

International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research
 Vol. 25, No. 6, pp. 225-244, June 2026
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.25.6.9>
 Received Mar 19, 2026; Revised May 18, 2026; Accepted May 20, 2026

Integrating Social-Emotional Learning into University EFL Instruction: Developing Self-Awareness and Social Awareness Via Video Based Discussions in a Vietnamese Context

Bui Thanh Tinh  and Le Thanh Nguyet Anh* 
 Dong Thap University, Dong Thap,
 Vietnam

Abstract. Although social-emotional learning (SEL) has been widely studied in K-12 settings, its integration into university-level English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) instruction remains underexplored, particularly in Vietnamese higher education. This study aims to examine how SEL can be integrated into English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) classes through video-based discussion activities at a university in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. The study focuses on two core competencies from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's framework: self-awareness and social awareness. The participants were 42 third-year English-major students (estimated B2 level) enrolled in an Advanced English Language Skills 1 course during the second semester of the 2024-2025 academic year. Data were collected through classroom observation notes and a focus group interview, and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The findings indicate that students were frequently engaged in sharing personal views, taking others' perspectives, and expressing their empathy in English. Importantly, the interview revealed that contextual factors such as topic sensitivity, teacher attitude, and classroom atmosphere considerably influenced how openly students engaged with classroom activities. The findings suggest that SEL integration is feasible and valuable within EFL courses in Vietnamese universities.

Keywords: social-emotional learning; EFL; higher education; video-based discussion

Citation:
 Bui, T. T., & Le, T. N. A. (2026). Integrating Social-Emotional Learning into University EFL Instruction: Developing Self-Awareness and Social Awareness Via Video-Based Discussions in a Vietnamese Context. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 25(6), 225-244. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.25.6.9>

*Corresponding author: Le Thanh Nguyet Anh; ltanh@dthu.edu.vn

1. Introduction

Education today is widely expected to go beyond just building academic knowledge. Recent studies have shown the connection between students' emotions and their academic performance (Gkintoni et al., 2025). Therefore, schools are increasingly expected to take more meaningful actions to support students' emotional and social development, alongside providing knowledge. More importantly, creating an empathetic learning environment where students are willing to listen to each other and respect each other's perspectives may also help them succeed not only in school but also later in life. In relation to this concern, social-emotional learning (SEL) has been increasingly used as an approach to address emotional and social issues.

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020), SEL provides a structured framework for developing students' competencies of self-awareness, social awareness, emotional management, relationship building, and responsible decision-making. Despite evidence supporting SEL in educational settings, its application in higher education is relatively limited. At the university level, students often face multiple pressures, such as academic overload, financial stress, peer pressure, and limited support networks.

However, it is observed that they are rarely given structured opportunities to develop the emotional and social skills needed to cope with these challenges. This gap is especially visible in EFL classrooms, where learners have to manage not only academic demands but also anxiety, self-doubt, and shyness when communicating in English. In Vietnam, these pressures seem to be intensified by several factors, such as exam-oriented teaching practices (Dang et al., 2025), large class sizes (Le et al., 2024), and cultural norms (Nguyen et al., 2025). These factors can discourage open emotional expression, creating classroom environments where students often hesitate to speak and struggle to engage meaningfully with peers.

Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining the integration of SEL competencies into an English language skills course at a Vietnamese EFL university. In particular, two core competencies of self-awareness and social awareness were explored through classroom video-based discussion activities. The aim of the study is to examine whether SEL integration is both feasible and pedagogically valuable in a university EFL context, and to offer practical insights for educators in similar settings.

The study is guided by the research question: *How do Vietnamese EFL university students demonstrate self-awareness and social awareness during SEL-integrated video-based discussion activities?*

It is important to note that the present study was conducted with third-year English-major students at an estimated B2 (The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) level enrolled in an Advanced English Language Skills course. The findings should therefore be interpreted within this context, and

any extension to other proficiency levels or non-English-major students requires further investigation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social-Emotional Learning: Definition, Core Competencies, and Rationale

According to CASEL (2020), SEL is defined as the process through which individuals (1) acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and (2) attitudes they need to understand and (3) manage emotions, (4) establish meaningful relationships, and (5) make responsible decisions. This definition highlights five core SEL competencies, including self-awareness, social awareness, emotional management, relationship building, and responsible decision making. Building on this framework, Herrera (2024) clarified that SEL is central to structured and evidence-based teaching practices rather than emotional analysis in isolation. This study focuses on two of these competencies: Self-awareness and Social awareness.

Firstly, self-awareness refers to the ability to recognize students' emotions, values, strengths, and weaknesses, and to understand how these states influence their thinking and behaviors (CASEL, 2020; Bai et al., 2024). This conceptualization aligns closely with earlier work on emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Goleman, 1995), which highlighted the essential role of emotional competencies to academic, social, and professional functioning. Regarding social awareness, it involves the ability to take others' perspectives, empathize, understand social cues, and appreciate diversity (CASEL, 2020; Bai et al., 2024).

As Weissberg et al. (2015) explained, social awareness allows learners to interpret interactions with others more accurately and to engage constructively in collaborative learning environments. This study focuses on self-awareness and social awareness because discussion tasks naturally require students to reflect on personal perspectives and interpret others' viewpoints. Such competences are highly relevant in EFL classrooms, where speaking in a foreign language requires students to manage anxiety, self-doubt, and interpret others' ideas.

2.2 Evidence for the Effectiveness of SEL

Meta-analysis by Durlak et al. (2011) showed that SEL intervention significantly improved social-emotional skills, positive attitudes toward school, classroom behavior, and academic performance. Moreover, Cipriano et al. (2023) extended these findings to a contemporary meta-analysis of 424 studies from 45 countries. This study reveals that SEL interventions have positive effects on academic outcomes, prosocial behavior, emotional well-being, and reduced mental-health symptoms. Beyond immediate benefits, Taylor et al. (2017) conducted a follow-up meta-analysis of 82 SEL interventions with data collected from six months to 18 years after program completion. The findings indicate that participants maintained significant improvements in social-emotional skills, emotional well-being, prosocial behavior, and academic outcomes. This study suggests that SEL competencies may remain relevant for university-level learners to prepare for their adulthood.

Critically, the effectiveness of SEL depends on how it is implemented. Durlak et al. (2011) identified four key features of effective programs, which are summarized by the acronym SAFE: Sequenced, Active, Focused, and Explicit. Programs following the SAFE model had significantly stronger effects than those that did not. This finding suggests that SEL is most effective when conducted through structured, practice-oriented instructional design rather than occasional discussion of emotions. This is directly relevant to the present study: the instructional design using structured video-based discussions, guided reflection prompts, and repeated opportunities to practice self-awareness and social awareness, following a consistent sequence of reading → video → reflection → discussion → feedback.

Although SEL was originally designed for school-aged learners, the need to prepare university students for the challenges of emerging adulthood makes it equally essential in higher education. Conley (2015) argued that university students face a set of issues, such as academic pressure, new social environments, and rapidly increasing personal responsibility, all of which intensify demands on emotional and interpersonal competencies. Yet the vast majority of SEL theory and research has been concentrated in K-12 contexts, leaving higher education comparatively rare.

2.3 SEL in English Language Teaching Contexts

Emotions have long been recognized as important in second language acquisition. Horwitz et al. (1986) demonstrated that foreign language classroom anxiety is different from general academic anxiety and can negatively shape students' willingness to communicate, self-perceptions of competence, and overall classroom participation. Similarly, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) examined students' anxiety and enjoyment. They found that these emotions coexist during communication tasks, and that enjoyment associated with engagement and social connectedness supports greater willingness to communicate. These findings highlight the necessity of instructional approaches that do not merely reduce anxiety but actively create positive emotional engagement.

Krashen (1982) argued that negative emotions can reduce the extent to which comprehensible input is processed, and positive ones can allow input to be more effectively acquired. Also, Luo (2024) highlighted the importance of affective factors in language input and classroom interaction. In a study of 315 Hong Kong secondary EFL students, Bai et al. (2024) found that self-awareness and social awareness significantly predicted English learning achievement through their influence on learners' self-management skills. Najjarpour (2025) similarly argued that SEL-informed approaches may reduce negative emotions and support learner confidence and engagement in English language teaching (ELT) contexts.

From these findings, we can see the connections between SEL and language learning, particularly in terms of self-awareness and social awareness. The former helps students recognize their emotional reactions and understand how these feelings influence performance, whereas the latter supports them in interpreting

peers' opinions and responding with empathy. If students can practice these competencies effectively, they are more likely to perform better in language tasks. Scholars have discussed several pedagogical strategies to support SEL and second language learning, including bibliotherapy, mindfulness, peace education, and restorative practices (Rutledge & Manegre, 2024). McGovern and Yeganeh (2024) suggested that structured discussion-based activities can cultivate self-awareness and social awareness, and create a supportive environment for emotional exploration.

Research has shown the important role of video-based activities in foreign language classrooms. In particular, such activities can enhance students' engagement (Lo, 2023; Teng & Wang, 2023) and promote collaborative learning and peer interaction (Huang, 2021; Bobkina et al., 2025). Video-based discussions may also create opportunities for reflection, empathy, and interpreting others' perspectives and emotions during classroom interaction. Therefore, the present study employs video-based discussions as another possible approach that integrates self- and social awareness into an EFL classroom.

2.4 Issues in SEL Integration in the Vietnamese EFL Context

Although SEL has gained increasing attention in the Vietnamese context, its implementation has faced several issues. Le (2020) explored SEL integration in an English course at the National Economics University. The author found that SEL activities helped students manage stress and increase participation in group discussions. She also highlighted several barriers, including the lack of institutional SEL guidelines, limited teacher preparation, and heavy curricular pressure. Similarly, Tran (2025) found that the pressure of exam-oriented teaching practices is a challenge to SEL implementation. Furthermore, Vietnamese schooling is described as prioritizing standardized test performances over holistic development (Cong-Lem, 2025), leading to the neglect of social-emotional skills (Dung et al., 2024; Dung, 2025).

Hoang (2010) illustrated why SEL integration requires careful consideration. He noted that despite reforms promoting communicative language teaching, Vietnamese classrooms continue to prioritize grammatical knowledge and test preparation. This problem continues to increase student passivity and cautiousness. Moreover, Nguyen (2011) indicated that teachers face strong pressure to complete compulsory curricula, which leaves little time for student-centered or reflective activities. Likewise, Le (2018) reported that even when teachers understand communicative pedagogy, the real-life implementation is constrained by assessment policies and students' limited exposure to English outside school. These conditions might create a number of pressures for students, yet are still rarely directly addressed.

Recent research emphasizes the concern about the emotional well-being of Vietnamese university students. Ha et al. (2024) reported that many students have academic burnout and emotional exhaustion, but universities provide limited support for students' emotional problems. Similarly, Nguyen et al. (2022) found that a large number of students suffered psychological distress. However, at the

policy level, the 2018 General Education Curriculum (VMOET, 2018) emphasizes competency-based education, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and personal development. Ngo and Nguyen (2025) observed that the integration of soft skills, reflective activities, and collaborative learning signals a recognition of students' socio-emotional needs. These directions explicitly highlight the importance of emotional development and interpersonal communication.

From the evidence above, the integration of SEL into university-level EFL instruction in Vietnam potentially addresses several issues: (1) the limited SEL implementation in Vietnamese higher education; (2) the emotional and social challenges in current EFL teaching practices; (3) and the need for feasible teaching approaches that support both language learning and SEL engagement. This study targets a specific group: third-year English-major university students at the B2 level, whose proficiency allows them to engage in extended discussion about emotional and social topics. Although findings cannot be generalized to all EFL learners, this focus provides depth of insight into how SEL functions for this particular learner population, complementing prior K-12 SEL research.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

The framework of this study is constructed with three connected ideas. First, the CASEL (2020) model identifies self-awareness and social awareness in how students discuss the issues and reflect on them. Second, research on emotions in language learning explains why these competencies matter (Krashen, 1982; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Accordingly, negative emotions can restrict language acquisition, while positive ones enhance learners' willingness to communicate. Third, video-based discussion activities serve as the link between SEL and language learning.

Specifically, videos, by nature, combine emotional cues, social situations, and authentic language. When followed by guided reflection and group discussion, they give students real opportunities to process emotions and practice English at the same time. This instructional design follows the SAFE principles identified by Durlak et al. (2011), ensuring that the activities are sequenced, active, focused, and explicit. Data were collected through classroom observation notes and student interviews to capture how students demonstrated self-awareness and social awareness during and after these tasks. The framework does not attempt to cover all five CASEL competencies or assess long-term behavioral changes. Instead, it focuses on how structured, discussion-based video activities can encourage socio-emotional engagement in a Vietnamese university EFL classroom.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design, Setting, and Participants

This study used a qualitative descriptive research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2025) to examine how university students engaged with self-awareness and social awareness during video-based discussion activities embedded within an Advanced English Language Skills 1 course. The research is part of a broader collaborative research project in which each participating lecturer designed and conducted their own classroom-based investigation with a supervisor. The

present study reports on one lecturer's implementation of SEL-integrated instruction within a single course. The study was conducted during the second semester of the academic year 2024 - 2025 in the course Advanced English Language Skills 1 (code EN4421). This is a three-credit compulsory module for English-major students at a public university in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. The course follows the official syllabus structure approved by the university, thereby including five 50-minute class periods delivered over nine weeks. SEL integration was implemented within the Reading and Speaking components because their thematic contents are highly relevant to the exploration of personal values, emotional responses, and social understanding. The Listening and Writing components were not analyzed in this study.

Participants were 42 third-year English-major students, including 20 females and 22 males aged 20 to 21, in the Faculty of Foreign Languages, in a Vietnamese university. Their English proficiency was estimated at the B2 level (The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), based on the expected proficiency for third-year students in the program. Students were familiar with pair and group discussions but had not been exposed to explicit SEL classroom activities. Participants in the study completed the study as part of regular classwork. All responses were anonymized during analysis.

3.2 Instructional intervention

SEL principles were embedded within five video-based discussion lessons, each aligned with one of the course's weekly reading themes. Videos were selected based on three criteria: (1) relevance to the weekly reading topic in the course syllabus, (2) emotional and social content capable of stimulating reflection on personal values and interpersonal understanding, and (3) language appropriate for B2-level learners. The appropriateness of the selected videos was also reviewed and confirmed by the supervisor of the research project.

The five videos are presented as follows:

1. Does more money equal more happiness?
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D0slPLpCYFM>)
2. How miscommunication happens.
3. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gCfzeONu3Mo>)
4. 10 habits for a better work-life balance.
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teE-xVO-ljw>)
5. The biggest challenges facing college students today
6. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bp5MJ0tFsWg>)
7. Brené Brown on Empathy.
8. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>)

Each lesson followed a consistent instructional sequence. First, students completed a reading task. The instructor then introduced lead-in questions to activate personal experience and connect the reading themes to broader emotional or social issues. Students watched an English-language video presenting an emotionally or socially meaningful scenario. After viewing, students reflected individually, then discussed the guiding questions in pairs or groups. Selected students or group representatives were randomly called. Finally, the instructor

provided feedback, focusing on the value of diverse perspectives without judging responses as right or wrong. The linguistic elements were also included in the feedback at this stage. In each lesson, 8-10 students were randomly selected to present their responses to the class. This random selection ensured that the data were from a range of perspectives rather than relying on volunteers, and it maintained a sense of shared responsibility across all students.

It is important to note that although videos are commonly used in EFL classrooms, the videos in this study served a different instructional purpose. They were selected specifically for their emotional and social themes to elicit self-awareness and social awareness. Video-based materials naturally include the tone of voice and visuals that may support reflection and emotional interpretation. When combined with structured discussion, these materials create conditions under which both SEL and language learning can occur simultaneously.

3.3 Data collection

Data were collected through two instruments: (1) classroom observation notes, and (2) a focus-group interview. Firstly, for (1), the instructor recorded real-time observation notes during presentations and discussions across the five lessons. These notes captured two main aspects: students' interpretations of video content, emotional reactions, and the reasoning behind them. Notes were recorded during or immediately after each student's presentation to ensure accuracy. Because the instructor also served as the researcher, the dual role required careful attention to documentation. To manage this, the instructor used keywords or phrases and expanded these into fuller notes immediately after each class session.

Secondly, for (2), during the final week of the course, a semi-structured focus group interview was conducted with five students selected through purposive sampling. They were selected because the instructor observed that they consistently contributed actively to group discussions and class presentations. Therefore, they were expected to provide rich qualitative data. To protect participants' confidentiality, the five interviewees are identified as codes (FG1-FG5) when their utterances are presented in the findings.

The interview lasted approximately 90 minutes and was conducted in Vietnamese to allow students to express their thoughts more naturally and fully. It was audio-recorded, transcribed, and inter-coded with an experienced lecturer. The interview explored students' reflections on their experience with the SEL-integrated activities, including how the activities influenced their emotional awareness, their understanding of others' perspectives, and their engagement with English communication. The purpose of the interview was to triangulate the observation data.

3.4 Data analysis

Data were analyzed using directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) noted that in this kind of analysis, frequency counts can be used to describe patterns in the data. Accordingly, the CASEL (2020) definitions of self-awareness and social awareness worked as the framework for

identifying and categorizing student responses, while emerging themes were allowed from the data during analysis. For the observation notes, the process followed these steps: First, reviewing all notes immediately after each lesson; second, organizing student responses into initial meaning categories; third, grouping recurring ideas into broader thematic categories; fourth, identifying which categories reflected the indicators of self-awareness or social awareness.

Finally, compare patterns across the five lessons to identify consistencies or patterns. It is important to note that frequency counts were used to indicate how many of the 8-10 randomly selected students expressed each thematic category per lesson. These counts serve a descriptive function, not establishing statistical significance. This is consistent with qualitative content analysis, where frequency supports thematic interpretation rather than replacing it (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). For the interview data, the Vietnamese transcript was analyzed thematically, following the same coding categories established from the observation data. The instructor identified responses that confirmed, extended, or added nuance to the patterns from the observations. Relevant findings were then reported in English. No back-translation procedure was used.

3.5 Credibility and trustworthiness

Several steps were taken to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. For the observations, the notes were recorded during or immediately after student presentations to reduce recall bias; peer debriefing was conducted with a colleague experienced in both EFL teaching and SEL research. She is also a member of the big project on SEL; emerging categories and interpretations were discussed to check plausibility and reduce individual bias. Also, transcripts were independently inter-coded with her, and discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. In the interview, the researcher maintained a low-pressure, non-judgmental environment to encourage authentic responses as much as possible. Finally, two research instruments were used to triangulate the data sources.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Data were collected as part of normal classroom activities and did not affect students' grades. No identifying information was recorded, and all student responses were represented using anonymous labels. The instructor created a non-judgmental atmosphere throughout the course to support psychological safety during sensitive, emotion-related discussions. Students were informed that their classroom contributions might be used for research purposes and that participation in the discussion activities was part of regular coursework.

4. Findings

Across the five SEL-integrated lessons, students showed consistent patterns in how they responded to the video content in terms of identifying emotions, sharing personal views, interpreting others' experiences, and proposing practical strategies. Although the topics changed across the lessons, students' engagement with self-awareness and social awareness was visible. Three thematic domains emerged from the data: (1) emotional interpretation and personal meaning-

making, (2) perspective-taking and empathy, and (3) emerging coping and reasoning strategies. The findings below draw on frequency counts from the 8-10 randomly selected student/groups per lesson, observations from classroom notes, and relevant responses from the focus group interview conducted during the final week of the course.

4.1 Emotional interpretation and personal meaning-making

This theme reflects how students identified emotions in the video content, connected them to their personal experiences, and expressed the values behind their responses. It was most visible in Videos 1 and 2, and became deeper in later lessons.

4.1.1 Recognizing key messages and emotional meanings (Video 1)

After watching a video exploring whether more money leads to more happiness, students were asked what key messages they took away. Their responses are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Key messages identified by students from Video 1 (n = 10)

Message	n
People tend to desire material things continuously, and satisfaction with what they have fades easily	10
Lasting happiness comes from living with purpose, meaning, and positive relationships	10
People often overestimate the role of money in determining happiness	8
Spending money on experiences brings more lasting value than spending on material goods	6
Helping others financially can bring more happiness than personal consumption	5
Beyond a certain income threshold, more money does not increase positive emotions	2

All 10 students recognized that the desire for material things tends to be endless and that lasting happiness comes from purpose and relationships rather than wealth. Most also pointed out that people tend to overestimate what money can do for their happiness. Instead, they were thinking about what it meant to them personally, which may reflect aspects of self-awareness.

4.1.2 Sharing personal views on money and happiness (Video 1)

When asked whether more money equals more happiness, students expressed three different positions. Specifically, six students disagreed. They explained that earning more money usually means giving up time, energy, and relationships, so wealth does not automatically lead to well-being. One student said that money can buy material things, but cannot buy emotional connection. He then gave an

example that many parents think earning a lot of money will make their children happy, but in fact, the children often feel alone. On the other hand, three students agreed with this statement. They perceived that money is essential for daily life. People will live in constant anxiety if they are not financially safe. Another student noted that nothing is free in this day and age, so lacking money means always worrying about it. Only one student took a neutral position. She believed that money helps reduce financial stress, but there are things we cannot simply buy with money. These responses suggest that students did not just repeat the video's message. Showing different positions and the reasoning behind them reflects their self-awareness.

Data from the focus group interview added important details to this finding. While students discussed this topic thoughtfully in class, some said that the question about happiness and money was the one they felt most hesitant to openly share. One student (FG1) explained: "Expressing a preference for money could be judged by others. That is why most of my friends choose health or happiness". Therefore, she thought her friends tended to choose health or happiness over money. Another student also mentioned that this topic felt more sensitive than the others.

4.1.3 Understanding how miscommunication happens (Video 2)

Video 2 gives information about how miscommunication happens. Students identified several key factors and messages as summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Key factors and messages identified by students from Video 2 (n = 10)

Key point	n
Communication involves more than words: listen with your eyes, ears, and intuition	10
Take time to understand others rather than focusing only on expressing yourself	10
Do not assume your perspective is always objective or correct	10
Each person interprets messages differently depending on experience, culture, emotions, and personal background	9
Active listening makes communication more effective	9
Successful communication requires both the speaker and the listener to actively participate and respond	6

All the presenter students recognized an important message that communication is not only about spoken words. They all agreed that successful communication requires taking time to listen and understand, and avoiding the assumption that your own view is always correct. In class, one student also explained the term "active listening" mentioned in the video. She described it as listening with concentration, emotion, and caring for what the speaker is saying. This finding was expanded in the interview. One student (FG3) reported: "I like this section

the most because it was an opportunity for me and my friends to discuss directly how to communicate with each other". She also shared that students need to talk about this topic because they spend a lot of time group-working together. These responses show that students connected emotional understanding with practical problem-solving strategies.

4.2 Understanding others' perspectives and showing empathy

This theme depicts how students interpreted others' experiences, identified shared social pressures, and expressed empathy. It is prominently presented in Videos 3, 4, and 5.

4.2.1 Identifying priorities and reasoning about values (Video 3)

After watching a video about 10 habits for achieving work-life balance, each of the eight discussion groups selected the habit they considered most important and expressed their reasons. Their choices are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Most important work-life balance habit selected by each group (n= 8)

Habit selected	n
Set clear goals before starting anything	4
Do not put too much pressure on yourself	1
Create a clear work schedule	1
Build a healthy lifestyle	1
Take time to rest and recharge	1

It is noticeable that half of the groups chose goal setting as the most important habit. These groups generally stated a similar idea that learning about what people are going to do and having a clear goal helps them allocate time effectively and avoid wasting time on trivial tasks. One group said that clear goals give people motivation and direction. Whenever things go wrong, they think of that as a never-give-up method. As for the other groups, one shared that some people demand perfection of themselves, and this is the major cause of pressure. This group recommended that we all need to learn to accept imperfection to achieve balance in our lives.

Another group emphasized the importance of a healthy lifestyle as they thought physical and mental health are closely connected, and they are the foundation for everything. While one group said that a clear schedule helped people divide their relaxation time and working clearly, the other group chose taking time to rest because that is the best way to have the mind and body recharge the energy. Students' responses showed their ability to compromise with their team for the habit selection, take the perspective, and reason it by connecting their perspective to their real-life experiences or observations. This reflects both self-awareness and social awareness.

In the interview, one student (FG2) shared: “I tended to do everything by myself. After the class discussion, I understood that I had a sense of perfectionism, which often puts me under pressure”. He then changed his mind set in order to accept imperfection and practiced dividing work with others more than before. Another student reported that the discussion made him realize that people nowadays are experiencing lots of pressures related to working or studying. She noted that she tends to view things more comfortably afterwards.

4.2.2 Recognizing shared struggles and expressing empathy (Video 4)

Video 4 is about the biggest challenges facing college students. All 10 students easily and correctly identified the three main challenges from the video: academic demands, extracurricular responsibilities, and financial pressures. They were then guided to share the biggest challenge in their own student life. Their responses are summarized in the table below.

Table 4: Biggest personal challenges reported by students (n = 10)

Challenges	n
Excessive homework and academic workload	6
Peer pressure	3
Financial difficulties	1

The majority of students identified academic workload as their biggest challenge, whereas three reported peer pressure, and one mentioned financial difficulty. Several students showed their surprise as they found that even students in a developed country face similar difficulty to them. More importantly, emerging data appears in these responses, which were reported in the emerging theme, as students discussed the strategies for the problems. This suggests that the activity may have helped create a sense of shared experience and connectedness among them. In the focus group interview, one student (FG3) shared: “The topic of college difficulties might feel sensitive for some classmates, particularly for those facing financial pressures”. However, one student (FG4) expressed the opposite view: “When the whole class discussed the same topic together, it was far more comfortable for me to share my own problems”.

4.2.3 Developing empathy through understanding others' emotions (Video 5)

Video 5 mainly focused on the concept of empathy. After watching this, students were asked to find out the key messages and reflect on their communication and relationships. The table below shows key messages identified by students.

Table 5: Empathy key messages identified by students (n = 8)

Message	n
Empathy involves more than simply giving advice or trying to solve a problem	8
Empathizing requires careful listening and effort to understand another's emotions	8
People often respond to difficulties too quickly with suggestions without acknowledging feelings	6
Empathy requires connection and recognizing the other person's perspective without judgment	2
True empathy means sitting with someone in their difficulty rather than trying to fix it	8

All the groups noted that empathy is more than just giving advice to someone or trying to handle a problem. They highlighted that it requires careful listening and understanding without judgment. Also, empathy sometimes is when sitting there with someone. The majority of presenting students mentioned that we tend to rush to suggest solutions when listening to others rather than acknowledging their emotions. In the interview, one student (FG5) shared: "Empathy is an abstract topic. However, I found it the most meaningful topic because the discussions provided me with knowledge about empathy and how to respond to people in different situations".

4.3 Emerging strategies for managing academic and personal challenges

In addition to the emotional and social awareness features analyzed above, students' responses also show some characteristics of decision-making competence, although it is not the focus of this study. Specifically, in their personal reflections in videos 3 and 4, students spontaneously proposed practical strategies for addressing the discussed challenges. These responses indicate a connection between recognizing emotions (self-awareness), understanding social context (social awareness), and generating solutions.

These emerging results are summarized as follows. For academic overload, students suggested creating weekly study plans; working in pairs or groups to share the workload; connecting with senior students for advice and experience; and using the university library as a focused study environment. For financial difficulties, students suggested finding a part-time job, cooking their own meals to save money, and making efforts to get scholarships. For peer pressure, students recommended sharing concerns with trusted friends or teachers; avoiding people who tend to boast or show off; setting clear study goals; and developing emotional openness to learn from others rather than comparing themselves negatively.

These strategies are meaningful for two reasons. First, they connected emotional recognition to practical actions. Specifically, they identified a feeling, understood its source, and proposed practical solutions. Second, these solutions were shifting from personal approaches to collaborative and social ones. They consistently

recommended setting their own plans and goals, and then reaching out to others, seeking support, and working together.

5. Discussion

5.1 How do students demonstrate self-awareness and social awareness?

The findings show that students demonstrated both self-awareness and social awareness consistently across the five lessons, though in different ways. Self-awareness was most visible when students identified emotional meanings in the videos and connected those meanings to their own values, beliefs, and personal experiences. Social awareness appeared most clearly when students identified factors behind miscommunication, recognized the pressures others face, and expressed empathy for people in difficult situations. They interpreted them through their own emotional and social lenses.

For example, when students were asked whether money brings happiness, they drew personal observations about family, sacrifice, and daily life. Another example is when students discussed miscommunication, they identified several interpersonal factors such as assumptions, emotional interference, and the failure to listen actively. Or when reflecting on empathy, students recognized that responding to others' difficulties requires listening first rather than immediately offering solutions or judgment. These responses reflect genuine engagement with the emotional and relational dimensions of the content, not just language processing.

This is consistent with the CASEL (2020) framework, which defines self-awareness as recognizing one's emotions and values and social awareness as the ability to take others' perspectives and empathize. What the present study adds is contextual evidence from a setting where SEL has rarely been examined. This study shows that university-level EFL students may demonstrate meaningful self-awareness and social awareness through structured discussion activities. This supports Conley's (2015) argument that SEL competencies are relevant across the lifespan and should not be limited to younger learners, and extends the small body of higher-education SEL research (Elmi, 2020; Conley et al., 2015). The findings also align with recent EFL research by Bai et al. (2024), who found that self-awareness and social awareness significantly predicted English learning achievements in a Hong Kong secondary EFL context. The present study extends this evidence to a Vietnamese university EFL context

5.2 The role of emotionally meaningful content in language engagement

The findings also carry implications for language learning. Students who engaged with the emotional content of the videos appeared more willing to share personal perspectives and participate actively in discussions. This observation is consistent with Luo (2024), who emphasized the role of affective factors in shaping learners' engagement with input and classroom interaction. Similarly, this finding also agrees with Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014), as they found that enjoyment and emotional engagement are associated with greater willingness to communicate in a foreign language. By making the content personally meaningful through SEL-focused tasks, the study appears to have created conditions that encouraged more

open and authentic English communication. This is further supported by Najjarpour (2025), who argued that SEL-informed approaches can reduce negative emotions and enhance learner engagement in EFL contexts. However, the focus group interview revealed that this engagement varied among students. Some students found certain topics personally sensitive.

This finding partly confirms what Nguyen et al. (2025) found about cultural norms surrounding emotional privacy among Vietnamese students, and aligns with Tran (2025), who noted that Vietnamese cultural norms emphasizing self-discipline and interpersonal harmony may shape how openly students engage with social-emotional topics in the classroom. This suggests that when integrating SEL into classroom activities, topic selection is an important consideration. Some topics may encourage personal engagement and activate self-awareness, but also create hesitation for some students.

5.3 Contextual factors that shaped SEL engagement

The data from the interview revealed two contextual factors that influenced how deeply students engaged with the SEL-integrated activities. These factors are worth considering since they give information about conditions that can either support or limit SEL integration in practice. The first factor was the teacher's role. Students noted that the teacher's attitude, feedback, and openness were important to their willingness to share personal or emotional ideas. In the interview, one student shared a negative experience he had with a teacher who had criticized his wrong answer in front of the class. That experience discouraged him from speaking for a long time.

Another student also said that when they feel genuinely interested and non-judgmental, they find it easier to share. This finding aligns with Huynh et al. (2021), who found that teachers' interpersonal skills and emotional openness are critical to creating the conditions under which SEL can work. Similarly, McGovern and Yeganeh (2024) emphasized that the facilitator's role in establishing a supportive, non-judgmental environment is central to engaging learners in SEL-integrated discussion activities. This study extends this insight to the university level and suggests that the teacher's role is also important in higher education.

Secondly, students spontaneously suggested practical strategies for the challenges discussed in class, although decision-making was not a target competency in this study. This may mean that decision-making competency is closely connected with self-awareness and social awareness in classroom teaching practices. This is consistent with the CASEL (2020) framework's emphasis on the interconnectedness among the five competencies. Therefore, practicing self-awareness and social awareness through structured reflection activities appears to have prompted students to engage in problem-solving.

6. Limitations

This study has several limitations, each of which points to directions for future research. Firstly, as this study represents one lecturer's and one supervisor's contribution within a larger team project, the findings reflect only a single

classroom of 42 students at one university. Future research could expand to multiple classes or institutions to provide broader evidence of how SEL-integrated EFL instruction functions across different contexts. Secondly, the instructor also served as the researcher, which represents potential sources of bias. Although several trustworthiness and rigor strategies were applied (see Section 3.5), the bias may still have influenced the interpretation. Future studies could address this by incorporating audio or video recordings of classroom discussions. Thirdly, the focus group participants were selected based on their observed active engagement, which may affect the interview data.

Future studies could use maximum-variation sampling to collect a wider range of perspectives. Finally, classroom observation data were based on real-time field notes rather than audio-recorded classroom interactions. As a result, student responses from classroom discussions were summarized rather than transcribed verbatim. Future studies could incorporate audio or video recordings to capture classroom interaction in greater detail.

7. Conclusion

This study explored how self-awareness and social awareness could be integrated into an advanced EFL course at a Vietnamese university. Through video-based discussion activities, students frequently engaged in emotional interpretation, value-based reasoning, perspective-taking, and empathy. The focus group interview confirmed that these activities were meaningful and revealed specific conditions that could help to increase students' engagement. Several implications can be drawn from these findings.

Firstly, for EFL teaching, embedding emotionally relevant videos, reflective questions, and guided discussion into existing lessons can encourage SEL engagement without requiring teachers to redesign their curriculum. However, teachers should be thoughtful about topic selection. Secondly, for higher education, integrating SEL into regular courses provides a practical approach to supporting students' emotional well-being alongside their academic growth. Thirdly, for teacher development, the interview findings point to a clear priority: teachers' facilitative manner may be as important as knowledge of SEL theory. Professional development should focus on building skills such as non-judgmental feedback, open-ended questioning, and creating a classroom atmosphere where students feel safe to share.

Finally, for curriculum design, courses that involve discussion, reflection, and interpretation are natural settings for SEL. Students suggested that providing the video or topic in advance could improve both the depth of reflection and the quality of English-language output.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

8. Acknowledgements

Disclosure of AI tool use: The authors used Consensus to assist in searching for relevant literature during the writing process. NotebookLM was used to summarize and facilitate understanding of several articles, while ChatGPT was used for language proofreading only. The authors take full responsibility for the content, interpretation, and conclusions of this paper. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed and revised by the authors.

9. References

- Bai, B., Shen, B., & Wang, J. (2024). Impacts of social and emotional learning (SEL) on English learning achievements in Hong Kong secondary schools. *Language Teaching Research*, 28(3), 1176-1200. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688211021736>
- Bobkina, J., Baluyan, S., & Romero, D. E. (2025). Tech-enhanced vocabulary acquisition: Exploring the use of student-created video learning materials in the tertiary-level EFL (English as a Foreign Language) flipped classroom. *Education Sciences*, 15(4). <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15040450>
- CASEL. (2020). CASEL's SEL framework: What are the core competence areas and where are they promoted? Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. Retrieved from <https://casel.org>
- Cipriano, C., Taylor, R. D., Elnakib, S., Kapadia, S., & Sapra, M. (2023). The state of evidence for social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of universal school-based SEL interventions. *Child Development*, 94(5), 1327-1347. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13968>
- Cong-Lem, N. (2025). Teaching with heart and mind: How social-emotional skills mediate observation, perezhivanie, and pedagogical agency in Vietnamese EFL classrooms. *Language Teaching Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688251367848>
- Conley, C. S. (2015). *SEL in higher education*. In J. A. Durlak, C. E. Domitrovich, R. P. Weissberg, & T. P. Gullotta (Eds.), *Handbook of social and emotional learning: Research and practice* (pp. 197-212). Guilford Press.
- Conley, C. S., Durlak, J. A., & Kirsch, A. C. (2015). A meta-analysis of universal mental health prevention programs for higher education students. *Prevention Science*, 16(4), 487-507. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-015-0543-1>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2025). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Dang, T. B. D., Tran, T. D., Le, V. L., & Nguyen, H. T. (2025). The practice of teaching to the test in general English classes: A case study of a university in Vietnam. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 16(4), 1250-1260. <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1604.19>
- Dewaele, J.-M., & MacIntyre, P. D. (2014). The two faces of Janus? Anxiety and enjoyment in the foreign language classroom. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 4(2), 237-274. <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssllt.2014.4.2.5>
- Dung, D. T. (2025). Teacher perspectives on the roles and implementation of social and emotional learning in Vietnamese primary schools. *International Journal of Childhood Education*, 6(1), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.33422/ijce.v6i1.889>
- Dung, D. T., Lan, L. T., & Pereira, A. E. (2024). Primary school teachers' conceptions of social and emotional learning for students in Vietnam. *International Journal of Childhood Education*, 5(1), 48-62. <https://doi.org/10.33422/ijce.v5i1.607>
- Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405-432. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x>

- Elmi, C. (2020). Integrating social emotional learning strategies in higher education. *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education*, 10(3), 848-858. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ejihpe10030061>
- Gkintoni, E., Dimakos, I., & Nikolaou, G. (2025). Cognitive insights from emotional intelligence: A systematic review of EI models in educational achievement. *Emerging Science Journal*, 8, 262-279. <https://doi.org/10.28991/esj-2024-sied1-016>
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. Bantam Books.
- Ha, C. T. M., Nguyen, H. T., Ngo, H. T. K., Do, T. T., & Nguyen, D. H. (2024). Vietnamese students' awareness of mental health issues and academic burnout. *ASEAN Journal of Psychiatry*, 25(3), 1-11. Retrieved from <https://www.aseanjournalofpsychiatry.org/articles/vietnamese-students-awareness-of-mental-health-issues-and-academic-burnout-105536.html>
- Herrera, L. J. H. (2024). Introduction to social-emotional learning in English language education: Mapping the landscape and reflecting on the way forward. *An International Journal of English Studies*, 33(1), 5-18. <https://doi.org/10.7311/0860-5734.33.1.01>
- Hoang, V. V. (2010). The current situation and issues of the teaching of English in Vietnam. *RELC Journal*, 41(1), 7-18. Retrieved from https://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/acd/re/k-rsc/lcs/kiyou/pdf_22-1/RitsIILCS_22.1pp.7-18_HOANG.pdf
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125-132. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1986.tb05256.x>
- Hsieh, H.-F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277-1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>
- Huang, H.-W. (2021). Effects of smartphone-based collaborative vlog projects on EFL learners' speaking performance and learning engagement. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 37(6), 18-40. <https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.6623>
- Huynh, V. S., Giang, T. V., Nguyen, T. T., & Dinh, D. H. (2021). Exploring the challenges of social-emotional learning integration in secondary schools: A phenomenological research in Vietnam. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management*, 14, 621-635. <https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S300748>
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Pergamon Press.
- Le, T. L. (2020). English language teaching integrated with social emotional learning (SEL) in response to stress exposure at higher education. *HNUC Journal of Science: Social Sciences*, 65(11), 93-109. <https://doi.org/10.18173/2354-1067.2020-0075>
- Le, V. C. (2018). Remapping the teacher knowledge-base of language teacher education: A Vietnamese perspective. *Language Teaching Research*, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168818777525>
- Le, X. M., Le, K. N., & Le, T. T. (2024). Factors hindering student participation in English-speaking classes: Student and lecturer perceptions. *SAGE Open*, 14(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241266297>
- Lo, S. (2023). Viewing dual-subtitled videos under different learning conditions: effects on learners' behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 38(4), 742-772. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2023.2219711>
- Luo, Z. (2024). A review of Krashen's input theory. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 26, 130-135. <https://doi.org/10.54097/3fnf5786>
- McGovern, K. R., & Yeganeh, V. (2024). Devised drama as social-emotional learning. *Anglica. An International Journal of English Studies*, 33(1), 19-41. <https://doi.org/10.7311/0860-5734.33.1.02>
- Najjarpour, M. (2025). Teachers' perceptions of challenges to integrating social emotional learning professional development into EFL teacher training

- programs. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2025.100501>
- Ngo, L. H. P., & Nguyen, T. T. L. (2025). The 2018 general education English curriculum implementation and primary English teachers' perceived opportunities. *Journal of Language and Culture Studies*, 9(2), 257-267. <https://doi.org/10.63506/jilc.0902.371>
- Nguyen, T. L. P., Nguyen, Q. A., Le, T. P. M., & Phan, T. L. (2025). Impacts of culture on Vietnamese students' willingness to communicate in English classes: An implication for teaching and learning activities. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 15(4), 1354-1362. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1504.34>
- Nguyen, T. M. H. (2011). Primary English language education policy in Vietnam: Insights from implementation. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 12(2), 225-249. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2011.597048>
- Rutledge, E., & Manegre, M. (2024). An emotionally intelligent, ecolinguistic approach to content and language integrated learning. *Anglica. An International Journal of English Studies*, 33(1), 109-124. <https://doi.org/10.7311/0860-5734.33.1.06>
- Salovey, P., & Mayer, J. D. (1990). Emotional intelligence. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 9(3), 185-211. <https://doi.org/10.2190/DUGG-P24E-52WK-6CDG>
- Taylor, R. D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2017). Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects. *Child Development*, 88(4), 1156-1171. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12864>
- Teng, Y., & Wang, X. (2023). Full caption, English proficiency and their relationships with behavioral, cognitive and emotional student engagement in Chinese EFL college content-based instruction video learning. *Education and Information Technologies*, 29, 861 - 880. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-023-12342-y>
- Tran, T. Y. (2025). Assessing social emotional learning instructional competence among EFL pre-service teachers at a Vietnamese pedagogical university. *European Journal of English Language Studies*, 5(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.12973/ejels.5.1.1>
- Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training. (2018). General education English language curriculum (Circular No. 32/2018/TT-BGDĐT). Retrieved from <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/EN/Giao-duc/Circular-32-2018-TT-BGDĐT-promulgating-general-education-program/519827/tieng-anh.aspx>
- Weissberg, R. P., Durlak, J. A., Domitrovich, C. E., & Gullotta, T. P. (2015). *Social and emotional learning: Past, present, and future*. In J. A. Durlak, C. E. Domitrovich, R. P. Weissberg, & T. P. Gullotta (Eds.), *Handbook of social and emotional learning: Research and practice* (pp. 3-19). Guilford Press.