



A DIACHRONIC ANALYSIS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has transitioned from a peripheral concern of moral philosophy to a central pillar of modern educational psychology and Second Language Acquisition (SLA). This article provides a comprehensive exploration of SEL, beginning with a diachronic analysis of its evolution—from the philosophical roots of character education to the contemporary era of neuroscientific validation. Subsequently, it synthesizes this historical context with the theoretical foundations of language teaching, arguing that SEL is a foundational necessity for achieving communicative competence. By bridging the gap between historical pedagogical shifts and modern frameworks like Krashen’s Affective Filter, Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory, and Goleman’s Emotional Intelligence, this paper posits that the integration of SEL into language education is essential for fostering holistic learner development in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: SEL, Second Language Acquisition, Pedagogy, Emotional Intelligence, Affective Filter, Sociocultural Theory, Neuroplasticity, Communicative Competence.

The integration of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) into language education has garnered increasing attention due to its potential to foster holistic learner development, encompassing not only linguistic proficiency but also crucial affective and interpersonal competencies (Allahyarova, 2025; Babazade, 2025). This pedagogical approach recognizes that language acquisition is not merely a cognitive process but is deeply intertwined with learners' emotional intelligence, social skills, and overall well-being (Lasekan et al., 2025). This perspective is rooted in theories that emphasize the reciprocal interplay of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors in shaping learning outcomes (Mukhemar et al., 2025).





In the contemporary language classroom, the objective of instruction has shifted from mere grammatical accuracy to the broader goal of communicative competence. This shift necessitates a focus on the learner as a “whole person.” Social-Emotional Learning—defined as the process through which individuals acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, and achieve collective goals (CASEL, 2020)—provides a robust framework for this approach. To understand the current state of SEL in language teaching, we must first examine its evolutionary trajectory in the broader fields of psychology and pedagogy.

The precursors to SEL are found in **Character Education**. Ancient Greek philosophy, particularly Aristotelian ethics, posited that the goal of education was the cultivation of Eudaimonia (flourishing) through the development of virtues. Pedagogy was centered on the habituation of specific social behaviors deemed necessary for civic life. By the 19th century, reformers like Pestalozzi began to shift this focus toward the “whole child,” arguing that the emotional bond between teacher and student was the primary vehicle for all intellectual growth.

In the early 20th century, education began to be viewed through a sociological lens. John Dewey (1916) argued that schools are “social laboratories,” moving the discourse from rigid character training to the development of social skills necessary for democratic participation. This was followed by the Humanistic Revolution; Maslow’s (1943) “Hierarchy of Needs” and Rogers’ (1961) “Person-Centered Approach” established that cognitive functions are subordinate to emotional safety and a sense of belonging. The landmark Comer Process (1968) provided the first empirical evidence that focusing on a child's social-emotional development directly correlated with academic success.

The 1990s marked the transition from fragmented “social skills” programs to a unified framework. Howard Gardner (1983) challenged the hegemony of IQ by introducing Interpersonal and Intrapersonal intelligences. In 1994, the founding of the **Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)** officially coined the term “SEL.” This was bolstered by Daniel Goleman’s (1995) Emotional Intelligence, which synthesized neurobiology and psychology to argue that “EQ” was a more accurate predictor of life success than “IQ” bringing SEL into the global mainstream.





In the 21st century, SEL has been validated by advanced brain-imaging technology. Research into the amygdala and prefrontal cortex has demonstrated that “emotional hijacking” physically prevents the brain from processing information. Furthermore, Durlak et al. (2011) proved through a meta-analysis of 213 programs that SEL interventions increase academic performance by an average of 11 percentile points. Today, the focus has shifted toward **Transformative SEL**, emphasizing equity and cultural relevance in a post-pandemic world.

As the “affective turn” in applied linguistics has highlighted, emotion and cognition are inseparable in the context of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The theoretical underpinnings of SEL in language teaching extend beyond traditional cognitive models to embrace the intricate interplay of emotional intelligence and social competence.

Specifically, frameworks such as the **Affective Filter Hypothesis** underscore how emotional states, including anxiety and motivation, can significantly modulate language acquisition by impacting learners' receptivity and engagement (Topal, 2024). Stephen Krashen (1982) posited that emotional variables—such as anxiety, self-doubt, and boredom—act as a mental block that prevents “comprehensible input” from reaching the brain's acquisition mechanisms.

From a researcher's perspective, SEL interventions function as a mechanism to lower this filter. When students possess self-regulation skills, they can manage the “language anxiety” inherent in performing in a foreign tongue. Furthermore, drawing from **Positive Psychology** (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014), SEL fosters resilience and “flow,” allowing learners to view linguistic errors not as failures, but as necessary data points in the learning process.

Language is fundamentally a social artifact. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory asserts that higher mental functions originate in social interaction. The **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)** suggests that learning occurs through social mediation and scaffolding. SEL provides the interpersonal infrastructure required for the ZPD to function effectively. Without social awareness and relationship skills, collaborative tasks—essential for language growth—become sites of conflict rather than sites of learning. By integrating SEL, educators ensure that the social environment is conducive to the negotiation of meaning.





Contemporary models of communicative language ability have evolved to explicitly incorporate socio-emotional dimensions. Dell Hymes' concept of **Communicative Competence** argued that knowing how to use language socially is as important as knowing the rules of grammar. This aligns with Goleman's EQ framework:

- **Empathy** is required for pragmatics (understanding intent and nuance).
- **Self-awareness** allows learners to recognize cultural biases.
- **Responsible Decision-Making** guides the choice of appropriate registers in diverse contexts.

Language learning involves a temporary “loss of self.” Learners often feel “infantilized” when they cannot express complex thoughts in a new language. Humanistic Education emphasizes a “non-threatening” environment to protect the learner's ego. SEL provides a framework for **Identity Safety**, where the learner's primary culture and language are respected, reducing the “symbolic violence” of subtractive environments.

This integrated approach posits that by addressing the emotional and social dimensions of learning, educators can optimize the cognitive pathways essential for robust language acquisition (Xuan, 2025). This recognition highlights the importance of **psychological safety, student voice, and collaborative belonging** in fostering sustained engagement and willingness to communicate (Eppendi, 2025). Such an environment cultivates deeper engagement, thereby enhancing cognitive processes such as memory, attention, and critical thinking (Elleuch, 2024).

The evolution of SEL reflects a deepening understanding of the human experience—transitioning from a moralistic endeavor to a social necessity, and finally to a biological imperative. In the realm of language pedagogy, SEL is not a peripheral “soft skill” but a foundational necessity for linguistic proficiency.

For the researcher and practitioner, the integration of SEL means:

1. **Prioritizing a classroom climate** that lowers the affective filter.
2. **Explicitly teaching social skills** required for collaborative language tasks.
3. **Recognizing that linguistic proficiency** is inextricably tied to the learner's emotional well-being.





Ultimately, by grounding language pedagogy in SEL, we prepare students not just to pass exams, but to navigate the complex, multilingual social realities of an ever-connecting world.

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