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Fostering Emotional Intelligence in Language Learners

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of integrating emotional intelligence (EI) strategies into ESL teaching to enhance student engagement, cultural sensitivity, and emotional resilience. Conducted in a multicultural classroom with intermediate to upper-intermediate learners, the study implemented role-playing for empathy, group activities for collaboration, reflection journals for self-awareness, and conflict resolution exercises to foster interpersonal skills. Results indicated significant improvements in student participation, emotional regulation, and confidence, as well as a stronger classroom sense of inclusion and support. Student feedback and self-assessment data revealed increased comfort with self-expression and collaboration, emphasizing the value of EI in reducing language anxiety and encouraging risk-taking in language use. The findings underscore the broader benefits of EI-focused approaches, suggesting that these methods not only support linguistic development but also prepare students for cross-cultural communication and social adaptability. This study recommends that ESL educators adopt EI strategies to create emotionally supportive, inclusive learning environments.

Keywords

emotional intelligence, ESL teaching, empathy, cultural sensitivity, language anxiety

Introduction

Context and Importance

Emotional Intelligence (EI) has become a focal point in education, especially in language learning, where it impacts not only academic success but also the interpersonal dynamics within the classroom. EI refers to the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions and to effectively handle interpersonal relationships. In educational settings, high EI can lead to a more conducive learning environment by fostering empathy, resilience, and adaptability among students and teachers alike. Research by Resnik and Dewaele (2020) emphasizes that EI in language learners is instrumental in regulating both positive and negative emotions in the classroom, ultimately affecting students' learning experiences. Language acquisition, in particular, is a deeply social process, making EI essential for language learners who must frequently navigate complex social interactions and cultural norms within their studies (Dewaele, Saito, & Halimi, 2022).

Relevance to ESL



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For English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, emotional intelligence plays a unique role in overcoming the psychological barriers associated with learning a new language. Unlike native language instruction, ESL education involves the challenges of adjusting to new cultural expectations, expressing oneself in a non-native language, and often dealing with the anxiety of making mistakes. Resnik and Dewaele (2023) explored these dynamics in their study of learner emotions in both traditional and remote language classrooms, finding that EI positively influences students' autonomy and emotional stability, even in virtual environments. Similarly, Li et al. (2021) identified a connection between the classroom environment and trait EI, showing that an emotionally supportive environment can significantly reduce language learning anxiety. Such findings highlight that fostering EI in ESL students is not merely about achieving linguistic competence; it is about building resilience and social skills that help students feel comfortable and confident in their language journey.

Objectives

The aim of this study is to explore effective strategies for fostering emotional intelligence within ESL learners. By incorporating EI-based teaching approaches, educators can help students not only improve their language skills but also enhance their emotional resilience, thereby creating a more positive and productive learning atmosphere. With guidance drawn from recent studies, this paper will discuss methods to cultivate an emotionally supportive classroom environment that values empathy, self-awareness, and collaboration among students. In doing so, we aim to demonstrate how nurturing EI can benefit language learners on both academic and personal levels, providing them with tools to navigate the linguistic and emotional complexities of learning English as a second language.

Methods

Participants and Setting

The study was conducted in a diverse ESL classroom, where students ranged from intermediate to upper-intermediate levels of English proficiency. The class, composed of students aged 18 to 25, included individuals from various cultural backgrounds, including Azerbaijani, Turkish, Iranian, and Kazakh students. Such diversity not only enriches the language learning experience but also brings a wide spectrum of emotional and social experiences, making it an ideal setting for integrating emotional intelligence (EI) into language education. The students in this class often bring differing perspectives on social norms, communication styles, and emotional expression, providing a valuable platform for empathy-building and cultural awareness exercises.

By creating a culturally sensitive learning environment, the ESL classroom can act as a "microcosm of the world," where students practice English while learning to appreciate cultural and emotional diversity. Previous research has shown that culturally responsive classrooms, combined with EI-focused strategies, promote more open-mindedness and adaptability among learners (Dewaele, Saito, & Halimi, 2022). This study uses that foundation to explore how specific EI-focused strategies impact student engagement, collaboration, and emotional well-being.



EI-Focused Teaching Strategies

To develop emotional intelligence in this ESL classroom, several teaching strategies were incorporated. These approaches were selected to foster empathy, collaboration, and self-awareness among students, supporting both language skills and emotional growth.

- **Role-playing Exercises for Empathy-Building:** Role-playing allows students to step into someone else's shoes, which is essential for developing empathy—a core component of EI. In this class, students participated in scenarios that encouraged them to express themselves from different perspectives. For example, one role-playing activity required students to portray a character from another culture, navigating a conversation where misunderstandings or cultural conflicts might arise. By experiencing the potential for miscommunication and the emotional impact it can have, students learned to approach cultural interactions with more sensitivity. Research by Resnik and Dewaele (2023) supports role-play's effectiveness in fostering empathy and emotional awareness, particularly in diverse classrooms where learners need to bridge cultural divides.
- **Group Activities that Require Collaboration and Self-Awareness:** Group work is a powerful tool for developing EI, as it requires students to listen actively, respect others' perspectives, and engage in collaborative problem-solving. This study implemented activities such as group storytelling, where each student contributed a part to a story with an emotional or moral lesson. In addition, projects that required consensus-building were used to encourage compromise and mutual respect. Such activities do more than just build language skills; they also encourage self-awareness, as students become attuned to their own communication styles and emotional responses in collaborative settings. Findings by Khoso et al. (2022) highlight that group work not only boosts language proficiency but also enhances students' motivation and engagement by reinforcing a sense of community.
- **Reflection Journals to Encourage Self-Assessment:** Reflection journals were introduced to help students cultivate self-awareness by reflecting on their own emotions, reactions, and progress in the classroom. After each class, students were asked to write a brief entry about their experiences, particularly focusing on moments of emotional engagement, discomfort, or breakthrough. This method encourages introspection and helps students recognize their emotional responses, a key aspect of EI development. By regularly reflecting on their experiences, students began to see patterns in their reactions to certain situations, allowing them to manage their emotions more effectively. Studies by Li and Dewaele (2020) support the use of reflection journals, noting that they promote emotional resilience and reduce feelings of foreign language anxiety, as students are able to process their experiences in a constructive manner.
- **Conflict Resolution Activities to Develop Interpersonal Skills:** Conflict resolution exercises were designed to help students develop their interpersonal skills in the face of disagreements. In these activities, students were paired and given a scenario where they



had to negotiate and resolve a conflict—such as a disagreement on how to approach a group project or a misunderstanding over cultural customs. Through guided practice, students learned to manage differences constructively, fostering respect and communication skills. Feedback and guidance were provided to help students identify strategies that facilitate effective conflict resolution, such as active listening, empathy, and calm expression of their viewpoints. The impact of such activities on reducing classroom tension and enhancing emotional self-regulation has been noted in similar studies, such as by Chang and Tsai (2022), who argue that these skills also translate to better academic outcomes.

Assessment Methods

To measure the development of EI in students, a combination of qualitative and quantitative assessment methods was used. These tools helped capture both the observable and self-reported growth in students' emotional intelligence over the course of the study.

- **Student Reflections:** The reflection journals served as a primary tool for assessing emotional development. Each entry provided insights into students' emotional growth, including their evolving capacity for empathy, self-awareness, and emotion regulation. These reflections were reviewed to identify recurring themes, such as increased confidence in group activities or heightened self-awareness during conflict resolution exercises. According to Resnik and Dewaele (2020), reflective practices like journaling help track emotional progress, allowing both students and instructors to understand the areas in which students are developing.
- **Peer Feedback:** Peer assessments were used periodically to gather feedback on each student's collaborative and emotional skills. In small groups, students rated each other's performance based on qualities like empathy, cooperation, and respectfulness. Peer feedback is valuable because it provides a perspective on how students' emotional growth is perceived by their peers, not just by themselves or the instructor. This aligns with findings from Dewaele and Dewaele (2020), who found that peer evaluations in language learning settings can reveal students' emotional impact on their classmates, promoting a more cohesive classroom environment.
- **Observation of Interpersonal Interactions:** The instructor kept observational notes on student behavior during group activities, role-playing, and conflict resolution exercises. Particular attention was paid to students' emotional responses, willingness to collaborate, and ability to manage disagreements. These observations allowed the instructor to identify subtle changes in students' EI, such as increased patience or a more open-minded approach to cultural differences. Chang and Tsai (2022) noted the effectiveness of teacher observation in capturing non-verbal indicators of emotional growth, as instructors can often see changes that students might not readily express.



Overall, this mixed-methods approach provided a comprehensive view of students' emotional development, tracking both self-reported and observed changes. By combining reflection, peer feedback, and instructor observation, this study was able to assess EI growth in a nuanced way, offering insights into how these strategies may foster a more emotionally intelligent and collaborative group of language learners.

Results

Observation Summary

Implementing emotional intelligence (EI) strategies had a transformative effect on the classroom environment and student learning. Initially, the classroom atmosphere was typical of a mixed ESL group, where some students struggled with speaking up or managing anxiety, especially in collaborative tasks. However, as EI-focused activities were gradually introduced, observable changes in student behavior emerged. For example, during role-playing exercises, students showed an increasing willingness to engage with perspectives different from their own, displaying empathy and cultural sensitivity as they navigated scenarios of misunderstanding or cultural tension. By the end of the semester, many students actively demonstrated more patience and open-mindedness during discussions, listening attentively and validating their peers' contributions.

In group activities that required consensus, students became notably more collaborative. Instead of one or two dominant voices, there was a more equitable distribution of speaking time, as students felt more comfortable expressing their ideas. These observations aligned with findings by Khoso et al. (2022), who emphasize that EI-oriented group activities promote a sense of community and reduce social anxiety. Additionally, conflict resolution exercises allowed students to develop practical skills in managing disagreements, reducing classroom tension, and fostering a more supportive learning environment. Instances of peer conflict, which were initially common due to cultural misunderstandings or misinterpretations of tone, decreased as students learned and practiced empathy, active listening, and clear communication.

Student Feedback

Feedback from students provided valuable insights into their personal experiences with EI-based activities. Many students reported that the role-playing exercises were initially intimidating but soon became an enjoyable and educational way to explore emotional nuances in language. One student mentioned, "At first, I was nervous about pretending to be someone else, especially when it involved a cultural context different from my own. But over time, I realized it helped me understand how people might feel and react differently depending on their background." Another student remarked on the reflection journals, saying, "Writing down my feelings and thoughts after each lesson helped me understand my own emotions better. It made me see how I could control my nervousness in group discussions and become more open to others' ideas."

Several students found group projects and consensus-building exercises particularly helpful in building confidence and communication skills. One participant shared, "In the



beginning, I usually kept quiet in group discussions because I was afraid of making mistakes in English. But when we had to work together and really listen to each other, I realized that everyone makes mistakes, and that's okay. Now I feel more confident sharing my ideas." Such feedback underscores the positive psychological impact of EI-oriented teaching methods, echoing the observations of Li and Dewaele (2020), who noted that increased self-awareness through reflection and collaboration reduced anxiety among language learners.

Quantitative Data

Quantitative data gathered throughout the study revealed measurable improvements in several areas. Participation rates increased by nearly 30% from the beginning to the end of the semester, indicating a stronger willingness among students to actively engage in class. For instance, in early group activities, roughly 40% of students contributed actively, while by the final sessions, that number had risen to around 70%, with many previously quiet students regularly participating in discussions. Additionally, peer feedback scores on empathy and collaboration showed a 25% improvement, highlighting the growth in students' interpersonal skills.

To measure self-assessed emotional growth, students completed a brief survey at both the beginning and end of the course, rating their comfort with self-expression, empathy, and emotional regulation on a scale of 1 to 5. Results showed that average scores for self-expression increased from 2.8 to 4.0, while ratings for empathy and emotional regulation rose from 3.1 to 4.2 and 3.0 to 4.3, respectively. These increases suggest that students not only felt more confident in sharing their ideas but also developed a greater ability to manage emotions constructively in social and academic settings. Such quantitative improvements align with the findings of Chang and Tsai (2022), who documented similar gains in academic motivation and self-efficacy as EI improved in students.

In summary, the results demonstrate that integrating EI strategies into the ESL classroom positively impacted both student participation and emotional growth. The observed and self-reported increases in empathy, collaboration, and confidence confirm that EI-focused activities contribute to a more inclusive and supportive classroom environment, enhancing both the emotional and linguistic development of language learners.

Discussion

Interpretation of Results

The results of this study align closely with prior expectations, reinforcing the hypothesis that emotional intelligence (EI) strategies can positively influence classroom dynamics, participation, and student emotional resilience. As anticipated, activities that focused on empathy-building, such as role-playing and conflict resolution exercises, proved particularly effective. These exercises not only helped students see from others' perspectives but also encouraged them to reflect on their own emotions and reactions in social interactions. The steady increase in students' comfort with expressing themselves and their noted improvement in empathy supports findings by Resnik and



Dewaele (2020), which suggest that empathy-driven activities reduce classroom anxiety and foster a collaborative environment.

Reflection journals, initially introduced as a supplementary tool, emerged as one of the most impactful activities for fostering self-awareness and emotional regulation. Students who may have previously felt self-conscious about their language skills or uneasy in social situations found an outlet for self-expression that allowed them to process and gradually overcome these challenges. This mirrors the conclusions drawn by Li et al. (2021), who noted that reflection activities allow learners to track and manage their emotions, resulting in reduced anxiety and enhanced self-confidence in language classrooms. Quantitative data on participation and self-assessment also reflected significant growth, particularly in students' willingness to participate and their capacity for emotional regulation. However, it was somewhat surprising to observe how quickly group activities improved class dynamics. Within just a few sessions, previously reluctant students became more engaged, and an increase in mutual respect and attentiveness among peers was noticeable.

Implications for ESL Teaching

The study highlights several significant implications for ESL teaching. By actively fostering EI in language learners, teachers can create an environment that not only enhances language acquisition but also helps students navigate the cultural and social complexities of learning a new language. Emotional intelligence is especially crucial in ESL contexts, where learners are likely to face challenges such as cultural adjustment, communication barriers, and self-expression difficulties. Fostering EI equips students with essential interpersonal skills, such as empathy, emotional regulation, and self-awareness, which are invaluable for overcoming these barriers. Research by Dewaele and Dewaele (2020) emphasizes that these skills are particularly beneficial for language learners who might otherwise feel alienated or overwhelmed by the demands of adapting to new cultural norms and language expectations.

Furthermore, this study suggests that EI-focused teaching may be particularly valuable in promoting a supportive and inclusive learning environment. When students feel emotionally safe and understood, they are more likely to take risks in language use—speaking up, trying new vocabulary, and participating actively in discussions. This risk-taking is an essential part of language development, as it allows learners to push the boundaries of their current skills and receive constructive feedback. The results also suggest that when students develop EI, they tend to contribute more meaningfully to group activities, bringing a sense of cohesion and cooperation to the classroom. As Chang and Tsai (2022) noted, such cohesion in an emotionally aware classroom leads to improved academic outcomes, as students are more focused and motivated to achieve both linguistic and personal goals.

Recommendations

For ESL teachers looking to integrate EI-focused methods into their classrooms, several strategies could effectively support emotional and linguistic development:



1. **Implement Role-Playing Activities Regularly:** Given their success in this study, role-playing exercises should be a staple in the ESL classroom. Teachers can create scenarios that require students to interact from various cultural or emotional perspectives, promoting empathy and cultural sensitivity. Start with low-stakes scenarios to ease students into the process, gradually introducing more complex interactions as they become more comfortable.
2. **Encourage Reflection through Journaling:** Reflection journals are simple yet powerful tools for fostering self-awareness and emotional growth. Teachers can prompt students to write about their feelings, challenges, and achievements after each class or specific activity. Over time, these reflections allow students to recognize their emotional progress, manage language anxiety, and set personal goals. Journals can be made optional or graded on participation rather than content to reduce pressure and promote honest self-reflection.
3. **Incorporate Conflict Resolution Exercises:** Conflict resolution activities allow students to practice valuable social skills while using their language skills in realistic contexts. Teachers can set up situations where students must negotiate, compromise, or address misunderstandings. By guiding students through these interactions, teachers help them develop emotional resilience and better handle real-life conflicts. Such activities not only build emotional skills but also encourage students to use language more authentically and spontaneously.
4. **Use Peer Feedback to Foster a Collaborative Environment:** Peer feedback activities provide students with insights into their interpersonal impact, as peers are likely to notice changes in empathy, cooperation, and communication skills that students may overlook. Encouraging students to provide constructive feedback on each other's collaboration skills reinforces a culture of mutual respect and accountability.
5. **Create a Culturally Responsive Classroom:** ESL teachers should recognize the diversity of their students' backgrounds and integrate activities that honor this diversity. Teachers can invite students to share cultural experiences, traditions, or language-specific expressions in a way that promotes understanding and appreciation. Building a culturally responsive classroom supports EI by enhancing students' sense of belonging and helping them practice empathy within a multicultural setting.

In conclusion, fostering emotional intelligence within ESL students not only enhances language acquisition but also equips students with crucial life skills. Implementing these EI strategies can make the ESL classroom a supportive, inclusive environment where students grow both linguistically and emotionally. By helping students develop emotional resilience, empathy, and self-awareness, ESL teachers can create a learning experience that transcends language, preparing students to navigate an increasingly interconnected world with confidence and compassion.

Conclusion



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The integration of emotional intelligence (EI) strategies in ESL teaching offers a powerful framework for enhancing not only students' language skills but also their social and emotional growth. As demonstrated in this study, activities such as role-playing for empathy, group work for collaboration, reflection journals for self-awareness, and conflict resolution for interpersonal skills all contributed to a more inclusive and supportive classroom environment. These strategies allowed students to better understand their own emotions, manage language anxiety, and engage more actively and confidently with peers. Quantitative and qualitative feedback both underscored the positive impact of these methods, as students showed measurable growth in participation, emotional regulation, and empathy.

The broader implications of fostering EI in ESL classrooms extend beyond academic achievement; they touch on essential life skills that help students navigate cultural challenges and communicate more effectively in a second language. Emotional intelligence not only prepares students for linguistic success but also instills resilience and social adaptability, essential traits in today's globalized world. By developing EI alongside language skills, educators can create a transformative learning experience that equips students for both personal and professional challenges.

As ESL teaching continues to evolve, incorporating EI-focused strategies offers educators a holistic approach to student development. This study recommends that ESL teachers embrace such methods to foster an environment where language learners can thrive emotionally and intellectually, ultimately enhancing their confidence, empathy, and cultural sensitivity. Emphasizing emotional intelligence within ESL pedagogy will not only improve language outcomes but also prepare students to engage thoughtfully and compassionately with the world around them.

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