimistic mindset which promotes resilience and the skill to adapt to future challenges (Seery, 2011). Participants were given the following prompt in their reflective journal:

Now it's time to practise finding a silver lining. Next to each cloud describe a challenging situation, a setback or adversity you've experienced. Then think what silver lining each setback brought into your life. Please use cloud 3 to write about the war in Ukraine.

Andriy's (a participant's) writing presents the impact of the war in Ukraine on his family and personal life. He writes about the bittersweet reality of living alone due to the war. Despite the challenges of separation from his family, he has developed a positive attitude and gained new skills. He recognises his personal growth in terms of responsibility and confidence.

The war in Ukraine made my family move out for an uncertain period of time. I really miss them. Even though it's been only 4 months since I saw them. Btw, I have wanted to live alone since I was 14 years old. I love spending time alone, although I'm an ardent extrovert. I never thought that my 'dream' would come true this way. Ironic, isn't it? Cut a long story short, the silver lining here is that now I'm on my own, which means I'm getting more responsible, confident and smarter.

Solia's (a participant's) writing reflects the lessons learned and the changes in her perspective due to the war in Ukraine. The constant threat symbolised by air raid sirens

emphasises the unsafety and instability. Yet she has developed a profound personal growth which positively shifted her values.

With constant air raid sirens
I learned not to put things off for later
I value the time spent with family and friends much more
I appreciate every moment of life.

Both expressive writing pieces showcase students' resilience and ability to find positive outcomes in challenging circumstances. They highlight the therapeutic value of expressive writing practices in processing trauma and fostering social-emotional well-being.

Haiku writing

Haiku poetry is a frequently utilised technique within the expressive writing paradigm. Haiku is a short Japanese poetic form that consists of three lines, with five syllables in the first line, seven in the second, and five in the third (Kern, 2018). Haiku poetry has been incorporated into therapeutic interventions to increase empathy (Gair, 2012), improve critical reflection (Harvey and Oliver, 2024), and enhance self-transcendent emotions (Kato and Hitsuwari, 2024).

The writing prompt for the reflective journal was as follows: 'Write your Haiku here. If you wish, you can compose one about the current situation in Ukraine, the balance between war and life, or any other topic that comes to mind.' In these haiku, students reflect on the disruption of peace and wartime challenges Ukrainians are facing nowadays. At the same time these haiku showcase a sense of pride and determination to survive and thrive. The emergence of hope and the enduring spirit encapsulates resilience in the face of the ongoing war.

Turbulent new world,
Uncertainty and much pride,
Now survive and thrive.

Amidst strife, they stand,
Ukraine's brave hearts, strong, true,

Hope for peace in mind.

Peace was shattered

Yet resilient hearts endure

Hope blooms through the pain

Recipe for self-worth

Practicing self-worth is crucial for mental and emotional well-being (Du et al., 2017). It can contribute to self-awareness and self-compassion as individuals develop a positive view of themselves, recognise their strength and accept weaknesses. Reflecting on one's self-worth through expressive writing may help cultivate a growth mindset and resilience.

The reflective journal included the prompt:

'In the spaces provided, complete the recipe to make a special YOU. Be sure to add the finest ingredients - these should be things that make you happy and unique. If you get stuck, ask friends and family for help in reminding you of the qualities and talents you possess' (Logan, 2020, p.88).

Diana's (a participant's) recipe below demonstrates a strong sense of self-awareness, recognising the importance of mindfulness and gratitude. Including 'a pinch of resilience' indicates the understanding of resilience as a crucial skill for navigating life's challenges and maintaining a positive outlook. This metaphorical recipe highlights insights into personal development and indicates commitment to compassion and resilience.

Recipe title: **Radiant Self-Worth Delight**

1 cup of **kindness** and **compassion**

1/2 teaspoon of **self-reflection** and **growth**

1 tablespoon of **embracing uniqueness**

3/4 cup of **helping others** and **spreading positivity**

A pinch of **gratitude** and **mindfulness**

Combine the first four ingredients and mix until smooth. Add the pinch of **resilience** to taste. Bake until self-love and self-worth have reached desired doneness. Now share with the rest of the world.

In summary, regular engagement in expressive writing journaling was reported by students to illuminate various potential advantages of expressive writing within the framework of trauma-informed pedagogy. According to students' feedback, these expressive writing practices seemed to empower their self-awareness, may have contributed to their emotional intelligence, and possibly enhanced well-being and fostered resilience.

Limitations

This research is an exploratory study which aims to define the impact of L2 expressive writing on students' well-being and resilience within the trauma-informed framework.

One limitation of this study is that student resilience was initially measured using the objective NMRQ before the intervention, while the impact of L2 expressive writing on students' resilience was assessed through subjective student feedback. Allowing students to evaluate the effectiveness of their engagement with expressive writing practices was prioritised over duplicating another standardised questionnaire, which might lack the specific context of their experiences. This approach values personal insights and perceptions when assessing the impact of the intervention. However, future research could incorporate both objective measures and subjective feedback to provide comprehensive assessment of resilience improvement.

Additionally, expressive writing in a foreign language might have hindered students' ability to articulate the whole spectrum of their thoughts and emotions, potentially limiting their reflections. Therefore, further research could delve into the correlation of L2 expressive writing and L2 identity.

Conclusion

During wartime, Ukrainian academia is facing unprecedented challenges, thus moving beyond subject mastery to increase the relevance of education. Given the substantial toll the war has taken on mental health of Ukrainian students, there is an urgent need to design a resilience-focused curriculum.

Incorporating principles of trauma-informed pedagogy into Ukrainian higher education settings aims to alleviate students' acute traumatic experiences and foster their academic success, resilience, and emotional intelligence. Compassionate and trauma-informed teaching methods are tailored to equip students with the skills needed to survive and thrive in their studies, future careers, and personal lives.

The findings presented in this study indicate that the integration of expressive writing practices within the trauma-informed pedagogy could offer a promising avenue for cultivating resilience in individuals experiencing wartime challenges. The thematic analysis of the research participants' feedback provided valuable insights into the multifaceted benefits of expressive writing practices in fostering emotional management, self-awareness, resilience, gratitude, and personal growth. These findings illustrate the potential therapeutic value of expressive writing as a tool for enhancing students' overall well-being, highlighting the significance of addressing students' holistic growth in the current educational landscape. The research contributes to current studies of L2 expressive writing and demonstrates how trauma-informed pedagogy can shape resilience-focused curricula to address challenges during times of crisis. Additionally, it expands research on integrating trauma-informed practices into EFL classrooms, potentially inspiring English teachers to prioritise student well-being through curriculum design.

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