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Beyond fluency: Integrating social-emotional learning into task-based language teaching for the whole learner

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Abstract

This qualitative investigation investigates the incorporation of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) into Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) for English language learners within a post-pandemic Saudi Arabian university setting. Being aware of the increased necessity to support students' emotional and social well-being as well as their academic recovery, the investigation explored 30 EFL students' experience via reflective journaling, interviews, and observations across a six-week SEL-enhanced TBLT intervention. Results reported that integrating SEL values into communicative activities promoted balanced growth with a resultant six major outcomes: increased emotional engagement with learning, enhanced empathy in group work, improved reflective recognition of emotions, increased sense of classroom safety and confidence, enhanced social support and belonging with peers, and significant personal development and self-discovery. The findings show that this combined practice efficiently met both students' linguistic and their socio-emotional necessities concurrently, reshaping the foreign language classroom as a venue for rebuilding communicative proficiency and emotional resilience. The study concludes that SEL-enriched TBLT is a robust, comprehensive pedagogical framework for post-pandemic education, fostering a whole learner with a simultaneous build-up in the aspects of emotional intelligence, social competence, and linguistic ability.



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Background and rationale

In this qualitative study, there was an exploration of integrating Social-Emotional Learning with Task-Based Language Teaching, which helped to address not just linguistic needs but 'the entire set of needs' having in mind English language learners in a post-pandemic scenario. This was tackled in a Saudi Arabian university due to an immense sense of urgency to address both the socio-emotional needs and linguistic requirements due to isolation. The six-week teaching intervention involved 30 participants in an English as a foreign language setting, integrating basic skills in communication tasks. These methods involved journals concerning reflections, themed interviews, and field notes. The data analysis showed that these teaching methods increased a productive environment to achieve six major objectives: a raise in socially or emotionally engaging with learning tasks, improvements involving empathy and teamwork in groups, increased reflective understanding concerning awareness and emotion regulation, bolstered feelings involving safety and confidence to linguistically take risks, increased association involving supportive networks and feeling socially belonging again, and improvements involving individual developments or discoveries. These objectives establish that there are immense benefits to linguistically developing participants' skills. In light of these objectives, there are numerous benefits to TBLT focusing on SEL development. Based on these objectives, this study concludes that immense benefits are using TBLT focusing on SEL development.

Introduction

An effective model has emerged in meeting such interconnected needs through Social Emotional Learning. Described as "the process whereby students learn to acquire and use skills related to regulating emotions, forming relationships, and making constructive choices" (CASEL, 2020) and additionally described as "something that is acquirable" related to "emotion regulation, relationship building, and constructive decision making" (Weissberg et al., 2015, P. 79), SEL encourages not only emotional strength but also cognitive engagement and intellectual strength. Evidence of effectiveness is clear in that when schools value such an aspect of SEL in their programs, students show improvement in emotional control, empathy, friendship, or academic success (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017; Raimundo et al., 2024) in classrooms that take place after a pandemic outbreak.

On the other hand, TBLT has been widely known as an effective communicative approach that emphasises meaningful interaction in learning a language (Willis, 1996). By placing participants in

natural communicative activities that need to be accomplished through collaborative efforts of understanding, TBLT encourages communicative ability and autonomy of learners (Ellis, 2009; Mardonova, 2025; Nunan, 2004). Nevertheless, in spite of its emphasis on interaction and understanding, TBLT often overlooks the emotional and interpersonal relationships that underlie human understanding. Incorporating SEL within TBLT holds a transformative power that brings together cognitive learning and emotional learning in a manner that combines linguistic skills with emotional intelligence, empathy, and self-awareness (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017; Weissberg et al., 2015). In post-pandemic conditions, such integration is greatly needed (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). The reintroduction of learners to offline learning environments needs not only linguistic familiarity but also safeguarding emotionally, socially, and mentally (Capurso et al., 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). This integration of TBLT and SEL may therefore enable such needs in a manner that transforms all linguistic activities in a field of emotional experience, cooperation, as well as metacognition (Rocha, 2019; Mohamadpour, 2018). This study, conducted at a public university located in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, will therefore examine how TBLT involving SEL enables the holistic development of university-level EFL students in a post-pandemic classroom by specifically looking at how students engage in communicative activities involving SEL and its implications for them in terms of emotional engagement, social bonding, and self-regulation (Aljasir, 2024; Hamouda, 2016).

Through interlocking principles in SEL and TBLT learning approaches, this research positions learning languages in line with whole-person education approaches, whereby EQ and communicative skills are developed together. To meet a growing body of demand from across the globe for approaches to learning that do not merely retrieve academic success but also work to reassemble students' EQ base after a virus outbreak (Raimundo et al. 2024; Domitrovich et al. 2017; Zins et al. 2004) in stepped-up learning approaches for students in similar EFL learning contexts in Saudi Arabia, this research positions a body of work in emotively responsive approaches to learning English.

Literature review

COVID-19 caused a huge effect on mental well-being in adolescents, as it affected disparities in mental health as well as increased depression, anxiety, and feelings of social isolation in adolescents as well as children (Raimundo et al., 2024). Disruptions in a normal routine schedule, such as school closures and lack of participation in social events, have also hampered interpersonal behaviour and caused declines in mental well-being, autonomy, and resilience (Raimundo et al., 2024; O'Connor et al., 2020; Loades et al., 2020). Adolescents with pre-existing mental problems or those in the less

wealthy section of society were worse sufferers of such disruptions, and a parity of care interventions needs to be provided to such people (Raimundo et al., 2024; Holmes et al., 2020; Wade et al., 2020).

Schools are increasingly becoming esteemed institutions for influencing academic as well as socio-emotional development in students. Research suggests that implementing social-emotional learning programs within school curricula could lead to improvement in emotional well-being, social skills, and academic performance as well as a decrease in behavioural problems (Raimundo et al., 2024; Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017; Domitrovich et al., 2017). Definition of SEL is described as “a process through which children and adults attain and apply in their lives successfully the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that they will need to effectively control their emotions, achieve their goals, feel empathy for others, become effective in creating positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (Raimundo et al., 2024; Weissberg et al., 2015). Self-awareness, self-management, social skills, skills in relationships, and responsible decision-making are common skills highlighted in all versions of social-emotional learning programs (Raimundo et al., 2024; Weissberg et al., 2015; CASEL, 2020). Research also highlights that evidence-based programs conducted in SEL have a positive and measurable influence or effect in areas of emotional, social, behavioural, and academic functioning (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017; Payton et al., 2000; Corcoran et al., 2018). Also, meta-analyses undertaken within hundreds of school programs have positive effects in areas such as peer relationships, social skills, self-management, and internalising/externalising behaviours (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017; Sklad et al., 2012; Durlak, 2015). Moreover, positive benefits in areas of inclusion, equity, and social cohesion might also be achieved through a buffer of safeguarding against disadvantaged economic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017; Zins et al., 2004).

‘Slowly but Steady’ in Portugal is an excellent example of an empirically supported and universal SEL intervention. Conducted over 21 classes in elementary school, it employs active learning strategies such as role-playing, storytelling, reflection, brainstorming, and group work and is intended to aid in generalising skills across situations (Raimundo et al., 2024). This also includes self-awareness, social knowledge, control of emotions, social skills, and responsible decision-making, and activities are intended to seamlessly lie together in a school-year arc (Raimundo et al., 2024; Marques-Pinto et al., 2016). Longitudinal studies employing a quasi-experimental research paradigm indicate that participants demonstrate marked positive changes in social-emotional skills, peer relationships, self-control, and academic performance, as well as a decrease in issues related to behaviour (Raimundo et al., 2024; Marques-Pinto et al., 2016; Roberto et al., 2021).

Despite such beneficial impacts, program moderators such as gender, socioeconomic status, and pre-existing social-emotional skills influence program efficacy. Girls generally have greater social skills

at a younger age, and boys will associate more with more externally oriented behaviours determined by sociocultural norms (Raimundo et al., 2024; Bandura, 1977; Chaplin & Aldao, 2013). Also, SES could represent students' usage and support of their sought or possessed SEL skills, while others will demonstrate greater benefit within lower-income-level children (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). This suggests that it is beneficial to have a responsive and malleable social-emotional learning program according to evidence-specific methods and undergo vigilant scrutiny of implementation (Durlak et al., 2011; Payton et al., 2000; Domitrovich et al., 2017; Raimundo et al., 2024).

This study's research bases inform that implementing SEL should be included in a class to enhance integrated development in students. Emotional Intelligence Theory, or Bandura's Social Learning Theory, provides a foundation for understanding how integrated social-emotional learning programmes integrated program of implementing SEL leads to students' ability to control their emotions, empathy, and social skills (Raimundo et al., 2024; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Bandura, 1977). Effective implementation of social-emotional learning programmes is a process involving a learning continuum of activities that require exposure to experience and practice, participation, engagement, and continuous staff development to enhance skills (Raimundo et al., 2024; Domitrovich et al., 2017; Zins et al., 2004).

Research questions

- 1. How do Saudi EFL university students experience the integration of social-emotional learning within task-based language teaching activities in a post-pandemic classroom?*
- 2. In what ways does embedding SEL principles into TBLT influence students' emotional engagement, collaboration, and self-regulation in English language learning?*

Methodology

Research design

The investigation involved a qualitative descriptive design to investigate how incorporating SEL values in TBLT promotes comprehensive development among EFL university students in post-pandemic contexts. Guiding this design was the interpretivist paradigm that participant experiences are constructed at a social level and are best construed at a participant level. A thematic analysis framework was adopted to extract common patterns and meanings inherent in students' responses to their emotional, social, and linguistic lives during activities involving SEL-infused TBLT.

Setting and participants

This study was carried out at a large public university in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, where English is a mandatory part of a one-year programme. The learning design involved a blended schedule of two 90-minute lectures per week (total 180 minutes per week) supplemented by the university's learning management system (LMS) for independent learning activities. The strategic module was an English Communication skills course in its mid-level semester form, emphasising speaking interaction, collaborative activity enactment, and short academic writing. Participants were 30 EFL undergraduates, 17 women and 13 men aged 18 to 22, all of whom were in two whole class groups taught by this research team member in two sessions of an identical intermediate-level academic semester English Communication course, having been assessed B1-B1+ in a previous semester university placement test measuring listening, reading, grammar, and guided writing for 43 out of 50 EFL foundation programme graduates. Participants additionally filled in a short baseline pair task (4 to 5 minutes) at a Week 0 administration as a means of improving cohort description rather than fulfilling an analysis of data necessity, involving a 5-level subjective scoring rubric for fluency, understanding, and interactive communication. Inclusion criteria specified participation in the strategic module, attendance of at least 80% in the previous eight-week half semester, and volunteering to take part in collaborative reflection activities, with all excluded participants either undergoing current counselling for acute psychologically dangerous conditions or course withdrawal at present or ever in previous participation. Two participants were excluded for inadequate attendance in Week 0, with a purposive replacement draw of participants from the same two whole class groups, bringing $N = 30$. Participant recruitment occurred at a scheduled class meeting in which a research team member orally described research aims, methods, and privacy arrangements, followed by a question-and-answer session. Participants received a bilingual informational pamphlet and consent form in Arabic and English, choosing research pseudonyms—those wishing to withdraw at present without loss of class participation in usual class activities were welcome to do so. Most participants reported at least six years of overall English learning experience in state and private learning institutes before university-level study, though self-reports showed inconsistent experience of interaction-fostered learning approaches within their earlier learning

experience in regularly state-educated public institutes of secondary and upper pre-pandemic remote learning phases. Social disparities in terms of the father's or mother's highest academic attainment and the father's or father's partner's job status factor represented a common foundation programme intake characteristic.

Instruments

Data collection was based upon three methods: reflective journaling, semi-structured interviews, and structured observation in classrooms, all of which highlighted social-emotional processing in task-oriented activities in a manner B1-B1+ students could understand. Each week after completing TBLT, students were asked to write a reflective writing of 250-350 words that was submitted to a "private" folder within an LMS that was visible to the student and the researcher only. "Secure" prompts would target CASEL's five competencies, including descriptions of feelings, regulating techniques, perspective-taking, and decision-making in task activities (for instance, "Which feelings were you feeling most today and at what point did you switch feelings?" or "How did you handle a classmate's emotion?") that allowed for a lot of sentence-level elaboration with a limited word bank of task-specific terms such as "feeling overwhelmed," "feeling reassured," "feeling hesitant," or "feeling included." Journals were unassessed, with feedforward messages commenting upon emotions and proposing communication or regulation strategies for future tasks. At Week 6, a total of twelve participants (including six women and six men) were deliberately chosen for the greatest diversity according to initial speaking profiles, participation trends, and journaling richness. Individual interviews lasting 25-35 minutes in a quiet departmental room were carried out mainly in English, but enabling variable translanguaging to Arabic when probed more specifically for emotional points. Any text in Arabic was *pari passu* translated back in transcription, with respondents verifying messages whenever quotations featured. An interview schedule of six principal points, including optional probes for emotional engagement, collaborative empathy, regulatory reflection, perceptions of a protective/comfortable environment, feelings of belonging, and elements of personal development, was pursued through recorded interviews of 25-35 minutes in all transcriptions carried out in an encrypted audio record, while also supporting field memos immediately after recording. Class sessions included all six weeks of a bi-weekly cycle (about 180 minutes per session) through an observational schedule based upon Willis's phases of tasks (task phases, pre-task phases, and language foci) and preselected evidence of Social Emotional Learning of

turn-taking support, perspective-taking talk, self-talk discourse, and co-regulation strategies as defined criteria. Artefacts included anonymous images of produced tasks (such as brainstormed sheets) or timestamped text memos of crucial incident events (like observable pupils' anxiety relieved by consolations from peers). To establish credibility, non-evaluative peer observations were carried out by a trained peer in Weeks 3 and 5, and compared in a debriefing session to identify blind spots. In order to establish credibility, triangulation was carried out involving all three sources of data. This was in addition to a member reflection activity in Week 7 when preliminary theme statements were shared with data participants for comment. An audit trail of versions of all research instruments, memos, versions of the codebook, and analysis decisions was also followed. Electronic research files were stored in an encrypted and password-protected file drive using coded participant IDs.

Procedure

This intervention ran for six weeks of instruction in the spring semester of 2025, followed by a setup for Week 0. Week 0 included an in-class briefing, informed consent, selection of usernames, baseline speaking assessment, and a micro-workshop session on labelling emotions and classroom psychological safety (topics such as “No judging” and “Consent to Share”). Starting with Week 1 through 6, a complete TBLT cycle in regards to pretask, task cycle, and language focus was fully integrated with activities related to multiple CASEL competencies. Weeks 1 & 2 focused upon self-awareness through storytelling and “emotion timelining” activities that related daily study activities to variable emotions; “Language Focus” activities centred upon narrative past tense form use, stance adverb use, and “soft hedging” in describing vulnerable experience sharing. Weeks 3 & 4 emphasised social skills and social-awareness through “role-play clinics” involving common issues in communicative interactions (such as pause, dominant talk, or “silent treatments”) plus “small projects” in small group work involving creation of short “peer support plans” for vulnerable speakers in anxiogenic situations in class presentations and discussions. Weeks 5 & 6 concluded with a concentration on self-regulation and responsible decision-making through a “strategy assortment” selection of approaches such as “rehearsal, reappraisal, or micro-pauses” followed before engagement of “timed-info decision-making” challenges designed to occasion self-regulation in full, followed by group reflection treatments that compared strategy functionality and concluded in a “speakers’ rights’ charter formation statement” within class’ full membership. After each weekly cycle, journal reflection submissions and peer talk sessions took place, while in Week 6, an individual growth plan

with one speaking objective and proposed approaches to pursue was also submitted by students. In Week 7, all twelve interviews were carried out and recorded verbatim, with bilingual passages reproduced in translation and use of culturally nuanced vocabulary annotated while participants validated their understanding of quoted translations reproduced in the findings. A rapid within-case coding of social-emotional experience across weeks for individual participants was developed to inform coding. Moreover, 60- to 90-second well-being checks opened or closed sessions as needed, allowing students to temporarily leave or assume a lower-exposure role without reason, while disclosures of possible acute need precipitated a private signposting discussion to university support resources as per the ethics clearance.

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee in Riyadh at a university (Ref. No. EDU2025/142) in Saudi Arabia. Participants were informed in writing about research purposes, procedures, and that their participation was voluntary. Informed consent was sought before data collection. Confidentiality was ensured by using all respondents' quotation marks (for instance, S1–S8) in transcripts.

Students were also assured that neither participation nor withdrawal from the study would have an effect on their course assessment. In an effort to safeguard participants' emotional well-being, a psychologically safe setting was created where students could discuss their experiences without fear of being judged. Also, all data was stored in password-protected equipment that was only accessible to the research team.

Researcher positionality

This study was unique in that a positioning as course instructor and data collector was taken, a positioning that provided ecological validity but also posed known challenges to objectivity. To try and control such challenges, it was decided to keep structured journaling as part of data analysis activities from Week 0 through to transcription and coding, including preconceptions of TBLT and SEL, decisions *in vivo* within classrooms, and increasing interpretations in light of data analysis. To also control for power issues in classrooms, measures were taken to ensure that routine course enrolment was decoupled from research activities, while making it clear that participation in

research was voluntary, allowing students to choose not to record without penalty, and developing classroom conduct guidelines that prioritised individual mental well-being through conditions of non-judgment as well as a right to pass. In interviews, flexible use of T in its translanguaging form was encouraged in order to decrease performance counts and maximise positive affect self-description, with translations member-checked as to possible interpretations. In all of this, a reflective approach was taken as an ongoing validation procedure to monitor such possible constructions of meaning as may result through *in vivo* decisions and through teacher-student relationships in classrooms as a means of improving qualitative research credibility through increased transparency.

Analysis

The qualitative data, see Table 1, reveal six interrelated themes that explain how the integration of social-emotional learning within task-based language teaching promotes holistic learner development in post-pandemic EFL classrooms. Collectively, these themes underscore the centrality of emotional engagement, empathy, reflection, and social connection in effective communicative pedagogy. As shown in Table 2, the emergent themes align with the five competencies proposed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020), indicating that SEL principles can be systematically embedded within task-based approaches to support both linguistic and socio-emotional growth.

Table 1

Themes and illustrative quotations from EFL university students on integrating SEL into TBLT

Theme	Description	Illustrative quotations
1. Emotional connection to learning tasks	Learners felt emotionally engaged when tasks involved personal or affective content, increasing motivation and participation.	“It made English more human, not just grammar and vocabulary.” (S8) “When the task linked to our real emotions, I wanted to speak more and share.” (S3) “I felt more interested when we discussed feelings, not only language rules.” (S7)

2. Empathy in collaboration	Group-based tasks encouraged empathy and cooperation, improving teamwork and communication quality.	“Helping my classmate when she was nervous made me feel more confident too.” (S1) “We listened more carefully to each other, not just corrected grammar.” (S2) “Our team tasks made me realise how emotions affect group harmony.” (S5)
3. Reflective emotional awareness	Reflection on emotional experiences during tasks helped learners recognise and regulate their feelings.	“The reflection part helped me see how I reacted when I made mistakes.” (S3) “I began to notice my feelings when I spoke English, especially when nervous.” (S2) “Writing about emotions after tasks made me calmer and more focused next time.” (S6)
4. Classroom safety and confidence	A supportive classroom atmosphere encouraged linguistic risk-taking and reduced anxiety.	“The teacher’s supportive feedback made me less afraid to speak.” (S6) “I knew I wouldn’t be judged, so I tried to talk more.” (S4) “Feeling accepted in the group gave me courage to use new words.” (S7)
5. Social belonging and peer support	Collaboration fostered emotional connection, peer support, and a renewed sense of belonging after the pandemic.	“I felt we were learning together, not competing.” (S5) “The group became like a small family; we supported each other.” (S1) “After the pandemic, I needed that feeling of being connected again.” (S8)
6. Personal growth and self-realisation	Students developed self-understanding, confidence, and emotional resilience through SEL-integrated TBLT.	“I discovered I’m more patient and positive than I thought.” (S2) “Now I see myself as a learner who can change and improve.” (S4)

“These tasks made me understand that learning English also means learning about myself.” (S7)

Table 2

Alignment between emergent themes and CASEL’s five SEL competencies

Emergent theme	Corresponding SEL competency (CASEL)	Description of connection
1. Emotional connection to learning tasks	Self-awareness	Learners recognised and expressed their emotions during tasks, linking personal feelings to classroom content, which enhanced motivation and authenticity in communication.
2. Empathy in collaboration	Social awareness	Students became more attentive to peers' emotions and perspectives, developing empathy and understanding during cooperative task completion.
3. Reflective emotional awareness	Self-management	Reflection encouraged learners to regulate anxiety, frustration, and other emotions, leading to better persistence and emotional balance in language learning.
4. Classroom safety and confidence	Relationship skills	Supportive teacher-student interactions and non-judgmental feedback nurtured trust, encouraged linguistic risk-taking, and built interpersonal confidence.
5. Social belonging and peer support	Social awareness / Relationship skills	Collaborative and empathetic peer relationships created a sense of belonging and mutual encouragement, essential for recovery from post-pandemic isolation.
6. Personal growth and self-realisation	Responsible decision-making / Self-awareness	Learners demonstrated self-evaluation, resilience, and personal responsibility for their emotional and linguistic progress, reflecting autonomy and maturity.

Emotional connection to learning tasks

The learners' emotional involvement was also evident when the tasks carried personal or affective components, supported by the self-awareness competency. The learners' emotional involvement had the effect of increasing their motivational, authentic, and participatory levels, having made their learning of English relevant to their experiences in life. A learner remarked, “It made English more

human, not just grammar and vocabulary" (S8). The learners' emotional involvement also supported Mayer & Salovey's claim in 1997 that emotional intelligence improves self-motivational and cognitive involvement because the learners' emotional involvement with the tasks made English their tool for self-expression, instead of merely being academic in focus.

Empathy in collaboration

Collaborative activities promoted the development of empathy and sociality, enabling the students to focus on the emotions, ideas, or needs of others. Some students reported developing consideration or supportiveness, illustrated by the remark, "Doing my part to help my schoolmate who was anxious made me feel even more confident" (S1). Such experiences are supported by Bandura's work on social learning theory, stating that "social behaviours, including empathy, are learned" (Bandura, 1977, P. 46). The reappearance of in-class learning due to the end of the pandemic reignited the suppressed social capabilities, hence improving communication in language activities.

Reflective emotional awareness

The reflection on emotional experiences by learners before, during, and even after the tasks was also another factor that positively impacted self-management. Reflecting on their experiences enabled the learners to recognise the emotional drivers, including fear and self-doubt, and to be able to control them or push forward. A learner reflected, "Writing about emotions after tasks enabled me to be calm and concentrated the following time" (S6). Reflecting on their experiences, just like the reflective element in some SEL programmes, including 'Slowly but Steadily' designed by Raimundo et al. (2024), enabled the learners to control their emotions, hence their success in dealing with communicative tasks.

Classroom safety and confidence

A psychologically safe environment was also seen to be an important context for taking risks and language play. The lack of evaluation and seeing the value of supportive interactions between teachers and students played an important part in developing relationship-building skills, leading to increased confidence for the learners. A learner said, "I knew I wasn't going to be judged, so I attempted to speak more" (S4). This is supported by the work of Domitrovich et al. (2017), who

discovered relational trust to be an important factor in the success of SEL because of its contributions to increased engagement by the learners.

Social belonging and peer support

The students' social awareness skills emerged with renewed meaning among the students' collaborative learning skills, especially after the period of the pandemic. Belonging developed from the involvement in group work, enabling the students emotionally to rebuild from the effects of the period of isolation, in the way that "The group was just like a small family, we supported each other", responded one of the students, S1. Following the arguments provided by Durlak et al. (2011) and Taylor et al. (2017), developing the components of belongingness and empathy enables inclusion, emotional, or academic perseverance, respectively.

Personal growth and self-realisation

The last theme, linked with self-awareness, self-regulation, and effective decision-making, was seen to manifest self-perception, the ability to bounce back, or taking responsibility for staying engaged with learning. Responses featuring the line "Now I realise myself as a learner who can change and develop" (S4) illustrate how the learners viewed the English language process through the lens of developing the self, identifying with the belief held by Weissberg et al. (2015) that SEL enhances autonomy with lifelong flexibility.

Synthesis and interpretation

The match between the themes and the CASEL competencies in Table 2 supports the inference that applying the pillar of SEL to TBLT encourages the production of emotionally intelligent, socially adept, and self-regulated learners. The connection between the themes is clearly cyclical, with emotional investment in tasks developing empathy and reflection, leading to strong class relationships, boosted confidence, and finally achieving self-realisation. The outcomes illustrate the confirmation of the effectiveness of the blend of TBLT with SEL in dealing with linguistic growth, but also with the emotional redemption and readaptation required post-pandemic. The intersection of SEL with English language communicative pedagogy completely recreates the process of language

learning as one of whole-person education, wherein language mastery is linked with emotional intelligence, empathy, and well-being.

Discussion

In the current study, the integration of social and emotional learning with task-based language teaching was examined, aiming to uncover the extent to which the integration of SEL with TBLT contributed to the holistic development of learners in EFL university settings post-COVID-19. The data show that the integration of SEL with TBLT contributed to emotional involvement, empathy, reflection, feelings of social affiliation, and self-realisation, all of which fall in line with the five competency areas developed by CASEL in the year 2020, among the five competency areas proposed by them.

Reconnecting emotion and language learning

The question of emotional connection with learning tasks explored the manner in which emotionally significant tasks brought about the motivation and reconnection with English language learning for the learners. The learners' responses, "It made English more human, not just grammar and vocabulary" (S8), show that the involvement of emotional aspects brings about the transformation from rote learning to expression. The study is supported by the work of Mayer & Salovey (1997), who proposed the Mayer & Salovey emotional intelligence theory, which assumes that emotional sensitivity leads to self-improvement and problem-solving. The relevance of the study is highlighted by the demotivation of learners due to the COVID-19 outbreak, especially after the period of the pandemic, in which learners' demotivation was evident, according to the study conducted by Raimundo et al. (2024), and also reported by another study by Loades et al. (2020).

The incorporation of affective components within the context of TBLT also supports existing empirical work, which indicates that genuine, personally meaningful tasks are crucial for encouraging investment on the part of the learners (Domitrovich et al., 2017). When the tasks undertaken by the learners are aimed at linking the usage of language with their own emotions, the learners feel the process is socially, as well as psychologically, meaningful to them.

Empathy and the return of social connectedness

A key element of working collaboratively, or achieving social belonging, that was revealed in the data is the importance of empathy in the process of learners overcoming the social isolation brought about by the pandemic. The data clearly show that the group tasks facilitated emotional empathy, or the ability to feel again, which is supported by Bandura's notion of social learning, wherein observation plays an important role in the process of learning behaviours or emotions, as confirmed in his work in 1977. The learners' responses, for instance, "The group became like a small family; we supported each other" (S1), show the importance of cooperation, or social empathy, in the process of learning outcomes, which is necessary for successful interactions in the classroom.

Such outcomes are in line with previous studies that show SEL improves social integration and decreases problem behaviours (Raimundo et al., 2024; Corcoran et al., 2018). The learning room is no longer just a linguistic setting but also serves as social rehabilitative areas, wherein students are taught to cooperate once more, to empathise with one another, because according to Durlak et al. (2011), SEL strategies improve relationships between pupils, creating a cohesive learning community, which is crucial, especially in the current post-COVID world, wherein the relationships between people are broken due to the impacts of online learning on intersubjective trust.

Reflection and emotional self-regulation

The question of reflective emotional awareness highlighted the importance of offering learners the chance to reflect in an organised way, which increased self-regulation and resilience. The activity of reflection was utilised by learners to help them acknowledge their emotions of anxiety, regroup their emotions, and reinterpret their emotional responses, which is linked to the competency of self-management according to the CASEL model (CASEL, 2020). The process of reflection brought about learners' emotional reactivity, transforming into self-awareness, calmness, and persistence, which had also occurred in the 'Slowly but Steadily' project, according to the study undertaken by Raimundo et al. (2024) and Marques-Pinto et al. (2016). A possible implication of the theme is the importance of emotional reflection as part of communicative pedagogy. Educators can encourage their students to explore their feelings constructively, instead of viewing them merely as barriers to be reduced. This is consistent with the view of Payton et al. (2000), who show that SEL leads to the

production of students with controls on emotions that go beyond the academic setting. The process of reflection in EFL learners serves to bridge the gap between the expression of emotions and their enactment in language, allowing them to express their emotions with greater clarity.

The role of psychological safety in communicative risk-taking

Classroom safety/ confidence was the value that stressed the relational paradigm of learning. The focus on taking risks with language was amplified by the provision of a setting by the teachers that was non-judgmental, non-condescending, where the learners felt that they were not being judged. The importance of not being judged is seen in the quote, “I knew I wouldn’t be judged, so I tried to talk more” (S4), which is the emotional notion of safety, laying the groundwork for communicative fear “not-beingness” itself, according to the work of Domitrovich et al. (2017), who found the relational trust between the teachers and the client to improve SEL outcomes and academic achievement. Under the TBLT approach, the psychic safety is central to the process of gaining participation in achieving tasks, hence production of the output. Without the psychic safety, the learners will feel inhibited from taking the risk of production, fearing the possibility of committing an error or putting themselves in the spotlight for embarrassment, according to the discovery that sheds light on the importance of emotional support that is just as important as linguistic support.

Growth, resilience, and responsible learning

The application of the process of personal growth and self-realisation summarised the transformative aspects of SEL-infused TBLT. The students reported increased self-perception, patience, and confidence, which can be attributed to the application of the SEL process developed by Weissberg et al. (2015) for making effective decisions responsibly throughout one’s life. The students began to realise that language learning was not the process of skill development, but, in fact, a process of personal transformation. Similar results are observed in the study conducted by Taylor et al. (2017), which reported the long-term effectiveness of the SEL process applied in schools, leading to increased emotional skill development, adaptability, and academic perseverance in students.

Notably, the importance of the previous theme is that the post-COVID teaching process needs to engage the whole learner differently. The emotional resilience that can be developed by the self-

directed tasks with the focus on SEL may shield learners from possible future disturbances in learning or social relationships in the academic context.

Theoretical and pedagogical implications

The integration of the six themes with the five CASEL competencies, see Table 2, illustrates how SEL can be easily integrated with the design of communicative tasks. Emotional connection is linked with self-awareness, empathy with social awareness, reflection with self-management, supportive environment with relationships, while self-realisation is linked with responsibility in decision-making. The integration of the six themes with the five CASEL competencies supports the view of Zins et al. (2004) who stress that capabilities in academics as well as emotional skills are developed in a synergistic, hence facilitating the sequencing of tasks with the intended SEL/language outcomes, the longitudinal tracking of progress, and the adjustment of scaffolding based on the observed cues of students' self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, or responsible decision-making practices.

What this looks like for EFL practitioners is the creation of emotionally genuine, socially engaged, and reflective tasks. There should also be professional development for teachers on the application of SEL-informed practices, as the integration process requires their skill in emotionally self-regulating and empathising with learners because teaching students these skills is only possible if the educator is able to demonstrate self-regulation and empathy themselves, according to Raimundo et al., (2024), and is supported by the work of Domitrovich et al., (2017). Another important consideration is culturally adapted interventions since there are differences in the density of emotional expression in different countries.

Conclusion

The current study endeavoured to investigate the integration of SEL with TBLT as an overarching educational paradigm for the needs of EFL learners in the post-COVID world. The outcomes unequivocally brought to the fore that the integration process is neither additive but transformative in spanning the age-old divide between cognitive/affective areas in language teaching. A Saudi university context, wherein learners had been adversely impacted due to the presence of solitude

with lost communicative confidence, enabled the TBLT paradigm integrated with SEL to encourage a crucial paradigm for simultaneous linguistic and socio-affective development. The outcomes from the qualitative study revealed tremendous benefits provided to the learners on diverse dimensions.

The establishment of an emotional connection with learning tasks, along with the design of the psycho-socially supportable learning environment, was Preparation grounds, in which learners could then reconnect with the English language, no longer being the dry academic discipline but the potential tool for their own genuine self-expression. Such reconnection on the emotional level was the erstwhile prerequisite for dealing with the demotivation experienced by many learners due to the post-COVID context. Furthermore, the cumulative character of the TBLT, well concatenated with the six SEL-aligned themes identified in this study, was the dynamo-like factor facilitating the development of empathy, the social consciousness, and the renewed sense of belonging. The learners ceased to be only the correctors-of grammar on the surface level, with the real-life interpersonal communication reinstating the broken social bonds from the remote learning context.

The practice of emotional reflective awareness also emerged as one of the core facilitators for self-regulation, allowing the learners to recognise, express, and regulate worry/anxiousness, hence converting possible disabilities into possible facilitators for growth. Finally, these co-interwoven experiences also contributed to the broader realisation of one's own maturation or self-self-disclosure, wherein the learners recognised language skill acquirement merely as part of the process of self-exploration itself. Theoretical relevance: The relevance of this study is that the integration of TBLT with the SEL process has been successful, allowing the adaptation of the best teaching practices from TBLT to the human development process, which is SEL. The integration of the five CASEL competencies into the study reveals the existence of proofed practices on how the whole education system can be adapted in the language educational context. The study also provides consequences to

the practitioners, who have significant impacts on the language educational context. The work assumes that there is the need for the conscious reform of the communicative tasks, allowing the integration of the emotional expression areas, problem-solving areas, or areas of systematic reflection. The work also points out the importance of the teaching process aimed at the provision of teachers' skills for the socio-emotional process management, along with the linguistic one. The current post-COVID world requires educational practices that focus on the whole educational process involving the whole learner. The study confirms the statement about the effectiveness of the integration of the whole educational system, which is the integration of the SEL process with the TBLT process, adapted to the educational current needs. The future work can be dedicated to the study of the deep impacts of the integration of the educational whole process on the current context, taking into account the different countries and cultures' points of view.

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Conflict of interest

The researcher confirms that there is no conflict of interest associated with this study.

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