

INTEGRATING SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract: *This article explores the integration of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in Uzbekistan. The study is based on a pre-survey conducted among 86 university students to examine their emotional experiences during oral English activities. The findings show that students often experience emotional barriers such as anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low confidence when speaking English. According to the survey results, 52.3% of students consider emotional regulation very important for successful oral communication. Students also reported that managing emotions improves confidence, fluency, and pronunciation. The results indicate that emotional factors significantly influence students' participation in language learning.*

Keywords: *Social Emotional Learning, EFL, speaking anxiety, emotional wellbeing, communicative competence, language education, classroom participation, Uzbekistan*

Introduction. Foreign language learning is not only a cognitive process but also an emotional one. Many students studying English as a Foreign Language possess sufficient knowledge of grammar and vocabulary; however, they often hesitate to participate in speaking activities. Emotional barriers such as anxiety, fear of mistakes, and lack of confidence influence communicative performance. In Uzbekistan, classroom instruction is traditionally teacher-centered and exam-oriented. Emotional wellbeing is rarely integrated into teaching practice. However, communicative language teaching requires a psychologically safe environment where students feel comfortable expressing their ideas.

Literature Review. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) has become an increasingly important concept in modern education. It refers to the process through which students develop essential emotional and social competencies that support both academic learning and personal development. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), SEL focuses on five key competencies: self-awareness, self-management (emotional regulation), social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These competencies enable students to understand their emotions, manage stress effectively, build positive relationships, and make responsible choices in academic and social situations [CASEL: 8].

A growing body of research demonstrates that integrating SEL into educational settings leads to significant improvements in students' motivation, classroom engagement, and academic performance. For example, a large meta-analysis conducted by Durlak and colleagues examined over 200 school-based SEL programs and found that students

participating in SEL interventions showed improved social behavior, reduced emotional distress, and higher academic achievement compared to students who did not receive SEL instruction [Durlak: 407]. These findings highlight that emotional and social competencies are closely connected with effective learning.

In addition to academic benefits, SEL plays an important role in creating supportive classroom environments. When students feel emotionally safe and supported, they are more likely to participate actively in classroom activities, express their ideas, and collaborate with peers. Teachers who integrate SEL practices into their teaching can foster positive classroom climates where students feel respected and valued. Such environments contribute to improved communication, mutual understanding, and stronger teacher-student relationships [Zins: 23].

The importance of emotional factors is particularly evident in foreign language learning. Learning to communicate in a new language often requires students to take risks, express personal ideas, and interact with others in unfamiliar ways. As a result, learners frequently experience emotional challenges such as anxiety, fear of making mistakes, or fear of negative evaluation from peers and teachers. These emotional barriers can significantly limit students' willingness to speak and participate in communicative activities.

Research in language education suggests that emotional regulation is one of the key factors influencing students' speaking performance. When students are able to recognize and manage their emotions, they become more confident in expressing themselves and more willing to engage in classroom discussions. Conversely, high levels of anxiety can reduce students' participation and negatively affect their language development.

Several studies have shown that integrating SEL principles into language classrooms can help address these challenges. For example, emotionally supportive teaching strategies such as encouraging feedback, collaborative learning tasks, and reflective activities can reduce speaking anxiety and increase students' communicative confidence. In such environments, students feel more comfortable experimenting with language, making mistakes, and gradually improving their skills.

In addition, communicative teaching techniques such as games, dialogues, and role-play activities have been proven effective in increasing student participation and reducing speaking anxiety, as they create interactive and engaging learning environments [Rafikova, 2021].

Furthermore, SEL-based teaching approaches encourage teachers to consider students' emotional experiences as an integral part of the learning process. Rather than focusing exclusively on linguistic accuracy, teachers can support learners' emotional wellbeing while guiding them toward effective communication. This balanced approach contributes to the development of both language competence and emotional resilience.

Therefore, integrating Social Emotional Learning into EFL classrooms represents an important step toward more holistic and student-centered language education. By addressing

emotional barriers and promoting positive classroom interactions, SEL can significantly enhance students' participation, motivation, and overall learning outcomes.

Furthermore, recent studies conducted in Uzbekistan's higher education context confirm that SEL-based approaches significantly improve students' oral communicative competence and confidence in English speaking. In addition, motivation has been identified as a key factor influencing students' engagement and success in language learning processes, while the development of intercultural competence through modern tools such as social networks also plays an important role in enhancing communicative skills [Dadaboyeva, 2024; Umirova & Dadabayeva, 2025; Alimova & Dadaboeva, 2023].

Methodology. This study employed a descriptive research design in order to explore the emotional experiences of students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. The research was conducted at Tashkent Kimyo International University, Namangan Branch.

The participants of the study were 86 university students studying English as a Foreign Language. The respondents represented different levels of English proficiency and were enrolled in regular EFL courses at the university. The purpose of selecting this group was to better understand the emotional challenges students face during oral communication tasks in the classroom.

Data for the study were collected through a pre-survey designed to investigate students' perceptions of emotional factors affecting their speaking performance. The survey consisted of several multiple-choice questions that examined different aspects of students' emotional experiences in English classes.

The questionnaire focused on three main areas. First, students were asked to evaluate the importance of managing and expressing emotions during oral communication in English. This question aimed to determine how students perceive the role of emotional regulation in speaking activities.

Second, the survey explored which aspects of oral performance are influenced by emotional control. Students were asked to identify whether emotional regulation improves factors such as confidence, fluency, pronunciation, or vocabulary use.

Third, students were asked to identify situations that create the greatest emotional difficulty when speaking English. The options included answering unexpected questions, speaking in front of an audience, participating in exams or presentations, and interacting with unfamiliar people.

The survey was distributed electronically, and students responded voluntarily. The results were presented in percentages to provide a clear understanding of students' perceptions regarding emotional factors in speaking activities. The results helped reveal the most significant emotional barriers affecting students' participation in EFL classrooms.

The findings of this pre-survey served as a basis for exploring how Social Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies could be integrated into classroom practice to support students' emotional wellbeing and improve their communicative confidence

Findings and results. The results of the pre-survey provide important insights into students' emotional experiences during oral English activities. The analysis shows that emotional regulation plays a significant role in students' communicative performance.

Regarding the importance of emotional control in oral communication, more than half of the respondents (52.3%) indicated that the ability to manage and express emotions is very important for successful speaking. In addition, 36% of students reported that emotional control is important, while only 10.5% expressed a neutral opinion. These results suggest that the majority of students recognize the strong connection between emotional regulation and effective communication in a foreign language.

Students were also asked to identify which aspects of oral performance improve when they are able to control their emotions. The results show that confidence was the most frequently selected factor, with 46.5% of students indicating that emotional control significantly increases their confidence while speaking English. Fluency was selected by 20.9% of students, suggesting that emotional comfort allows learners to speak more smoothly and naturally. Pronunciation and vocabulary use were both selected by 11.6% of respondents, indicating that emotional stability may also contribute to better language production.

Another important aspect explored in the survey was the identification of situations that create the greatest emotional difficulty during English speaking activities. The results show that the most stressful situation for students is answering unexpected questions, which was selected by 36% of respondents. This suggests that spontaneous speaking tasks often cause anxiety due to the lack of preparation time. Speaking in front of an audience was reported as another significant challenge by 26.7% of students, reflecting the influence of public speaking anxiety in language learning contexts. Exams or presentations and talking to new people were both selected by 17.4% of students, indicating that formal evaluation and unfamiliar social interactions also contribute to emotional discomfort during communication.

Overall, the findings reveal that emotional factors play a crucial role in shaping students' experiences in EFL classrooms. The results highlight that emotional challenges such as anxiety, fear of mistakes, and lack of confidence can significantly influence students' willingness to participate in oral communication activities.

Discussion. The findings of this study demonstrate that emotional barriers represent one of the main challenges affecting students' participation in EFL classrooms. Although students may possess sufficient linguistic knowledge, emotional factors such as anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and lack of confidence often prevent them from expressing their ideas during speaking activities.

These results support previous research indicating that emotional wellbeing is closely connected with successful language learning. When students feel anxious or insecure, they are less likely to take risks in communication and may avoid participating in classroom discussions. As a result, their opportunities to practice speaking and develop communicative competence become limited.

In this context, integrating Social Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies into EFL teaching can provide effective support for students' emotional needs. SEL-based practices encourage students to recognize and regulate their emotions while participating in learning activities. For example, simple strategies such as emotional check-ins at the beginning of a lesson can help students become aware of their feelings and prepare mentally for communication tasks.

Supportive feedback from teachers also plays an important role in reducing students' fear of making mistakes. When feedback is constructive and encouraging rather than critical, students feel more comfortable experimenting with language and expressing their ideas.

Pair and group activities can further reduce anxiety by allowing students to practice speaking in smaller, less intimidating settings before addressing the entire class.

By integrating such strategies into daily classroom practice, teachers can create psychologically safe learning environments where students feel respected, supported, and motivated to participate. In this way, SEL does not replace language instruction but enhances it by addressing the emotional factors that influence learning.

These findings are also supported by previous studies emphasizing the importance of emotional, motivational, and intercultural factors in language learning [Umirova & Dadabayeva, 2025; Alimova & Dadaboeva, 2023].

Therefore, addressing emotional factors should become an essential component of modern language teaching methodology.

Conclusion. The present study highlights the important role of emotional factors in English language learning. The findings indicate that many students experience speaking anxiety, fear of mistakes, and low confidence during oral communication tasks. These emotional barriers can significantly limit students' participation and hinder the development of communicative competence.

The results of the pre-survey demonstrate that students themselves recognize the importance of emotional regulation in successful speaking performance. Therefore, addressing emotional wellbeing should be considered an essential component of effective language teaching.

Integrating Social Emotional Learning strategies into EFL classrooms can help create supportive and psychologically safe learning environments. Through practices such as emotional awareness activities, supportive feedback, and collaborative learning tasks, teachers can encourage students to participate more actively and confidently in communication.

In the context of Uzbekistan's higher education system, where classroom instruction has traditionally been teacher-centered and exam-focused, the integration of SEL approaches may contribute to more student-centered and emotionally supportive teaching practices. Ultimately, combining linguistic instruction with emotional support can lead to more effective language learning outcomes and improved communicative competence among students.

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