

A Conceptual Framework for Chinese University Students: Active Learning and the Development of Emotional Expression, Self-Esteem, and Self-Regulation

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This conceptual study develops a culturally responsive framework for strengthening Chinese university students' psychological competence through active learning in mental health education. It focuses on the coordinated development of emotional expression, self-esteem, and self-regulation as mutually reinforcing dimensions rather than isolated outcomes. **Method:** Drawing on Experiential Learning Theory and Positive Psychology, the study conducts a conceptual analysis of literature on Chinese university students, cultural patterns of emotional restraint, lecture-based mental health education, and participatory pedagogical design. The analysis integrates theoretical assumptions with a ten-module active learning structure organized around classroom safety, self-value reconstruction, and regulation internalization. **Results:** The framework conceptually explains how active learning may narrow the knowledge-behavior gap through psychologically safe interaction, reflective practice, and the conversion of classroom experience into practical coping strategies. It proposes three intervention pathways: active interaction for adaptive emotional expression, strengths-based practice for self-esteem reconstruction, and reflective practice for self-regulation strengthening. These pathways are theoretical propositions rather than verified causal effects and require empirical testing across diverse university contexts. **Conclusion:** The proposed framework offers a localized and operational model for Chinese university mental health education while recognizing variation across institutions, disciplines, and student groups. It shifts the pedagogical emphasis from passive knowledge transmission to competence-oriented development and provides testable propositions and implementation guidance for future multi-site and longitudinal research.

Keywords: Active Learning; Mental Health Education; Emotional Expression; Self-Esteem; Self-Regulation

INTRODUCTION

Student mental health has become a global concern in 21st-century higher education. Under the dual pressures of escalating social competition and an achievement-oriented culture, Chinese university students face distinctive psychological adaptation challenges (Shi, 2022). Contemporary mental health is no longer defined as the absence of illness, but as a broader psychological competence involving emotional awareness, self-evaluation, and behavioral regulation (Gautam et al., 2024). Exploring educational strategies that enhance psychological literacy is therefore both practically urgent and academically valuable (Tick et al., 2023).

Confucian traditions of collectivism and interpersonal harmony may encourage emotional restraint in some Chinese educational and interpersonal settings, and prior studies have reported withdrawal and avoidance as coping responses to negative emotions among university students (Fogel & Jiang, 2025; Wulijijirigela, 2023). These tendencies vary across individuals and contexts and should not be interpreted as universal characteristics of Chinese students. Persistent emotional inhibition may restrict authentic self-expression, increase vulnerability to psychological distress, and impair resilience (Fogel & Jiang, 2025). Although mental health education has been widely implemented in Chinese universities, many programs remain teacher-centered and lecture-based, limiting opportunities for active participation (Isomova et al., 2022). Such methods may improve conceptual

understanding without ensuring behavioral application because emotional expression, self-esteem, and self-regulation are practice-dependent competencies (Warburton, 2025; Kaur, 2025), creating a continuing knowledge-behavior gap.

This study argues that mental health cultivation may benefit from the coordinated development of emotional expression, self-esteem, and self-regulation. These constructs are theoretically interrelated: limited emotional expression may erode self-worth and weaken regulation, whereas low self-esteem may intensify inhibition and reduce proactive self-management (Cui, 2025; Korzeniowska et al., 2024). Single-construct interventions may therefore produce limited or short-lived effects, highlighting the value of integrated and participatory educational programs. Despite growing research on student mental health and active learning, four gaps remain: first, the three constructs are often examined separately, producing fragmented accounts of psychological functioning (Prokhorov et al., 2023); second, didactic instruction frequently receives more emphasis than experiential learning, reinforcing the knowledge-behavior disconnect (Zhang & Abdullah, 2024; Yap & Mak, 2025); third, the mechanisms through which active learning may strengthen the three competencies remain insufficiently specified (Attié et al., 2022; G S & Paul, 2024); and fourth, limited research integrates cultural context, psychological variables, and active-learning mechanisms while also recognizing diversity within Chinese higher education (Chen et al., 2025; Lu et al., 2025).

To address these gaps, this study reinterprets active learning within a comprehensive developmental framework that connects interactive experiences with the coordinated development of the three core competencies. It offers three theoretical contributions: first, it frames the constructs as mutually dependent components of a coherent system; second, it combines two foundational theories to explain how active learning may support psychological competence; and third, it proposes a step-by-step teaching structure designed to cultivate adaptive emotional expression, stronger self-worth, and internalized self-regulation. Four theory-informed and empirically testable propositions are developed to guide future research.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

The pedagogical framework proposed in this paper is grounded in Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and Positive Psychology, which provide critical theoretical support for explaining how active learning translates into psychological competence development from the perspectives of learning process and developmental value respectively.



Figure 1. Theoretical Support Framework for Active Learning.

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT)

Proposed by Kolb (1984), ELT describes learning as a cyclical process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation rather than passive knowledge reception (Jones-Roberts & Bechtold, 2024). ELT has been widely applied in Western educational contexts (Burke, 2020; Diyanni & Borst, 2020), but its use in Chinese higher education may require contextual adaptation. Whereas many applications foreground individual reflection, collectivist and relational norms may make group-based experience and peer-supported reflection particularly relevant in some Chinese classrooms (Lu et al., 2025). The

proposed framework therefore emphasizes collaboration and guided group reflection while allowing instructors to adapt activities to local student needs.

Experience and Self-Esteem Development

Concrete experience is the starting point of the ELT cycle. For students with low self-esteem, persuasion or reasoning hardly alters negative self-perception, but active learning creates structured experiences including collaborative tasks, role-playing and situational participation for them to perceive their own worth and capabilities, gaining genuine "I can do it" feedback. Such practice-derived positive feelings lay a stable foundation for self-esteem reconstruction (Diyanni & Borst, 2020).

Reflection and Self-Regulation Development

Reflective observation is the core of both ELT and self-regulation development. Self-regulation involves monitoring and adjusting emotions, impulses, cognition and behaviors, which relies on conscious awareness and reflection of personal experiences. In active learning contexts, students shift from "experiencers" to "self-observers" by reviewing classroom interactions, analyzing emotional changes and identifying response patterns, thus understanding their stress coping styles and forming targeted regulation strategies (Stevanus & Budhayanti, 2024).

Positive Psychology

Unlike a traditional medical model focused primarily on problem remediation, Positive Psychology emphasizes positive traits, strengths, and healthy development (Zhu, 2020; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Western applications often foreground individual strength expression (Saksena, 2023), whereas Chinese cultural contexts may place greater emphasis on modesty, relational obligations, and group harmony (Kitayama & Markus, 1994). These are broad cultural tendencies rather than fixed traits. The present framework therefore combines strengths-based development with culturally sensitive forms of peer recognition, self-cultivation, and harmonious participation, while maintaining a universal-development orientation for the wider student population (Xu et al., 2024).

From Remediation to Development

Positive Psychology redefines mental health education goals as promoting positive competence and growth potential for all students, rather than only remediating psychological deficiencies (Zhao, 2025). This framework targets the entire student population, framing emotional expression as a positive communication competence, self-esteem as a supportive psychological resource, and self-regulation as a lifelong self-management competence—expanding the task of mental health education from "reducing problems" to "promoting development" (Zhu, 2020).

Students as Active Constructors

Positive Psychology holds that individuals are active developmental subjects with growth potential, rather than passive recipients of psychological intervention. This redefines teachers' roles from knowledge transmitters to designers and facilitators of supportive learning environments (Saksena, 2023). Through active learning modules, teachers create a classroom context of positive feedback, peer support and psychological safety, enabling students to discover their strengths, accumulate successful experiences, and build confidence in psychological competence—evolving from passive assistance recipients to active constructors of their own psychology (Nagizade, 2024).

Theoretical Integration

ELT and Positive Psychology provide complementary foundations for the conceptual framework, addressing the learning process and developmental value of active learning, respectively:

ELT provides a procedural mechanism for active learning, whose cyclical process explains how students internalize psychological skills through concrete participation (Chae, 2024), bridging the knowledge-behavior gap by emphasizing practice and reflection over memorization (Wu, 2020);

Positive Psychology provides a value orientation for psychological competence development, shifting focus from "reducing problems" to "promoting strengths" (Zhao, 2025) and aligning with the developmental needs of Chinese students under achievement pressure (Shi, 2022), fostering sustainable psychological resources such as resilience and self-acceptance;

Together, the two theories offer potentially compatible principles for Chinese higher education: ELT supports group experience and guided reflection, while Positive Psychology can incorporate relational strengths and harmonious participation (Fogel & Jiang, 2025; Lu et al., 2025). Their integration is intended to reduce, rather than eliminate, the risk of cultural mismatch.

Importantly, Chinese university students do not constitute a culturally homogeneous group. Emotional norms, classroom participation, and help-seeking may vary by region, institution type, discipline, year level, gender, socioeconomic background, and previous exposure to mental health education (Chen et al., 2025; Guan et al., 2025; Lu et al., 2025). The framework therefore treats collectivism, emotional restraint, and peer orientation as context-sensitive design considerations rather than universal student attributes, and it requires a local needs assessment before implementation.

REVIEW OF CORE CONSTRUCTS

Emotional expression, self-esteem and self-regulation constitute the core of university students' psychological competence, forming a dynamic interactive system rather than existing in isolation. Clarifying their theoretical connotations and inherent correlations lays the foundation for the pedagogical framework construction.

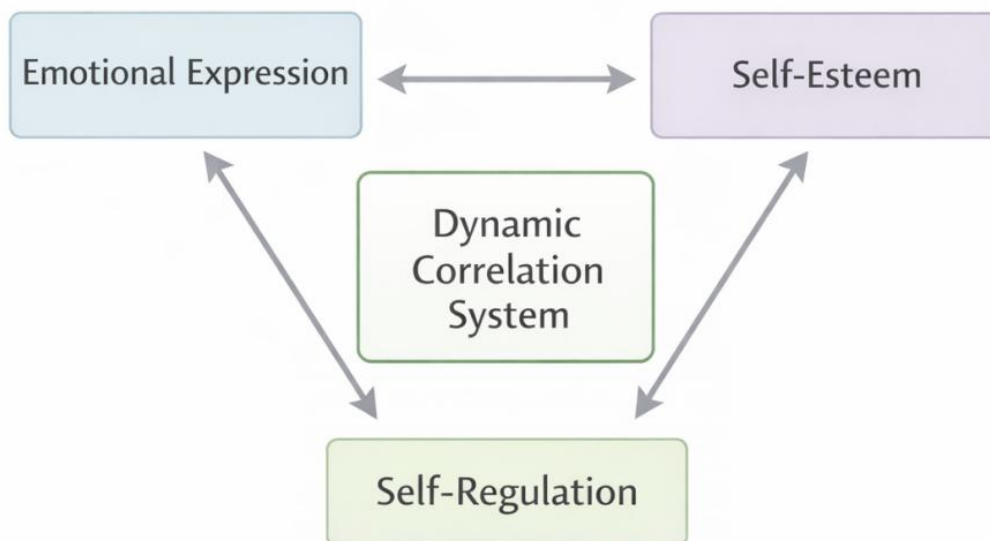


Figure 2. Interactive Logic of the Three Core Psychological Competence Constructs.

Emotional Expression

Emotional expression refers to the communication of internal emotional states through verbal, facial, and bodily channels (Parapat, 2025). It includes sharing positive emotions and identifying, acknowledging, and appropriately communicating negative emotions such as anxiety, frustration, and sadness. Context-appropriate expression may reduce emotional burden and create opportunities for social support (Sharafitdinov, 2024).

Within cultural contexts that value restraint and interpersonal harmony, some Chinese students may interpret overt emotional expression as socially risky or immature (Fu et al., 2024). Emotional restraint can have both costs and context-dependent interpersonal functions, including the maintenance of group harmony (Kitayama & Markus, 1994). Rather than treating restraint as either a cultural defect or an unquestioned virtue, this paper

defines adaptive emotional expression as the moderate and context-appropriate communication of positive and negative emotions while balancing personal needs and relational norms.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is an individual's overall evaluation and subjective feeling of self-worth (Rosenberg, 1965), reflecting an affirmative attitude toward one's own value and capabilities. A relatively stable psychological resource for college students, it is also susceptible to academic achievement, interpersonal feedback and social comparison. High self-esteem maintains positive self-identity in the face of challenges, while low self-esteem erodes resilience and leads to withdrawal and helplessness (Yaremko, 2023).

This study regards self-esteem not as a mere outcome variable, but a core supportive psychological resource that influences students' classroom participation willingness, emotional expression courage and post-failure adjustment ability, forming a close association with emotional expression and self-regulation (Zemskova, 2024).

Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is the ability to monitor, evaluate, and adjust cognition, emotions, and behavior in pursuit of goals (Zimmerman, 2000). In this paper, it refers specifically to maintaining psychological stability and selecting adaptive responses under pressure or emotional fluctuation, including emotional identification, strategy adjustment, impulse control, and goal commitment (Moilanen, 2024).

More executive and transformative than the other two constructs, self-regulation does not directly produce emotions or determine self-perception; instead, it shapes how emotional experiences, self-understanding, and external pressure are integrated into action. As a key psychological mechanism, it may influence whether internal resources are translated into effective behavior (Romanovska & Novak, 2025).

Interactive Logic of Core Constructs

Emotional expression, self-esteem, and self-regulation are conceptualized as an interdependent system. The following reciprocal relationships are informed by theory and prior empirical work but remain open to direct testing within the proposed framework:

1. Emotional expression → Self-esteem: Genuine expression strengthens self-acceptance (a core of self-esteem, Rosenberg, 1965). Prolonged suppression leads to the belief that "my true self is unacceptable", eroding self-worth (Fu et al., 2024; Cui, 2025), while adaptive expression fosters coherent self-identity and healthy self-esteem;
2. Self-esteem → Self-regulation: Self-esteem may provide psychological resources that support persistence in emotional and behavioral regulation. Under achievement pressure, students with lower self-esteem may disengage more readily from regulation strategies (Liang, 2024; Zemskova, 2024), suggesting that self-esteem may facilitate, rather than guarantee, effective self-regulation;
3. Self-regulation → Emotional expression/self-esteem: Self-regulation judges the timing and intensity of emotional expression (Bravo Anchundia et al., 2024), avoiding impulsive outbursts that damage relationships. Successful regulation enhances self-efficacy (Martínez Díaz, 2023) and further boosts self-esteem, ensuring the system's stability and adaptability.

Core Competence Triad

The three constructs correspond to different dimensions of psychological development: emotional expression is the gateway for externalizing and communicating internal experiences; self-esteem is the core resource for self-worth evaluation; self-regulation is the executive mechanism for translating psychological resources into adaptive actions (Gómez Muzzio & Strasser, 2022). With independent connotations and close mutual support, they form a dynamic psychological competence system. Thus, the subsequent active learning framework focuses on their synergistic development, rather than isolated single-variable interventions (Lin et al., 2025).

Theoretical Propositions

Based on the integrated theories and proposed construct relationships, four testable propositions are advanced. The directional and mediating statements below are conceptual expectations, not empirical findings:

Proposition 1: Active learning is expected to be positively associated with adaptive emotional expression among Chinese university students, with psychological safety mediating this relationship.

Theoretical Justification: ELT suggests that learning develops through concrete and comparatively low-risk experiences (Kolb, 1984). Anonymous sharing and structured small-group interaction may reduce evaluation anxiety and face-related concerns (Mai et al., 2024), thereby creating conditions that support more open and context-appropriate emotional expression (Fogel & Jiang, 2025).

Proposition 2: Adaptive emotional expression and self-esteem are expected to show a positive bidirectional association among Chinese university students.

Theoretical Justification: Adaptive expression may strengthen self-understanding and acceptance, while stronger self-esteem may increase students' confidence to communicate emotions. Prior work on emotional coping and self-esteem supports examining this reciprocal association, but the direction and magnitude require direct empirical testing (Fu et al., 2024; Yaremko, 2023).

Proposition 3: Self-esteem is expected to positively moderate the relationship between active learning and self-regulation; the association between active learning and self-regulation is expected to be stronger at higher levels of self-esteem.

Theoretical Justification: Self-esteem may provide psychological resources that help students persist in reflective practice, a core component of active learning. Higher self-esteem may support the sustained application of regulation strategies, whereas lower self-esteem may be associated with reduced motivation for competence development (Kholbotayeva, 2021).

Proposition 4: Adaptive emotional expression, self-esteem, and self-regulation are each expected to be positively associated with psychological competence, and active learning is expected to strengthen their combined contribution.

Theoretical Justification: Psychological competence is multidimensional and may require integrated development (Chen et al., 2024). Active learning can combine experience, reflection, and peer support in a single instructional process (Attié et al., 2022; G S & Paul, 2024), providing a plausible basis for a synergistic rather than isolated pattern of development.

PEDAGOGICAL DESIGN OF THE MODULES

Based on the preceding theoretical analysis, this paper proposes a ten-module active learning framework for university mental health education, guided by the Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation (ADDIE) approach (Sanchez-García et al., 2023). The framework is organized into three progressive stages, moving from psychological safety and initial participation to self-value development and strategy internalization. It is an operational proposal rather than a validated intervention and should be piloted and adapted before large-scale use.

Module Design Logic

The framework targets key psychological challenges of Chinese university students: reluctance to express vulnerability, poor emotional identification, negative self-evaluation, and lack of practical self-regulation strategies (Guan et al., 2025). The ADDIE model underpins its core logic:

Analysis: Conduct a brief local needs assessment covering students' perceived safety, expression preferences, existing support resources, and relevant demographic or institutional differences;

Design: Set staged learning objectives and specify how each activity contributes to emotional expression, self-esteem, and self-regulation;

Development: Prepare structured experiential, interactive, and reflective activities, facilitator scripts, opt-out procedures, referral pathways, and culturally appropriate examples;

Implementation: Use trained facilitation, small-group participation, voluntary disclosure, peer support, and session-level fidelity checklists;

Evaluation: Combine process, outcome, and follow-up measures; document participation, acceptability, psychological safety, module completion, and changes in the three target competencies (Gledhill & McAuliffe, 2025; Sanchez-García et al., 2023).

The ten modules form a coherent system that transforms the abstract conceptual framework into practical teaching logic, making active learning a structured educational process for psychological competence development rather than a random combination of classroom activities.

10-Module Active Learning Pedagogical Framework

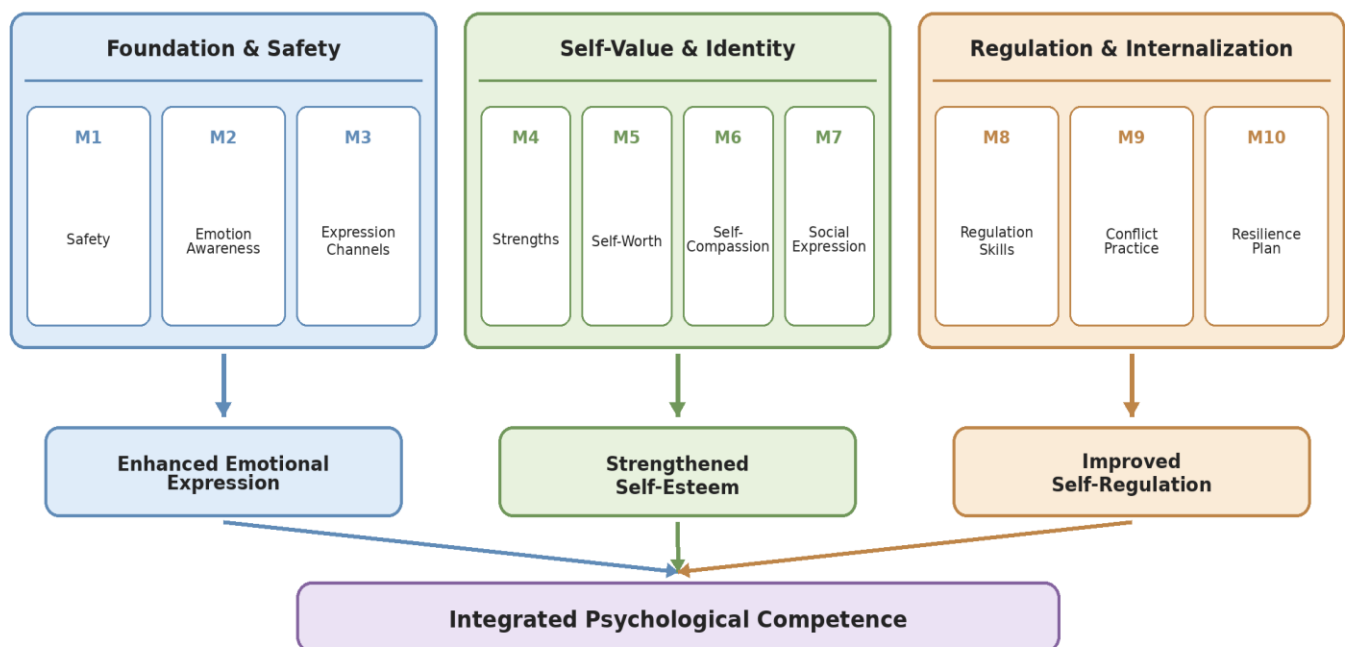


Figure 3. The 10-Module Active Learning Pedagogical Framework.

Content of the Ten Modules

Divided into three interconnected stages, the modules progress in content and difficulty, closely aligning with the developmental focus of the three core competencies:

Stage 1: Foundation & Safety (M1-M3) comprises inclusive classroom norms, emotional identification, and verbal/non-verbal expression channels. The stage aims to reduce participation anxiety, strengthen emotional vocabulary, and establish a non-judgmental environment.

Stage 2: Self-Value & Identity (M4-M7) comprises strengths identification, cognitive reframing of negative self-evaluation, self-compassion and self-acceptance, and context-appropriate social emotional expression. The stage aims to develop practice-based self-worth while preserving relational sensitivity.

Stage 3: Regulation & Internalization (M8-M10) comprises immediate regulation techniques, interpersonal conflict practice, and a personalized resilience and support plan. The stage aims to help students select, test, and internalize strategies for academic and interpersonal stress.

Implementation and Evaluation Guidelines

The modules should be implemented as structured educational activities rather than psychotherapy. Facilitators should establish confidentiality limits, voluntary participation and opt-out procedures, and referral pathways for students who disclose significant distress. Suggested activities draw on safe-learning-environment principles, emotional-vocabulary development, self-compassion practice, and emotion-regulation training (Eachempati & Ramnarayan, 2020; Grčić Simeunović & Simeunović, 2024; Lundeen & Perkins, 2024; Preece et al., 2025). Each module may be delivered in a 45- to 90-minute session, with timing adapted to institutional schedules and student needs.

Table 1. Implementation and Evaluation Matrix for the Ten Active Learning Modules.

Module	Suggested instructional activity	Process/fidelity indicator	Assessment criterion
M1 Safety	Co-create participation, confidentiality, and respectful-response norms; complete an anonymous readiness check.	Facilitator checklist; attendance; opt-out use; observed adherence to norms.	Students can restate the norms; session safety and acceptability ratings.
M2 Awareness	Emotion-vocabulary sorting, trigger mapping, and a brief body-sensation map.	Completion of emotion-trigger-body worksheet; participation without forced disclosure.	Ability to identify an emotion, likely trigger, and bodily cue using a rubric.
M3 Expression	Use emotion cards, “I” statements, drawing, or non-verbal expression in low-risk pairs.	Choice of expression channel; respectful peer response; completion of reflection.	Context-appropriate communication on a brief behavioral rubric.
M4 Strengths	Strengths spotting through individual examples and structured peer feedback.	Specificity and balance of feedback; documented personal examples.	Identification of personal strengths supported by concrete evidence.
M5 Self-Worth	Challenge a negative automatic thought using evidence-for/evidence-against and balanced reappraisal.	Completion and quality of cognitive-reframing worksheet.	More balanced self-evaluation; pre/post self-esteem measure.
M6 Acceptance	Write a self-compassionate response to a recent setback and discuss optional coping alternatives.	Completion; non-judgmental language; voluntary sharing.	Ability to replace global self-criticism with a specific, compassionate response.
M7 Social Expression	Role-play an academic or interpersonal scenario using graded emotional disclosure.	Use of agreed communication steps; peer/facilitator fidelity rating.	Appropriate timing, intensity, and wording of emotional expression.
M8 Regulation Skills	Practice two or more strategies, such as paced breathing, grounding, cognitive reappraisal, or a pause plan.	Correct performance and strategy-selection rationale.	Ability to select and demonstrate a strategy suited to a stated trigger.
M9 Conflict Practice	Use a pause-express-listen-negotiate sequence in a conflict role-play, followed by reflection.	Completion of role-play and reflective debrief; peer feedback quality.	Behavioral rubric covering impulse control, perspective taking, and repair.
M10 Resilience Plan	Develop a personalized plan listing triggers, early warning signs, coping strategies, support people, and referral resources.	Completeness and feasibility of the plan; scheduled review point.	A realistic written plan and confidence rating at post-test and follow-up.

Program evaluation should include baseline, immediate post-intervention, and delayed follow-up assessments whenever feasible. A multi-method design should combine validated and culturally tested self-report measures with behavioral rubrics, reflective journals, attendance, attrition, and fidelity records. Evaluation criteria should be specified before implementation and should include feasibility, acceptability, safety, effect sizes, confidence

intervals, and maintenance of change. Multi-site studies should additionally test measurement invariance and institution-level variation.

Progressive Structure and Significance

The modular design follows the interdependent logic of the core competence triad: Stage 1 creates the entry point for psychological participation by building psychological safety and emotional awareness; Stage 2 provides core internal psychological resources through self-esteem reconstruction; Stage 3 realizes the ultimate goal of psychological competence development by promoting the transformation of competencies into stable, automatic behaviors.

This design addresses two major drawbacks of traditional mental health education—passive knowledge instillation and isolated skill training. Through a hierarchical instructional arrangement, it fosters the synergistic development of the three core competencies, framing active learning as a developmentally meaningful educational mechanism rather than a mere collection of fragmented activities. More importantly, it aligns the teaching modules with the core logic of the conceptual framework, rendering active learning an operational pathway for integrated competence development and achieving the organic integration of theory and practice.

PROPOSED INTERVENTION PATHWAYS

Three interrelated intervention pathways are proposed to explain how active learning modules may support psychological competence within a Pedagogical Input-Psychological Mediating Process-Developmental Outcome framework. The pathways are conceptual generalizations, not verified causal mechanisms. They identify plausible processes for future testing and should be interpreted as adaptable rather than universally applicable.

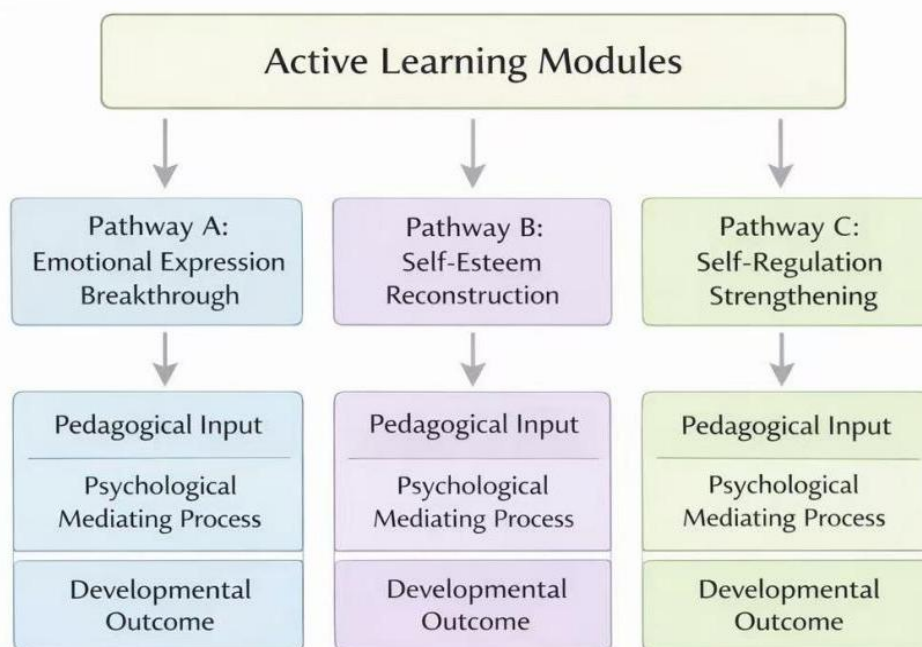


Figure 4. Three Intervention Pathways of Active Learning for Psychological Competence Development.

Pathway A: Active Interaction and Adaptive Emotional Expression

This pathway addresses emotional inhibition that may be associated with evaluation anxiety, face-related concerns, and insufficient psychological safety in some Chinese classroom contexts (Mai et al., 2024). The relevance and intensity of these barriers should be assessed locally rather than assumed for all students.

Pedagogical Input: Low-risk interactive activities, including anonymous emotional sharing, small-group guided discussion, and peer emotional agreement-making, are designed to construct a decentralized, non-judgmental classroom atmosphere (Vîşcu, 2024).

Mediating Mechanisms: Peer resonance reduces social defensiveness, alleviating the loneliness and shame associated with emotional suppression (Shah & Galantino, 2019); meanwhile, vocabulary expansion and bodily awareness training enhance students' capacity to identify and articulate their emotions (Velmurugan et al., 2025).

Developmental Outcome: Students may progress from limited emotional awareness toward conscious identification and moderate, context-appropriate expression. Active participation and guided practice are expected to provide opportunities that lecture-based instruction alone may not fully offer (De-Damas-González & Gomariz-Vicente, 2020).

Pathway B: Strengths-Based Practice and Self-Esteem Reconstruction

This pathway links self-esteem development to concrete active learning practices, addressing the limitation of isolated self-esteem research and the short-term effects of traditional verbal encouragement (Yaremko, 2023).

Pedagogical Input: Strength-oriented experiential activities, including peer strength evaluation, collaborative task completion, and social scenario simulation, are designed to help students rediscover their personal capabilities and receive authentic positive feedback (Dunn, 2022).

Mediating Mechanisms: Continuous successful experiences gradually loosen negative self-narratives, while self-compassion and cognitive challenge activities support the positive reinterpretation of failures, reducing the erosion of self-esteem (Jeon & Jo, 2022).

Developmental Outcome: Students are expected to develop more stable, practice-based self-esteem characterized by competence and self-acceptance. This resource may subsequently support emotional expression and self-regulation, although the sequence and strength of these relationships require empirical testing.

Pathway C: Reflective Practice and Adaptive Self-Regulation Strengthening

This pathway is intended to address the knowledge-behavior gap in conventional self-regulation teaching (Martínez Díaz, 2023) by explaining how active learning may facilitate the practice and real-world application of regulation strategies.

Pedagogical Input: Reflective and practice-oriented activities, including emotional reflective journals, teacher-guided discussion, regulation skill training, conflict role-playing, and personalized coping plans, are designed to convert classroom experiences into structured opportunities for self-observation and iterative practice (Velmurugan et al., 2025).

Mediating Mechanisms: Through the experience-reflection-adjustment-practice cycle, students develop emotional metacognition—identifying emotional triggers, recognizing response patterns, and evaluating the effectiveness of coping strategies—aligning closely with the reflective observation stage of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984).

Developmental Outcome: Students are expected to develop context-adaptive self-regulation strategies and translate abstract knowledge into practical tools for academic and interpersonal pressure. Improved regulation may, in turn, support healthier emotional expression and more stable self-esteem, forming a hypothesized positive growth cycle (Cercado-Acosta et al., 2025).

Integrative Significance of the Three Pathways

The three pathways form an integrated conceptual system. A single well-designed activity may engage all three processes: interpersonal conflict role-playing can provide practice in emotional expression (Pathway A), create competence feedback relevant to self-esteem (Pathway B), and support self-regulation through reflective discussion (Pathway C).

This example illustrates the paper's central conceptual argument: active learning can be designed as a coordinated educational mechanism rather than as a collection of unrelated activities. If supported empirically, such an approach would represent a shift from knowledge transmission toward practical psychological competence development.

EDUCATIONAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Educational and Practical Implications

The conceptual framework and phased pedagogical design offer preliminary, context-sensitive guidance for Chinese university mental health education in four areas:

Curriculum Design: Move from exclusively lecture-based knowledge transmission toward a student-centered and progressively structured curriculum. Courses should link explicit objectives, experiential activities, reflection, and follow-up while remaining integrated with wider curriculum and support systems (Hargreaves et al., 2025; Kakunje, 2023; Zhang & Liu, 2025).

Teaching Practice: Transform teachers' roles from knowledge transmitters to participation facilitators, reflective practice guides and psychological safety builders. Incorporate non-judgmental emotional response and guided discussion into teacher training, building an interactive education ecosystem of teachers, students and peers (Gunawardena et al., 2024).

Educational Positioning: Shift from remedial intervention for distressed students to universal developmental prevention for all. Align with Positive Psychology's goal (Zhao, 2025), integrate mental health education into campus life, and proactively cultivate psychological resources to build resilience and prevent problems.

Institutional Development: Avoid uncritical transplantation of any single Western framework. Institutions should use local needs assessment to determine how collectivism, emotional restraint, academic pressure, discipline, campus culture, and student diversity should shape group work, expression options, and referral support (Guo, 2025).

Conclusion

This paper proposes a culturally responsive conceptual framework linking active learning with the coordinated development of emotional expression, self-esteem, and self-regulation among Chinese university students. Grounded in ELT and Positive Psychology, it integrates the three constructs into an interdependent system, translates theoretical principles into a ten-module design and three intervention pathways, and explicitly treats cultural characteristics as adaptable contextual considerations rather than fixed attributes.

The intended contributions are threefold: theoretically, the framework specifies possible links between active learning and psychological competence in a collectivist context; pedagogically, it organizes active learning as a staged mechanism rather than a set of fragmented activities; and practically, it provides implementation and evaluation guidance that can be examined, refined, or rejected through empirical research.

As a conceptual study, this paper does not provide empirical evidence of effectiveness, causal direction, mediation, or moderation. The proposed pathways may also oversimplify substantial variation across Chinese universities and students, including differences by region, institution type, discipline, year level, gender, socioeconomic background, prior mental health education, family environment, and campus culture. Future research should: (1) pilot the modules and assess feasibility, acceptability, implementation fidelity, and safety; (2) use multi-site quasi-experimental or cluster-randomized pre-test-post-test designs across universities and disciplines; (3) employ validated, culturally adapted measures and test measurement invariance across demographic groups; (4) examine mediation, moderation, and institution-level effects using longitudinal and multilevel models; (5) include follow-up assessments, such as 3-, 6-, and 12-month evaluations, to determine whether changes are sustained; and (6) report facilitator training, activity dosage, attendance, attrition, protocol deviations, and evaluation criteria in sufficient detail to support replication.

Overall, the framework proposes that active learning may support psychological competence by creating a safe, reflective, and experiential environment in which emotional expression, self-esteem, and self-regulation can be practiced together. Its educational value and cross-cultural transferability remain to be established through rigorous multi-site and longitudinal research. Subject to such testing, the framework may offer a useful localized reference for the development of competence-oriented mental health education in Chinese universities and other collectivist contexts.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This conceptual article is based on analysis of published literature and does not involve human participants, animals, identifiable personal information, or primary data collection. Therefore, formal ethics approval was not required. Any future empirical implementation of the proposed framework should obtain approval from the relevant institutional ethics committee before data collection.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current conceptual study. The literature sources discussed in this article are available through the cited publications.

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