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The Role of Social and Emotional Learning in Language

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Abstract

This article explores the integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) into language education, emphasizing its role in fostering learner motivation, confidence, and communicative competence. Drawing on established frameworks such as CASEL and key educational theories—including Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory, Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis, and Carl Rogers’ humanistic pedagogy—the paper highlights how emotional and interpersonal dynamics influence second language acquisition. It discusses the benefits of SEL-informed teaching, such as reduced anxiety, enhanced peer collaboration, and the development of emotional vocabulary. Practical strategies are provided, including mindfulness practices, storytelling, empathy-building tasks, and classroom norms that promote emotional safety. The paper also addresses limitations in implementation, such as time constraints, cultural considerations, and the challenge of assessment. Ultimately, it advocates for SEL as a core element of language instruction and calls for teacher training and curriculum development that reflect its value.

Keywords

Social and Emotional Learning, language education, affective filter, emotional intelligence, second language acquisition

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, language educators around the world have increasingly recognized that effective teaching involves more than delivering grammatical rules and vocabulary lists. Learning a language is an emotional journey—a process that is deeply influenced by learners’ self-awareness, motivation, interpersonal relationships, and overall emotional well-being. This is where Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) emerges not as a supplemental approach but as a core component of impactful language education.

Social and Emotional Learning refers to the process through which individuals acquire and apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve goals, feel and show empathy, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2023). Within the context of language education, SEL fosters an emotionally supportive environment where students feel safe to take linguistic risks, interact with others meaningfully, and express themselves authentically.

The integration of SEL in language classrooms has been shown to increase learner engagement, reduce language anxiety, and enhance both academic and interpersonal outcomes (Billy & Garríguez, 2021; Storey, 2019). For example, in a multilingual classroom, a teacher who practices SEL might use daily emotional check-ins where students express how they feel using new vocabulary, thus combining emotional

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expression with language development. Similarly, pair or group work becomes more than a linguistic task—it becomes an exercise in empathy, cooperation, and negotiation.

Research by Melani, Roberts, and Taylor (2020) demonstrates how SEL practices such as active listening, open-ended questioning, and emotional reflection can transform English as a Second Language (ESL) classes into spaces of deeper personal connection and more authentic communication. Emotional regulation skills are also critical when students face challenges, such as public speaking in a foreign language or misunderstanding idiomatic expressions, which often cause embarrassment or fear of judgment.

Furthermore, studies in neuroscience and child development suggest that emotional security is a prerequisite for sustained attention, memory retention, and motivation—three pillars of successful language acquisition (Nall, 2020). Bai, Shen, and Wang (2024) recently confirmed this in their large-scale study of Hong Kong secondary schools, concluding that students with high SEL exposure achieved significantly better outcomes in English language assessments.

Despite these promising findings, SEL remains underutilized in many language teaching contexts, particularly where test-based instruction dominates. Yet, as Kim and Hong (2019) point out in their comparative research across South Korea and the U.S., even modest incorporation of SEL principles can enhance classroom dynamics and promote inclusive learning environments.

The purpose of this article is to explore how Social and Emotional Learning can be meaningfully embedded into language education, particularly English language teaching (ELT). Drawing on interdisciplinary research, practical classroom applications, and theoretical models such as Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, this paper argues that SEL is not only beneficial but essential for fostering emotionally resilient, confident, and communicatively competent language learners.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

To understand the role of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in language education, it is essential to examine the foundational frameworks that explain how emotional and social competencies support learning. This section outlines the widely adopted CASEL framework, alongside educational theories that emphasize the interplay between emotion, cognition, and communication in the classroom.

2.1 The CASEL Framework

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) identifies five interrelated core competencies that define SEL:

1. **Self-awareness** – recognizing one's emotions, thoughts, and values and understanding how they influence behavior.
2. **Self-management** – regulating emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations, including managing stress and motivating oneself.
3. **Social awareness** – showing understanding and empathy for others, including those from diverse backgrounds.



4. **Relationship skills** – establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation, listening, and conflict resolution.
5. **Responsible decision-making** – making constructive choices about personal and social behavior.

In language classrooms, these competencies can directly support learners' communicative goals. For instance, when learners build **self-awareness**, they are more attuned to their learning needs and language anxiety. **Relationship skills** enhance collaborative tasks, while **social awareness** enriches intercultural communication and perspective-taking—core aspects of any second language use.

3.2 Sociocultural Foundations: Vygotsky's Social Development Theory

Vygotsky's Social Development Theory (1978) asserts that learning is fundamentally a social process, rooted in interaction. According to his concept of the **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)**, learners achieve more with the help of others—peers or teachers—than they can independently. This notion aligns seamlessly with SEL, which emphasizes interpersonal relationships and emotional support. For language learners, peer collaboration within the ZPD is not only cognitively enriching but also emotionally reinforcing. Teachers who foster supportive, trust-based environments are essentially practicing SEL by scaffolding both language and emotional growth.

3.3 Emotional Filters in Learning: Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) explains how emotional variables—such as motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety—can either facilitate or hinder language acquisition. When learners experience high anxiety or fear of making mistakes, their "affective filter" becomes elevated, blocking linguistic input. Conversely, in emotionally supportive settings where SEL is integrated, learners are more relaxed and receptive. Research by **Oz, Demirezen, and Pourfeiz (2015)** supports this view, showing that emotional intelligence significantly correlates with positive attitudes toward language learning.

3.4 Humanistic Language Teaching: Carl Rogers' Influence

The **humanistic approach to education**, deeply influenced by Carl Rogers, emphasizes learner autonomy, empathy, and emotional expression. Rogers believed that for meaningful learning to occur, the classroom must be a place of **unconditional positive regard**, where students feel valued and emotionally safe. Language teachers who use reflective activities, open dialogue, and personal storytelling embody this humanistic SEL perspective. As **Storey (2019)** notes, emotionally engaged learners not only retain more but also develop deeper connections with the language and each other.

Together, these theoretical perspectives underscore that language learning is not merely a cognitive process but an **affective and relational one**. Incorporating SEL principles ensures that learners are not only linguistically competent but also emotionally resilient, socially connected, and ready to use language as a tool for human interaction.

3.5 The Role of Emotions in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)



The field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has long acknowledged that emotional states significantly influence how effectively learners acquire and use a new language. Emotions are not peripheral to learning—they are **central agents that regulate attention, memory encoding, and motivation** (Nall, 2020). For example, a learner who feels anxious when speaking in class may avoid participation, even when their linguistic knowledge is sufficient. On the contrary, a student who feels confident and supported is more likely to take risks, engage actively, and persevere through difficulties.

Studies have increasingly highlighted how **positive emotional experiences** contribute to deeper language retention and fluency. Emotional intelligence, closely aligned with SEL principles, is positively associated with learners' attitudes, classroom engagement, and performance (Oz, Demirezen, & Pourfeiz, 2015). Bai, Shen, and Wang (2024) found that students exposed to emotionally responsive teaching practices demonstrated significant gains in English language test scores compared to those in traditionally structured classrooms.

Moreover, **language is inherently emotional**: learners must convey feelings, interpret tone, and manage cultural differences in interpersonal exchanges. Thus, fostering emotional awareness enhances not only learners' **internal readiness to acquire language** but also their **external competence in using it meaningfully**.

4. SEL AND ITS IMPACT ON LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Social and Emotional Learning has a tangible and measurable impact on how language learners experience, process, and use the target language. The integration of SEL in the classroom helps to create an atmosphere of **psychological safety** and **interpersonal trust**, both of which are foundational for communicative success.

4.1 Boosting Learner Motivation and Self-Confidence

Motivation is one of the strongest predictors of language acquisition success. SEL practices—such as goal setting, positive feedback, and recognition of personal progress—enhance learners' intrinsic motivation and encourage them to take ownership of their learning journey. According to **Billy and Garríguez (2021)**, students in SEL-integrated classrooms report greater self-confidence and persistence, particularly when faced with complex linguistic tasks or unfamiliar cultural content.

4.2 Reducing Speaking Anxiety and Fear of Mistakes

Fear of making mistakes is a well-documented barrier in language classrooms, especially in speaking activities. SEL helps to normalize error-making as part of the learning process by cultivating empathy, mutual support, and a non-judgmental atmosphere. **Melani, Roberts, and Taylor (2020)** observed that when learners are encouraged to express emotions and feel validated, their willingness to speak and experiment with language increases noticeably.

4.3 Enhancing Peer Collaboration and Classroom Relationships

Language learning thrives in collaborative settings. SEL competencies such as relationship-building and social awareness enable learners to work more effectively in pairs and groups. Tasks like role-playing,



group storytelling, and problem-solving activities benefit from students who can **listen actively, resolve disagreements constructively**, and support their peers emotionally (Kim & Hong, 2019). These relational dynamics not only enhance learning outcomes but also reflect the real-world use of language as a social tool.

4.4 Promoting Reflective Learning and Emotional Vocabulary Use

SEL encourages learners to reflect on their emotional states, which in turn supports metacognitive strategies. For instance, journaling about daily experiences or describing personal challenges in the target language nurtures both emotional awareness and language development. Additionally, learners exposed to SEL are more likely to expand their emotional vocabulary—words such as *frustrated*, *grateful*, *anxious*, or *hopeful*—enriching their expressive abilities and promoting authentic communication (Storey, 2019).

5. STRATEGIES FOR INTEGRATING SEL IN LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

Implementing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in the language classroom does not require an overhaul of existing curricula—it requires intentional practices that prioritize emotional engagement and social interaction. The following strategies illustrate how SEL can be seamlessly woven into daily language teaching practices to enhance both linguistic and personal development.

5.1 Mindfulness and Self-Awareness Activities

Mindfulness activities such as short breathing exercises, “emotion check-ins,” or guided visualization at the beginning of class help learners become aware of their emotional states. For example, teachers may begin a lesson by asking students to select a word that best describes their current mood and explain why, using the target language. This fosters **self-awareness**, supports vocabulary development, and creates a safe, reflective environment.

As **Nall (2020)** suggests, emotionally attuned learners are more capable of focusing, managing frustration, and participating constructively—critical factors in second language acquisition. Mindful pauses during tasks can also help reduce anxiety before speaking or presenting in front of peers.

5.2 Collaborative Learning Tasks

Group work naturally promotes **social awareness** and **relationship skills**, two core SEL competencies. Activities such as **think-pair-share**, jigsaw reading, or debate circles require learners to listen actively, negotiate meaning, and support one another’s contributions.

Teachers can encourage group roles—such as timekeeper, encourager, or clarifier—not only to share responsibility but also to cultivate empathy and mutual respect. **Kim and Hong (2019)** emphasize that when emotional and social dimensions are recognized in collaborative learning, students become more engaged and develop more meaningful peer relationships.

5.3 Storytelling and Roleplay with Emotional Themes



Storytelling is a powerful tool for connecting language, emotion, and identity. Asking students to narrate personal experiences, create stories around emotions (e.g., fear, joy, regret), or engage in **roleplay scenarios** that involve conflict or empathy allows them to explore emotional vocabulary in context.

For example, a roleplay in which a student pretends to comfort a sad friend in English not only activates useful expressions (“*I understand how you feel*”, “*I’m here for you*”) but also develops their **emotional intelligence**. As **Melani et al. (2020)** point out, language learning is enriched when it reflects real human emotions and relationships.

5.4 Journaling and Empathy Exercises

Written reflection gives students space to process their emotions in connection with language learning. Weekly journals in which learners write about classroom experiences, communication challenges, or moments of pride help them build both **metacognitive** and **emotional awareness**.

In addition, short exercises like writing letters of encouragement to classmates, expressing appreciation, or describing a situation from another person’s perspective support **empathy** and emotional vocabulary acquisition. These tasks build what **Storey (2019)** calls “language of the heart”—the expressive, nuanced use of language tied to lived experience.

5.5 Building Classroom Norms of Respect and Listening

Creating a classroom culture grounded in **respect, kindness, and active listening** is essential for SEL to flourish. Teachers can co-create community agreements with students—for example: “*We listen without interrupting*”, “*Mistakes are okay*”, or “*We support each other.*” These norms should be revisited regularly and integrated into classroom routines.

According to **Billy and Garríguez (2021)**, when students feel emotionally safe, they are more willing to contribute, make mistakes, and grow. The teacher’s consistent modeling of empathy, patience, and constructive feedback serves as the foundation for this emotional climate.

These strategies not only support language development but also foster a sense of belonging and emotional security, both of which are essential for meaningful learning. When SEL becomes a natural part of classroom life, learners thrive not just as students of a language, but as emotionally intelligent communicators.

6. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

While the integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in language education offers numerous benefits, it is not without challenges. Understanding these limitations is crucial for realistic and sustainable implementation.

6.1 Time Constraints in the Curriculum

Language curricula are often packed with grammatical objectives, vocabulary targets, and exam preparation requirements, leaving little room for non-linguistic content. Teachers may feel that there is insufficient time to devote to SEL activities, especially in exam-driven contexts. However, many SEL practices—such as



emotional journaling or pair discussions with reflective prompts—can be **embedded within existing language tasks** rather than treated as separate components.

6.2 Teachers' Readiness and Training in SEL

Another significant barrier is the **lack of professional training** in SEL among language educators. Teachers may feel ill-equipped to address students' emotional needs or may not be aware of how SEL principles translate into language learning contexts. As **Kim and Hong (2019)** suggest, even educators who support the idea of SEL often struggle to apply it in culturally appropriate and pedagogically effective ways. Without targeted training and ongoing support, SEL risks becoming an ideal more than a practical strategy.

6.3 Cultural Sensitivity in Expressing Emotions

Emotional expression varies widely across cultures. What is considered appropriate self-disclosure or interpersonal behavior in one setting may be perceived as intrusive or uncomfortable in another. This presents a unique challenge in **multicultural or EFL contexts**, where both teacher and students may navigate different emotional norms. As **Malloy (2019)** highlights, language educators must be sensitive to learners' emotional boundaries and remain respectful of cultural differences in communication style and emotional display.

6.4 Assessing Emotional Growth

Unlike linguistic skills, emotional competencies are difficult to measure using traditional assessment tools. Teachers may find it challenging to evaluate progress in areas like empathy, emotional regulation, or self-awareness. While reflective writing and behavioral observations can offer insight, there is a **lack of standardized tools** to assess SEL outcomes in language education. This can limit its perceived value in institutional settings that prioritize quantifiable results.

7. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite these challenges, the integration of Social and Emotional Learning into language teaching is both feasible and essential. Moving forward, stakeholders in education must consider the following recommendations to promote effective and inclusive SEL practices.

7.1 Call for SEL-Informed Teacher Training

Language teacher education programs should include dedicated modules on SEL, highlighting its relevance to student well-being, classroom management, and language acquisition. **Gkonou and Mercer (2017)** argue that language educators must not only understand emotional dynamics in the classroom but also develop their own emotional intelligence as part of professional growth. Workshops, mentoring, and reflective practice sessions can serve as accessible entry points.

7.2 Encourage Curriculum Designers to Embed SEL Goals

Curriculum developers should integrate SEL outcomes into language learning objectives. This can include lesson plans with empathy-driven tasks, materials that explore diverse emotions, and assessment rubrics that recognize interpersonal collaboration. As **Rivers and Brackett (2010)** demonstrated through the



RULER approach, embedding SEL into literacy programs can simultaneously raise academic and emotional performance.

7.3 Suggest Tools and Techniques for Language Educators

Teachers can start small by incorporating proven techniques such as:

- Emotion-based vocabulary lessons (e.g., expressing opinions and feelings)
- “Feelings journals” or gratitude writing
- Classroom agreements for communication norms
- Reflection circles or debriefing sessions after group work

Resources like **The RULER Approach, Second Step**, and **MindUP** offer adaptable models that can be contextualized for language education. Even simple strategies like using culturally relevant storytelling or mindful silence before tasks can help establish emotionally intelligent classrooms.

CONCLUSION

Language learning is not merely an intellectual exercise—it is a deeply emotional and social process. As this article has illustrated, integrating **Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)** into language education supports learners not only in acquiring linguistic competence but also in building the confidence, empathy, and resilience necessary to thrive in communicative settings.

By grounding our approach in frameworks such as CASEL’s five competencies, and drawing from educational theories by Vygotsky, Krashen, and Rogers, we see that SEL provides a solid foundation for more meaningful and human-centered language instruction. Research shows that SEL enhances learner motivation, reduces anxiety, promotes collaboration, and expands emotional vocabulary—ultimately leading to greater fluency and personal expression.

Despite challenges such as limited time, lack of training, and cultural complexity, the integration of SEL remains both possible and essential. Teachers who foster emotionally safe environments and attend to learners’ inner experiences are not only teaching a language—they are shaping communicative citizens of the world.

As **Rita Pierson**, a renowned educator, once said:

“Every child deserves a champion—an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection, and insists that they become the best that they can possibly be.”

Let us become those champions in our classrooms—not only teaching language, but speaking to the hearts behind the words.



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