

A SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING-BASED APPROACH TO ENHANCING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstract

The study examines the effectiveness of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)-based instructional approaches in improving communicative abilities within the process of second language acquisition (SLA). Traditional language teaching methods tend to emphasize grammatical accuracy and linguistic knowledge; however, they often overlook the crucial role that social and emotional factors play in language learning development. This research explores how fostering emotional awareness, self-regulation, and social competence through structured training can enhance students' communicative performance, drawing on theories of communicative competence and SEL frameworks.

The study adopts a mixed-methods research design and involves undergraduate students at the intermediate (B1) level who have no philological background. An SEL-based language learning program was implemented during regular instructional sessions to examine its impact on learners' communicative development. Qualitative data were collected through classroom observations, learner reflections, and semi-structured interviews, while quantitative data were obtained from pre- and post-tests designed to measure communicative competence.

The findings indicate that students exposed to the SEL-based intervention achieved statistically significant improvements in overall communication skills, particularly in sociolinguistic and strategic competence. In addition, the results show that the integration of SEL principles contributed to increased learner motivation, enhanced communicative performance, and a noticeable reduction in language anxiety.

The study emphasizes the educational benefits of integrating Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) principles into second language learning, as learners demonstrate improved language performance when taught in emotionally supportive environments. The findings contribute to the growing body of research suggesting that effective language education should develop not only cognitive abilities but also learners' social and emotional competencies alongside linguistic skills. The study further offers recommendations for future research, as well as for teacher training programs and curriculum development aimed at promoting more holistic and effective approaches to language instruction.

Key words

Second Language Acquisition, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), communicative competence, language anxiety, willingness to communicate (WTC), learner motivation, emotional intelligence in education, student-centered learning, non-philological students, EFL/ESL pedagogy, classroom interaction

1. Introduction.

Second language acquisition (SLA) has undergone significant theoretical and practical changes over the past few decades, shifting from structure-focused instruction to communicative and learner-centred approaches. Contemporary language education primarily aims to develop learners' communicative competence, enabling them to use the language effectively in everyday



real-life contexts. The notion of communicative competence was first introduced by Dell Hymes in 1972, who argued that effective language use requires social and pragmatic abilities that extend beyond grammatical knowledge. This concept was later expanded by Michael Canale and Merrill Swain (1980), who outlined four key components: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence.

Although communicative teaching approaches are now widely accepted, many educational settings still prioritize structured instruction and grammatical accuracy over meaningful student interaction (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The limitation of this approach is that it does not adequately prepare learners to produce spontaneous language in real-life situations. This gap indicates that language education should adopt more integrated methodologies that combine emotional development, social interaction skills, and cognitive processes to enhance overall communicative ability.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has become a useful framework in educational research and practice because of this. SEL is the process by which people acquire critical abilities like empathy, self-awareness, emotional control, and interpersonal competence (CASEL, 2020). Since learning a language requires contact, self-expression, and social involvement by nature, these competences are especially pertinent. Nevertheless, there is still a lack of research on the incorporation of SEL into SLA instruction.

SLA theory has long acknowledged the importance of affective elements in language learning. Notably, Stephen Krashen (1982) put up the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which postulates that emotional factors like motivation, anxiety, and self-assurance can have a big impact on language learning. While a supportive and low-anxiety setting promotes language development, a strong affective filter may impede learners' capacity to process linguistic input. Further studies have verified that learners who are more motivated and less anxious exhibit better language proficiency and a stronger willingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Dörnyei, 2005).

Additionally, new research highlights how emotionally supportive learning environments can improve communication results and student engagement (Mercer & Gkonou, 2017). SEL-based teaching techniques, like group projects, introspective exercises, and empathy-building exercises, can create a supportive learning environment in the classroom and motivate students to communicate more actively. For non-philological students, who can lack confidence and have greater levels of language anxiety, these strategies are very helpful. Despite these theoretical advances, practical studies examining the methodical incorporation of SEL into language training and its direct influence on communicative competence are still lacking. For SLA theory and educational practice to advance, this gap must be filled.

Therefore, the present study aims to explore the effectiveness of an SEL-based instructional approach in enhancing communicative competence among second language learners. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How does the integration of SEL strategies influence learners' communicative competence in SLA?
2. To what extent does SEL-based instruction affect learners' motivation, anxiety levels, and willingness to communicate?
3. Which components of communicative competence are most significantly improved through SEL integration?

By tackling these issues, this study adds to the expanding corpus of literature supporting a more comprehensive method of teaching languages that incorporates social, emotional, and cognitive aspects.



2. Literature Review

2.1 *Communicative Competence in Second Language Acquisition*

The idea of communicative competence, which emphasises the useful application of language in social situations rather than just mastering grammatical rules, has grown to be a fundamental component of second language acquisition (SLA). By adding sociocultural aspects of communication, communicative competence—first proposed by Dell Hymes in 1972—challenged the then-dominant structuralist understanding of language. Grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence are the four components of the comprehensive model that Michael Canale and Merrill Swain (1980) presented to further operationalise this viewpoint.

The significance of communicative competence in language education has been reaffirmed by later studies, especially in frameworks for communicative language teaching (CLT) (Savignon, 2002). The successful development of communicative competence is still difficult in many educational settings, despite its theoretical prominence. When affective barriers like fear and poor self-confidence are present, learners frequently struggle with real-time engagement, pragmatic appropriateness, and strategic language use (Dörnyei, 2005). This implies that emotional and social factors have a significant impact on communicative ability, which is not just a cognitive concept.

2.2 *Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in Education*

The importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) in education is becoming more widely acknowledged. The development of five fundamental competencies—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relational skills, and responsible decision-making—is what CASEL (2020) defines as SEL. These skills support students' social functioning, psychological health, and overall academic performance.

SEL has a favourable effect on students' academic achievement, motivation, and interpersonal connections, according to an increasing amount of studies (Durlak et al., 2011). Crucially, SEL promotes an inclusive and encouraging learning environment, which is necessary for engaged students. It has also been demonstrated that emotional intelligence, which is strongly linked to SEL, has a major impact on how students perceive, process, and react to information (Goleman, 1995).

Despite these advantages, SEL is still not widely used in language instruction. Few studies have examined how SEL competencies might be methodically incorporated into SLA to improve communication results, with the majority of extant research concentrating on general education contexts.

2.3 *The Role of Affective Factors in Language Learning*

In SLA research, the importance of emotive variables in language learning has been widely recognised. In this context, Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) is one of the most significant theoretical frameworks. This theory holds that learners' emotional states, including motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence, can either help or impede language acquisition. A low affective filter encourages more efficient learning, while a high affective filter—caused by unpleasant emotions—restricts the absorption of understandable material.

The influence of affective elements on communicative behaviour has been further investigated by empirical research. For example, learners' confidence and anxiety levels have been closely associated with willingness to communicate (WTC), a crucial SLA concept (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Learners who are more motivated and less anxious are more inclined to communicate and take linguistic chances, both of which are critical for language growth. Furthermore, Zoltán Dörnyei's (2005) study emphasises the importance of motivation as a



catalyst for language acquisition, impacting both the amount and calibre of learners' involvement. These results highlight how important it is to address emotional aspects of language learning in order to promote more effective communicative skills.

2.4 Integrating SEL into Second Language Teaching

A promising yet unexplored field of study is the incorporation of SEL into language instruction. More academics are advocating for a more comprehensive approach to SLA that takes social and emotional aspects into account in addition to cognitive development (Mercer & Gkonou, 2017). Collaborative learning, role-playing, reflective journaling, and peer interaction are examples of SEL-based pedagogical techniques that can foster a positive learning environment that boosts students' self-esteem and communicative engagement.

According to recent research, SEL integration may boost motivation, lessen language anxiety, and enhance interpersonal communication abilities (Oxford, 2016). For instance, it has been demonstrated that emotionally supportive learning environments motivate students to engage more actively in communicative tasks, which enhances their strategic competence and fluency. Additionally, SEL promotes cultural awareness and empathy, two qualities that are crucial for successful cross-cultural communication.

Despite these encouraging results, comprehensive empirical research on the direct effects of SEL-based instruction on the development of communicative competence is still lacking, especially for non-philological learners. This disparity emphasises the need for more research into the operationalisation of SEL principles in language courses to provide quantifiable gains in communicative outcomes.

2.5 Research Gap

The explicit incorporation of SEL as a structured instructional method has received little attention, despite prior research recognising the significance of both communicative skills and affective components in SLA. The majority of studies have looked at emotional factors separately rather than as a component of an all-encompassing educational framework. Empirical research is therefore required to investigate how SEL-based treatments can methodically improve language learners' communicative ability.

3. Methodology

The usefulness of a Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)-based instructional approach in improving communicative competence within Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is investigated in this study using a mixed-methods research methodology. By integrating quantifiable learning outcomes with in-depth insights into learners' experiences, the integration of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies allows for a thorough analysis of the research problem. In particular, the study uses a quasi-experimental design with a control group that receives conventional language training and an experimental group that receives SEL-integrated instruction. This design makes it possible to compare how SEL affects students' emotional growth and communication skills.

Purposive sampling was used to choose 60 undergraduate non-philological students at the B1 (intermediate) level of English proficiency for the study in order to ensure relative homogeneity in language proficiency and educational background. The participants were split evenly between a control group (n = 30) and an experimental group (n = 30). The goal of this grouping was to reduce unnecessary variables and improve the findings' dependability.

Several research tools were used to guarantee data validity and triangulation. A standardised test based on the approach put out by Michael Canale and Merrill Swain (1980), which included grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic components, was used to evaluate communicative ability. Language anxiety levels were assessed using the Foreign Language



Anxiety Scale created by Horwitz et al. (1986), while learners' social-emotional development was assessed using a questionnaire modified from the CASEL framework (2020). Additionally, semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were used to collect qualitative information about students' emotional reactions, interaction styles, and level of engagement during the teaching process.

The pre-test, intervention, and post-test were the three primary stages of the eight-week research process. To establish baseline data, both groups performed an anxiety scale and a communication competence assessment during the pre-test period. In order to promote self-regulation and interpersonal skills, the experimental group engaged in SEL-integrated instruction during the intervention period. This comprised role-plays, reflective journaling, cooperative learning activities, and emotion-awareness exercises. The control group, on the other hand, got traditional education that mainly addressed vocabulary acquisition, grammatical structures, and individual exercises without specifically addressing social or emotional competencies. Post-tests were given to both groups after the intervention, and some participants were interviewed to learn more about their learning experiences.

Both statistical and interpretive techniques were used to analyse the gathered data. Using paired and independent sample t-tests to find significant changes within and between groups, as well as correlation analysis to look at connections between SEL abilities and communicative performance, quantitative data were processed using SPSS. Through thematic analysis of qualitative data from interviews and classroom observations, recurrent patterns pertaining to motivation, anxiety reduction, and communicative behaviour were found.

Lastly, the investigation was conducted with great adherence to ethical principles. Every participant gave their voluntary consent after being made aware of the study's objectives. Participants were guaranteed the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any repercussions, and confidentiality and anonymity were upheld.

4 . Results

The study's findings show that learners exposed to the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)-based instructional strategy had a statistically significant increase in communicative competence when compared to those who received traditional teaching. Both the experimental and control groups made some progress, but the experimental group's gains were significantly greater, according to a quantitative analysis of the pre- and post-test results.

Table 1. Pre-test and Post-test Results of Communicative Competence

Group	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Mean Gain	p-value
Experimental Group	62.4	78.9	+16.5	0.001
Control Group	63.1	69.2	+6.1	0.072

Table 1 illustrates that the experimental group's communicative competence ratings significantly increased (Mean Gain = 16.5), with statistically significant results ($p < 0.05$). The control group, on the other hand, just slightly improved; this improvement was not statistically significant.

A more thorough examination based on the model put out by Michael Canale and Merrill Swain (1980) reveals variations among particular communicative skill components.

Table 2. Improvement Across Components of Communicative Competence (Experimental Group)



Competence Component	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Gain
Grammatical Competence	65.2	72.3	+7.1
Sociolinguistic Competence	60.8	79.5	+18.7
Discourse Competence	61.7	77.8	+16.1
Strategic Competence	62.0	80.1	+18.1

The most significant gains were shown in sociolinguistic and strategic competence, as shown in Table 2, suggesting that the SEL-based strategy had a significant influence on learners' capacity to communicate successfully and modify language according to context. Additionally, there was a notable improvement in discourse competency, which reflected better coherence and fluency. The moderate improvement in grammatical competence suggests that SEL integration mostly affects communicative rather than structural components of language. Regarding affective factors, the study found that the experimental group's linguistic anxiety significantly decreased, which is consistent with the Affective Filter Hypothesis.

Table 3. Foreign Language Anxiety Levels

Group	Pre-test Score	Anxiety	Post-test Anxiety Score	Change
Experimental Group	3.8		2.6	-1.2
Control Group	3.7		3.4	-0.3

The experimental group's anxiety levels significantly decreased, while the control group's anxiety levels only slightly decreased (Table 3). This suggests that the development of a more emotionally supportive learning environment was facilitated by SEL-based training. Additionally, correlation analysis showed that communicative performance and SEL abilities were positively correlated.

Table 4. Correlation Between SEL Competencies and Communicative Competence

Variable	Correlation Coefficient (r)
Self-awareness	0.62
Emotional regulation	0.68
Social awareness	0.71
Relationship skills	0.74

Higher levels of social-emotional competence are linked to improved communicative outcomes, according to Table 4's findings, which show moderate to strong positive relationships. These findings were further supported by qualitative data from interviews and classroom observations. Students in the experimental group reported feeling more self-assured, motivated, and open to talking. They stressed that cooperative exercises and emotionally supportive



assignments promoted active engagement and decreased anxiety of making mistakes. Students in the control group, on the other hand, said that their experience was less interesting and more regimented, with less chances for deep engagement.

The results show that including SEL into training for second language acquisition greatly improves communicative competence while lowering emotional obstacles to language acquisition.

5. Discussion

The results of this study offer compelling evidence that incorporating a Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)-oriented instructional framework into Second Language Acquisition (SLA) substantially improves learners' communicative competence while simultaneously lowering affective obstacles, such as anxiety. The progress demonstrated by the experimental group indicates that language learning extends beyond cognitive processes and is significantly shaped by emotional and social factors.

The most significant improvements were identified in sociolinguistic and strategic competence, as conceptualized by Canale and Swain (1980). This indicates that instruction grounded in Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is especially effective in enhancing learners' capacity to adjust language use according to social contexts, handle communication difficulties, and sustain the flow of interaction. These findings are consistent with earlier studies, which highlight that communicative competence is most successfully developed within interactive, meaningful, and socially rich learning environments (Savignon, 2002).

A primary explanation for these improvements lies in the reduction of language anxiety, which aligns with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis. The observed decline in anxiety among the experimental group suggests that SEL-based strategies—such as activities promoting emotional awareness, collaborative learning, and reflection—effectively lower learners' affective filters. Consequently, students become more receptive to language input and more willing to engage in communication. This result is in line with earlier research indicating that lower anxiety and greater self-confidence contribute to an increased willingness to communicate and enhanced language proficiency (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

Moreover, the strong positive relationships identified between SEL competencies—such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, social awareness, and relationship skills—and communicative competence indicate that emotional intelligence is a key factor in successful language acquisition. Notably, social awareness and relationship skills showed the highest correlation coefficients, suggesting a particularly close connection between interpersonal abilities and effective second language communication. These results reinforce the perspective that language learning is fundamentally a social process, in which interpersonal competence plays a vital role in achieving meaningful communication in real-world contexts.

The qualitative findings further reinforce the quantitative results. Students in the experimental group reported greater levels of motivation, engagement, and self-confidence. They noted that SEL-based activities fostered a supportive and psychologically safe classroom atmosphere, where errors were treated as a natural part of learning rather than as failures. This reduction in anxiety promoted more active participation and a greater willingness to take risks in communication. In contrast, learners in the control group were exposed to more traditional forms of instruction, which tended to limit interaction and place greater emphasis on linguistic accuracy, thereby constraining opportunities for communicative practice.

These results are in line with earlier studies emphasizing the role of emotionally supportive learning environments in fostering learner engagement and communication (Mercer & Gkonou, 2017; Oxford, 2016). At the same time, they contribute to the existing body of research by



offering empirical support for the systematic integration of SEL into language instruction as a means of enhancing both emotional and linguistic outcomes.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that gains in grammatical competence were comparatively modest relative to other components. This indicates that although SEL-based instruction is highly effective in developing communicative and interactional skills, it may need to be complemented with more explicit, form-focused approaches to achieve well-rounded language proficiency.

Overall, the findings confirm that an SEL-based pedagogical approach provides a more holistic framework for second language acquisition by simultaneously addressing cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of learning. This integrated approach not only enhances communicative competence but also promotes a more positive, engaging, and sustainable language learning experience.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study carry significant implications for language teaching practice, particularly regarding the integration of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) into Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Firstly, the results indicate that language instruction should extend beyond a strictly form-focused approach and adopt a more comprehensive framework that simultaneously addresses learners' emotional, social, and cognitive development. In this regard, teachers are encouraged to foster supportive classroom environments in which students feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of making mistakes.

Secondly, the study underscores the value of embedding SEL-oriented strategies into everyday language teaching. Instructional practices such as collaborative tasks, peer interaction, role-plays, reflective journaling, and group discussions can substantially increase learners' communicative involvement. These activities not only facilitate language use in meaningful contexts but also contribute to the development of self-awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills, all of which are crucial for effective communication.

Third, the findings demonstrate that reducing language anxiety is a key factor in enhancing communicative competence. Consistent with the Affective Filter Hypothesis, teachers should aim to lower learners' affective barriers by offering constructive feedback, promoting risk-taking, and avoiding excessively corrective practices that may heighten anxiety. In this way, a supportive classroom environment becomes essential for facilitating effective language acquisition.

Fourth, the study emphasizes the need to incorporate SEL components into teacher education programs. Educators should be equipped not only with linguistic and pedagogical expertise but also with the ability to understand and manage students' emotional experiences. Ongoing professional development can support teachers in designing SEL-informed lesson plans and implementing them effectively across diverse instructional contexts.

Finally, curriculum developers are encouraged to incorporate SEL principles into language teaching syllabi. This involves systematically integrating activities that foster empathy, collaboration, and emotional reflection alongside conventional linguistic objectives. Such an approach supports the balanced development of both communicative competence and socio-emotional skills, ultimately contributing to more effective and sustainable language learning outcomes.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its significant findings, this study is subject to several limitations that should be recognized. First, the relatively small sample size ($n = 60$), drawn from non-philological



undergraduate students at a single institution, may limit the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other educational settings or learner groups.

Second, the intervention period was restricted to eight weeks. A longer duration of instruction could potentially provide more substantial evidence regarding the sustained impact of SEL-based teaching on the development of communicative competence. Short-term interventions may not fully reflect gradual changes in both language acquisition and socio-emotional growth.

Third, the study partially depended on self-reported measures, particularly in assessing SEL competencies and language anxiety. Such instruments may be affected by subjective bias or social desirability tendencies, which could influence the precision and reliability of the findings.

Finally, although the study employed a mixed-methods approach combining both quantitative and qualitative data, future research would benefit from employing more advanced longitudinal designs and larger-scale experimental studies. Such approaches could provide stronger evidence for the long-term effectiveness of SEL-based instruction and further validate and expand upon the current findings.

Conclusion. This study investigated the effect of a Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)-based instructional approach on the development of communicative competence in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The results indicate that integrating SEL into language teaching substantially improves learners' communicative competence, with particularly strong gains in sociolinguistic and strategic areas, alongside reduced language anxiety and increased motivation.

The findings further highlight that emotional and social factors are central to successful language learning. Consistent with the Affective Filter Hypothesis, reducing affective barriers facilitates more effective language acquisition and enhances learners' willingness to communicate. Consequently, SEL-oriented instruction offers a purposeful and effective framework for strengthening both linguistic performance and learner engagement.

Overall, this study adds to the expanding body of literature supporting a holistic approach to language education that integrates cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learning. It is recommended that future research investigate the application of SEL integration across diverse educational contexts, varying proficiency levels, and extended instructional periods in order to further confirm its effectiveness and pedagogical significance.

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