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CHAPTER 1

Introducing Teaching for a Better World: Cultivating Social-Emotional Learning in English Language Pedagogy

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Introduction

We have arrived at a crucial moment where we must recognize that education is no longer what it used to be. Before the advent of technology and artificial intelligence (AI), education often resembled a transactional process, where information was deposited into passive students by teachers, rather than fostering an environment of active engagement and critical thinking (Freire, 2014). Then, pioneering scholars and educators in various contexts, such as John Dewey in the United States (Dewey, 1938) and Ana Echegoyen de Cañizares in Cuba (Aguayo Sánchez & Echegoyen de Cañizares, 1938), opposed those “traditional” learning models, advocating for a progressive approach to education. In these discussions, progressive education signified a shift toward more dynamic, student-centered learning experiences that promote active participation, critical thinking, and the holistic development of the individual. Now, in present times, contemporary global challenges compel the field of education to traverse yet a new horizon—social-emotional education. In this new perspective of education, the goal is to educate individuals who will be not only critical thinkers and active learners, but also thoughtful human beings who will support and work toward the sustainability of a peaceful world and a healthy natural environment.

The call for social-emotional education, as conceptualized in modern discourse, can be traced back to early educational theorists who emphasized the importance of social and emotional development in learning. Jean Piaget, primarily known for his cognitive development theory (Piaget, 1964), indirectly contributed to the understanding of social-emotional education through his stages of child development, which include the development of empathy and moral reasoning as integral aspects of cognitive growth. Around the same time, Albert Bandura and Richard H. Walters (1963) introduced *social learning theory*, which emphasized the importance of modeling, observation, and imitation in learning. Their work provided a framework for understanding how emotional regulation and prosocial behavior develop through social interaction—concepts that would later become central to social-emotional learning (SEL). Similarly, Lev Vygotsky's social-constructivist approach (Vygotsky, 1978) also provides a direct foundation for SEL, highlighting the role of social interactions in cognitive development and emphasizing the sociocultural context of emotional growth. Later, contemporary neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1994) demonstrated how emotions are integral to rational thought and decision-making. His work reinforces the idea that emotional processes are not separate from, but central to, cognitive development and social behavior—thereby further validating SEL as a vital teaching element that supports both intellectual and emotional growth. These differing perspectives historically guided distinct educational trends. However, contemporary SEL approaches seek to synthesize various views such as these, recognizing that cognitive, emotional, and social development are interconnected processes that enrich the teaching and learning experience alike.

Building on these and other foundational insights concerned with individuals' development, the pioneering work and publications by Maurice J. Elias et al. (1997) helped ensure that social-emotional education became operationalized as SEL, giving practitioners tools and guidance on how to incorporate SEL into their learning environments. For clarity, although SEL is not new in the field of education, it can be considered an innovative educational perspective in English language teaching (ELT), given the relative infancy of research in this area and the limited publications that specifically address its integration into ELT practices (Pentón Herrera, 2024a). To further elaborate, SEL focuses on the development of core competencies like emotional intelligence, empathy, and resilience, along with the traditional goals of critical thinking and active learning (Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021). By doing so, SEL aims to sculpt informed, competent individuals and compassionate citizens committed to fostering a harmonious society

and preserving a viable natural world (Durlak et al., 2011; Elias et al., 2014; Zins et al., 2004). Such an approach aligns with the emerging recognition of well-being and identity as critical components of language education, acknowledging that learners' social and emotional development is inseparable from their cognitive growth (Pentón Herrera, 2024b).

So what, then, is the role of the English language and English language education in supporting the academic and social-emotional growth and well-being of teachers and students alike? As the lingua franca of the world, English occupies a unique space where cultural exchange, communication, and emotional expression converge. The teaching of English must then evolve beyond grammar and vocabulary instruction, and embrace critical competencies such as understanding diverse perspectives, forming relationships across cultures, and developing a global mindset. In this context, SEL becomes not just an addendum but a cornerstone of effective English pedagogy, facilitating learning spaces where empathy and understanding are as crucial as linguistic competence, and where students' social-emotional growth is seen as not only important, but vital for a peaceful and sustainable future. It is at this juncture and realization that we, the editors and contributors of this volume, recognize the importance of teaching from the heart—a place where the profound interplay of language, cognition, and emotion shapes teachers' and our students' minds, and the very fabric of what we consider to be a compassionate and interconnected world.

Throughout this book, individually and collectively, we fervently advocate for SEL not merely as a supplementary practice but as a fundamental pedagogical stance. This distinction underscores our belief that SEL transcends traditional teaching methodologies, embedding itself into the very essence of educational philosophy and approach. To conceive SEL as pedagogy in ELT means to recognize it as the backbone of curriculum design, instructional strategies, and classroom interactions. Such a shift moves beyond treating SEL as an accessory or add-on to making it the lens through which all aspects of education are viewed—where learning objectives are intertwined with social-emotional competencies, and where the cultivation of empathy, resilience, and emotional intelligence is as intentional as the teaching of academic content.

Embedding SEL into the pedagogical architecture of English education involves reimagining how we engage with language and literature to foster deeper connections with texts and with the diverse narratives and experiences they represent. Embracing SEL as a pedagogical stance and practice prompts educators to create learning environments that prioritize emotional literacy and intelligence alongside linguistic proficiency, thereby preparing

students to navigate the complexities of global citizenship with compassion and understanding (Pentón Herrera & Darragh, 2024; Silver & Blue, 2024). By positioning SEL at the heart of ELT pedagogy, we commit to nurturing learners who are proficient in English and possess the social and emotional acumen to contribute meaningfully to a more empathetic and interconnected world. This holistic approach to teaching and learning, we believe, heralds a transformative journey for educators and students alike, marking a departure from conventional pedagogy to one that truly teaches from the heart.

SEL in ELT: Current State and Future Directions

SEL has only begun to gain international attention and traction in the ELT field, especially after the pioneer book *Social-Emotional Learning in the English Language Classroom: Fostering Growth, Self-Care, and Independence* (Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021) was released in 2021. However, it is important to clarify that before this book, there were a handful of publications that explored the intersections of SEL and multilingual learners of English (MLEs)—primarily in the United States—focusing on how SEL strategies could address the unique challenges faced by this population, such as language acquisition barriers, cultural adjustment, and social integration. For example, Kate Niehaus and Jill L. Adelson (2014) examined the link between parental involvement and social-emotional well-being, showing that stronger home-school connections were associated with fewer social-emotional concerns among MLEs. Similarly, M. Beatriz Arias and Milagros Morillo-Campbell (2008) emphasized the importance of culturally responsive family outreach in building supportive educational environments that foster both academic and social-emotional development.

Furthermore, research by Elizabeth Vera et al. (2017) and Sara Maria Castro-Olivo (2014) explored the socio-emotional experiences and targeted interventions adopted by schools to support MLEs. Vera et al. (2017) emphasized the importance of multicultural sensitivity and teacher support, revealing how adverse experiences like bullying and social exclusion often undermine students' sense of belonging. On the other hand, helpful interactions with peers and educators, particularly in supportive environments, demonstrated the potential to foster resilience and motivation. Complementing these findings, Castro-Olivo's (2014) evaluation of the culturally adapted *Jóvenes Fuertes* (Strong Teens) SEL program for Latino MLEs highlighted its success in enhancing SEL knowledge and social-emotional

resilience. The study underscored the critical role of culturally responsive interventions in addressing the unique challenges of acculturative stress and social segregation faced by Latino adolescents. Together, these early studies affirm that integrating SEL practices, especially those that are culturally sensitive, is vital for empowering MLEs to navigate both their academic and social-emotional landscapes effectively.

The aforementioned publications laid the groundwork for understanding the role of SEL in addressing the dual academic and social-emotional needs of MLEs, serving as a springboard for more practical and teaching-focused publications. For example, at the time of writing this chapter (April, 2025), three practitioner-oriented monographs have been published in ELT: the seminal work introducing SEL as a teaching approach in ELT (Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021), a more expansive and conceptual book that centers teacher and student well-being (Pentón Herrera & Darragh, 2024), and a guidebook on planning and implementing SEL in ELT (Hasper & Pentón Herrera, 2024). Together with earlier practitioner-focused works (e.g., Abdel Razeq, 2020; Pentón Herrera, 2020), these publications have catalyzed academic forums, conferences, and workshops globally. Such teacher-led conversations have contributed to what Nurdan K. Ulutaş (2024) describes as a “surge in attention towards SEL” (p. 202) in ELT. This increased focus aligns with bibliometric trends showing SEL’s expanding prominence in educational research worldwide (Haruna & Isa, 2024).

In addition to the practitioner-led insights aforementioned, as of January 2025, two special issues have been curated focusing on SEL in ELT. The first special issue, curated by the *Journal of English Learner Education*, included seven articles exploring SEL in the United States and Taiwan. These articles addressed diverse aspects of SEL implementation, such as the theoretical underpinnings of SEL (Pentón Herrera, 2020), its adaptation for culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Cuocci & Arndt, 2020), and strategies for incorporating SEL into language instruction (Melani et al., 2020). For example, Sophie Cuocci and Rebeca Arndt (2020) highlighted the criticality for SEL frameworks to be tailored to MLEs’ needs, emphasizing linguistic and cultural adaptations to meet their unique emotional and educational requirements. Matthew Nall (2020) advocated for a “gardener model” of teaching, integrating play and apprenticeship in second-language classrooms to promote SEL. Other studies, such as one by Chin-Wen Chien (2020), investigated Taiwanese English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers’ contextualized vocabulary and grammar instruction, aligning it with SEL principles. Dylan Thibaut and Irina McLaughlin (2020) examined teacher preparation programs, emphasizing the importance of linguistic inclusion

and awareness in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) courses to enhance SEL integration. Collectively, these works underscore SEL's transformative potential in diverse ELT contexts.

The second special issue, edited by Luis Javier Pentón Herrera (2024a) and published in *Anglica: An International Journal of English Studies*, brought together a diverse array of research showcasing the innovative applications of SEL in English language education across varied cultural and educational contexts. This special issue included seven articles that delved into how SEL principles addressed the multifaceted challenges of language education, ranging from supporting multilingual refugee families to integrating SEL into teacher training programs. For example, Kathleen McGovern and Vahdat Yeganeh (2024) explored the transformative role of devised drama as an SEL tool for adult learners, fostering emotional awareness and resilience through creative collaboration. Similarly, Wafa Hiwari et al. (2024) illuminated the barriers and opportunities for integrating SEL into Palestinian EFL classrooms, highlighting the urgent need for professional development and institutional support. These contributions underscored SEL's capacity to foster emotional growth and improve learner outcomes in linguistically and culturally diverse settings.

Another significant focus of the special issue was the role of SEL in fostering social and emotional skills through innovative pedagogical strategies. For instance, Fares Karam and Eleni Oikonomidou (2024) examined the role of culturally responsive SEL practices in resettlement contexts, demonstrating how values like mindfulness and mutual respect supported refugee-background families' language learning. Meanwhile, Mohammed Elmeski and Adil Bentahar (2024) investigated the integration of SEL into pre-service teacher preparation programs in Morocco, identifying gaps in addressing stress management and collaboration skills. Additionally, Anna Pereszlényi and Rita Divéki (2024) explored how engaging university students in discussions about controversial topics fostered empathy and emotional growth alongside language proficiency. Collectively, these studies emphasized the importance of embedding SEL into the broader frameworks of ELT to enhance not only academic success but also the holistic development of learners and teachers alike (O'Brien et al., 2024). This special issue established a robust foundation for future research and practical applications of SEL in English language education globally (Martínez-Alba, 2024).

Emerging directions in SEL research highlight the need to address its intersections with political ideologies and environmental challenges. One promising avenue is the critical examination of how SEL initiatives—and even the vocabulary used to refer to SEL practices—are shaped by and

respond to sociopolitical contexts, particularly amid global debates on education's role in fostering values and ideologies. Future studies could investigate how SEL can navigate these divides to affirm its educational neutrality while empowering teachers and learners with emotional resilience and critical thinking skills. Another direction lies in exploring SEL's application to environmental education, as exemplified by Edward Rutledge and Marni Manegre's (2024) ecolinguistic approach, and Hannah Mueller and Luis Javier Pentón Herrera's (2023) advocacy for nature journaling as SEL in ELT. Integrating SEL with environmental education could promote empathy, collaboration, and social responsibility, equipping learners to face ecological challenges. These innovative points have the potential to expand the scope of present conversations in SEL, reinforcing its relevance in equipping individuals to navigate complex societal and environmental issues.

Book Organization and Chapters

In this groundbreaking edited collection—the first of its kind!—we have curated contributions to guide English educators striving to integrate SEL into their pedagogy, research, and language teaching practices. This volume sheds light on the multifaceted role of English educators who are tasked to teach language while also nurturing the hearts and minds of our students. The chapters herein explore conceptual approaches, empirical inquiries, and practical applications of SEL within English language pedagogy. By drawing on a wealth of international perspectives and insights, we hope to offer a comprehensive look at how SEL can be seamlessly woven into the fabric of English language education to enhance both linguistic proficiency and emotional literacy. This integrated approach embodies the essence of teaching for a better world, where language learning is not just an academic exercise but a transformative journey that enriches teachers' and students' lives.

The book is divided into three main sections. In part 1, “Conceptual Pieces,” contributions encompass theory exploration, synthesis of ideas, framework development, critique, proposition of ideas, and identification of gaps within the SEL and ELT landscape. In part 2, “Empirical Studies,” the authors report on data-based studies, shedding light on the promise and opportunities for including SEL in English language pedagogy. Lastly, in part 3, “Practical Examples,” contributors provide real-world instances, vignettes, case studies, lesson plans, best practices, and tangible illustrations that demonstrate the application of SEL across different spaces around the world. Individually, each chapter is a profound journey, and in unison, they compose a symphony of insights that enrich our understanding of SEL's

transformative potential in English language education. In the subsections that follow, we introduce each chapter.

Part 1: Conceptual Pieces

This section introduces readers to conceptual underpinnings and explorations of SEL in ELT. The section begins with chapter 2, “Integrating Social-Emotional Learning into English Pedagogy: Prospects and Perspectives,” authored by Hamisu Hamisu Haruna and Azza Jauhar Ahmad Tajuddin. This chapter offers a powerful argument for embedding SEL into ELT through the lens of social justice, calling for culturally sensitive, contextually grounded approaches that extend beyond language acquisition to foster critical consciousness. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as Stephen Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis, Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, and Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy, the authors illustrate how SEL can promote both linguistic and emancipatory goals. Following this, chapter 3, “Social-Emotional Learning as a Culturally Responsive Approach to Connect with Multilingual Learners of English,” by Wing Shuen Lau, explores how SEL, when combined with culturally responsive teaching, enhances equity and inclusion in English language classrooms and teacher training, especially for MLEs.

Chapters 4 and 5 highlight how SEL frameworks can be contextually adapted to meet settings shaped by trauma and crisis. In chapter 4, “Promoting Social-Emotional Learning and Trauma-Sensitive Practices with Pre-Service Teachers in TESOL,” Amea Wilbur and Allyson Eamer present an autoethnographic dialogue exploring the integration of trauma-sensitive practices, SEL, and global competencies in Canadian pre-service TESOL programs. Through reflective narratives, the authors advocate for care-based, equity-oriented pedagogies that support both teacher and learner well-being. In chapter 5, “Wartime and Post-War Ukraine SEL Framework for ESP [English for Specific Purposes] Courses,” Serhii Petrenko, Iryna Zuyenok, and Nataliia Mochalova introduce a context-specific SEL framework designed for ESP courses in wartime and post-war Ukraine. Their wartime and post-war Ukraine SEL framework addresses emotional resilience, adaptability, and practical problem-solving as essential competencies for students navigating conflict and contributing to national recovery. Together, these chapters shed light on how SEL can be a transformative, context-responsive approach that supports both immediate classroom needs and broader social healing.

Part 2: Empirical Studies

This section brings together five empirical studies that examine how SEL is being implemented, adapted, and evaluated in diverse ELT contexts. Starting with chapter 6, “Familiarizing Pre-Service ESOL [English for Speakers of Other Languages] Teachers with the Social-Emotional Approach for Teaching Multilingual Learners of English,” Brian Hibbs presents a detailed account of a multimodule SEL course unit designed for undergraduate ESOL teacher candidates. Through a mixed-methods study, Hibbs explores how the unit influenced participants’ understanding of SEL, perceptions of their own emotional intelligence, and professional identity development. The study reveals that structured engagement with SEL principles enhanced the pre-service teachers’ emotional regulation and rational decision-making abilities. In chapter 7, “SEL Implications for Translation Assessment: Sentiment Analysis of Students’ Reflective Entries,” Tetiana Korol investigates the emotional dimensions of reflective journal writing in a translation classroom. Using sentiment analysis, Korol examines how emotional saturation in students’ reflections correlates with translation quality, demonstrating that both positive and negative emotional engagement can predict higher reflection quality and stronger translation performance.

Chapters 8, 9, and 10 each delve into context-specific explorations of teacher well-being, identity, and pedagogical engagement through SEL. In chapter 8, “Supporting Ukrainian Educators’ Well-Being in Pre-Service Teacher Training,” Olha Bilyk, Iryna Malyshevskaya, and Nataliia Pyliachyk present a qualitative case study focused on the integration of SEL practices to foster the well-being of Ukrainian pre-service teachers amid crisis-affected educational settings. In chapter 9, “Exploring Well-Being in the Language Teaching Context in Japan,” co-authors Lynsey Mori, Philip James Gurney, and Trevor Raichura investigate how English language instructors at a Japanese university conceptualize and maintain well-being using the Six Seconds SEL framework, revealing a gap between individual resilience and institutional support. And in chapter 10, “Portraits of Engaged Foreign Language Educators,” Nuria Alonso García, Jaime Demberio, and Martyna Kozłowska engage in a collaborative autoethnographic account that weaves their reflective narratives as language teachers, highlighting their commitment to inclusive pedagogy, student-centered SEL practices, and intercultural dialogue through their work on the CLIC (Culture, Language, Identity and Community) Project in Québec, Canada.

Part 3: Practical Examples

This final section showcases six grounded, practitioner-driven illustrations of SEL in action, offering readers real-world strategies, classroom-based practices, and innovative applications from practitioners in various ELT contexts around the world. The section begins with chapter 11, “A Portrait of Socio-Emotional Learning in the Kyrgyz Republic,” where Gulbarchyn Ergeshova, Gulrukh Mamatkasimova, Katie Miller, Aisuluu Syzdykova, and Chinara Zheenbekova offer a powerful case study documenting how educators across Kyrgyzstan are responding to systemic challenges—such as migration, trauma, and outdated pedagogies—by integrating SEL into teacher training and English classrooms. Chapter 12, “Fostering Social-Emotional Learning Through a Collaborative American-Ukrainian Wordless Graphic Narrative Project,” Alla Fridrikh and Małgorzata Durygin present a moving account of a transnational project where American and Ukrainian students co-created a wordless book reflecting the wartime experiences of Ukrainian youth, blending art, empathy, and intercultural dialogue. In chapter 13, “Happy Thoughts Foster Language Learning: Hands-On SEL in the University EFL [English as a foreign language] Classroom,” Samantha Mele and Nachayadar Srithum share a practical, SEL-infused lesson plan from a Thai university EFL context that helps reduce anxiety and foster collaborative learning through mindfulness, music, and meaningful peer interaction.

In chapter 14, “Promoting Nature Connection Through SEL in ELT,” Hannah Mueller explores how nature connection can help students cope with eco-anxiety while developing SEL competencies and pro-environmental behavior, offering experiential strategies like journaling and “Three Good Things in Nature” for ELT contexts. Chapter 15, “Colors of My Heart: A Multicolored Approach to Language and Emotional Development for English Learners,” by Heather Perry, introduces a vibrant, semiotics-based approach to SEL through color symbolism, enabling multilingual learners to explore emotional expression and cultural understanding via multisensory activities like Emotion Color Wheels and Cultural Color Charts. Finally, in the last chapter of this edited collection, chapter 16, “Social-Emotional Learning to Support Learners in Rural Low-Income Contexts in Honduras,” Grazzia Maria Mendoza Chirinos reports on a project where SEL was implemented at low-income, high-crime rural areas of Honduras. Drawing on national policies, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) initiatives, and grassroots partnerships, Mendoza Chirinos outlines a sustainable, community-integrated approach that supports school retention and emotional well-being.

Final Thoughts

We would like to end this editorial chapter with a line from *The Little Prince*: “It is the time you have spent with your rose that makes your rose so important” (de Saint-Exupéry, 2000, p. 64). In this simple yet profound reflection, we are reminded that what we give our time, energy, and care to becomes meaningful—not because of what it is, but because of how we choose to engage with it. The same can be said for teaching. Every moment we spend listening to students, building relationships, supporting their emotional needs, and creating space for joy and connection is what makes our work—education—so powerful. These are the moments when we realize that SEL, beyond being a framework or a checklist, is a lived practice. And they are also the moments that define our roses—our students, our classrooms, our communities, and our world.

As educators, we are constantly balancing multiple demands: assessments, curriculum standards, technological tools, and the rapid shifts in education policy. But at the heart of our work is the human element—the emotional lives of our learners and ourselves. Teaching for a better world requires recognizing that social-emotional competencies are not “extras”; they are at the core of why we do what we do, and why we choose to become educators. By embedding SEL into English language pedagogy, we are not just teaching grammar or vocabulary—we are planting the seeds of peace, emotional intelligence, and respect, in the hope that they will flourish into thriving flowers and trees across the world. We hope this volume affirms what many of us have long felt: that SEL is not something separate from our work as English teachers—it *is* our work. Whether we are supporting students through transitions, cultivating emotional literacy and intelligence through storytelling, or engaging in honest reflection about our own well-being as educators, we are always nurturing something beyond the academic. We are teaching from the heart. And in doing so, we are building classrooms—and lives—rooted in compassion, connection, respect, and hope. This, we believe, is what it truly means to teach for a better world.

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