Cultivating Communication Skills in Times of Crisis: The perceived impact of SEL techniques in formative assessment on the communication competence of pre-service teachers in Ukraine

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This study examined the integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) in formative assessment of pre-service English as foreign language (EFL) teachers during times of crisis and its perceived impact on their communicative competence. The study encompasses a six-month trial period of SEL-enriched formative assessments across five Ukrainian universities. Findings from interviews with 12 participants indicate that incorporating SEL in EFL teacher education programs enhanced learning outcomes, when compared to traditional assessment methods. Furthermore, data suggest that promoting SEL in formative assessment provides invaluable feedback for tutors, prompting them to modify their teaching strategies appropriately while applying and expanding pre-service EFL teachers' professional-focused skills.

Keywords: social-emotional learning, formative assessment, pre-service education, EFL teachers.

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Introduction

Present-day reality presents numerous challenges for educators. Distance education, being currently the only possible method of instruction all over Ukraine, provokes new ideas on how to make learning beneficial for students' needs and demands. Traditional, in-person methods and techniques require modification to be effective in the online teaching and learning context. The introduction of social and emotional learning (SEL) in formative assessment contributes to creating a fertile educational space in the classroom while attending to students' emotional needs and overall well-being. In our experience, SEL has proven particularly important in times of crisis when students are socially and emotionally vulnerable.

The purpose of the present study is to explore the perceived effects of SEL in formative assessment in initial teacher education. As such, the research question guiding the study is: How did the implementation of SEL techniques in the process of formative assessment influence the formation of pre-service EFL teachers' communicative competence according to the students? In the context of this study, we understand 'formative assessment' as a type of ongoing assessment conducted during the learning process to collect information about the tutors' experience with the intervention procedures, as well as students' ongoing progress in the English language acquisition.

SEL is an approach emphasizing the development of students' social and emotional competences alongside academic skills (Pentón Herrera, 2020). By cultivating self-awareness, self-regulation and interpersonal skills, educators can create an inclusive and supportive atmosphere for language learning (Saliuk & Shkola, 2023). Research shows that SEL not only enhances academic performance but also fosters positive social behaviors such as kindness, sharing, and empathy, bolsters students' positive attitudes towards pursuing higher education, and reduces anxiety (Durlak et al., 2022).

As a pedagogical methodology, SEL aims to help students understand their emotions and develop empathy and social skills. There is a strong and active role for students in formative assessment, which is largely dependent on well-developed SEL skills (Dmitrenko et al., 2021). This interrelationship between SEL and formative assessment becomes increasingly apparent when examining the alignment between the five SEL competences specified by CASEL (2013) and the 10 dimensions of formative assessment outlined by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO, 2018).

Methodology

The present study explores the perceived influence of SEL in formative assessment on pre-service EFL teachers' communicative competence. It adopts a qualitative case study approach, employing semi-structured interviews as instruments to collect data. The six-month teacher training sessions were conducted online, with synchronous and asynchronous elements. Before this study, the participating students had no previous exposure to or experience with SEL.

A group of 80 pre-service English teachers from five Ukrainian universities, in their third and fourth years of study with English proficiency ranging from upper-intermediate to advanced levels, participated in

this study. Many had experienced displacement due to present conflict in Ukraine. Tutors from five universities in Ukraine incorporated five SEL activities with their pre-service EFL teachers. After each class, selected participants shared their experiences and reflections on the implementation of SEL techniques in formative assessment, specifically focusing on its impact on English communicative competence. Of these 80 participants who attended the classes where the intervention was implemented, 12 voluntarily participated in semi-structured interviews. In view of the traumatic experience, participants may be experiencing, the authors followed rigorous protocols to ensure data is collected safely and ethically.

In the analysis phase, a three-stage inductive approach was adopted. 1) The raw data were condensed by scanning them multiple times to identify key patterns. 2) The condensed texts were labeled and described, linking them to the research questions. 3) Conclusions were drawn through a recursive process, with emerging findings crosschecked against existing publications for trustworthiness, measurability, and validity. Each author independently analyzed the data using the expert evaluation method. The collaborative platform (i.e. Google Drive) was used to share instructors' observations and insights, which facilitated ongoing collaboration. This approach allowed all instructors to observe and compare the results of the interviews, fostering a collective understanding of the impact of SEL techniques in the formative assessment of students' English communicative competence.

Findings

Most interviewees remarked that the *exit tickets* were one of the SEL strategies particularly enriching their overall learning experience. Exit tickets for pre-service EFL teachers regularly addressed emotions, self-awareness, and interpersonal skills. Participants used various digital tools to provide feedback, combining text, drawings, and emojis to express lesson understanding, activity preferences, and language skill development.

Through *reading logs*, participants were engaged in responding to thought-provoking questions related to the literature or copying a brief text on one side of the page while expressing their emotional responses on the other side. When sharing their reflections practically all participants mentioned that this approach helped them connect with the material on a more personal level, challenging them to articulate their thoughts and interpretations, fostering a deeper understanding.

Most of the participants highlighted that various SEL-enhanced *assessment rubrics* helped them to pinpoint their strengths and weaknesses and adopt a more structured approach to the assessment. All the participants marked *reflective activities* (*Share the photo that brings you happiness and peace, and reflect (either orally or in writing) on the reason why, etc.*) as their favourite activities. They mentioned that reflective activities prompted them to analyze their communicative competence and have a positive learning experience, which increased their positive emotions and their well-being.

Most of the participants indicated *graphic organizers* as invaluable tools in fostering their autonomy and instilling a heightened sense of responsibility in language acquisition. Different graphic organizers like the K-W-L charts, which track what a student knows (K), wants to know (W), and has learned (L) about a

topic, seemed to nurture individual expression and served as a valuable source of ideas during subsequent oral exchanges.

Discussions and Conclusion

The present study shows that incorporating SEL techniques in formative assessment enhanced participants' social-emotional skills, thereby bolstering their communicative competence. Continuous SEL-enhanced assessments facilitated ongoing improvement, providing constructive feedback and guidance, reinforcing language development, and promoting a positive, growth-oriented mindset, consistent with Pentón Herrera's (2020) findings. All the responses from the students reinforce the notion that SEL techniques contribute not only to academic progress, but also to a deeper and more meaningful engagement with English, fostering a positive and supportive learning environment, nurturing the development of essential communication skills. Students underlined the positive impact of SEL strategies like collaborative projects, mindfulness techniques, and peer reviews, attesting to their role in fostering enhanced communicative competence, increased engagement, and improved language skills (Saliuk & Shkola, 2023).

This was a small-scale study in one particular context with the participation of only 12 participants in the interviews. Further, more rigorous research is required to investigate whether, as indicated in the present study, the incorporation of SEL techniques in formative assessment in pre service education, may lead to significant shifts in attitude towards English learning, transitioning from seeing it as a routine task to a personalized, meaningful journey enriched by a positive emotional experience.

Disclosure

The authors confirm that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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