

*International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*  
 Vol. 25, No. 9, pp. 265-299, September 2026  
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.25.9.11>  
 Received Jun 26, 2026; Revised Aug 18, 2026; Accepted Aug 24, 2026

# Addressing Social and Emotional Learning Roles in EFL Teaching and Learning: A Contextually Rooted Conceptual Framework

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Citation :

Sui, D., Jamaludin, K. A.,  
 & Nasri, M. N. (2026).  
 Addressing Social and  
 Emotional Learning  
 Roles in EFL Teaching  
 and Learning: A  
 Contextually Rooted  
 Conceptual Framework.  
*International Journal of  
 Learning, Teaching and  
 Educational Research*,  
 25(9), 265-299.  
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.25.9.11>

**Abstract.** Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) can improve EFL learners' emotional well-being, social competence and language engagement. However, the existing evidence is still fragmented and lacks a unified ecological explanation of how SEL processes play a role in diverse instructional contexts. This study is guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) and follows a PRISMA-aligned theory-building synthesis and analyzes 25 international empirical studies to build an integrated ecological SEL framework for multilingual EFL education. The framework contains five interrelated domains: contextual conditions, teacher SEL pedagogy, learner SEL development, SEL-oriented assessment and technology-enabled SEL support. This framework transcends the decontextualized competency-based approaches and regards learner SEL as a relational process: it is through this process that classroom practices may relate to language outcomes, and multiple contextual layers shape these interactions. As context-specific extensions embedded in this overarching ecological architecture, the resilience of teachers in crisis, translanguaging-driven SEL growth and AI-mediated emotional regulation have further broadened the framework's applicability across multicultural, crisis-affected and digitally mediated EFL environments. By integrating past fragmented strands of EFL SEL research into a coherent EST-grounded explanatory structure, the study promotes the process of SEL theorization for foreign language education and provides insights for research, pedagogy and policy.

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**Keywords:** Social and emotional learning (SEL); English as a Foreign Language (EFL); Ecological Systems Theory; conceptual framework; language education

## 1. Introduction

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) comprises five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, and it has emerged as a prominent focus in contemporary educational research and practice (Weissberg et al., 2015). In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, a growing body of evidence indicates that robust SEL competencies can reduce foreign language anxiety, strengthen learner engagement, foster peer interaction, and facilitate sustained learning (Kusuma et al., 2025). Nevertheless, evidence-based guidance for integrating SEL into routine EFL instruction remains limited, resulting in a gap between theoretical support and classroom implementation (Garnica-Rey & Navarro-Arana, 2025).

Research on SEL in EFL contexts has yielded differentiated, not uniformly positive findings. Studies emphasizing affective dimensions suggest that SEL-oriented practices can alleviate negative emotions and promote learning motivation (Dmitrenko et al., 2024); however, some findings also indicate that an overemphasis on emotional aspects may divert attention from linguistic knowledge acquisition (Elmeski & Bentahar, 2024). Beyond this tension between affect and cognition, disagreement persists regarding which specific SEL competencies most effectively support specific language skills, as well as on whether teacher-led or student-centred activities yield better outcomes (Bai et al., 2024). Overall, the evidence remains differentiated and fails to provide a settled picture of how SEL operates across diverse EFL instructional settings.

Beyond these empirical inconsistencies, a more fundamental limitation lies in the explanatory depth of current scholarships. Much of the existing research prioritizes describing relationships between SEL practices and learning outcomes, while paying less attention to the processes through which these effects occur (Oberle et al., 2016). This descriptive emphasis leaves open how contextual conditions, teacher SEL capacities, and learners' socio-emotional development interact to shape EFL proficiency. The demand for an integrated framework that explains these interrelationships has been recognised in recent EFL SEL scholarship (Martínez-Alba et al., 2025); yet such a framework remains underdeveloped for multilingual instructional settings.

Existing EFL SEL research has explored several strands—teacher resilience and well-being (Bentahar et al., 2025), translanguaging as a carrier for socio-emotional growth (Sangeetha & Sri Dhivya, 2025), and AI-mediated emotional regulation (Zong & Yang, 2025; Bin-Hady et al., 2024). However, these lines of inquiry have been studied in isolation. What is lacking is an integrated ecological framework that accounts for how these factors interact with classroom practices, assessment approaches, and institutional conditions across nested contextual layers. This framework-level gap not only constrains theoretical understanding of SEL

processes in multilingual EFL settings but also motivates the present theory-building synthesis.

This limitation further exacerbates the tension among existing theoretical perspectives. The CASEL model, Positive Psychology, and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) all propose that socio-emotional development stems from broadly applicable competencies and universal psychological needs across different educational settings (Frye et al., 2024; Chim et al., 2024; Deci & Ryan, 2000). These perspectives differ in emphasis, focusing on competency frameworks, psychological processes, or motivational conditions.

Relative to EST, however, they give less direct analytical attention to how nested contextual layers interact in shaping SEL enactment in the specific EFL context examined here. In contrast, emerging EFL evidence indicates that SEL implementation and outcomes are profoundly impacted by context, institutions, and culture (Bin-Hady et al., 2024; Hiwari et al., 2024). These findings suggest that existing SEL theories may not fully explain the contextual variations in EFL settings, particularly those arising from differences in institutional structures, cultural values and orientations, and classroom environments. Consequently, it is essential to establish a more contextually rooted explanatory framework.

In this regard, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) offers a robust analytical lens (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022). By conceptualizing learning as a dynamic interaction between individuals and their nested ecological systems, EST facilitates examination of how contextual conditions shape SEL enactment and outcomes in EFL environments (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022). For this study, EST is especially appropriate because SEL processes in EFL involve multiple interacting layers, including individual, classroom, institutional, and cultural, that influence how SEL practices are enacted and sustained. This ecological perspective is relevant to EFL education because language learning is inherently embedded within institutional structures, cultural expectations, pedagogical arrangements, and interpersonal interactions that move beyond learners' psychological characteristics (Chong et al., 2023).

Given the cumulative empirical and theoretical limitations in this field, theory-building research via literature synthesis is warranted (Jaakkola, 2020). This study develops an explanatory framework for SEL in EFL settings. The framework integrates previously fragmented strands, including teacher resilience, learner development, assessment, technology-mediated support, and contextual conditions, into an ecological architecture. This architecture conceptualises how these factors relate to one another rather than revising existing SEL competency systems. It is expected that this framework may help interpret divergent research findings and address the long-standing theoretical gap in this research domain.

Given the research gaps above, this study adopts a theory-building literature synthesis, aiming to establish a contextually grounded explanatory framework for EFL-based SEL. This study formulates four objectives: to map the practical application scenarios of SEL across diverse EFL settings worldwide; to summarize

methodological trends in existing EFL-SEL research; to synthesize key results, academic debates and limitations in current literature; and to construct a context-driven explanatory framework for SEL implementation and its relational patterns. This study contributes to interpreting empirical inconsistencies, offering insights for researchers and EFL practitioners, and pointing out directions for future studies. Ultimately, the framework outlines relational pathways among contextual factors, instructional practices, individual SEL competencies and EFL learning outcomes.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Research Design**

This study adopts a theory-building literature synthesis design. The core goal is to build an explanatory conceptual framework for SEL implementation in EFL contexts. In order to ensure the transparency and consistency of this process, structured literature retrieval procedures were adopted to screen relevant empirical studies. It should be emphasised that the purpose of these procedures was not to obtain all evidence, nor to make a conventional systematic review in which methodological appraisal is usually the central organising principle of evidence synthesis.<sup>4</sup>

In this study, literature synthesis is regarded as an interpretive process to construct theories: evidence was collected and synthesised to promote the abstraction of concepts and build a framework. The analytical process involved iterative examination of empirical findings, multi-level thematic induction, and logical deduction of relationships among contextual factors, instructional practices, socio-emotional processes, and learning outcomes. Therefore, the study focuses more on theoretical integration and conceptual explanation than on meta-analytic estimation or quantitative evidence synthesis; methodological quality appraisal was only an auxiliary step for quality control rather than the primary goal of synthesis.

This study distinguishes between two theoretical frameworks with different functions. First, the CASEL framework developed by Weissberg et al. (2015) is adopted as a competency classification framework, providing a stable classification system for SEL-related skills and serving to systematically organise the relevant literature. After the combination, EST extends the analysis beyond classification level and helps explain the contextual processes through which social-emotional learning is enacted and sustained in EFL settings.

EST provided the theoretical structure for interpreting and integrating the identified constructs and their interrelationships. SEL-related contextual and relational constructs were extracted from the included studies and categorized into Bronfenbrenner's five nested ecological strata (Chong et al., 2023): classroom interpersonal exchanges (microsystem), coordination between teacher training and daily SEL practice (mesosystem), curriculum and high-stakes testing policies (exosystem), cross-cultural educational norms (macrosystem), and wartime, post-disaster or remote teaching disruptions (chronosystem). Throughout the iterative coding process, cross-system interactions were strictly examined. These cross-

system interpretations not only facilitated the proposition of a SEL-instruction-learner SEL pathway but also laid the foundation for subsequent framework development.

A theory-building literature synthesis was viewed as the most appropriate design because the primary objective of this study was to generate conceptual abstractions and infer relationships among constructs, instead of estimating effect sizes or comprehensively displaying the breadth of existing evidence. Methodological quality appraisal was conducted to characterise the evidence base, but it did not serve as the primary organising principle of the synthesis. Instead, the study was dedicated to generating conceptual abstractions, inferring construct relationships, and developing an explanatory framework for understanding SEL implementation in EFL contexts. These objectives are more aligned with theory-generating and framework-building forms of synthesis than with conventional systematic reviews, scoping reviews, or meta-analyses.

PRISMA was utilized in this study as a documentation framework to ensure traceability, not as a systematic review protocol. Its identification, screening, and inclusion procedures were considered appropriate for this framework-building synthesis as they provided a transparent record of how studies were selected and how empirical evidence pertinent to the contextual and relational processes in EFL SEL was retained.

## 2.2 Literature Search Strategy

In the initial stage, four major academic sources: ERIC, Scopus, Springer and the Web of Science (WoS) were selected for the literature search. These databases provide extensive coverage of high-quality research literature across key fields, including education, language teaching, and social-emotional learning. Searches were conducted across all titles, abstracts, and keywords, utilizing the following search string: (("social emotional learning" OR "social and emotional learning" OR "social-emotional learning" OR "socio-emotional learning" OR SEL) AND (EFL OR "English as a foreign language" OR "English language teaching" OR ELT OR "English language learning")). The final search was conducted in March 2026.

This review focuses on the studies published between 2015 and 2026. The year 2015 marked a period of stronger conceptual consolidation and broader international development of SEL research (Weissberg et al., 2015; Oberle et al., 2016). Existing literature indicates a substantial increase in interdisciplinary efforts connecting SEL and language education, with an expanding empirical focus in recent years (Martínez-Alba et al., 2025). The search strategy was designed to facilitate the transparent identification of evidence relevant to framework development, rather than to cover all existing literature.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the initial search yielded a total of 550 records from ERIC (n = 200), Scopus (n = 41), Springer (n = 275) and WoS (n = 34). After removing duplicate records (n = 29), 521 records were retained for screening. During the title and abstract screening stage, 491 records were excluded for failing to meet the predefined eligibility criteria listed in Table 1. Additionally, five

reports were excluded due to unavailability of full texts. The selection process ultimately resulted in the inclusion of 25 studies, which constitute the empirical evidence base for the subsequent synthesis and framework development.

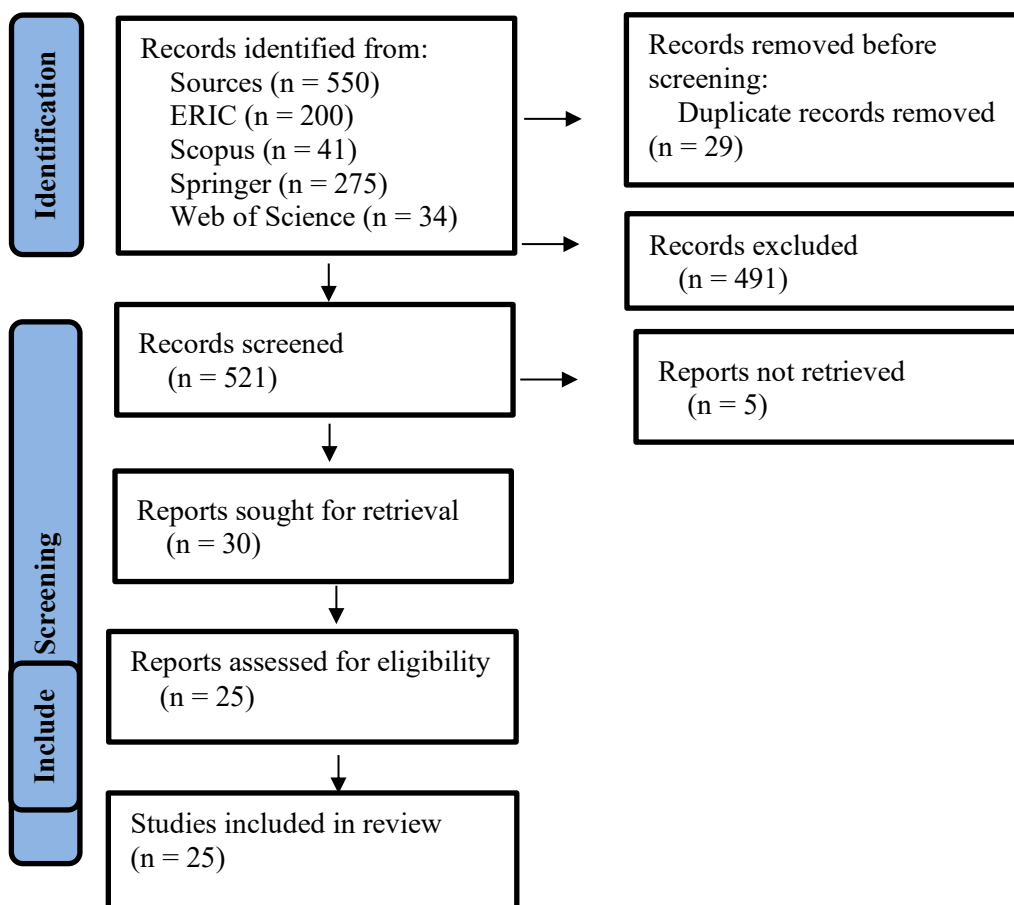


**Figure 1: Literature Identification and Selection Process**

PRISMA was employed as a transparent reporting and evidence-tracking framework to document the identification, screening and selection of literature. Its application was aimed at enhancing transparency and reproducibility of the search process rather than to position this study as a conventional systematic review. The final collection of 25 studies was not meant to represent comprehensive coverage of SEL-EFL literature, but rather to provide a carefully designed evidence base for developing the proposed conceptual framework.

For this reason, the selected studies served as units of analysis for identifying salient constructs, relational patterns, and contextual influences relevant to SEL implementation in EFL settings, consistent with established theory-generating approaches to literature synthesis (Jaakkola, 2020). Subsequently, the extracted evidence was analysed to identify recurring constructs, relational patterns and contextual influences relevant to SEL implementation in EFL contexts.

### 2.3 Study Selection Criteria

During the screening phase, titles, abstracts, and research questions were examined to assess the relevance to the review objectives. Particular attention was given to studies that explicitly addressed SEL or constructs closely related within English language teaching and learning contexts. Priority was given to studies investigating the role, influence, or associations of SEL competencies within EFL teaching and learning contexts. To ensure the methodological rigor and the reliability of the evidence, only peer-reviewed publications were included, such as journal articles and appropriate conference proceedings.

To further refine the dataset, this study focuses on empirical research conducted in English language teaching and educational settings. Empirical studies were defined as those involving systematic data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2014; Cohen et al., 2017), excluding theoretical or opinion-based works. A summary of the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied at this stage is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

| Category            | Inclusion                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Exclusion                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Topic               | Studies focusing on social and emotional learning (SEL) or closely related constructs (e.g., emotional regulation, socio-emotional competence) when explicitly framed within or theoretically linked to SEL.<br>Studies investigating the roles, effects, or associations of SEL skills in English language teaching or learning contexts. | Studies not related to SEL or lacking explicit connection to social-emotional dimensions;<br>Studies without empirical data or data-supported analysis.<br>Studies that only introduce SEL concepts without exploring their roles or impacts in English language education. |
| Time period         | 2015-2026                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Not within the 2015–2026 time period                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Language            | English                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Non-English                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Publication type    | Peer-reviewed sources (journal articles; conference proceedings included where relevant)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Not peer-reviewed sources                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Language context    | Situated in English language education, including EFL, ELT, or English language learning contexts.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Studies not related to English language learning or teaching                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Educational context | Conducted in educational settings (e.g., schools, universities, classrooms, training programs).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Studies conducted outside educational contexts                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |

### 2.4 Data Extraction and Analysis

The process of data extraction used the Population–Concept–Context (PCC) framework, which was recommended by the Joanna Briggs Institute (Peters et al., 2020), enabling a structured organisation dedicated to participant characteristics, SEL-related concepts, and EFL instructional contexts. The JBI Manual for Evidence Synthesis further proposes extracting not only descriptive study information but also evidence relevant to synthesis and framework construction (Aromataris et al., 2024). Therefore, this extraction process covered the key

elements of the PCC framework, research design features, and main research results.

Specific extracted items included: (1) Population: participants including EFL learners, teachers, or both, as well as educational stage and instructional background; (2) Concept: SEL competencies addressed in the studies, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making; (3) Context: EFL instructional settings, educational levels, and cultural or institutional contexts; (4) Study design: research type, data collection methods, and sample characteristics; and (5) core findings: reported roles, impacts, and implications of SEL in EFL teaching and learning. All data extracted were categorized into a standardized summary table (see Table 2) for subsequent comparative sorting and thematic induction.

**Table 2: Concise Overview of Included Studies**

| Study ID | Author(s)/Year                    | Country Context                               | / Educational Level / Participants                                         | Research Design                      | SEL Focus / Application Context                                                                            |
|----------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| S01      | Pentón Herrera & Chugai, 2024     | Poland, Ukraine; stable vs. conflict-affected | Primary, secondary, tertiary / 53 EFL teachers (Poland = 22; Ukraine = 31) | Mixed methods                        | Self-awareness; self-management / Cross-national EFL contexts                                              |
| S02      | Najjarpour & Salimi, 2024         | Iran; multi-institutional                     | Tertiary / 19 EFL teachers                                                 | Qualitative                          | Responsible decision-making / Language institute, public school, university EFL                            |
| S03      | Hiwari et al., 2024               | Palestine; K-12 education                     | Primary, secondary / 10 EFL teachers                                       | Qualitative case study               | General SEL integration / K-12 EFL                                                                         |
| S04      | Canli et al., 2025                | Türkiye; pre-service teacher education        | Tertiary / 139 pre-service language teachers (132 valid responses)         | Sequential explanatory mixed methods | Self-awareness; self-management; social awareness; relationship skills / Pre-service EFL teacher education |
| S05      | Najjarpour, 2024                  | Iran; multi-institutional                     | Unspecified / 19 EFL teachers                                              | Qualitative grounded theory          | Self-management / Private language institutes, public schools, universities                                |
| S06      | Garnica-Rey & Navarro-Arana, 2025 | Colombia; public secondary                    | Secondary / 30 students                                                    | Quantitative correlational           | Emotional intelligence / Secondary EFL                                                                     |

| Study ID | Author(s)/Year             | Country Context                        | /   | Educational Level / Participants                          | Research Design                                | SEL Focus / Application Context                                                                  |
|----------|----------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| S07      | Dmitrenko et al., 2024     | Ukraine; crisis-affected               |     | Tertiary / 12 pre-service English teachers                | Qualitative case study                         | SEL-integrated formative assessment / Pre-service EFL teacher education                          |
| S08      | Asanjarani et al., 2026    | Iran; youth EFL                        |     | Primary, secondary / 463 young EFL learners               | Cross-sectional quantitative validation design | Compassion within SEL / K-12 EFL                                                                 |
| S09      | Najjarpour, 2026           | Iran; teacher education                |     | Tertiary / 20 EFL teachers                                | Explanatory sequential mixed methods           | General SEL integration / EFL teacher PD                                                         |
| S10      | Elmeski & Bentahar, 2024   | Morocco; pre-service teacher education |     | Tertiary / 518 pre-service teachers; 10 teacher educators | Mixed-methods concurrent explanatory           | General SEL integration / Moroccan EFL pre-service teacher education                             |
| S11      | Kusuma et al., 2025        | Indonesia; social media pedagogy       |     | Tertiary / 69 undergraduate students                      | Mixed-methods quasi-experimental               | Socio-emotional engagement and learning support / Social media-assisted EFL learning             |
| S12      | Zong & Yang, 2025          | China; enabled instruction             | AI- | Tertiary / 816 undergraduate and postgraduate students    | Quantitative correlational survey              | Social-emotional learning / AI-enhanced EFL instruction                                          |
| S13      | Pereszlényi & Divéki, 2024 | Hungary; English major education       |     | Tertiary / 31 undergraduate students                      | Mixed-methods exploratory classroom-based      | Holistic SEL implementation / Controversial-issue discussion in EFL                              |
| S14      | Bai et al., 2024           | Hong Kong; exam-oriented               |     | Secondary / 315 students                                  | Quantitative correlational survey              | Self-awareness; social awareness; self-management; social management / Secondary EFL achievement |
| S15      | Mythiri & Karthika, 2024   | India; education                       | ESP | Tertiary / 124 undergraduate engineering students         | Qualitative classroom implementation           | Self-awareness; self-management; social awareness; relationship skills; responsible              |

| Study ID | Author(s)/Year         | Country Context                           | / Educational Level / Participants                    | Research Design                 | SEL Focus / Application Context                                                                                                  |
|----------|------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|          |                        |                                           |                                                       |                                 | decision-making / Online ESP                                                                                                     |
| S16      | Bentahar et al., 2025  | Morocco; post-earthquake                  | Secondary / 133 EFL teachers                          | Quantitative descriptive survey | Teacher socio-emotional resilience and well-being / Moroccan secondary EFL                                                       |
| S17      | Megawati et al., 2022  | Indonesia; cross-border teacher education | Tertiary / 15 pre-service English teachers            | Qualitative study               | Self-awareness; self-management; social awareness; relationship skills; responsible decision-making / Cross-border EFL practicum |
| S18      | Dmitrenko et al., 2025 | Ukraine; remote wartime education         | Tertiary / 12 pre-service English teachers            | Qualitative case study          | SEL-integrated formative assessment / Remote EFL formative assessment                                                            |
| S19      | Pentón Herrera, 2024   | U.S.A.; immigrant newcomer                | Secondary / 24 ESOL newcomer students                 | Qualitative case study          | SEL and learner emotional well-being / Secondary ESOL newcomer                                                                   |
| S20      | Najjarpour, 2025       | Iran; teacher training constraints        | Tertiary / 18 EFL teachers                            | Exploratory qualitative study   | SEL professional development integration / EFL teacher training                                                                  |
| S21      | Daniel Burgin, 2024    | Uruguay; immigrant linguistic diversity   | Primary / 32 K-5 EFL teachers                         | Qualitative case study          | SEL professional development and instructional infusion / Uruguayan primary EFL                                                  |
| S22      | Bin-Hady et al., 2024  | Yemen, Saudi Arabia, 14 other countries   | Tertiary / 57 EFL students (16 countries); professors | Mixed-methods study             | AI-mediated SEL / Multinational EFL                                                                                              |
| S23      | Xiong, 2025            | China; university EFL                     | Tertiary / 701 undergraduate students                 | Cross-sectional quantitative    | Socio-emotional competencies / Chinese tertiary EFL writing                                                                      |

| Study ID | Author(s)/Year               | Country Context                    | /   | Educational Level / Participants      | Research Design                        | SEL Focus / Application Context                                                           |
|----------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| S24      | Coli et al., 2024            | Uruguay; primary curriculum reform | EFL | Primary elementary teachers / 22 EFL  | Qualitative intervention study         | SEL instructional integration / Uruguayan primary EFL                                     |
| S25      | Sangeetha & Sri Dhivya, 2025 | India; rural multilingual          |     | Tertiary / 75 female college learners | Quasi-experimental mixed-methods study | Self-awareness; self-management; social awareness; relationship skills / Indian rural EFL |

This study conducted thematic analysis to identify theoretically relevant constructs and relationships that could contribute to framework development, rather than to quantify patterns of evidence across studies. The analytical process distinguished between two levels of conceptual work.

First, theme generation followed an inductive approach: codes and provisional sub-themes were derived from the findings of the 25 included studies, rather than being imposed from pre-existing frameworks. This bottom-up process involved extracting empirical observations, grouping overlapping findings into provisional sub-themes, and iteratively consolidating them into higher-order domains. After identifying themes, the study introduced CASEL as a classification framework to organise SEL-related competencies, ensuring conceptual alignment with established SEL terminology. The resulting domains are shown in Table 3 and Table 4.

The extracted data were then subjected to thematic synthesis. Coding was performed by one single researcher, without independent inter-coder validation; thus, no resolution of inter-coder disagreements was involved. To ensure consistency, iterative checking was adopted: each code and emerging theme was repeatedly traced back to the original study findings and extraction records to verify that the thematic interpretation remained grounded in the source evidence.

The analysis proceeded in three stages: initial coding of extracted findings into provisional sub-themes; consolidation of overlapping sub-themes into broader thematic groups; and final organisation into five higher-order domains. This process is presented in Table 3 and Table 4. These five domains cover: teacher SEL capacity development, learner SEL growth, technology-supported SEL practices, SEL-infused assessment, and institutional barriers to SEL integration. These five domains provided the basis for the relational analysis (Section 3.3) and the organisation of components within the proposed framework (Section 3.4).

Throughout this analysis, findings that diverged from the dominant patterns were not discarded but were retained and examined against their research study contexts. This enabled the synthesis to identify contextual variations, boundary conditions, and the limitations of emerging interpretations, particularly when

evidence from specific settings diverged from trends observed elsewhere. These divergent cases informed the scope and nuance of the framework, rather than being simply treated as outliers.

**Table 3: Thematic Synthesis Matrix of Included Studies**

| Study ID | Synthesized SEL Dimension                 | Main Outcome                                                                            | Preliminary Theme                                                      |
|----------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1        | Teacher socio-emotional self-regulation   | Contextual variation in teacher SEL engagement and well-being                           | Teacher socio-emotional adaptation across EFL contexts                 |
| 2        | Ethical instructional decision-making     | Aligned teacher ethical decision-making and classroom instructional                     | Teacher socio-emotional and ethical pedagogy in EFL                    |
| 3        | EFL instructional SEL integration         | Persistent barriers and unmet support needs for EFL SEL integration                     | Institutional and pedagogical barriers to SEL integration              |
| 4        | Pre-service teacher core SEL competencies | Critical SEL competence gaps among pre-service EFL teachers                             | Pre-service teacher SEL preparedness in teacher education              |
| 5        | Teacher socio-emotional self-management   | Structured self-management supports EFL teacher professional development                | Teacher self-regulation in EFL professional development                |
| 6        | EFL learner emotional intelligence        | Emotional intelligence positively predicts EFL listening proficiency                    | Affective factors in EFL learning and language proficiency development |
| 7        | SEL-informed formative assessment         | SEL-integrated formative assessment supports pre-service EFL teachers'                  | SEL-informed assessment in pre-service EFL teacher education           |
| 8        | Learner compassion-oriented SEL           | Learner compassion is shaped by socio-demographic differences in                        | Compassion-focused SEL in K-12 EFL classroom contexts                  |
| 9        | EFL teacher SEL professional development  | SEL workshop engagement enhances EFL teachers' perceived value of SEL                   | SEL professional development in tertiary EFL teacher education         |
| 10       | Pre-service teacher SEL readiness         | Pre-service EFL teachers receive insufficient training in stress/emotion management and | Pre-service teacher SEL readiness in EFL teacher education contexts    |
| 11       | EFL learner socio-emotional engagement in | Learner motivation and instructional support shape socio-emotional engagement           | Learner socio-emotional engagement in media-assisted EFL learning      |
| 12       | AI-enhanced learner SEL                   | AI-enhanced SEL supports learner emotional well-being and engagement in tertiary        | AI-enhanced learner SEL in tertiary EFL contexts                       |
| 13       | Tertiary dialogic SEL integration         | Controversial topic discussions foster a safe affective climate and                     | Dialogic SEL integration in tertiary EFL contexts                      |

|    |                                              |                                                                                  |                                                                             |
|----|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 14 | Self-management-centred SEL                  | Self-management mediates the link between SEL awareness and English              | Self-management and EFL achievement in secondary education                  |
| 15 | ESP learner holistic SEL competencies        | Framework-aligned activities foster core SEL competencies and learner            | Framework-guided SEL integration in tertiary ESP contexts                   |
| 16 | EFL teacher socio-emotional resilience and   | EFL teachers rely on relational coping strategies to maintain instructional      | Teacher socio-emotional resilience in crisis-affected EFL teaching contexts |
| 17 | Pre-service teacher SEL competencies         | Reflective practice facilitates professional identity formation through SEL      | Reflective SEL development in pre-service EFL teacher education             |
| 18 | Socio-emotional formative assessment         | SEL-integrated formative assessment promotes learner autonomy, engagement, and   | SEL-informed assessment in remote tertiary EFL education                    |
| 19 | ESOL newcomer student emotional well-        | SEL practices cultivate inclusive classroom climates and support emotional well- | Inclusive SEL practices in secondary ESOL newcomer classroom contexts       |
| 20 | EFL teacher SEL professional development     | Systemic, cultural, and institutional barriers impede SEL integration into EFL   | Barriers to SEL integration in tertiary EFL teacher training contexts       |
| 21 | Primary EFL teacher SEL instructional        | SEL and culturally responsive pedagogy foster respectful interaction and         | Culturally responsive SEL integration in primary EFL contexts               |
| 22 | Multinational EFL student AI-mediated socio- | AI-mediated tools exert mixed positive and negative effects on EFL students'     | AI-mediated socio-emotional learning in multinational tertiary EFL          |
| 23 | Tertiary EFL learner socio-emotional         | Motivation regulation strategies mediate the link between socio-emotional        | Socio-emotional competencies and motivational regulation in                 |
| 24 | Primary EFL teacher SEL instructional        | Primary EFL teachers show inconsistent SEL instructional practices               | Classroom SEL enactment in primary EFL instructional contexts               |
| 25 | Indian rural tertiary EFL learner holistic   | Translanguaging practices enhance learners' socio-emotional competencies and     | Multilingual SEL empowerment in rural tertiary EFL contexts                 |

**Table 4: Thematic Development of Included Studies**

| Higher-order Theme                                       | Preliminary Themes Included                                                                                                                                      | Representative Studies   | Analytical Interpretation                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Teacher SEL Capacity Development & Pedagogical Enactment | Teacher socio-emotional adaptation; ethical pedagogy; pre-service preparedness; self-regulation; professional development; crisis                                | 1,2,4,5,9,10,16,17,21,24 | Teacher SEL capacities—regulation, resilience, ethical decision-making, cultural responsiveness—appear to support SEL instructional enactment and adaptive teaching across diverse EFL                                   |
| Learner SEL Competence Development & Learning Engagement | Affective factors in learning; compassion-focused SEL; socio-emotional engagement in media; dialogic SEL; self-management and achievement; framework-guided SEL; | 6,8,11,13,14,15,19,23,25 | Learner SEL competencies—emotional intelligence, self-management, social competence, compassion, and motivation regulation—are linked to learning engagement, proficiency development, and well-being across educational |
| Technology-Enhanced SEL Support                          | AI-enhanced learner SEL; AI-mediated socio-emotional learning in multinational contexts                                                                          | 12,22                    | AI-mediated and technology-enhanced environments provide emerging pathways for supporting SEL and learner engagement in EFL, though evidence regarding effectiveness remains mixed                                       |
| SEL-Informed Assessment Practices                        | SEL-informed assessment in pre-service teacher education; SEL-informed assessment in remote tertiary EFL                                                         | 7,18                     | SEL-informed assessment practices support reflective learning, learner engagement, and socio-emotional development across pre-service teacher education and tertiary EFL contexts                                        |
| Institutional & Pedagogical Barriers to SEL Integration  | Institutional and pedagogical barriers; barriers in tertiary EFL teacher training                                                                                | 3,20                     | Systemic, institutional, and pedagogical barriers—limited support, implementation constraints, cultural challenges—impede effective SEL integration into EFL instruction and teacher                                     |

This study employed the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018 (Hong et al., 2018) to conduct a methodological quality assessment of the 25 included studies. Each study was classified according to its reported research design (qualitative, quantitative descriptive, or mixed methods) and appraised against the corresponding MMAT criteria. At the criterion level, all applicable criteria were rated as 'Yes', 'No', or 'Can't tell'. For mixed-methods studies, the qualitative and quantitative components were assessed separately in addition to the mixed-methods criteria. No overall numerical score was calculated for the MMAT.

## 2.4 Conceptual Sufficiency

This literature synthesis prioritizes conceptual framework development over the quantitative effect size calculation or generalisable statistical inferences. The 25 selected empirical studies were highly relevant to SEL implementation in EFL contexts and provided diverse evidence in terms of contextual factors, instructional practices, and socio-emotional development.

Despite variations in educational settings, instructional stages and research designs, the literature shows substantial consistency in how SEL is conceptualised and operated in EFL contexts. Recurring patterns relating to contextual influences, socio-emotional development, assessment practices, and technology-supported learning provided a foundation for identifying key concepts and relationships relevant to framework construction. Overall, these findings outlined the key relational patterns and conditions underpinning SEL in EFL teaching and learning and laid an empirical basis for the proposed contextualized conceptual framework.

Further evidence of the conceptual breadth of this corpus lies in its balanced coverage of all five core layers embedded in the proposed ecological framework: environmental constraints under cross-cultural, test-oriented, and crisis-affected settings; pre-service and in-service teachers' SEL competencies and resilience; embedded SEL instruction, translanguaging practices, and formative assessment; learners' comprehensive CASEL socio-emotional competencies; and multidimensional language learning outcomes, including engagement and language proficiency.

The 25 peer-reviewed papers cover primary, secondary, tertiary and pre-service teacher education across Asia, Europe, Africa and Latin America, involving regular, remote, conflict-affected and multilingual EFL environments. For theory-building synthesis, conceptual saturation across all key constructs is more important than a large sample size; the included studies demonstrated recurring evidence across the major constructs and relationships represented in the proposed framework, suggesting that the corpus provided adequate conceptual coverage for framework development.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Overview of Included Studies

The results are organised around four research objectives: mapping of the geographical and educational coverage and the practical application scenarios synthesised from the included studies; the examination of methodological trends; thematic synthesis of findings and debates; and the proposed framework.

The evidence synthesis encompassed 25 peer-reviewed empirical studies published from 2015 to 2026, including several recent online-first articles. The studies involve diverse geographical contexts—Asia, Europe, Africa, Latin America, and North America—and span primary, secondary, tertiary, and pre-service teacher education across regular, remote, and multilingual EFL settings.

The literature review extends beyond the five core CASEL competencies to examine related socio-emotional constructs, including emotional intelligence, compassion, other dimensions of social management, and teachers' socio-emotional resilience. In addition, studies examined technology-supported SEL, SEL-oriented assessment, and contextual factors that hinder SEL integration. In terms of the second research objective, these studies adopted a wide range of methodological approaches, including qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, quasi-experimental, and descriptive designs. Data collection commonly relied on Likert-scale questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, classroom observations, and pre-post assessments. The thematic classifications and synthesis results are presented in Tables 3 and 4. All the literature provided an empirical foundation for informing the development of the proposed conceptual framework and the subsequent discussion.

Methodological quality appraisal of the 25 included studies was conducted by using the MMAT (Hong et al., 2018). As shown in Table 5, the final set comprised 11 qualitative studies (Category 1), six quantitative descriptive studies (Category 4), and eight mixed-methods studies (Category 5). All studies satisfied the two MMAT screening questions (clear research questions and adequate data to address them). Uncertainty in the quantitative descriptive studies mainly concerned sample representativeness and nonresponse bias. The mixed-methods studies generally met the integration criteria (5.1–5.4), though some remained unclear in one or both component traditions (5.5). The appraisal is reported at the level of criterion, without calculating an overall MMAT score.

**Table 5: Methodological Quality Appraisal of Included Studies Using the MMAT**

| Study ID | Study design  | MMAT category | Applicable MMAT criteria           | Main methodological limitation / uncertainty                                                                                   |
|----------|---------------|---------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1        | Mixed methods | 5             | 5.1 Y; 5.2 Y; 5.3 Y; 5.4 Y; 5.5 CT | Quantitative component: representativeness (4.2) and nonresponse bias (4.4) could not be determined.                           |
| 2        | Qualitative   | 1             | 1.1 Y; 1.2 Y; 1.3 Y; 1.4 Y; 1.5 Y  | No Category 1 criterion remained unresolved.                                                                                   |
| 3        | Qualitative   | 1             | 1.1 Y; 1.2 Y; 1.3 Y; 1.4 Y; 1.5 Y  | No Category 1 criterion remained unresolved.                                                                                   |
| 4        | Mixed methods | 5             | 5.1 Y; 5.2 Y; 5.3 Y; 5.4 Y; 5.5 CT | Quantitative component: representativeness (4.2) and nonresponse bias (4.4) could not be determined.                           |
| 5        | Qualitative   | 1             | 1.1 Y; 1.2 Y; 1.3 Y; 1.4 Y; 1.5 Y  | No Category 1 criterion remained unresolved; single-city convenience sampling was recorded as a transferability consideration. |

| Study ID | Study design             | MMAT category | Applicable MMAT criteria            | Main methodological limitation / uncertainty                                                                                                                      |
|----------|--------------------------|---------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 6        | Quantitative descriptive | 4             | 4.1 Y; 4.2 CT; 4.3 Y; 4.4 CT; 4.5 Y | Target population was not clearly defined; representativeness (4.2) and nonresponse bias (4.4) could not be determined.                                           |
| 7        | Qualitative              | 1             | 1.1 Y; 1.2 Y; 1.3 Y; 1.4 Y; 1.5 Y   | Sampling strategy, interview protocol, and some analytic details were not fully reported, although no Category 1 rating remained unresolved.                      |
| 8        | Quantitative descriptive | 4             | 4.1 Y; 4.2 CT; 4.3 Y; 4.4 CT; 4.5 Y | Representativeness (4.2) and nonresponse bias (4.4) could not be determined; the source also contained item-count and outlier-sequence reporting inconsistencies. |
| 9        | Mixed methods            | 5             | 5.1 Y; 5.2 Y; 5.3 Y; 5.4 Y; 5.5 CT  | Quantitative component: representativeness (4.2) and nonresponse bias (4.4) could not be determined.                                                              |
| 10       | Mixed methods            | 5             | 5.1 Y; 5.2 Y; 5.3 Y; 5.4 Y; 5.5 CT  | Quantitative component: representativeness (4.2) and nonresponse bias (4.4) could not be determined.                                                              |
| 11       | Mixed methods            | 5             | 5.1 Y; 5.2 Y; 5.3 Y; 5.4 Y; 5.5 CT  | Non-randomized quantitative component: participant representativeness (3.1) and confounding (3.4) could not be determined.                                        |
| 12       | Quantitative descriptive | 4             | 4.1 Y; 4.2 CT; 4.3 Y; 4.4 CT; 4.5 Y | Representativeness (4.2) and nonresponse bias (4.4) could not be determined; internal statistical reporting inconsistencies were noted.                           |
| 13       | Mixed methods            | 5             | 5.1 Y; 5.2 Y; 5.3 Y; 5.4 Y; 5.5 CT  | Quantitative component: representativeness (4.2), measurement appropriateness (4.3), and nonresponse bias (4.4) could not be determined.                          |
| 14       | Quantitative descriptive | 4             | 4.1 Y; 4.2 CT; 4.3 Y; 4.4 CT; 4.5 Y | Representativeness (4.2) and nonresponse bias (4.4) could not be determined.                                                                                      |
| 15       | Qualitative              | 1             | 1.1 Y; 1.2 Y; 1.3 Y; 1.4 Y; 1.5 Y   | Intercoder reliability and member checking were not reported; the                                                                                                 |

| Study ID | Study design             | MMAT category | Applicable MMAT criteria            | Main methodological limitation / uncertainty                                                                                                                               |
|----------|--------------------------|---------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|          |                          |               |                                     | source reported 120 participants in the abstract and 124 in the method.                                                                                                    |
| 16       | Quantitative descriptive | 4             | 4.1 Y; 4.2 CT; 4.3 Y; 4.4 CT; 4.5 Y | Representativeness (4.2) and nonresponse bias (4.4) could not be determined; an inferential subgroup test was reported without naming the procedure.                       |
| 17       | Qualitative              | 1             | 1.1 Y; 1.2 Y; 1.3 Y; 1.4 Y; 1.5 Y   | Sampling strategy, formal intercoder reliability, and member checking were not explicitly reported, but no Category 1 criterion remained unresolved.                       |
| 18       | Qualitative              | 1             | 1.1 Y; 1.2 Y; 1.3 Y; 1.4 Y; 1.5 Y   | Sampling strategy and member checking were not explicitly reported, but no Category 1 criterion remained unresolved.                                                       |
| 19       | Qualitative              | 1             | 1.1 Y; 1.2 Y; 1.3 Y; 1.4 Y; 1.5 Y   | Researcher-teacher dual role was acknowledged and mitigated; sampling strategy, intercoder reliability, and member checking were not explicitly reported.                  |
| 20       | Qualitative              | 1             | 1.1 Y; 1.2 Y; 1.3 Y; 1.4 Y; 1.5 Y   | Convenience sampling was recorded as a transferability consideration rather than a Category 1 MMAT deficiency.                                                             |
| 21       | Qualitative              | 1             | 1.1 Y; 1.2 Y; 1.3 Y; 1.4 Y; 1.5 Y   | Sampling strategy, formal intercoder reliability, and member checking were not explicitly reported, but no Category 1 criterion remained unresolved.                       |
| 22       | Mixed methods            | 5             | 5.1 Y; 5.2 Y; 5.3 Y; 5.4 Y; 5.5 CT  | Quantitative component: representativeness (4.2) and nonresponse bias (4.4) could not be determined; the source reported 16 countries in Table 1 but 10 in the conclusion. |
| 23       | Quantitative descriptive | 4             | 4.1 Y; 4.2 CT; 4.3 Y; 4.4 CT; 4.5 Y | Representativeness (4.2) and nonresponse bias (4.4) could not be determined.                                                                                               |
| 24       | Qualitative              | 1             | 1.1 Y; 1.2 Y; 1.3 Y; 1.4 Y; 1.5 Y   | Observer and participant bias and limited sample size were acknowledged and mitigated; sampling strategy and formal                                                        |

| Study ID | Study design  | MMAT category | Applicable MMAT criteria           | Main methodological limitation / uncertainty                                                                                                                       |
|----------|---------------|---------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|          |               |               |                                    | intercoder reliability were not explicitly reported.                                                                                                               |
| 25       | Mixed methods | 5             | 5.1 Y; 5.2 Y; 5.3 Y; 5.4 Y; 5.5 CT | Uncertainty remained in qualitative derivation/substantiation and in quantitative representativeness, measurement, confounding control, and intervention fidelity. |

*Note.* Y = Yes; N = No; CT = Can't tell. Criterion numbers are MMAT item identifiers, not numerical scores. No overall MMAT score was calculated.

## 3.2 Thematic Synthesis

### 3.2.1 Teacher SEL Capacity Development and Pedagogical Enactment

This synthesis of 25 included studies identified that Teacher SEL Capacity and its corresponding Instructional Enactment is a central theme across global EFL teaching settings. Teachers' individual SEL attributes, such as self-awareness, emotion regulation, resilience, reflective capacity, and professional responsibility, support embedding SEL into classroom practice (Pentón Herrera & Chugai, 2024). Building on this, existing research converges on the view that culturally responsive teaching and teachers' ethical awareness can advance SEL implementation in diverse and multicultural EFL contexts (Najjarpour & Salimi, 2024).

Cross-national evidence reveals a common developmental pattern among pre-service EFL teachers: their five CASEL core competencies develop unevenly, with stress management and emotional regulation emerging as the most pronounced areas of weakness (Canli et al., 2025; Elmeski & Bentahar, 2024). This deficiency reflects curricula that prioritise language proficiency and methodology over affective development (Megawati et al., 2022). Consequently, this educational gap makes it difficult for novice teachers to support students' socio-emotional needs in authentic classroom contexts.

Reflective practice fosters pre-service teachers' SEL development and professional identity formation, especially in remote and crisis-stricken contexts (Dmitrenko et al., 2025). Although reflective practice can boost individual socio-emotional growth, its effects will remain limited without institutional support. Gains are isolated and insufficient to address the systemic deficits of pre-service SEL preparation. Evidence therefore indicates that reflective practice, if implemented in isolation, is unlikely to yield sustained and meaningful improvements in SEL.

For in-service EFL teachers, social-emotional competence is strongly associated with their ability to adapt to changing circumstances and maintain stable instruction (Bentahar et al., 2025). In Poland, Ukraine and Morocco, external adversities such as political unrest, post-disaster disruption and institutional uncertainties impose substantial emotional stress on frontline teachers (Bentahar et al., 2025; Pentón Herrera & Chugai, 2024). Facing such high-pressure conditions,

teachers mainly depend on individual reflection, self-regulation and interpersonal support among peers to sustain professional resilience and teaching effectiveness. In addition to emotion regulation, teachers' decision-making capacity based on ethical instruction is as vital a SEL dimension as it regulates classroom interactions, lesson arrangement, and equitable distribution of learning opportunities for all students (Najjarpour & Salimi, 2024).

A notable contradiction across the literature is the mismatch between teacher attitudes and practical enactment. While most EFL teachers have realized the significance of SEL for students' holistic development, the implementation in class largely remains inconsistent and superficial (Coli et al., 2024). Evidence indicates that the limited adoption of Social and Emotional Learning is not only because of teachers' cognitive perceptions but also because of the influence of situational constraints, including insufficient professional training, ambiguous teaching guidance, and the lack of effective strategies in the classroom. SEL typically becomes an occasional activity rather than part of daily EFL instruction. In examination-oriented contexts, this pattern is extremely pronounced as high curriculum demands and assessment pressures leave little space for sustained SEL practice.

In multicultural environments with large numbers of immigrant learners, culturally informed SEL practice is especially important as it helps teachers create inclusive classroom atmospheres, reduce cross-cultural misunderstandings and encourage respectful interaction (Daniel & Burgin, 2024). A lack of cultural competence in training among instructors appears to constrain the effectiveness of inclusive SEL interventions. Differences in findings across studies indicate that cultural and institutional contexts may be important boundary conditions shaping the integration of SEL.

### *3.2.2 Learner SEL Competence Development and Learning Engagement*

Learners' SEL competence is consistently associated with learning outcomes—including emotional well-being, engagement, linguistic development, and motivation—though predictive power varies across contexts (Xiong, 2025). Self-management has proven particularly influential. In Hong Kong secondary schools, self-management mediates the link between self-awareness and English achievement (Bai et al., 2024). At the tertiary level, learners' social-emotional traits can significantly predict engagement in English writing tasks. Motivational regulation further mediates this relationship, suggesting that SEL indirectly influences language learning by shaping learners' behaviours and self-regulatory processes (Xiong, 2025). The reviewed studies suggest that SEL may exert a stronger influence on learners' self-regulatory processes than on directly measurable academic outcomes.

Recent research has also gone beyond the traditional CASEL framework by examining related affective constructs such as emotional intelligence and compassion. At the same time, divergent findings have pointed to important boundary conditions that shape the effects of SEL across contexts. A study in Colombian secondary schools found that emotional intelligence was only weakly

correlated with general English proficiency, yet it may predict listening comprehension. Its effects on speaking, reading and writing appear relatively limited (Garnica-Rey & Navarro-Arana, 2025). Some included studies also reported weak associations between general emotional intelligence and global English learning outcomes, suggesting that the effectiveness of affective SEL-related constructs may vary across language skill domains and educational settings. In K-12 EFL classrooms, learners' compassionate attitudes vary significantly by age, gender and socioeconomic backgrounds (Asanjarani et al., 2026). Such individual characteristics may contribute to more positive peer interactions and a favorable classroom climate (Pentón Herrera, 2024). Variations in these affective traits across student groups may account for heterogeneous SEL performance in regular EFL classroom settings, implying that there exist potential individual-level boundary conditions for CASEL-based SEL practice.

Specific learning environments shape SEL engagement in different ways. Controversial discussions create emotionally safe conditions for critical dialogue (Pereszlenyi & Divéki, 2024); social media activities support speaking and willingness to communicate by means of emotional engagement and peer support (Kusuma et al., 2025); regular SEL activities foster a sense of belonging and adaptation among immigrant ESOL learners (Pentón Herrera, 2024); translanguaging strengthens multilingual self-awareness and collaboration of rural learners (Sangeetha & Sri Dhivya, 2025). Effectiveness varies across different contexts.

### *3.2.3 Technology-Enhanced SEL Support*

Emerging research on AI-supported learning tools and ChatGPT-assisted interaction has revealed promising potential for technology-enhanced SEL in EFL education (Zong & Yang, 2025; Bin-Hady et al., 2024). In modern higher education reforms, AI-supported learning environments have shown potential to promote university EFL learners' emotional well-being and increase classroom engagement. Customized AI resources can help students regulate their emotions, reduce foreign language anxiety and maintain ongoing learning efforts (Zong & Yang, 2025). In multinational classrooms with culturally diverse student groups, learners generally hold favourable views toward ChatGPT-assisted English learning, with the tool producing moderate positive effects on overall SEL development (Bin-Hady et al., 2024).

However, current findings remain mixed; the actual value of technology-enhanced SEL is dependent on pedagogical guidance and implementation context (Zong & Yang, 2025; Bin-Hady et al., 2024). Technology-assisted SEL in EFL education remains in its early exploration phase. Evidence suggests its potential for providing personalised support and expanded teaching approaches, yet uneven implementation quality, inconsistent effects, and difficulties in scaling up continue to constrain its effectiveness.

### 3.2.4 SEL-Informed Assessment Practices

SEL-oriented formative assessment research has focused on pre-service teacher training and university distance courses (Dmitrenko et al., 2024; Dmitrenko et al., 2025). In crisis-affected contexts, integrating SEL into formative assessment helps develop pre-service teachers' communication skills, emotional intelligence, and reflective practice (Dmitrenko et al., 2024). For university EFL learners in fully online environments, formative assessment enriched with SEL components enhances learner autonomy and emotional resilience (Dmitrenko et al., 2025). Assessment activities aligned with broader SEL objectives can effectively create supportive learning conditions.

From the empirical evidence available in the literature, SEL-informed formative assessment demonstrates context-specific effectiveness in EFL contexts. The observed positive outcomes of SEL-oriented assessment are predominantly documented in crisis-affected teacher education and fully online university EFL learning environments. Pre-service teachers' reflective capacities and online learners' autonomous learning and emotional resilience have witnessed consistent improvements (Dmitrenko et al., 2024; Dmitrenko et al., 2025). The available evidence for SEL-informed assessment primarily derives from two core studies which are concentrated in tertiary-level remote and crisis-stage contexts. Its applicability to conventional EFL classroom settings needs further exploration, meaning boundary conditions for mainstream implementation.

### 3.2.5 Institutional & Pedagogical Barriers to SEL Integration

The thematic synthesis of this review shows that there are a range of interrelated obstacles that prevent SEL from being systematically embedded into mainstream EFL curricula and teacher training programs. These contextual and institutional barriers are prevalent across diverse global educational contexts, limiting the widespread integration of SEL in EFL instruction (Hiwari et al., 2024; Najjarpour, 2025). At the institutional and policy levels, insufficient systemic support and rigid curriculum arrangements constitute core barriers. The current EFL curricula are highly content-oriented and the heavy teaching tasks lead to limited space for systematic SEL embedding. In most contexts, the lack of institutional backing hinders large-scale curriculum-based SEL integration (Hiwari et al., 2024).

From the perspective of teaching, the lack of teacher training is a prominent constraint. Most EFL educators have rarely received preparation and support for the systematic SEL implementation in daily language teaching (Hiwari et al., 2024; Najjarpour, 2025). The emphasis on academic outcomes in culture and institutions further constrains SEL introduction (Najjarpour, 2025). Prevailing educational philosophies are still hindering the systematic integration of SEL across mainstream EFL settings. The intertwining of institutional, instructional, and cultural barriers confines SEL practice to isolated teacher-led initiatives and limits its transformation into lasting and large-scale curricular implementation.

## 3.3 Relational Analysis of SEL Implementation

Whereas thematic synthesis captures recurring empirical patterns, relational analysis aims to explain how identified constructs are interconnected, thereby offering a theoretical foundation for the study's conceptual framework. Based on

the five established thematic domains, this study proposes an integrated pathway that links instruction and learning outcomes, a synthesis-derived interpretation of how SEL may operate across multiple layers in EFL settings.

The pathway follows a progressive logic: Teacher SEL–Instructional Enactment–Learner SEL–Learning outcomes. As the core implementers of classroom teaching, teachers' SEL capacities, including self-awareness, emotional regulation and interpersonal communication abilities, appear to represent an essential condition associated with effective SEL integration. Teachers who possess well-developed SEL competencies are better able to embed social and emotional guidance into daily EFL teaching design and classroom practice, thereby giving context-responsive instruction integrated with SEL principles.

Instructional practices may function as instructional inputs associated with the development of learners' SEL competencies. Learners' SEL growth is conceptually positioned as a relational process through which instructional inputs may relate to learners' emotional experiences, behavioral engagement, and classroom participation. Ultimately, improved learner SEL may be associated with multiple learning outcomes, covering in-class emotional experience, behavioral engagement and gains in English proficiency.

This multi-layered pathway offers a conceptual explanation of how teacher factors, instructional practices, learner development, and learning outcomes may be interconnected, and it influences the proposed framework's structure. The five domains, derived from the thematic synthesis, were not mechanically transferred into the framework; rather, their cross-study relationships were interpreted and subsequently organised through EST to inform the framework's structure.

### **3.4 Conceptual Framework for SEL Implementation in EFL Contexts**

This section presents a context-specific SEL conceptual framework for EFL instruction. The framework fulfills the fourth research objective by integrating the synthesized empirical evidence and the explanatory relationships identified through the relational analysis into a unified analytical model. The section systematically explains the layout logic behind all components of the framework, including the hierarchical placement of contextual factors, institutional barriers, technology modules and the design of the feedback loops.

Table 6 displays the frequency of thematic domains across the 25 included studies, calculated on the basis of the representative cases shown in Table 4. While thematic frequency informed component arrangement, theoretical logic of instructional procedures and the proposed relational structure served as the primary placement criterion. To ensure completeness and conceptual rigour, two low-frequency components were retained for theoretical necessity.

**Table 6: Rationale for Framework Component Placement**

| Thematic Domain                                          | Number of Representative Studies | Percentage of Representative Studies | Assigned Role in the Framework            | Primary Justification (Theoretical Necessity)                                                                             |
|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Teacher SEL Capacity Development & Pedagogical Enactment | 10                               | 40%                                  | Core instructional module                 | Teacher SEL generally precedes classroom practice; teacher SEL capacity is widely identified as a key enabling condition. |
| Learner SEL Competence Development & Learning Engagement | 9                                | 36%                                  | Cognitive & behavioural relational factor | Instructional inputs may relate to learning outcomes through learners' socio-emotional processes                          |
| Technology-Enhanced SEL Support                          | 2                                | 8%                                   | Supplementary component                   | Addresses a distinct support pathway (AI/chatbot support) not covered elsewhere; evidence too limited for core status.    |
| SEL-Informed Assessment Practices                        | 2                                | 8%                                   | Embedded instructional element            | Assessment practices operate within instruction, not as a separate layer.                                                 |
| Institutional & Pedagogical Barriers to SEL Integration  | 2                                | 8%                                   | Outer contextual constraint               | Barriers shape the entire system; placed at the outermost layer by ecological systems logic, not by frequency.            |

First, contextual factors form the outermost layer of the framework. Cross-national research indicates that culture, education policies, curricula, school environments, technology and crisis settings commonly constrain EFL and SEL practices. These contextual influences correspond to different layers of Bronfenbrenner's EST (Chong et al., 2023) and collectively represent the broader environment within which SEL implementation takes place.

Second, teachers' SEL competencies and their practical implementation, namely instructional enactment, constitute the framework's core instructional module. As key agents of classroom instruction, teachers' SEL competencies and instructional decisions appear to influence the effectiveness of SEL integration. Its prominence across the reviewed literature reinforces its central position within the framework. By contrast, technology-enhanced SEL tools are sparsely documented and thus defined as supplementary resources. SEL-oriented formative assessment, embedded in daily instruction rather than operating independently, is classified as an embedded instructional element within the core module.

Third, following the hierarchical logic of Teacher SEL Capacity→ Instructional Enactment→ Learner SEL Competence→ Learning Outcomes, learners' SEL competencies are positioned as core cognitive and behavioral factors linking instructional inputs that may relate to learning outcomes. Evidence from the literature review suggests that SEL-oriented teaching practices may relate to language learning outcomes through learners' socio-emotional processes. Learners' SEL competencies appear to be a relational process through which instructional experiences may be associated with behavioural engagement and emotional responses.

Fourth, learning outcomes comprise three dimensions: learners' emotional experiences in class, behavioural engagement, and gains in English proficiency. This classification reflects the multidimensional benefits of SEL integration as documented in EFL-related research. Finally, a feedback loop connects learning outcomes to instructional design. Given the inherently dynamic nature of EFL teaching, learning results offer teachers opportunities to reassess contextual conditions and refine instructional strategies. Accordingly, the framework adopts a closed-loop structure, which is consistent with the ecosystemic perspective on person-environment interaction.

The analytical procedures above form an integrated conceptual framework that is adaptable to diverse EFL contexts through contextual influences and proposed relational pathways. The framework is intended to identify theoretically plausible constructs and their interrelationships rather than to provide exhaustive empirical validation. As such, the proposed framework and its pathways should be regarded as an evidence-informed provisional conceptual model derived from the present theory-building synthesis, rather than as a fully validated causal model.

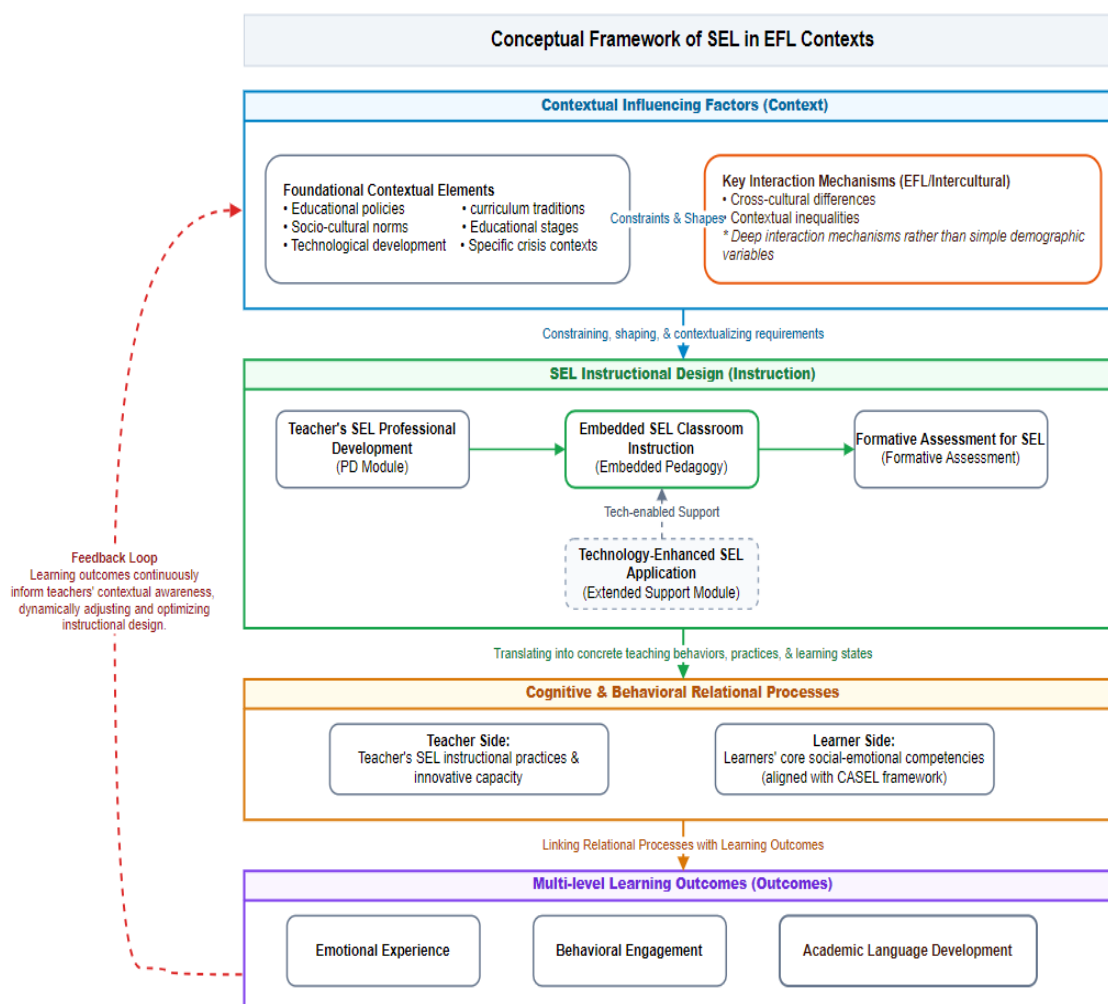


**Figure 2: A Context-Dependent Framework for EFL SEL: Contextual Influences and Proposed Relational Pathways**

Macro-level contextual factors constitute the outermost layer of the framework, encompassing educational policies, curricular traditions, socio-cultural norms, technological conditions and crisis-related backgrounds. These factors impose curricular constraints on SEL implementation: policies and curricula appear to influence the positioning of SEL in daily instruction, cultural norms may shape the impact of dialogic SEL practices; crisis environments can affect the link between teachers' SEL competencies and classroom practices; and technological conditions may either facilitate or hinder the implementation of AI-supported SEL (Pentón Herrera & Chugai, 2024).

Teachers' SEL competencies and corresponding classroom teaching practices form the core module of the framework, as teachers are the primary implementers of SEL in EFL classrooms. SEL-oriented formative assessment is involved in regular instructional activities instead of operating alone (Dmitrenko et al., 2024; Dmitrenko et al., 2025). Between instructional practices and ultimate outcomes, learners' CASEL-aligned SEL competencies are positioned as key relational processes through which instructional experiences may relate to behavioural

engagement and socio-emotional development (Bai et al., 2024). Learning outcomes cover learners' emotional experiences, behavioral engagement and the development of academic language proficiency. In addition, the feedback loop derived from EST may provide opportunities for teachers to dynamically adjust instructional design in response to real learning results.

The framework reflects key characteristics of EFL learning, including cross-cultural diversity and stage-specific educational demands. Guided by an ecological perspective that emphasises dynamic interactions between individuals and their environments (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022), the framework conceptualizes cultural differences and contextual inequalities as conditions that shape SEL implementation. This positioning also aligns with transformative SEL perspectives that foreground concerns of context and educational equity (Jagers et al., 2019).

The framework also incorporates constructs highlighted in recent studies, including teachers' socio-emotional resilience and institutional barriers to SEL integration (Hiwari et al., 2024; Najjarpour, 2025). In line with the theory-generation purpose of this synthesis (Peters et al., 2020), the proposed relationships are theoretically derived from the comprehensive evidence. Table 7 further links the reviewed studies to each framework component, providing empirical support for the proposed framework.

**Table 7: Mapping from Synthesized Evidence to Framework Components**

| Thematic Domain                                      |       | Synthesized Evidence (Representative Studies)                                                                                                                    | Framework Component             |               |
|------------------------------------------------------|-------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------|
| Teacher Capacity Development & Pedagogical Enactment | SEL   | Teacher resilience, ethical decision-making, reflective practice, culturally responsive teaching, classroom enactment (Studies 1,2,4,5,9,10,16,17,21,24)         | Core Module                     | Instructional |
| Learner Competence Development & Learning Engagement | SEL   | Learner self-management, emotional intelligence, compassion, motivation regulation, inclusive SEL practices, multilingual SEL (Studies 6,8,11,13,14,15,19,23,25) | Cognitive & Behavioural Factors | Relational    |
| Technology-Enhanced Support                          | SEL   | AI-supported emotional well-being, ChatGPT-assisted SEL (Studies 12,22)                                                                                          | Supplementary Component         |               |
| SEL-Informed Assessment Practices                    |       | SEL-informed formative assessment in crisis/remote contexts (Studies 7,18)                                                                                       | Embedded Instructional Element  |               |
| Institutional Pedagogical Barriers to Integration    | & SEL | Institutional constraints, curriculum overload, inadequate teacher training (Studies 3,20)                                                                       | Outer Layer                     | Contextual    |

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Theoretical interpretation of the Results

Evidence suggests that SEL operates as a dynamic process in EFL classrooms. Language learning is fundamentally dependent on social and interactive factors, and learners' emotional experiences influence their engagement and capacity to benefit from instruction. Research points to a sequential process: teachers' socioemotional competencies are associated with instructional practices, which may in turn support learners' self-regulation and social skills, ultimately facilitating learning outcomes.

The effectiveness of this process appears to be contingent on supportive institutional arrangements, adequate teacher preparation, and manageable assessment requirements. High-stakes examinations, resource constraints, and cultural perceptions that marginalize affective learning may undermine SEL implementation. A similar pattern emerges in technology-enabled SEL—personalised digital tools may support affective regulation, yet achieving consistent outcomes requires structured pedagogical guidance and institutional support; integration without such guidance may lead to inconsistent results. SEL-infused assessment appears particularly valuable in remote or crisis-affected settings, where traditional evaluation methods fail to capture learners' holistic growth.

The CASEL model tends to conceptualise SEL competencies as relatively stable and less context-dependent (Weissberg et al., 2015). However, evidence suggests that language learning contexts reshape the practice and development of SEL (Najjarpour & Salimi, 2024; Sangeetha & Sri Dhivya, 2025). Teachers' and learners' socio-emotional growth cannot be separated from classroom interaction, interpersonal relationships, and institutional arrangements; the interplay of multiple contextual factors shapes variations in emotion regulation and learning engagement (Megawati et al., 2022). Building on existing correlational findings, this study offers an ecological explanation of how key constructs may be interconnected across different contexts.

This synthesised EFL evidence supplements the predominantly Western-centric SEL perspectives by embedding context-bound constructs that are unique to foreign language instruction. These include teachers' socio-emotional resilience (Bentahar et al., 2025), translanguaging-driven SEL (Sangeetha & Sri Dhivya, 2025), and AI-enabled emotional regulation (Zong & Yang, 2025). Such context-specific constructs provide new perspectives on socio-emotional development in multicultural, crisis-impacted, and technology-mediated EFL environments.

The resulting EST-grounded framework synthesises fragmented EFL SEL research into a coherent explanatory structure. It enhances the understanding of how contextual conditions, teacher practices, learner SEL development, and language outcomes may interact across ecological layers—suggesting reciprocal and sequential relationships among these elements warrant further empirical investigation. Rather than introducing new constructs, the study offers a unified

ecological explanation of how existing factors collectively shape SEL processes in foreign language education.

#### **4.2 Repositioning SEL roles in EFL teaching and learning**

The synthesised evidence suggests that SEL extends beyond conventional classroom applications, necessitating a broader conceptualisation within language education systems. SEL has been associated with more positive and inclusive classroom environments, lower foreign language anxiety, and greater willingness to communicate—effects particularly pronounced among immigrant learners and student groups from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (Pentón Herrera, 2024). SEL is not merely a supportive intervention but a vital condition for meaningful engagement in language learning.

Between instructional design and learning outcomes, SEL appears to operate as a possible relational process through which pedagogical intentions may be associated with learner engagement and academic achievement. Learners' emotional states may influence their willingness to participate in interactive tasks, and AI-based tools have the potential to strengthen SEL's regulatory function although their effectiveness depends on pedagogical guidance and contextual support (Zong & Yang, 2025).

At the same time, SEL has been an increasingly important part of EFL teachers' professional competencies. It not only supports culturally responsive teaching in multicultural classrooms, but also helps teachers maintain psychological resilience (Najjarpour & Salimi, 2024; Bentahar et al., 2025). Beyond these core functions, SEL appears to advance language development and educational assessment. By enhancing motivation and self-regulation, SEL may promote learners' engagement in EFL writing, contributing to language proficiency in general (Xiong, 2025). What's more, the integration of SEL may drive reform in EFL assessment, shifting the focus from knowledge-oriented evaluation toward a more developmental approach that covers cognitive, behavioral and socio-emotional growth (Dmitrenko et al., 2025). The evidence suggests that SEL is playing an increasingly important role in addressing practical challenges in foreign language teaching.

#### **4.3 Theoretical Propositions**

This study extends perspectives that imagine SEL as a broadly applicable set of socio-emotional competencies by highlighting the importance of contextual influences in EFL settings. Also, it reframes the understanding of SEL in language education by proposing explanatory relational pathways grounded in ecological systems logic, showing how multi-layered contextual factors may interact with instructional practices and individual socio-emotional development. By proposing a context-sensitive explanatory framework specifically tailored to EFL contexts, this study complements existing SEL models. This framework outlines possible relational pathways, including potential mediating and moderating effects specified in the propositions below, offering a perspective to interpret how SEL may function dynamically in EFL teaching.

Based on the theoretically expected associative pathways within the proposed framework, this study puts forward three testable theoretical propositions for future empirical verification:

**Proposition 1 (Contextual Moderation):** Institutional contexts may moderate the relationship between Teacher SEL Capacity and the quality of instructional enactment. In settings with explicit SEL curriculum guidelines, the positive association between teacher SEL capacity and instructional enactment is expected to be stronger; whereas in exam-oriented, content-driven educational environments, this positive association is expected to be weaker. This moderation effect is influenced by curricular flexibility and institutional support for affective teaching. Although existing research has observed notable variations in teachers' SEL practices across different institutional and crisis contexts (Pentón Herrera & Chugai, 2024; Hiwari et al., 2024; Bentahar et al., 2025; Najjarpour, 2025), this moderating relationship has yet to receive sufficient empirical testing.

**Proposition 2 (Instructional Mediation):** This study proposes that instructional enactment, including emotionally responsive teaching and SEL-centered classroom activities, mediates the relationship between Teacher SEL Capacity and the development of Learner SEL Competence. Teachers' SEL capacity alone may be insufficient to affect learners' SEL outcomes without corresponding instructional enactment, and effective classroom practice is an indispensable intermediate pathway. Current research has confirmed the correlation between teachers' SEL capacity and instructional behaviors (Najjarpour & Salimi, 2024; Canli et al., 2025; Najjarpour, 2024; Najjarpour, 2026). However, the full mediating pathway leading to students' SEL growth remains to be thoroughly examined.

**Proposition 3 (Learner Mediation):** Learner self-management competency, a core component of Learner SEL Competence, may mediate the association between classroom emotional climate and EFL students' writing engagement and language proficiency, with motivational regulation strategies serving as an additional mediator. Prior research has confirmed that self-management is closely related to English learning performance (Bai et al., 2024) and motivational regulation mediates the relationship between learning environment and engagement (Xiong, 2025). Nevertheless, the complete sequential pathway has yet to be adequately validated by empirical data.

#### 4.4 Practical implications

The framework carries curricular, instructional, and policy implications for EFL teachers, teacher educators, curriculum designers, and educational administrators. By foregrounding the linguistic, cultural, and contextual realities that shape socio-emotional development in EFL, it enriches contextualised applied linguistics and offers a mechanism-based perspective for future research on affective factors in second language acquisition.

In terms of curriculum design, teacher education programs should involve systematic SEL training modules with a focus on emotion regulation, professional stress, and ethical decision-making, so as to address the uneven development of pre-service teachers' competencies (Canli et al., 2025; Bentahar et al., 2025). SEL goals should be embedded in unit design and language skills teaching, rather than being arranged as occasional extracurricular activities (Coli et al., 2024).

In classroom practice, teachers should adopt SEL strategies which are well-suited for local contexts: controversial discussions may help create safe emotional climates (Pereszlenyi & Divéki, 2024); AI tools may support emotional regulation and raise engagement (Bin-Hady et al., 2024); translanguaging may facilitate the socio-emotional development of multilingual learners (Sangeetha & Sri Dhivya, 2025); and portfolio evaluation and reflective journals can implement SEL-guided formative assessment. These strategies need to be matched with different contextual conditions: multilingual environments may benefit from translanguaging, and digitally mediated environments from AI-supported tools.

At the policy level, educational authorities should issue clear curriculum guidelines for SEL integration, increase investment in teacher SEL training, and strengthen institutional support, in particular in under-resourced, post-conflict, and rural multilingual contexts (Hiwari et al., 2024; Bentahar et al., 2025). Reducing examination pressure can also create room for students' social-emotional development.

#### **4.5 Limitations of the study**

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the framework is developed solely through structured literature synthesis; the interactive associations among its components and their real effects have not yet been empirically tested through primary data collection. Second, the literature search was restricted by four mainstream sources and the 2015–2026 timeframe, excluding regional non-indexed journals, gray literature, and unpublished theses – potentially excluding locally documented SEL practices in marginalised EFL regions, reducing generalizability of the findings.

Third, while the study acknowledges the influences of cultural background, socioeconomic status, and schooling stages on SEL development, it does not provide an in-depth intersectional analysis of how multiple individual identity factors jointly shape the SEL performance of teachers and learners. Fourth, the framework remains underdeveloped in terms of operational indicators and implementation guidelines for EFL contexts at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, partially hindering its direct application in daily teaching to some extent.

#### **4.6 Directions for future research**

Future research could employ experimental, quasi-experimental, or design-based approaches to test the validity of the framework and practical effects across educational stages and cultural contexts. The framework needs to be translated into operable teaching principles, classroom activities, and assessment standards, with targeted SEL intervention models developed for rural multilingual classrooms, crisis-affected environments, immigrant ESOL courses, and AI-

assisted EFL teaching. Longitudinal research should track changes in learners' SEL abilities and language learning trajectories. Cross-cultural comparative research could explore SEL implementation differences between collectivist and individualist educational cultures, while interdisciplinary research may integrate intercultural competence and mindfulness education into the EFL-SEL research agenda.

## 5. Conclusion

Existing research often reduces classroom social and emotional learning in EFL settings to isolated emotional capacities or supplementary instructional activities. Moving beyond these perspectives, this theory-building synthesis repositions EFL-based SEL as a context-grounded rooted interactive system, which is shaped through relationships among teacher capacities, pedagogical practices, learner socio-emotional development, technology, and broader institutional contexts. The resulting integrated ecological framework, which is rooted in EST, offers a context-sensitive conceptual account of how these elements may be interconnected in multilingual EFL education. The proposed relationships remain conceptually derived and await empirical validation. The framework lays a foundation for developing more context-responsive and equitable approaches to SEL across culturally diverse EFL settings.

## Conflict of Interest

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

## Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge the use of ChatGPT to assist in improving clarity and grammar. The paper remains the author's own work and intellectual contribution.

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