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Social and Emotional Learning in Higher Education EFL Teaching: Pedagogical Strategies, Global Perspectives and a PRISMA-Compliant Systematic Review (2015–2025)

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Abstract. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is becoming more and more acknowledged as a basic competency for holistic development in higher education; however, the systematic integration of SEL into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching is yet to be explored in depth. This study aims to systematically synthesize the existing evidence on SEL competencies, pedagogical strategies, contextual influences and outcomes in higher education EFL contexts. A systematic literature review (SLR) was performed based on established screening protocols. Relevant studies were retrieved from Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC and SpringerLink using predefined search terms. Out of 612 initial records, 17 studies met the inclusion criteria. The results show that the core SEL competencies in the field of EFL teaching in higher education mainly include emotional regulation, self-awareness, empathy, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. Pedagogical strategies include technology-enhanced approaches, classroom-based and blended interventions. Reported outcomes include greater engagement of learners, reduced anxiety, increased classroom interaction, and greater professional resilience among educators. These results highlight the fact that the successful implementation of SEL is affected by cultural, institutional, and resource-related factors. Future studies should focus on longitudinal and cross-cultural studies, the development of EFL-specific SEL assessment tools, and the optimization of context-specific,

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technology-enhanced SEL models to foster sustainable language education.

Keywords: SEL; core competencies; pedagogical strategies; EFL; higher education

1. Introduction

In the context of global educational reform and the recent growing emphasis on holistic development, this research examines the integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching at the tertiary level. This section presents the research background, existing gaps in the literature, and research objectives and guiding questions for this systematic review.

1.1 Research Background

Higher education is experiencing massive change with universities increasingly focusing not just on disciplinary knowledge, but on the development of wider competencies. These competencies prepare students to successfully navigate complex social, emotional, and intercultural challenges. Within this context, SEL has become an important aspect of the holistic development of students. Research shows that SEL plays a role in academic success and psychological well-being (Alghorbany & Hamzah, 2020; Canlı et al., 2025), and also in improving classroom participation and interpersonal communication skills (Budak & Mede, 2022; Saraa et al., 2025). A growing body of educational research underscores the role of SEL in promoting learner motivation, emotion regulation, collaboration, self-efficacy, and adaptability (Li & Zhang, 2024; Zong & Yang, 2025). Collectively, this evidence highlights SEL as a cornerstone of modern education.

In recent years, there has been a great deal of interest in incorporating SEL into language education. EFL learning is social, emotionally charged, and relational in nature, and requires constant learner interaction, self-regulation, empathy, and adaptability (Öz & Çepik-Kirish, 2018; Chang & Tsai, 2022; Gao et al., 2025). There is empirical evidence that SEL competencies can increase learner confidence in communication, decrease language anxiety, and encourage active involvement in activities, including peer discussions, oral presentations, and group writing tasks (Guo et al., 2018; Wang & Liu, 2026). Classroom practices such as emotional support in speaking exercises, positive relationships in group work, and management of responsible intercultural communication have been found to promote both linguistic and socio-emotional development (Pereszlényi & Diveki, 2024; Kusuma et al., 2025). These findings suggest an emerging consensus that linguistic competence and socio-emotional competence reinforce each other in EFL learning.

At the same time, University EFL students are faced with unique emotional and social challenges that increase the need for targeted SEL support. These challenges include high language anxiety (Li et al., 2021; Al-Obaydi et al., 2022; Zhang, 2023), lower engagement in lecture-based EFL classes (Kusuma et al., 2025; Xiong, 2025), difficulties with multicultural adjustment (Sangeetha & Sridhivya, 2025; Amini et

al., 2025) and increased academic demands (Mujiono et al., 2019; Imamyartha et al., 2021). Learners can become anxious when making academic presentations, fear negative evaluation by their peers in group discussions, and feel pressured in English-medium instructional settings (Alhassan et al., 2021). These factors can directly influence EFL learning outcomes: unregulated anxiety might negatively impact the ability of learners to process linguistic information effectively (Li et al., 2021; Zhang, 2023), while low self-efficacy might discourage their engagement and negatively impact their achievement (Chang & Tsai, 2022; Santoso et al., 2024).

Concurrently, higher education is being digitally transformed, with blended learning, virtual classrooms, and collaborative learning platforms being integrated. While these innovations present new opportunities, they also present challenges, such as reduced face-to-face interaction, challenges in maintaining motivation in online environments, and the need to adapt to technology-driven modes of communication (Benavides et al., 2020).

1.2 Theoretical Framework

SEL is based on well-known frameworks, including the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) Core Competencies which is considered by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a holistic approach connecting cognitive, social, and emotional development (Unesco, 2024). These frameworks focus on five key areas: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. This study uses the CASEL framework as the main analytical tool to identify, classify and interpret the SEL competencies in higher education research on EFL teaching. The incorporation of SEL is further supported by second language acquisition (SLA) theory, in particular Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which states that emotional factors, such as anxiety and motivation, play a role in the success of language learning (Charos, 2024).

EFL learning in universities is a complex socio-emotional process that is influenced by cultural diversity, language-related pressures, and socio-emotional identity development. Learners have to negotiate linguistic and cultural identities as they engage in English-mediated academic and professional communication (Farsad & Modarresi, 2023; Zong & Yang, 2025). These processes, often manifested through dynamic transcultural practices and translanguaging, impact learners' sense of belongingness in translingual spaces, confidence in cross-boundary communication and willingness to engage in multilingual academic interactions (Baker, 2022).

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), one of the main goals of EFL education, is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultural differences, using attitudes, knowledge and skills such as cultural awareness, empathy, and contextually adaptive communication (Heggernes, 2021). SEL competencies are important support for the development of ICC. Social awareness and relationship skills as expressed through awareness of social cues, taking the perspective of others, and respectful communication increase the

ability of learners to empathize and take the perspective of others. Meanwhile, self-management, especially reflection on intercultural experiences, develops emotional regulation, and helps learners develop adaptive responses in cross-cultural interactions. Both of these processes are necessary for growing ICC (Heggernes, 2021). Additionally, enhancement in adaptability (Ghenaati & Naeini, 2019; Zhang, 2023) and relational awareness (Pereszlényi & Diveki, 2024) further aid learners in careers that demand effective English communication.

Moreover, SEL goes hand in hand with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), a student-centred approach that focuses on the development of genuine communicative competence through interpersonal and intercultural encounters (Santos, 2020). CLT practices, such as peer discussions, group activities and role plays, require socio-emotional competence. CASEL's relationship skills for effective classroom collaboration; self-management to reduce speaking anxiety for effective participation; and social awareness for empathy to enhance cross-cultural communication. Collectively, these SEL competencies are essential for the successful overcoming of passive learner behavior and the successful application of CLT in EFL classrooms (Mahoney et al., 2021). While CASEL offers a widely accepted framework, some studies indicate that SEL models developed in Western contexts may need cultural adaptation to fit different higher education environments (A. Al-Hroub & R. Al-Hroub, 2024).

1.3 Research Gap in Higher Education EFL

Despite these advantages, the available literature is fragmented and limited in scope. Most of the studies are conducted on primary or secondary education, and much less attention is paid to higher education, especially in discipline-specific fields, such as EFL teaching (Dmitrenko et al., 2024; Shen & Abalkheel, 2024; Xiong, 2025). Even within the university context, research tends to focus on isolated aspects of SEL, instead of taking a holistic approach that integrates SEL fully into EFL instruction.

Some research has examined emotional intelligence (EI) development in general education (Alzaanin, 2024; Sangeetha & Sridhivya, 2025), while other research has examined well-being promotion during remote learning (Chang & Tsai, 2022; Resnik & Dewaele, 2023). As mentioned by some scholars, much of the existing EFL and SEL research is based on narrow frameworks, focuses on specific interventions (Imamyartha et al., 2021; Imamyartha et al., 2023) or uses non-systematic approaches that hamper the coherence of the theoretical framework and cross-study comparisons (Hermana & Suganda, 2021; Al-Obaydi et al., 2022).

1.4 Research Objectives and Questions

Therefore, it can be stated that the aim of this study is to fill the gaps in the literature identified in relation to integrating SEL in higher education EFL teaching through the following objectives:

- RO1: To synthesize theoretical and empirical research on SEL competencies in higher education EFL
- RO2: To identify the most relevant SEL competencies most relevant to English learning outcomes.

- RO3: To examine pedagogical strategies for the integration of SEL into EFL instruction.
- RO4: To examine the academic and socio-emotional outcomes of both students and educators.
- RO5: To suggest evidence-based guidelines for practitioners and curriculum designers.

The basis for the research objectives outlined above is based on the core problem that underlies this study. Theoretically, research on SEL in higher education EFL is fragmented and does not have a coherent conceptual framework. Practically, educators do not have structured models, assessment tools, and institutional guidance for incorporating SEL into language instruction. Although available studies show that learners' academic performance is enhanced by SEL-related interventions, emotional support mechanisms, and socio-emotional skill development (Balasubramanian & Al-Mahrooqi, 2016; Zokaee & Suzani, 2020), the field remains without an integrated synthesis including findings across different types of institutions, cultural contexts, and methodological approaches. Consequently, the lack of systematic consolidation impedes the development of the theory, teacher training, and the implementation of policies.

In order to operationalize the research objectives, and address the core problem of this study, the following research questions were formulated:

- RQ1 How are SEL competencies conceptualized in higher education EFL settings?
- RQ2: Which SEL competencies are most relevant to achieve English learning outcomes?
- RQ3: What pedagogical approaches are used to incorporate SEL in higher education EFL teaching?
- RQ4: What is the impact of contextual factors on the effectiveness of such strategies?
- RQ5: What are the academic and socio-emotional outcomes of students and educators that are linked to SEL-integrated EFL practices?

2. Methodology

This section outlines the systematic review methodology that was employed to answer the study's research questions and includes the review design, eligibility criteria, literature search, study screening, data extraction, quality assessment, and data analysis procedures, such as thematic synthesis. All methods were carried out in line with established systematic review guidelines in order to ensure rigor, transparency and reliability in synthesizing evidence on SEL integration in higher education EFL teaching.

2.1 Review Design and Conceptual Framework

This study used the systematic review methodology, combining empirical and theoretical research on the incorporation of SEL skills in higher education EFL teaching. To ensure a structured, transparent and reproducible process for the identification, screening and selection of relevant studies, the review followed the

PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021) and underlying recommendations for rigorous systematic reviews (Booth et al., 2021; Higgins et al., 2019).

The PICOS framework (Higgins et al., 2019) defined the scope of the review as follows: Population (P): EFL learners and teachers involved in SEL-related teaching/learning; Intervention (I): teaching strategies, interventions or support mechanisms aimed at integrating SEL in higher education EFL contexts; Comparison (C): no mandatory comparisons, as the aim of the review is to synthesize methodologies rather than to evaluate direct interventions; Outcome (O): key findings related to SEL integration in EFL contexts; Study design (S): peer-reviewed empirical and theoretical studies, including quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods.

Given the multidisciplinary nature of the topic, conceptual depth was given priority over experimental standardization. A review protocol was prepared before the full screening phase, but it was not preregistered, because the study involves pedagogy and not clinical intervention, and was not eligible for PROSPERO registration. The exclusion of grey literature was deliberate in order to ensure methodological rigour, replicability and peer-reviewed validation of the evidence included. While grey literature can offer emerging insights, often there are no standardized reporting structures and transparent quality appraisal, which can introduce heterogeneity and bias in systematic synthesis. Consequently, only peer reviewed journal articles were included to increase internal validity and comparability across studies.

2.2 Criteria for Eligibility

Following the PROSPERO framework, the screening process included the refinement of titles and abstracts and the development of clear inclusion and exclusion criteria. A study was included if it fulfilled the following criteria:

- Types of research: Empirical and theoretical research published in peer-reviewed journals, both qualitative and quantitative, including mixed-method research, systematic mapping, scoping reviews and conceptual analyses.
- Language: Published in English or non-English language with complete and accurate translation.
- Publication period: From January 2015 to October 2025.
- Participants: EFL teachers (pre-service or in-service), university students enrolled in EFL programs and/or faculties involved in EFL teacher education. Studies which focused on general education students or non-EFL teachers were excluded.
- Educational context: Higher education (undergraduate level and above), focus on EFL teaching and learning. Studies with a limited focus on K-12 education with no relevance to higher education EFL were excluded.
- Transferability: Studies that were conducted in higher education EFL settings focusing on students were included if findings were transferable to EFL teacher development or instructional practices.
- Intervention focus: Studies that address the integration or application of SEL skills in EFL teaching practices, curriculum design, teacher training,

classroom interventions, or technology-enabled support of teacher or learner SEL skills

- **Outcomes:** Studies explicitly addressing SEL related competencies, such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making in higher education EFL contexts, either through measurable outcomes or explicit articulation of instructional practices.

Studies were excluded if they: (1) were not peer reviewed; (2) were not full text or did not have an accurate translation; (3) had no relationship to EFL; (4) did not explicitly connect SEL to higher education EFL; and (5) only focused on K-12 education. The choice to exclude grey literature was deliberate, and it is consistent with the goal of synthesising empirically validated and theoretically grounded studies to minimise variability in the quality of evidence.

2.3 Sources of Information and Methodology for Literature Search

The literature search was carried out in four academic databases: WoS, Scopus, ERIC, and SpringerLink to ensure that the search was comprehensive in terms of the retrieval of studies in the intersection of SEL, higher education, and EFL teaching and empirical, theoretical, and interdisciplinary work. These databases were chosen because they are a collection of databases that index high-impact international journals in education, applied linguistics, psychology and interdisciplinary social sciences. Other databases were excluded to reduce duplication and keep the scope of screening to a manageable level while still including the most relevant peer-reviewed literature.

Search strategies were tailored to the syntax of each database, using Boolean operators and keyword mapping to ensure a balance between accuracy and comprehensiveness. Search terms were developed from three fundamental areas: SEL-related constructs, higher education contexts, and EFL teaching. Example search strings included combinations such as:

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(( "social and emotional learning" OR "socio-emotional learning" OR "SEL" OR "social emotional competence*" OR "emotional competence" OR "emotional intelligence" ) AND ( "higher education" OR "tertiary education" OR "universit*" OR "post-secondary" OR "college" ) AND ( "English as a foreign language" OR "EFL" OR "English language teaching" OR "TESOL" OR "TEFL" OR "English teaching" ) ) AND PUBYEAR > 2014 AND PUBYEAR < 20
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The search was performed in November 2025 and consisted of studies published between 2015 and 2025. Filters specific to each database were used to limit results to peer-reviewed journal articles, to ensure methodological rigor. Only studies with full-texts available were considered for further eligibility assessment. Limited backward and forward snowballing was also carried out by manual screening of reference lists of the 17 included studies and testing citation tracking in WoS and Scopus, but no additional eligible studies were identified.

2.4 Selection and Screening of Studies

The first search produced 612 records. After duplicate removal (using Rayyan) 582 unique studies were left for screening. Two reviewers independently evaluated titles and abstracts based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria, resolving disagreements by discussion and reference to the PICOS framework. Studies with unresolved disagreements were temporarily retained for full-text review to prevent premature exclusion, with final decisions made by consensus after full text assessment. Inter-reviewer agreement was monitored throughout to ensure consistency of procedure.

The study selection process was conducted in four standard stages of systematic reviews, including identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion, as suggested by PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021). This process is summarised in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Figure 1), which gives a good overview of how records were identified, screened, excluded and finally included. During title and abstract screening, 517 studies were excluded and 65 full-text articles were available for eligibility assessment.

During the full-text review, 48 studies were excluded for two main reasons. First, 20 studies did not clearly adopt SEL framework or related concepts, or their research aims were not within the realm of EFL teaching. Second, 28 studies did not address SEL or EI in higher education EFL contexts and did not have a clear link with classroom practice, curriculum design, teacher preparation, or learner competency development. A quality appraisal was carried out, based on the guidelines of PRISMA 2020, to ensure methodological rigor. Studies were considered strong if they reported a clear research design and involved valid and reliable SEL/EI outcome measures. Ultimately, 17 studies were included in the final synthesis.

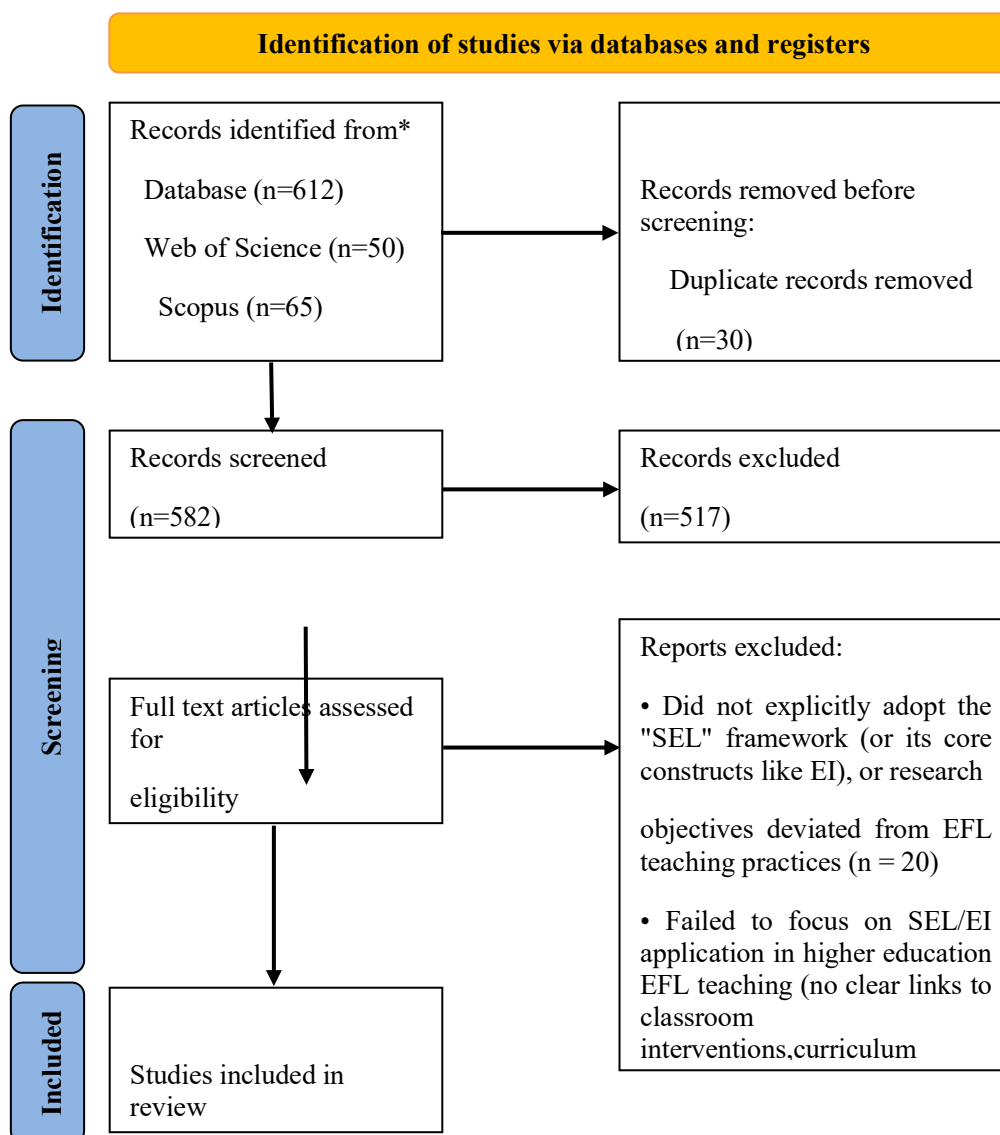


Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 flow diagram detailing the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of the study

2.5 Data Extraction, Coding and Quality-relevance Assessment

A data extraction template was created using Microsoft Excel in order to systematically, consistently and objectively gather information that was aligned with the core research questions of the review and the PICOS framework. For each of the 17 included studies, key information was documented, including study citation, context, participants, theoretical foundations, SEL or EI concepts, implementation approach, research design and methodology, outcomes, and practical implications. Studies were organised in Zotero in thematic folders, classified on the basis of three dimensions: SEL/EI concept, implementation mode and research methodology in EFL teaching. The theoretical contributions, methodological rigour and limitations for each study were further recorded so that synthesis and analysis could be conducted.

Following methodological guidance from Gough (2021), a framework for assessing the quality of research on narrative was created, adapted to the specific considerations of SEL research in higher education EFL contexts. Given that the included studies were quantitative, qualitative and mixed-method designs, no formal risk of bias tool was used. Instead, the evaluation was based on four major dimensions: clarity and relevance of research objectives, appropriateness of methodology selection, richness of findings, and congruity with predefined inclusion criteria. Each study was rated as High, Medium or Low in relevance. High: Direct application of SEL in higher education EFL contexts with practical insights. Medium: SEL in higher education with indirect implications EFL. Low: Studies that meet basic inclusion criteria, but that do not focus primarily on direct EFL relevance or on general SEL theory.

Studies that were less rigorous in method were included where they provided new conceptual insights or were from contexts that were rarely studied, to increase the scope and diversity of the review. This approach reflects the exploratory and integrative nature of the study, in which conceptual coherence and contextual diversity were taken into consideration alongside methodological robustness, in accordance with reporting guidance for narrative synthesis (Campbell et al., 2020).

2.6 Data Synthesis and Thematic Analysis

Given the broad range of methodologies used in the 17 included studies, including quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods approaches, a qualitative thematic synthesis was adopted following the procedural guidance of Thomas and Harden (2008) and Braun and Clarke (2006). To closely follow the aims of the review, coded data were grouped into four general analytical themes: (1) core SEL/EI competencies in higher education EFL; (2) SEL pedagogical strategies; (3) factors influencing SEL effectiveness; and (4) SEL-related outcomes.

An iterative and reflexive synthesis process was adopted, where data from different topics and contexts were constantly compared to find consistency, variations and contradictions. The thematic connections were then organised in a structured matrix according to the PICOS framework to enable the integration of findings in a systematic manner and to identify research strengths, differences in context and gaps in the evidence.

In addition to research directly concerned with SEL in higher education EFL teaching, a few student-centered SEL studies were kept for their transferable teaching insights. These studies provided practical ideas, including SEL-oriented task design, peer interaction structures and reflective writing activities, which can be informative for SEL practices in EFL classrooms. To preserve the clarity of the analysis, these transfer-focused studies were excluded from outcome analyses because they were primarily conceptual rather than evaluative in function.

A sensitivity check was made by re-coding and re-analyzing the thematic categories after removing the transfer-focused studies. The 4 main analytical themes have been stable, and no significant changes were found in the overall

thematic structure and interpretation of the results. This validates the inclusion of the transferable studies to improve conceptual breadth without distorting the central findings of the review.

3. Results

This section is presented in two stages, the findings of the review. First, the general characteristics of the included studies are summarized in order to give an overview of the evidence base. Second, a thematic synthesis is reported showing major patterns in SEL competencies, pedagogical strategies, and contextual influences in the context of higher education EFL settings.

3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

In total, 17 studies passed the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis (Table 1). To give an overview, the main features of each study are summarised according to four main dimensions:

- Year of publication
- Study region
- Research design type
- Participant characteristics

Table 1: Overview of included studies

Study Code	References	Study design	Participants
S1	Canlı, N., Aygün, Ş., Kitiş, E., Aslan, Y., & Yaylı, D. (2025)	Mixed methods (Sequential explanatory design)	139 pre-service language teachers from ELT and Turkish Language Teaching programs at a Turkish university
S2	Li, Y., & Zhang, L. (2024)	Quantitative (Structural Equation Modeling)	806 Chinese EFL students
S3	Xiong, Y. (2025)	Quantitative (correlational analysis; Structural Equation Modeling)	701 Chinese EFL undergraduates from two universities
S4	Zong, Y., & Yang, L. (2025)	Quantitative (survey; regression analysis; Structural Equation Modeling)	816 undergraduate and postgraduate EFL students from five Chinese provinces
S5	Kusuma, I. P. I., Walker, D., Ardi, P., & Budiarta, L. G. R. (2025)	Mixed methods (experimental design)	Indonesian EFL students at a state university (20 in unguided social media group, 23 in guided social media group, 26 in control group)
S6	Sangeetha, S., & Sridhivya, D. (2025)	Mixed methods (Quasi-experimental research design)	75 multilingual EFL learners from rural colleges in Salem District, Tamil Nadu

S7	Zuo, M. (2025)	Qualitative (multimodal conversation analysis)	6 EFL teachers at a Chinese university
S8	Dmitrenko, N., Panchenko, V., Hladka, O., Shkola, I., & Devitska, A. (2024)	Qualitative (interviews)	12 pre-service EFL teachers from five Ukrainian universities
S9	Zhang, T., Zhang, R., & Peng, P. (2024)	Quantitative (Structural Equation Modeling)	489 second-year non-English-major Chinese university students
S10	Pereszlényi, A., & Divéki, R. (2024)	Mixed methods	2 groups of English-major university students in Hungary
S11	Eraldemir-Tuyan, S. (2019)	Qualitative (action research)	17 EFL instructors at a Turkish state university
S12	Kliueva, E., & Tsagari, D. (2018)	Mixed methods	102 EFL teachers; 11 teachers for follow-up interviews
S13	Gao, Y., Guo, Y., & Wang, Y. (2025)	Quantitative (cross-sectional survey)	476 Chinese EFL college students
S14	Zou, X., & Park, H. (2024)	Quantitative (cross-sectional survey)	1040 Chinese non-English major university students
S15	Al-Otaibi, S. M., & Alshaihai, A. (2023)	Qualitative (case study)	6 female Saudi in-service EFL teachers
S16	Resnik, P., & Dewaele, J. M. (2023)	Mixed methods	510 tertiary-level EFL students in Europe
S17	Imamyartha, D., Widiati, U., & Anugerahwati, M. (2023).	Quantitative (Structural Equation Modeling)	371 Indonesian freshmen

This review considers studies published between 2015 and 2025 and shows a clear upward trend in research activity. One of the studies was published in 2018 (S12) and one in 2019 (S11). The number of studies subsequently increased, with three studies published in 2023 (S15, S16, S17) and peaking in 2024 with five studies (S2, S8, S9, S10, S14). By the time of data collection, seven studies (S1, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S13) were published in 2025. Overall, 12 of the 17 studies were published in the period 2024-2025, which seems to show a rapid growth of interest in the integration of SEL into higher education EFL teaching in recent years.

The studies were conducted in geographically diverse research contexts across Asia, Europe and the Middle East. The most studies came from Asia, especially China (S2, S3, S4, S7, S9, S13 and S14). Turkey and Indonesia each contributed two studies (S1, S11; S5, S17, respectively). Europe was represented by Hungary (S10) and Ukraine (S8), while one study was carried out in several countries (S16). In the Middle East and adjacent areas, Saudi Arabia (S15), India (S6) and Cyprus and others (S12) contributed studies. This geographical distribution suggests that the topic of SEL in EFL education is being investigated in a variety of sociocultural contexts, offering possibilities for cross-cultural comparison.

Three major types of research designs were identified: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Quantitative studies were the largest group with seven studies (S2, S3, S4, S9, S13, S14, S17) using methods such as SEM analysis, correlation and cross-sectional surveys. Four studies (S7, S8, S11, S15) had qualitative designs, which included multimodal discourse analysis, intensive interviews, and follow-up case studies. Mixed-methods designs were reported in six studies (S1, S5, S6, S10, S12, S16) and use quantitative and qualitative analysis to enhance explanatory depth. In total, 13 out of 17 studies included quantitative elements, indicating that there is a strong focus on measurable outcomes as well as qualitative insights.

Participants were mainly foreign language teachers, program educators and pre-service teachers. Eleven studies were conducted among foreign language teachers (S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S9, S10, S13, S14, S16, S17), and the sample sizes varied between 20 (S5) and 1040 participants (S14). These studies involved undergraduate and graduate students, and non-professional English teachers. Six studies were focused on teachers, including pre-service teachers (S1, S7, S8, S11, S12, S15), with sample sizes ranging from 6 (S7, S15) to 139 participants (S1). Collectively, these studies involved various stakeholders involved in foreign language teaching and offer a comprehensive view on the integration of SEL in higher education EFL contexts.

3.2 Thematic Synthesis of Findings

Through systematic coding, data extraction and integration of the most important findings from the 17 included studies, three core themes were identified (Refer to Appendix 1):

- Core SEL competencies in EFL teaching and learning
- SEL-facilitating pedagogical strategies in EFL contexts
- Contextual influencing factors and practical outcomes

3.2.1 Core SEL competencies in EFL teaching and learning

Systematic analysis of the 17 included studies showed that core SEL competencies in higher education EFL teaching can be divided into five main dimensions: emotional regulation (15 studies), relationship skills (11 studies), social awareness and empathy (8 studies), self-awareness (6 studies), and responsible decision-making (4 studies). Each dimension is closely related to language acquisition, cross-cultural communication and motivation enhancement in learning.

Emotional regulation, which is a key sub-competency of self-management, was the most discussed. S1 emphasized the fact that pre-service English teachers tend to have poor stress management skills, resorting to avoidance styles when they are under pressure to teach. The practical experiment in S9 showed that support in emotion regulation helps reduce boredom in the learning of EFL and helps improve overall academic performance. Similarly, S14 highlighted the need for emotional regulation to help reduce English-related anxiety, resulting in increased engagement and communication in the classroom.

Relationship skills such as communication, teamwork, and teacher-student interaction were the focus of 11 studies. S1 and S12 stated that positive teacher relationship skills led to better classroom management and positive teacher-student relationships. S5 and S17 found that the relationship skills of students in collaborative learning positively affected the proficiency of oral languages and online participation. In S7, the multimedia dialogue analysis showed that emotional coordination strategies increased team cohesion.

Social awareness and empathy were highlighted in eight studies. For example, S6 showed that the use of multiple languages (translanguaging) in learning improved mutual cultural understanding, social awareness and overall English proficiency. S15 said that teacher's social awareness, learning the needs of learners by paying attention to social contexts, enhanced the effectiveness of instruction and engagement of learners.

Self-awareness was mentioned in six studies. S1 indicated that self-awareness of EFL teachers was moderate but significant in teaching effectiveness. Studies S10 and S11 showed that increased self-awareness helped learners make rational and responsible decisions during discussions and made a positive contribution to emotional skill development. In S13, latent variable analysis classified emotional abilities of learners in four clusters, which showed that self-assessment of learning was used to differentiate levels of SEL competencies.

Responsible decision-making was discussed in four studies. S10 showed how the analysis of controversial topics improved the ability of the learners to make responsible decisions. S6 found that translanguaging supports responsible decision making in cross-cultural EFL contexts and S8 found that SEL applications enhance the ability of educators to make responsible pedagogical decisions.

It is important to note that a number of studies (S11, S12, S15) addressed specifically EI as a measurable psychological construct, often measured by standardized instruments. Other studies viewed broader SEL competencies as multidimensional learning outcomes. Maintaining this distinction is important, as EI is usually one component or indicator of larger SEL frameworks, not a synonym of SEL.

3.2.2 *SEL-facilitating pedagogical strategies in EFL contexts*

SEL-related pedagogical strategies identified in the included studies can be broadly divided into four main types:

- Technology-enabled strategies: 4 studies
- Classroom interventions: 5 studies
- Teacher training and professional development: 4 studies
- Mixed strategies: 3 studies

The pedagogical strategies in relation to SEL that were identified in the included studies can be broadly summarized into four major types: technology-enabled strategies, classroom-based interventions, teacher training and professional development, and mixed strategies. Technology-enabled strategies included AI-

based learning, social media-enabled learning and collaborative learning through mobile technologies. In S4, students underwent personalised learning using an SEL-informed AI framework, which improved both engagement and psychological well-being. S5 compared guided and unguided social media support finding that unguided learners were significantly more likely to intend to communicate. S16 described an online learning model that combined collaboration, openness and emotional support as seen in the Emergency Remote Education approach using virtual learning environments. S17 used the application, Telegram, to facilitate collaboration and EI building.

Classroom-based interventions were analyzed in five studies and consisted of discussion of controversial topics, multilingual collaborative activities, and reflective assessments. S2 improved classroom climate and SEL integration by designing the curriculum. In S6, multi-lingual collaborative activities supported both language development and SEL skills development. S7 used emotional regulation strategies to enhance team cohesion and S8 used SEL-based formative assessments to enhance communication. S10 provided a safe space for the expression of different perspectives through discussion of controversial issues, in order to improve social and emotional skills.

Teacher training and professional development were highlighted in four studies, employing techniques like workshops, role-playing, and reflection logs to boost the SEL competence, emotional literacy, and teaching confidence of teachers (S1, S11, S12, S15). In S1, SEL interventions were embedded in new teacher training courses for foundational skills. S11 implemented an emotional culture improvement project that included EI assessment, experiential activities, learning records, group discussions, and peer guidance to enhance emotional literacy of teachers. S12 focused on increasing teacher knowledge of emotional culture to improve emotional guidance in classrooms and S15 used workshops and semi-structured interviews to improve teacher EI, self-efficacy, and instruction.

Mixed strategies in three studies included classroom environment enhancement, integration of emotional elements in instruction, and developing teacher and learner skills. S3 integrated SEL strategies with motivation management in order to enhance classroom environment and student engagement in writing. S13 focused on deeply integrating SEL into the instructional content and S14 used participatory teaching, trust-building and EI development to alleviate foreign language anxiety and enhance learners' willingness to communicate. A small contradictory finding about the use of technology also emerged: although S5 found evidence of higher communication willingness in unguided digital environments, other research stressed the importance of structured guidance for emotional support, indicating that the optimal scaffolding levels are context dependent.

3.2.3 *Contextual influencing factors and practical outcomes*

The effectiveness of SEL depended on four categories of contextual factors:

- Cultural and institutional factors: 7 studies
- Individual characteristics: 9 studies

- Resources and technology: 5 studies
- Learning environments and instructional practices: 5 studies

Seven studies (S2, S5, S6, S8, S9, S14, S16) focused on the impact of cultural and institutional factors on the implementation of SEL. S2 and S14 found that Confucian cultural values had a significant impact on Chinese EFL learners' emotional regulation and teacher-student relationships understanding. In contrast, S6 identified a lack of bilingual education framework and a lack of teacher professional development as key constraints on effective SEL application. Additionally, S8 and S16 emphasized the importance of online learning approaches and other institutional factors that may have a significant impact on the implementation of SEL.

Individual learner and teacher characteristics were investigated in nine studies (S1, S9, S11, S12, S13, S14, S15, S16, S17). S12 and S15 showed that the level of EI of teachers and their teaching experience is an important factor in determining the effectiveness of SEL strategies. Studies S13 and S14 showed that family background, personality traits, curiosity as well as individual differences of the learners influence both EI development and motivation for language communication. S16 found that students who had higher levels of self-directed learning skills experienced more benefits from SEL when learning remotely.

Five studies (S4, S5, S7, S15, S17) were about the role of resources and technical support. S5 and S17 stressed that access to technology and mobile devices are crucial to the effective implementation of technology-based SEL strategies. S7 and S15 emphasized the need for wider educational resources to help with SEL outcomes, while S4 emphasized that organizational support, alongside guaranteed resources, is key to implementing AI-based SEL frameworks.

Finally, five studies (S3, S7, S8, S10, S16) investigated the role of teaching environments and teaching methods. In the context of online learning, S3 and S16 found that the openness of classrooms and social isolation had a significant impact on the success of SEL interventions. S7 found that in collaborative curriculum designs, limited resources and challenges in forming effective groups affected SEL promotion. S8 observed that even in times of remote learning in crisis situations, low social sensitivity among students may serve as a barrier to successful implementation of SEL.

These contextual and individual factors shape the way in which SEL strategies are designed, implemented and adapted across EFL settings, and provide the foundation for the observed practical outcomes. Across the 17 studies, multidimensional results of integrating SEL were:

- Language outcomes: Improvements were found in EFL proficiency, willingness to communicate, learning motivation, writing engagement and overall academic performance (S3, S4, S5, S6, S8, S13, S14, S16, S17).
- Emotional and social well-being: The implementation of SEL decreased boredom and foreign language anxiety, and increased emotion regulation, empathy, and psychological well-being (S6, S8, S9, S10, S11, S14, S16, S17).

- Teacher development Positive effects included improved classroom management, more student-centered instruction, improved teamwork, increased teaching confidence (S1, S7, S11, S12, S15).
- Classroom environment: Integration of SEL helped achieve more supportive learning atmospheres, boosted teacher-student relationships, and improved team cohesion (S7, S10, S12, S14, S15).

SEL-Related Outcomes in Higher Education EFL Contexts Integration of SEL into higher education EFL teaching resulted in consistent multidimensional outcomes in terms of language learning, emotional and social well-being, teacher development and classroom environment. Language Learning Outcomes. Several studies reported measurable improvements in language performance, participation and communication. S5 found that including SEL in EFL teaching had a significant effect on language performance and willingness to communicate, especially for those learners who were involved with unguided social media.

S8 and S16 reported gains in communicative competence and language skills, and S6 showed that SEL promotes the integrated development of social-emotional competencies and EFL learning. S17 showed the participation in SEL informed online learning had a positive predictive power on the motivation and academic results of the learners. Additional evidence included increased participation in writing (S3), greater engagement in learning (S4, S8), a greater engagement in bilingual communication (S14), and overall improvements in learning outcomes and willingness to communicate (S13, S15). In all, 11 of the 17 studies reported definite gains in language performance or communicative competence, indicating a consistent instructional effect.

Emotional and Social Well-Being. SEL implementation also had a positive impact on learners in terms of emotional and social outcomes. Studies found decreased boredom and foreign language anxiety (S9, S14, S16), as well as improvements in emotion regulation, coping abilities, empathy and responsible decision-making (S6, S8, S11, S17). Psychological wellbeing and enjoyment of language learning were further improved in technology mediated and remote contexts (S4, S16). In total, nine studies reported statistically or qualitatively significant improvements in emotional regulation or well-being, though a few reported context-dependent or small effects, suggesting the importance of instructional design and mode of delivery in influencing SEL outcomes.

Teacher Development. SEL integration was part of professional growth and increased classroom efficacy. S1 and S12 found enhanced classroom management strategies as a result of SEL training and implementation and S15 found enhanced ability of instructors to understand and respond to student needs. S12 further improved teachers' skills to control classroom interruptions and individualized emotional support. S7 was able to document professional growth in collaborative emotion regulation strategies, and S11 showed meaningful progress through the Emotion Skills Development program. Overall, implementation of SEL enhanced teaching confidence (S15) and offered practical frameworks for designing EFL teacher training curriculums focusing on emotional skills development (S12).

Classroom Environment. SEL applications also resulted in an improved learning environment. Supportive and positive classroom climates were found in S10, and more positive teacher-student interactions and relationships were found in S1, S2, S12, S14 and S15. Collaborative cohesion in curriculum design was enhanced (S7), and successful adaptive strategies for emergency remote teaching were put into place (S16). Technology mediated environments, such as social media - supported learning (S5) and AI assisted writing platforms (S4), further encouraged communication, engagement and deep learning. Collectively, these findings show that SEL integration is beneficial not only for linguistic proficiency but also for emotional development, teacher professional growth, and the establishment of supportive and collaborative learning environments in higher education EFL contexts.

4. Discussion

This review synthesized 17 studies on social-emotional learning (SEL) in higher education EFL contexts between 2015 and 2025 with the aim to identify core competencies, pedagogical strategies, influencing factors, and learning outcomes. Rather than confirming the value of SEL at a glance, the findings provide insight into the workings of specific competencies in language learning environments marked by intercultural interaction and communicative demands. For example, emotion regulation was consistently linked with decreases in language-related anxiety, whereas other SEL dimensions supported intercultural exchange, relational skills, and other broader developmental goals.

Pedagogical Strategies. The promotion of SEL in EFL contexts encompasses a variety of strategies, such as technology-enabled learning, classroom-based interventions, and teacher training. Technology-supported approaches respond to the challenges of digital change, including the use of personalized learning, collaborative interactions online, and remote engagement. Classroom interventions focus on teachers as main facilitators with practices such as reflective writing, structured peer interaction and emotionally supportive feedback found to be pedagogically feasible and relatively low-cost. These strategies can be incorporated into CLT without the need for major institutional change. However, large-scale technology initiatives or comprehensive teacher training programs may need extra resources and institutional coordination which may have implications for implementation feasibility in different contexts.

Context and Culture: Considerations. Effective integration of SEL is shaped by cultural, individual and environmental factors. Empirical evidence shows positive synergies from combining SEL strategies with classroom practices, resulting in improvements in students' language skills, decreased anxiety, greater teacher adaptability and more supportive learning environments. Studies in East Asian contexts, for example, suggest that Confucian cultural values lead to learners having particular attitudes to authority, group harmony and emotional expression. While these orientations may enable cooperation and persistence, they may also result in a lower willingness to express personal opinions or take communicative risks, suggesting the need for culturally sensitive SEL-oriented speaking and interaction tasks in university EFL classrooms.

Comparison to K-12 SEL Research. Unlike primary and secondary education where SEL is often carried out through structured curricula and school-wide programs, in higher education study of EFL is focusing on classroom-level practices, short-term interventions, and competencies that are closely related to communicative performance. This suggests that SEL in tertiary EFL contexts is more pedagogically embedded and context specific, which suggests the need to integrate socio-emotional learning with academic communication requirements, especially in intercultural and multilingual contexts.

Teacher Workload and Institutional Support. Several studies noted that the implementation of SEL may increase emotional labor and workload of teachers. Without proper institutional support, professional development, or adjustments to workload, sustained adoption of SEL may contribute to teacher stress or burnout. These findings highlight the importance of long-term SEL integration not only on pedagogical design but also on organizational structures that protect teacher well-being.

Theoretical Implications. From a SLA perspective, this review clarifies the role of socio-emotional competencies as mediating mechanisms in language learning environments that are characterized by intercultural communication, identity negotiation, and performance-related anxiety. While previous SLA research acknowledged the role of affective factors, the current synthesis shows that SEL offers a systematic, pedagogically operational framework between emotional regulation, social awareness, and relationship skills and communicative competence. In this way, SEL is a way to extend affect-oriented SLA theories by linking emotional processes to concrete instructional strategies and classroom practices.

Broader Contributions and Future Directions. Through synthesis of dispersed empirical evidence, this review identifies consistent patterns across contexts, competencies and pedagogical approaches. It shifts the discussion about whether SEL is beneficial to how it can be successfully implemented in the context of higher education EFL, while pointing out feasible strategies, contextual constraints and institutional requirements. Future research should include more comparative cultural studies, the development of longitudinal and vertically integrated research designs, and improvement of measurement tools for SEL in foreign language education. As the demands of global communication continue to increase, the integration of socio-emotional dimensions to language learning will continue to be an important direction of research and pedagogical practice.

5. Limitations and Future Research

Although this study systematically analyzed the academic literature on SEL in higher education EFL contexts, there are a number of limitations that point to directions for future research. Geographical and Cultural Representation. Chinese studies had a relatively high proportion of the 17 included studies. While other regions were represented, this uneven distribution may impose a limitation on the cross-cultural generalizability of the findings. Future research should focus on cross-cultural comparative designs, increase the geographical and cultural

diversity of samples, and investigate the adaptation of SEL competencies to different educational systems and cultural practices. Such efforts would increase the applicability and synchronisation of key outcomes across diverse contexts.

Methodological Diversity. Most current studies have been based on quantitative or mixed methods, with few qualitative studies. This restricts deeper understanding of classroom processes, teacher and student experiences and interactive dynamics. Future research should expand qualitative studies to examine in-depth processes and key factors involved in SEL integration in order to offer richer and context-sensitive information and practical suggestions for educators.

Longitudinal Evidence. Current studies largely focus on short-term interventions, and thus the long-term effects of SEL integration remain largely unexplored. Longitudinal research is needed to examine the long-term effects of SEL on socio-emotional development and language learning trajectories. Additionally, research should examine implementation models in different instructional settings, such as online and hybrid environments, and examine the role of institutional structures, teacher training programs, and resource allocation in sustaining SEL practices.

Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration and Applied Practice. Greater collaboration across applied linguistics, psychology and educational technology could improve both integration of theories and methodological rigor. Action research by classroom teachers, peer-supported learning initiatives, and open-access repositories for SEL-EFL teaching resources could further encourage scalable, context-sensitive implementation so that research findings can be both practical and transferable in a variety of higher education contexts.

6. Conclusion

This systematic review synthesized 17 studies published between 2015 and 2025 to investigate the role of SEL in higher education EFL with a focus on core competencies, pedagogical integration, and contextual influences. The results show that SEL competencies such as emotion regulation, social awareness, and relationship skills are closely related to the communicative, cultural, and psychological demands of university-level language learning. Across studies, SEL-informed practices were linked to increased learner engagement, lower levels of language anxiety, more effective classroom interaction, and teacher development. Implementation outcomes, however, were influenced by contextual factors such as cultural norms, institutional support and resource availability.

Despite limitations concerning regional representation, methodological diversity and the absence of long-term evidence, this review offers a aggregated picture of current knowledge and identifies priorities for future research, especially cross-cultural comparison, longitudinal research and the development of context-sensitive assessment tools. Integrating socio-emotional dimensions into foreign language education seems both necessary and promising, as long as implementation is pedagogically based and sensitive to local contexts.

Notably, this review is one of the first PRISMA-guided systematic syntheses that specifically address the topic of SEL integration in higher education EFL. By synthesising recent empirical evidence (2015-2025), it goes beyond the fragmented studies on specific interventions and proposes a coherent analytical framework that relates core competencies, pedagogical strategies, contextual constraints and multidimensional outcomes. In doing so, it contributes to the research on affect-oriented SLA by operationalizing socio-emotional competencies in the context of communicative and intercultural language education and provides practical and theoretical guidance for educators, institutions, and curriculum designers.

Conflict of Interest

The authors confirm that there are no competing interests related to this work.

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Appendix 1

Overview of core SEL dimensions across included studies

Study Code	Core SEL Competencies	SEL-Facilitating Pedagogical Strategies	Contextual Influencing Factors	Practical Outcomes
S1	Problem-solving; relationship skills; self-awareness; stress management	Workshops; role-play; collaborative learning/peer-led discussions; practicum; reflective journaling; learner-centered collaborative activities	Cultural norms; family expectations; societal perceptions	Enhanced SEL; reduced burnout; improved classroom management; positive teacher-student relationships; promoted students' academic achievement & social-emotional development
S2	Emotional regulation; empathy; relationship skills	Relationship-building; enjoyment-oriented learning environments; EI-integrated curricula	Confucian cultural values	Reduced burnout; increased enjoyment; strengthened teacher-student relationships & enhanced emotional regulation/coping skills
S3	Self-awareness; social awareness; self-management; social management	Classroom climate optimization; SEL-integrated instruction; teacher professional development, SEL-focused activities	Classroom environment	Improved EFL writing engagement
S4	Self-awareness; self-management; social awareness; relationship skills; responsible decision-making	AI-enhanced instruction	Institutional support; resource conditions	Improved engagement and emotional well-being
S5	Engagement; motivation; learning environment	Guided/unguided social media learning	Institutional permission	Improved speaking performance; willingness to communicate enhancement for the

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	and support adaptation			unguided social media group
S6	Emotional regulation; empathy; self-awareness; relationship skills	Cross-linguistic and collaborative activities	Limited teacher training; monolingual-dominant systems	Systematic development of both SEL competencies and English language acquisition
S7	Emotional regulation	Collaborative emotion-regulation strategies	Collaborative environment context; resource constraints; team adaptation challenges; external interruptions	Improved curriculum development; enhanced team cohesion; teachers' professional growth.
S8	Self-awareness; self-regulation; interpersonal skills	Reflective assessment; SEL tools	Crisis and distance education; students' social and emotional vulnerability, and displacement	Enhanced communicative competence; deeper engagement; positive and supportive learning environment; improved language skills; fostered social-emotional skills
S9	Emotional regulation; self-awareness	Emotionally engaging instruction	Exam-oriented education system, traditional rote learning culture, high-stakes testing	Reduced burnout; improved performance
S10	Self-awareness; responsible decision-making; social awareness	Controversial-issue discussions	Cultural context	Positive classroom climate
S11	Self-awareness; emotional regulation; empathy; self-motivation; relationship	Experiential and reflective learning	Participant self-initiation; supportive learning environment; researcher's	Emotional literacy development

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			empathetic guidance	
S12	Emotional literacy; trait emotional intelligence	Emotionally responsive classroom strategies	Teacher trait EI level, teaching experience, class size, educational sector	Promoted effective application of emotional literacy strategies in EFL classrooms; improved teacher-student relationships and classroom interaction quality; enhanced teachers' ability to respond to disruptive behavior; provided empirical basis for the design of emotional literacy training programs for EFL teachers; facilitated the implementation of personalized emotional support in small classes
S13	Self-emotional appraisal; others' emotional appraisal ; regulation of emotion, use of emotion	EI-integrated instruction	Family background, parenting style, curiosity, personality, and cultural/social background	Enhanced EI related communication willingness, profile improvement, and holistic language learning outcomes
S14	Self-emotional appraisal; others' emotional appraisal ; regulation of emotion, use of emotion	Engagement-oriented instruction	Teacher immediacy; foreign language classroom anxiety ; Confucian cultural values	Enhanced L2 willingness to communicate; reduced foreign language classroom anxiety; improved teacher-student relationship; increased active participation in L2 communication
S15	Intrapersonal emotional intelligence; interpersonal emotional intelligence; adaptability; problem-solving; stress	Emotion-responsive and supportive teaching with adaptive methods	Teaching experience; gender segregation in Saudi universities; classroom social context; availability of	Better understanding of students' needs; adjusted teaching methods; effective classroom management; enhanced student engagement/enthusiasm; positive teacher-student relationships; improved

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	management; general mood; self-efficacy beliefs		teaching resources	teachers' teaching confidence; promoted students' learning outcomes
S16	Trait emotional intelligence (TEI); learner autonomy; open-mindedness; intrinsic motivation; emotional regulation	Comprehensive online instruction integrating collaboration, autonomy, and emotional support	Emergency remote teaching (ERT); teaching mode differences; social isolation in online settings; limited face-to-face interaction; technology access and usability; availability of self-directed learning resources	Reduced foreign language enjoyment (FLE) in ERT; slightly decreased foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) in ERT; positive correlation between TEI and learner autonomy; higher FLE for more autonomous learners; weakened emotional intensity in ERT; disappearance of FLE-FLCA negative correlation in ERT; varied student engagement
S17	Trait emotional intelligence (TEI); online learning engagement	Team-based mobile collaborative learning with peer; formative assessment	Availability of mobile technologies; team collaboration dynamics; technical limitations; Indonesian EFL context; English for Academic Purpose (EAP) program nature; teacher support; curriculum alignment	Positive prediction of online learning engagement (OLE) by TEI; positive prediction of EFL motivation by OLE; positive prediction of EAP course grades by EFL motivation; enhanced peer collaboration and support; improved autonomous learning ability; fostered positive language learning attitudes; strengthened self-regulation in mobile learning