

Moving Forward with Social-Emotional Learning: Practical Strategies and Reflections for English Language Teachers

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Framing the Issue

Social-emotional learning (SEL)—albeit in diverse forms, names, and approaches—has been present in education for many years. From early scholars such as Dewey, who advocated for education to be grounded in experience and reflective thinking (Dewey, 1933), to Freire’s emphasis on critical pedagogy and the importance of sociocultural contexts in learning (Freire, 2005), the vision of cultivating well-rounded individuals capable of critical thinking, emotional awareness, and social engagement has been a consistent thread in educational philosophy. In recent times, SEL’s influence has extended to English language teaching (ELT), where its principles are recognized as integral to language acquisition and student well-being. Research underscores the integration of SEL in ELT as not merely beneficial but essential for the holistic development of language learners (Pentón Herrera, 2023). This literature review explores the burgeoning nexus of SEL and ELT, revealing why the incorporation of SEL is crucial in language education contexts.

SEL has many definitions and conceptualizations around the world. However, the authors agree with Osher et al.’s definition that SEL is the process “by which children and adults acquire and apply competencies to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle personal and interpersonal situations constructively” (p. 645). In ELT, these competencies are particularly salient, as language teaching and learning are inextricably linked with social interaction and cultural exchange (Dewaele

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et al., 2019; Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021, 2022). The interplay between language learning and SEL becomes apparent when considering the affective factors of language acquisition, such as the role of emotions in second language speech (Yu, 2022), and the impact of teacher–student relationships on language development (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Furthermore, the communicative approach to language teaching, with its emphasis on authentic interaction, aligns closely with SEL principles, fostering not just language skills but also the social and emotional competencies that facilitate communication across cultural boundaries (Richards, 2006).

The foundation of SEL in ELT is supported by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which posits that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition (Vygotsky, 1978). In language classrooms, this interaction is not only a medium for linguistic exchange but also a channel for social and emotional engagement (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Moreover, Krashen's affective filter hypothesis suggests that emotional states can influence language acquisition, whereas lower affective filters facilitate the intake of new linguistic information (Krashen, 1982). Emotions and affective concerns, therefore, are not peripheral in ELT; they are central to the processes of language teaching and learning, shaping the way students and teachers perceive and engage with the language.

Making the Case

Given the social nature of language learning, where the affective filter can either facilitate or hinder language acquisition, SEL offers a framework for lowering this filter. By equipping learners with the tools to manage stress, build resilience, and engage positively with their peers, SEL enhances the learning environment. It allows learners to take linguistic risks without fear of unhelpful emotional consequences. This is particularly crucial in multicultural and multilingual classrooms, where learners must navigate the complexities of a new language along with differing cultural expectations and norms. As such, SEL becomes not only a complement to language instruction but a vital component of it, fostering an atmosphere in which learners can thrive both linguistically and emotionally (Pentón Herrera, 2020, 2023).

Contemporary studies illustrate the beneficial effects of SEL on language learners' academic performance and well-being. Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba (2021) argue that SEL practices in ELT classrooms lead to enhanced student motivation, improved attitudes toward learning, and increased empathy toward peers. SEL is also linked to better classroom behavior and higher academic achievement (Pentón Herrera & McNair, 2021; McNair & Pentón Herrera, 2022), which are critical factors in the language-learning journey. Moreover, SEL has been found to be a powerful tool to lower undesired emotions, while increasing confidence and enjoyment in ELT (Mueller & Pentón Herrera, 2023). Similar to students, SEL offers many benefits to English language teachers (Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021). Scholars agree that teachers equipped with SEL strategies and higher

emotional intelligence are better prepared to create inclusive classrooms that address language learners' emotional and cultural diversity (Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2022; Burgin et al., 2023). This is particularly relevant in multicultural and multilingual settings, where students often navigate complex social and emotional landscapes. However, despite the growing recognition of its importance for students and teachers alike, SEL remains underutilized in many ELT programs and classrooms.

Although SEL in ELT remains a new and growing field, the literature decisively points to its critical role in creating positive learning spaces for students and teachers alike (Kovats Sánchez et al., 2022). SEL enriches the language-learning and teaching experience while preparing students and teachers to navigate the emotional complexities inherent in education and beyond. As the global landscape of language education continues to shift, SEL stands as a vital component in addressing the affective needs of learners and educators alike. In moving forward, ELT practitioners and researchers are encouraged to explore further and document the multifaceted applications of SEL. There is a need for more empirical studies that examine the long-term effects of SEL on language proficiency and its potential to transform language-teaching methodologies. As SEL gains traction in the field of ELT, it promises to redefine the contours of language education, making a compelling case for its widespread adoption.

Pedagogical Implications

How might SEL in English language teaching look? Educators can start by considering their students' ages and language proficiencies to select or modify ideas that can be integrated within lessons seamlessly. The following examples provide concrete ways that can be used in any English language classroom, as the ideas can easily be modified to meet the needs of students regardless of their age or language level.

Selecting Texts with Emotions

Educators can make conscious decisions about what texts they select for students to read that help them identify, label, and express emotions. Books can tap into a variety of emotions that can help students to develop a way to communicate their feelings and needs. By carefully selecting books, the first step is made. Then, time is needed within lessons so that these concepts are not rushed and can become a part of regular discussions. You can also have the books available for students in a classroom library (if possible), read them to students, or have students read them in pairs. The goal would be to provide students with the language to be able to express themselves when they go through a range of emotions in school, work, or life in general. Scholastic is one venue to find books for young children, as noted in the article *20 Children's Books About Feelings Every Kid Should Read Before Turning 8* (Scholastic, 2023). Moreover, for a wider range of ages, you can find

ideas in the article 15 *Visual Books to Help Students Grapple with Big Feelings* (Hinds, 2023).

Using Positive Psychology

Have you considered having students write three positives for every negative? The lesson could include language objectives, such as vocabulary related to positivity and negativity while benefiting students by helping them see how positives in their lives can outweigh negatives. For a younger student, this might be having them talk about their favorite times in school, such as playtime and science experiments, as opposed to a time they might not care for as much, such as math assessments. For older students, the focus could be on positives related to their academic and potential career success by having students research qualities needed for different positions and connect them to their own positive characteristics, while reflecting on one area that they can continue to build. In the same way, using three positives for every constructive comment, educators can balance their feedback to students for them to feel successful while knowing they can also work toward goals (Carr, 2020).

Playing Games Related to Your Local Environment

An interesting game that brings in nature within your local environment can help students from the area as well as students new to the area learn about their surroundings. It also provides the opportunity to then go outside and look for natural things, such as different types of plants, trees, and birds. It can be very engaging for both those that are knowledgeable about nature in the area and those that are not because some of the same things might exist in other areas. For example, a common plant in China, such as bamboo, is seen in many other areas. A well-known tree in Brazil is the palm tree, which also grows in many other places around the world, and a common bird in the United States, such as a sparrow, is very populous throughout the world. Thus, students can learn about the names of these things from their environment and go out in search of them as a class. Then, they can write about how they feel after going out for their walk in nature. For other outdoor nature games, see the article 25 *Best Outdoor Nature Games for Kids*. The games are intended to help with building resilience. You will note that many of them can be adapted for older students as well (Emotionally Healthy Kids, 2023).

Making Sure You Know Every Student

An easy way to track what you know about students is by having a simple chart, such as the one shown in Figure 1. Start by typing or writing in everyone's name. Then, as you get to know them, check the boxes. As you might know, some students are very easy to get to know because they are very vocal about their lives, what they like, and so on. However, by keeping track of what you know about

students, you can make a concerted effort to talk to the students who are not as readily conversational. It is important to create activities to make sure you can get to know them better, since establishing rapport with students can help them feel comfortable enough to ask you questions about assignments and other concerns they might have in school.

Walking in My Shoes Activity

Having students create posters with either drawings or photos about themselves (which they can find online if they do not have any of their own) is an easy and engaging way to have students share more about themselves. That will not only help you check off more boxes if you are filling out the chart from Figure 1 but will also help students feel welcomed. They will notice that you care enough about them to get to know them. For students that might not know what to include, you can have them start by simply talking about their day right before coming to school or your class. Make sure to post these around the classroom to have students do a gallery walk to learn about each other, and the posters can remain on the walls so that students see themselves as part of the class. On the Web site Colorín Colorado, there is an article that includes many excellent videos that bring this to light, see *How to Create a Welcoming Classroom Environment for ELLs* to observe in action how this can work (Colorín Colorado, 2016). As you look through the videos, think about:

- How might creating a welcoming environment help with success in the classroom?
- What are ways you have (or might try) to create an inclusive classroom climate and culture?

Creating Opportunities for Transformative SEL

Use the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) Framework (2023, www.casel.org) to think about creating more of a sense of identity, agency, and collaboration among the diverse students in your classroom. One of a special issues series by CASEL is titled, *Equity & Social Emotional Learning: A Cultural Analysis* (Jagers et al., 2018). Here the authors explain potential concerns and opportunities for multilingual learners from diverse

NAME OF STUDENT	KNOW THEIR NAME	KNOW A PERSONAL STORY ABOUT THEM	KNOW THEIR ACADEMIC LEVEL

Figure 1 Checklist to help you verify that you know about your students.

cultures within the five key areas of the overall CASEL framework: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Instructional approaches, such as project-based learning, community building, and cultural integration can all be effective strategies to help students develop an appreciation for their own identities and cultural perspectives as they establish a real sense of belonging within their classroom environments. Opportunities to work toward social justice by valuing diverse assets and increasing agency and voice can transform expectations and achievement for all learners. See the article, *In Pursuit of Educational Equity and Excellence* (Jagers et al., 2021) to read more examples of how to understand and create transformative SEL experiences for your students.

Using the Multilingual Learners Hub

A new resource developed through the College of Education at Towson University, Maryland is an open-access hub for teachers and families of multilingual learners. The ML Hub (<https://wp.towson.edu/tesol/>) contains practical learning modules, classroom video examples, webinars, and links to toolkits and Web sites that can be easily searched to help educators learn to build on the assets and scaffold their support for multilingual learners in their classrooms. Many of the modules under the “All Educators” section of the ML Hub support SEL applications and practical ways to enhance the social-emotional skills and attitudes of students. For example, some of these learning modules are titled, *Building a Respectful and Caring Culture in the Classroom*, *Social-Emotional Learning for Multilingual Learners*, *Trauma-Informed Supports for Multilingual Learners*, and *Wellness for Multilingual Learners*. Use the ML Hub to gain practical knowledge to apply in your own classroom or to share with families.

Being the Teacher You Needed

What teachers do you remember fondly? Were they caring and supportive? Hopefully you can name at least a few that were there for you. However, growing up you might have experienced teachers that perhaps were not. Maybe you had teachers that scolded you for talking too much or took away your playtime if you did not bring in your homework completed, without considering why you did those things. Those teachers could have provided group work, for example, where you would have time to talk. The teachers could also have looked further into why homework was not getting completed, and helped you stay up-to-date rather than be punitive. Think about how wonderful it would have been to be the teacher you needed and be that teacher.

SEE ALSO: Can-Do Statements; Second Language Learning Anxiety; Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in the English Language Classroom

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Online Resources

- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. <https://casel.org>
- Schoolwide SEL in International Settings. <https://schoolguide.casel.org/schoolwide-sel-in-international-settings/>
- Multilingual Learners Hub (ML Hub). <https://wp.towson.edu/tesol/>
- Colorín Colorado. *Social and emotional support for ELs and immigrant students*. <https://www.colorincolorado.org/teaching-ells/creating-welcoming-classroom/social-emotional-support-ells-and-immigrant-students>