



The integration of Social Emotional Learning in English as a Foreign Language elementary classrooms in Uruguay

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The integration of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) into educational settings has gained significant attention due to its positive correlation with student academic achievement and long-term success. While extensively studied in developed nations, empirical evidence regarding SEL implementation in Latin America (LA) remains limited. Uruguay, one of the few countries in LA integrating SEL into educational curricula, aims to bolster SEL practises to improve student outcomes. However, there is prevailing concern among Uruguayan teachers regarding the need for adequate training to effectively implement SEL. This qualitative study investigates the efforts of Uruguayan English as a Foreign Language (EFL) elementary teachers to embed SEL within their instruction. Following a three-week online SEL course, 22 teachers were observed using the SEL Coaching Toolkit. Findings revealed teachers' commitment to integrate SEL, yet inconsistencies and limited explicit SEL practises were observed. The study highlights a need for enhanced SEL training and support for educators. Recommendations include providing foundational SEL knowledge, fostering collaborative learning environments, and empowering educators to effectively nurture students' social emotional competencies, thereby advocating for equitable educational opportunities and fostering positive learning outcomes.

Keywords: Social emotional learning, professional development, teacher training, SEL practises, English as a Foreign Language.

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Introduction

The push to integrate social emotional learning (SEL) into the classroom has gained momentum as decades of research have indicated a positive relationship between the development of social emotional competencies (SECs) and academic achievement in students (CASEL, 2024a; Durlak et al., 2011; Zins, 2004). Self-regulation, perseverance, and relationship skills predict students' future success in school and post-secondary education (Bisquerra, 2003; McKown, 2017). Academic performance levels, improved behaviour, attendance rates, and student participation have been linked to strong SECs (CASEL, 2024a; Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). The development of students' SECs enhances their empathy, pro-social behaviour, agency, and advocacy (CASEL, 2024a; Durlak, 2015; Jagers et al.; 2019).

International organisations have recognised the value and need for enhancing SECs within educational settings in Latin America (LA) to assist in shaping educational and labour outcomes (Bassi et al., 2012; Berniell et al., 2017; Greenberg, 2023; Huerta, 2019; Revista de Educación, 2017). While developed countries have extensively investigated the need for SEL and studied its benefits through empirical and longitudinal studies, countries in LA lack sufficient empirical evidence in this area. Uruguay is one of the few countries in LA integrating SEL in educational programmes and explicitly encouraging teachers to support the development of students' SECs to improve student retention, academic achievement, and graduation rates in Uruguayan schools (ANEP-CES, 2006; Dirección Nacional de Impresiones y Publicaciones Oficiales- IMPO, 2020; Instituto Nacional de Educación Evaluativa -INEEd, 2024; Mels, 2023; Panizza et al., 2020; Revista Educación, 2017; Rivero Cancela, 2017). The development of SECs has thus emerged as a critical objective for the Uruguayan Board of Education, leading to various current initiatives towards the integration of SEL in Uruguayan classrooms (Mels, 2023; Panizza et al., 2020).

Teacher Education in SEL

Successful implementation of SEL programmes in schools requires adequate teacher education (Bisquerra, 2003; Castillo et al., 2013; Kimber et al., 2013). SEL teacher training equips educators with the theoretical and empirical background to make sense of new instructional practises, enhancing their capacity to implement SEL practises (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2023; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Yoder & Gurke, 2017). Educators who receive SEL training are more likely to view the integration of SEL in their instruction as a part of their job (Madueke, 2014; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). SEL training supports teachers in developing their self and social awareness, reflect upon their practises, beliefs and interactions, unlearn prejudiced behaviours, and create student-centred classrooms that empower students (Jennings et al., 2020; Kimber et al., 2013; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2023; Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Teachers across the world have expressed the need for more support from district and school leaders to implement SEL instructional practises in the classroom and provide students with opportunities to develop their SECs (Burgin et al., 2023; Daniel et al., 2022; Kimber et al., 2013; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Yoder, 2014). While educators are willing to support SEC development in their students, a systemic approach that facilitates

implementation is necessary to support SELs development (Batejan, 2020; Harewood, 2016; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Effective professional development (PD) integrates professional learning focused on SEL as well as other areas that embed SEL practises and concepts into the classroom (CASEL, 2024a). Yoder (2014) and Yoder and Gurke (2017) advocate for the integration of tools and resources within SEL PD systems to effectively bridge the disparity between SEL theory and teachers' actual practises.

Teaching practises that support SEL

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) conducted an extensive literature review on evidence based SEL programmes and identified four social and six instructional teaching practises to effectively integrate SEL into instruction (Yoder, 2014; Yoder & Gurke, 2017). The four social teaching practises include student-centred discipline, teacher language, responsibility and choice, and warmth and support. The six instructional teaching practises are cooperative learning, classroom discussions, self-assessment and self-reflection, balanced instruction, academic press and expectations, and competence building. The integration of these instructional practises can assist teachers in creating a safe nurturing learning environment that supports the development of their students' SELs (Batejan, 2020; Beggs & Olson, 2020; Yoder & Gurke, 2017).

Social Teaching Practises

Effective SEL implementation requires teachers to use a student-centred approach that incorporates student voice to promote student agency and advocacy (CASEL, 2024a; Howley et al., 2021; Jagers et al., 2019; Yoder & Nolan, 2018). SEL practises create opportunities for students to participate in the decision-making process and share their learning experiences and interests (CASEL, 2024a; Howley, 2021). Teachers provide students with enough freedom to choose the best ways to learn and to find solutions to problems (CASEL, 2024a; Yoder & Gurke, 2017). Supportive and caring instruction is key so that students feel valued, respected, and engaged (Durlak, 2015; Kendziora & Yoder, 2017; Mahoney et al., 2021; McCaughtry, 2004). SEL practises foster students' collaboration, exchange, and dialogue (Bisquerra, 2003; CASEL, 2024a; Castro-Olivo et al., 2023; Durlak, 2015; Yoder & Gurke, 2017). Instead of taking punitive measures to manage students' behaviour, teachers implement restorative SEL practises that allow students to take ownership of their actions, reflect on how their actions affect themselves and others, and learn skills to repair any harm caused (Gregory et al., 2023; Pentón Herrera & McNair, 2021; Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021; Zins, 2004).

Instructional Teaching Practises

SEL instruction offers students the opportunity to engage with authentic material, active and direct instruction, and collaborative learning experiences that emphasise diverse instructional approaches like games, projects, and other interactive methods (Durlak, 2015; Yoder & Gurke, 2017). Successful SEL practises require teachers to create an environment conducive to self-reflection, urging students to actively monitor their work, seek assistance, and develop self-advocacy skills (CASEL, 2024a; Howley, 2021; Ramirez et al., 2021; Yoder & Gurke, 2017). In this regard, teachers present challenging and meaningful tasks to students, complemented by

support through competence building, self-assessment, and reflection (Yoder & Gurke, 2017). Teachers help develop student competence when SECs are systematically embedded in the instructional cycle: lesson objective, introduction, individual and group work, conclusion and reflection (Benson, 2021; Fawcett, 2022; Yoder & Nolan, 2018). Thus, it is imperative for teachers to employ instructional practises that seamlessly integrate academic content with SEL skills (CASEL, 2024a; Durlak, 2015; Yoder & Gurke, 2017; Zins et al., 2007).

Current Efforts to Implement SEL in Uruguay's Schools

The 2008 Uruguayan General Education Law adopts an integral development perspective, acknowledging that the education of individuals transcends the mere acquisition of subject matter content (IMPO, 2020). The Uruguayan National Institute of Educational Evaluation (INEEd) was created in 2008 to evaluate educational quality in primary, secondary and tertiary levels in Uruguay. Since then, the INEEd has conducted, published, and disseminated biannual reports on student learning, retention and evaluation processes, contributing to quality education of all students. Since 2015, the INEEd focused on the development of comprehensive systems to assess educational achievements, including social, emotional, and cognitive skills (INEEd, 2024; Panizza et al., 2020). In the private sector, the bilingual Queens School organised conventions focused on SEL in 2018 and 2021 (Queens School, n.d.). In 2023, this institution played a key role in supporting the development and presentation of an Emotional Education Law in Uruguay to establish SEL as a fundamental right for every Uruguayan student (Cámara de Representantes Poder Legislativo, n.d). Additionally, the University of Montevideo, a private university, offers an annual course on SEL as part of its four-year teacher training programme (Universidad de Montevideo, 2020).

The Uruguayan English as a Foreign Language (EFL) national curriculum mandates EFL teachers to foster students' development of SECs (ANEP-CES, 2006). However, as of now, there is a lack of defined and developed SEL guidelines, resources, or standards to support such educators in their efforts to integrate SEL into their instruction. Consequently, there is prevailing concern among these teachers on the need for adequate training to effectively implement SEL (Burgin et al., 2023; Mels, 2023). Educational stakeholders in Uruguay are thus actively exploring strategies to equip EFL teachers with the requisite knowledge and skills to create conducive learning environments that foster SECs development among Uruguayan students (Burgin et al., 2023; Llambí et al., 2015; Panizza et al., 2020). Recognising the imperative for foundational knowledge in the area, the present study argues that providing Uruguayan EFL teachers with solid understandings of SEL and its implementation could significantly enhance the likelihood of successful SEL instruction.

Theoretical Framework

The CASEL Five Framework, selected for the present study, was developed in 1994 by interdisciplinary researchers to address learners' social and emotional needs holistically. As one of the most extensively used SEL frameworks, it highlights five core SECs that can be taught in various ways in different school or community settings. The present study used the CASEL Five Framework (CASEL, 2024b) to define SEL,

describe SECs, offer strategies for SEL implementation, and provide reading materials on SEL best practises. CASEL (2024b) defines SEL as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (para. 1). SEL promotes educational equity by creating meaningful learning opportunities and authentic partnerships between schools, families, and the community (CASEL, 2024b; Jennings et al., 2020; Mels, 2023). Effective SEL implementation helps students develop the skills to address existing forms of inequalities and co-create just educational environments (Howley, 2021; Jagers et al.; 2019; Ramirez et al., 2021).

Methodology

This qualitative study investigated the efforts of Uruguayan EFL teachers to embed SEL into their elementary school instruction after participating in a SEL intervention course. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How present are SEL practises in the EFL teachers’ instruction?
2. What are the observed areas for improvement in the integration of SEL in EFL practises?

Data were gathered through 22 one-hour classroom observations two weeks after participants completed the SEL intervention course. Two EFL Uruguayan national supervisors (UNS) responsible for Uruguay’s EFL elementary teacher training and evaluation, and a team of three researchers with experience conducting SEL studies in LA, conducted the observations. The UNS individually observed and provided data on 12 of the 22 classroom observations conducted due to limited schedule availability, while the research team individually observed all 22 classroom observations. Frequent meetings among all observers were conducted to discuss the data collected.

All observers utilised the SEL Coaching Toolkit developed by Yoder and Gurke (2017) to record comments and determine the extent of SEL implementation in the observed classrooms. The toolkit has a 4-point performance-level scale to evaluate SEL practises (1= not yet present; 2= minimally present; 3= moderately present; 4= fully present) for each of the 10 SEL teaching practises and a note-taking tool to record observation evidence for each SEL practise. Observers used the tool to identify and determine the SEL practises present in the observations conducted. The SEL Coaching toolkit (Yoder & Gurke, 2017) was selected among other tools to determine the level of SEL implementation and guide inter-rater conversations on participants’ SEL instruction.

Observational data from the two EFL UNS and the research team were analysed using a six-phase thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These phases included becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing identified themes, defining the themes, and reporting findings. Thematic analysis was chosen due to its systematic approach in exploring participants’ perspectives on the research topic (Nowell et al., 2017). Following data review, each researcher created initial codes, which

were then discussed and refined in a collaborative meeting to generate final themes. The inductive coding process allowed researchers to interpret responses within the context of the study. In the process of analysing the data, the researchers observed differences with the UNS' perceptions of the EFL teachers' SEL implementation, which were documented in the study findings.

Researchers' Positionality

The three researchers in this study are bilingual Hispanic female educators with experience in designing and conducting research on SEL, teacher PD, and SEL training in the U.S. and in LA such as Ecuador, Guatemala, and Uruguay. The PD was delivered by a former Uruguayan EFL teacher whose dissertation research focuses on SEL implementation in Uruguay. Her strong ties to EFL education in her homeland, and professional connections to the UNS, contributed to the EFL supervisors' openness to participate in this study, and share their interpretations of the lessons observed.

Intervention

This qualitative intervention study offered EFL teachers a three-week training on SEL foundational knowledge and integration in lesson plans delivered asynchronously online. The intervention was organised into three weeks including weekly readings and tasks to promote teachers' active participation and reflection on SEL integration in their classrooms and impact on their students' academic success.

Week 1 discussed SEL definition, benefits of SEL integration in the classroom, and approaches to promote SECs. Week 2 introduced strategies to embed SEL in teachers' planning and instruction. Week 3 provided tools and opportunities to apply and reflect on SEL practises.

Participants

After completing the three-week intervention, all EFL teachers who completed the course (n=40) were invited to participate in a one-hour classroom observation of SEL integration in their classrooms. A total of 22 teachers (n=21 female; n=1 male) agreed to participate. They had between 3 to 20 years of teaching experience in elementary schools and 2 to 7 years teaching EFL in elementary schools. Pseudonyms were used to ensure participants' confidentiality and anonymity.

Results and Discussion

Three themes were identified from the analysis of the data, namely integrating SEL to address student behaviour; creating classroom environments that support SEL integration; and SEL integration to support instructional teaching practises. These are described in more detail below.

Integrating SEL to address student behaviour

Effective SEL integration addresses behaviour through student-centred discipline incorporating students' perspectives to foster agency and advocacy (CASEL, 2024a; Howley, 2021; Jagers et al., 2019; Yoder & Nolan,

2018). When describing teachers' behaviour management skills, data from all observers suggest that participants (n=13) showed minimal implementation of student-centred discipline in the observed lessons. The researchers agreed that in most observed lessons (n=14), "the teacher provided the classroom rules about raising hands, respecting others, and the consequences for bad behaviour (the team will get marks)" but no contribution from students was observed. One researcher noted, "Rules were provided but it is unclear if students participated in setting the rules." Another researcher stated that "discussion of rules was not present" in the observations conducted (n=13). In this regard, the UNS expressed that "in some lessons this discussion was not necessary as students showed appropriate classroom behaviour." One of the UNS commented, "Valentina has effective classroom management techniques, and the rules of the class are clear. She has no need to make any reference to the expected behaviour, learners behave all the time, and they work actively." However, research states that proactively addressing the root causes of misconduct equips students with the knowledge and abilities needed to behave better (Yoder & Gurke, 2017).

Although all observers indicate that teachers demonstrated high levels of interest infusing SEL practise in EFL instruction, discrepancies among the observers' perspectives on the use of teachers' language were observed. The researchers indicated that the language teachers (n=17) used to direct students did not reflect SEL models, while the UNS commented that participants (n=9) "correctly implemented principles related to SEL and EFL." The researchers noted that 14 participants used affirming language such as "good", "very good", "excellent" to reward positive behaviour and effort without communicating what students were doing right and what they needed to improve. One researcher observed, "teachers use the word excellent to encourage the students and nothing else." Another researcher's recording documented that Rosana said to a student: 'you are not listening'; to another: 'can you help so and so?' Then, 'Excellent.' The teacher used 'Excellent' most of the time. I heard her say perfect and very good once." In this regard, the UNS commented that "positive reinforcement of expected types of interaction in the language was present throughout the lessons with appropriate praise being given effortlessly." The UNS highlighted that the observed teachers (n=9) used polite language and tone when talking to students. Some of their comments were: "Lucia is polite," "students talk to the teacher as she talks to them nicely and without raising the volume," and "Mariana uses changes of pitch and intonation to make herself understood." Research recommends that teachers emphasise the use of language that promotes students' effort and work, by communicating what the student did right and the specific areas that need improvement (CASEL, 2024a; Durlak et al., 2011; Yoder & Gurke, 2017).

Furthermore, all observers agreed that some participants used punitive language and actions to get students to behave and were not explicit about the class expectations and targeted competencies. Effective SEL practises require teachers' conversations with students that explicitly address self-monitoring and regulation of behaviour instead of demanding students to behave well (CASEL, 2024a; Yoder & Gurke, 2017). The UNS indicated that some teachers (n=7) were clear about the behaviour that was not accepted in the classroom; however, expected behaviour was not addressed. For example, a supervisor said, "After working in pairs, the teacher explains that a group has not worked nor behaved appropriately, she explicitly lists what they did wrong." According to the researchers' observational data, teachers (n=10) used punitive language towards the

end of the lesson. Some examples include: “Silence,” “Be quiet,” “[Misbehaviour] costs the group a lot of points,” and “the Lions are talking without permission [and proceeds to discount a point].” Additionally, the researchers agreed that in six lessons when “a student spoke out of turn, the teacher explained the rules and a mark [points discounted] was given as a consequence of the behaviour.” These marks indicated that a group lost points previously earned through good behaviour. These results suggest that participants need to better implement student-centred discipline. When teachers are explicit about the what, why, and how of the expected behaviour, students feel empowered and assume ownership of their learning processes (CASEL, 2024a; Durlak, 2015; Yoder & Gurke, 2017). Educators need to employ developmentally suitable disciplinary approaches that encourage students’ desire to exhibit positive behaviour within the classroom.

Data from all observers suggest that participants did not take advantage of teaching moments to improve self-regulation of behaviour and consistency of consequences. The UNS observed that in three lessons “consequences were not indicated, only expectations.” They documented, “Some students were out of task, behaviour rules seem to be unclear and inconsistent.” Similarly, the researchers agreed that in nine lessons “students did not present behaviour of regulating themselves and the teachers had to keep reminding them about expected behaviour in the classroom.” Additionally, the researchers indicated that in six lessons, student misbehaviour was intentionally not addressed, and teachers continued with their lesson delivery. A researcher observed, “When students are not following expectations, there’s no teacher intervention. The teacher seems focused on her lesson goals and plans, not addressing students’ behaviour.” Along these lines, researchers claim that establishing consistent and reasoned rules along with corresponding consequences, helps students acquire the ability to self-regulate their behaviour and navigate challenging situations within the classroom environment (Gregory et al., 2023; Yoder & Gurke, 2017; Zins, 2004).

Overall, observational data from all observers suggest that SEL practises to address student behaviour were minimally implemented in 14 of the observed lessons and moderately present in eight lessons. Commonalities and discrepancies in the presence of student-centred discipline and effective use of teacher language were evident in the observer comments. While the UNS were satisfied with the use of affirmative and polite language, they also expressed lack of consistent and clear rules in the classrooms. However, the researchers viewed teachers’ language as lacking explicit behavioural expectations and tools to support student self-monitoring and behaviour regulation.

Creating classroom environments that support SEL integration

A learning environment supportive of students’ social and emotional development promotes warmth, support, and students’ sense of responsibility (CASEL, 2024a; Durlak, 2015; MCAughtry, 2004; Yoder & Gurke, 2017). Data from all observers suggest differences between the researchers and the UNS’ perspectives of observed teachers’ practises to create learning environments conducive to the development of SECs. The UNS indicated that SEL practises fostering warmth and support in the classroom were fully implemented in 11 lessons while the researchers considered it was minimally present in 12 practises.

All observers commented that teachers (n=14) demonstrated concern and care for students and created positive learning environments. The UNS observed “nice learning environments and attentive students that participated more as the class progressed.” One supervisor mentioned, “The teacher has created a nice learning atmosphere. She shows care and warmth.” Similarly, the researchers noted, “The teacher clearly demonstrated concern about students. For example, a student was late, and the teacher made sure that she had a chair and was able to sit with her group.” Another researcher documented that “the students seem comfortable with the teacher. They expressed being happy in class.” These findings align with research suggesting that SEL integration requires teachers to create learning environments where all students feel valued, supported, and engaged (Batejan, 2020; CASEL, 2024a; Durlak, 2015; Yoder & Gurke, 2017).

Additionally, all observers noted that teachers (n=6) created a learning environment where students felt comfortable taking risks and asking questions. The literature suggests that a warm and caring learning environment lowers the affective filter, leading students to feel safe and confident to learn (Krashen, 1988; Yoder & Gurke, 2017). One supervisor observed that “the affective filter was sufficiently lowered so children interacted with each other and the teacher stress-free” while the researchers commented that “students were comfortable asking questions to the teacher. Students take risks and participate.” Furthermore, teachers foster warmth and support by asking students’ personal and academic questions and addressing students’ concerns (Durlak, 2015; Yoder & Gurke, 2017). The UNS indicated that participants (n=9) demonstrated care and appreciation by asking about students’ feelings. The UNS noted, “the teacher explicitly asks students how they feel and asks them for further information, she shows interest in them.” The researchers indicated, “The lesson begins with ‘How are you feeling today?’ Many children respond simultaneously. The teacher continues to prod them for their response.” The researchers also noted that seven teachers did not take advantage of teaching instances when students expressed anxiety and lack of understanding. One researcher noted, “the teacher seems very focused on her lesson plan, ignoring that students are not engaged, their anxiety is rising as they keep asking her to switch languages.” Another researcher observed, “students repeatedly told the teacher to speak Spanish and said ‘teacher, I didn’t learn anything’ while the teacher keeps speaking English and does not address this issue.”

Discrepancies were observed between the UNS and researchers’ perspectives of participants’ SEL practises to promote student responsibility and choice. SEL instruction offers opportunities for students to make meaningful choices and responsible decisions pertaining to their academic and personal development (Yoder & Gurke, 2017). The UNS observed that nine teachers moderately implemented SEL to promote student responsibility and choice in the classroom while the researchers agreed that this practise was not present in 15 observations. The UNS stated, “The teacher asks students ‘How are you going to behave?’ and gives examples of behaviour that is not accepted, ‘If you want your team to receive a star you...’ making explicit what she expects. Students show their thumbs up to illustrate how they will behave.” The researchers documented that the teachers do not discuss with students that “they [the students] are responsible for their own academic success” and “are not held accountable for learning together.” The teachers “focus on the result rather than teaching students the process.” Additionally, the researchers noted that 15 lessons were predominantly teacher-

led with minimal opportunities for students to provide meaningful input into the development of class rules, procedures, and academic content (Yoder, 2014). The researchers indicated that teachers offered “limited choices” which “don’t seem to be meaningful.” However, the UNS observed that six teachers offered students choices regarding prizes, forming groups, and sitting arrangements. One supervisor said, “the teacher gives choices and autonomy. She makes students part of the lesson and lets them decide. They form groups independently; one student has no group.” The other UNS stated, “the teacher asks students to organise the groups, she leaves them to work independently. Then, she realises she has to get involved.”

Overall, the UNS and researchers’ records showed commonalities and discrepancies in the teachers’ SEL practises to create learning environments that make content meaningful to students, enhance their confidence, and foster their decision-making skills. The researchers’ data indicate that participants need better preparation to implement SEL practises that seek students’ input and responsibility. The UNS seemed satisfied with the observed practises although their field notes suggest teachers’ lack of SEL effective practises.

SEL integration to support instructional teaching practises

SEL enhances instructional practises through classroom discussions, cooperative learning, student self-reflection and assessment, and competence building (Yoder & Gurke, 2017). Results indicate that the participants’ integration of SEL to support instruction was minimally present; however, commonalities and discrepancies between observers were identified. All observers noted that there was minimal to no classroom discussion in the implementation of 16 lessons. The researchers documented, “there were no discussions for students to express their voice. There was no conversation about why they are learning what they are learning.” The UNS noted that content was not discussed with students in eight of the lessons and claimed, “teachers do not discuss with students’ content, expectations, consequences and strategies to improve behaviour.” These comments align with research suggesting that classroom discussions guide students in developing effective listening and communication skills through in-depth content discussions, in which students express their ideas and reflect on peers’ contributions (Yoder & Gurke, 2017). Moreover, all observers agreed that self-assessment and reflection were not observable in most lessons (n=17); however, five participants created instances for students to reflect on behaviour. One researcher said, “José promoted whole class reflection about the noise level in the classroom; ‘You were kind of noisy. What do you think about that?’” The UNS stated that “Analia planned moments for learners to self-assess and reflect. She used a poster for students to say how they felt during the activity.” Teachers foster self-reflection and assessment through collaborative goal setting with students, facilitating awareness of available resources, and prompting them to actively think about their work (CASEL, 2024a; Yoder & Gurke, 2017).

Data indicates differences in the observers’ perspectives of the teachers’ implementation of cooperative learning and competence building practises. Effective implementation of cooperative learning fosters active engagement around content through students’ collaborative work, assessment, and monitoring of their shared goal (Kendziora & Yoder, 2017; Liu, 2013; Mahoney et al., 2021; Yoder & Gurke, 2017). In this regard, the UNS indicated that eight teachers moderately integrated SEL to foster cooperative learning and

commented that group work “was correctly implemented, providing a balance between teacher-led and student-centred activities.” They observed, “Cristina plans group work. She monitors them. They make their own groups. Students work cooperatively and correctly.”

In contrast, the researchers agreed that teachers (n=19) demonstrated little to no effective implementation of cooperative learning. They documented that in eight lessons “students are sitting in a group but working individually” while in six lessons no pair or group work was evident. The researchers observed “groups were very involved” in five lessons. They noted, “students expressed their progress among the group members to make sure the work was completed. However, not all members listen.” These observations align with the literature suggesting that cooperative learning enhances student learning and the development of SECs through positive interdependence, individual accountability, mutual support, and group processing (Yoder & Gurke, 2017).

Differences were also identified between the researchers and the UNS’ perceptions about competence building practises. While UNS’ data revealed that competence building was moderately present (n=8), researchers observed little to no presence (n=18) of this SEL practise. Teachers promote students’ competence building through systematic integration of SEL skills in each phase of the instructional cycle (goal setting, introduction of new material, group and individual practise, and conclusion/reflection) (Liu, 2013; Yoder & Gurke, 2017). The UNS commented that 10 teachers implemented the instructional cycle, and the researchers’ observational records indicate that four teachers introduced the lesson objectives, encouraged students to share their work and receive feedback from others, and two created opportunities for students to reflect at the end of the lesson. To support competence building, teachers model prosocial behaviour, encourage positive behaviours during cooperative work, provide feedback on students’ interactions and content learning, and provide students with conflict-resolution strategies (Yoder & Gurke, 2017; Williford & Wolcott, 2015). In this regard, the researchers documented, “Jimena introduced the lesson and said, ‘Let’s go over the rules for today [points at the written goals]. Do you agree to use English today? What do you think about being kind? Working in teams? What about helping other students?’ and Valentina encouraged students to reflect on their competency development by asking ‘How did you feel working together? Did you like working like this?’”

Overall, the results suggest that the participants’ integration of SEL to support instruction was minimally present. While the UNS’ data suggested more presence of these SEL practises in participants’ instruction, their field notes did not align with research on effective SEL practises. The researchers’ data indicate the need for teachers to adapt their practises to better foster SECs through classroom discussions, student reflection, cooperative learning, and competence building in the classroom.

Conclusion

Data indicated that while there was a clear instructional intention among teachers to incorporate SEL into EFL instruction, many SEL practises were not explicitly addressed nor consistently implemented. Although the UNS were satisfied with the teachers’ efforts to implement SEL, both the UNS and the research team identified areas for improvement. With regards to the first research question, the findings suggest that SEL practises were

inconsistent, and teachers demonstrated minimal to no implementation of SEL practises in the observed lessons. The observers documented that the responsibility for lessons predominantly rested on the teachers, indicating a need to reduce teacher-centred approaches and increase student-led tasks with an SEL focus for students to lead learning rather than merely follow commands from teachers.

Research recognises the pivotal role of teachers in actively modelling and intentionally assisting students in cultivating the SECs they need to succeed in school (Kendziora, 2017; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Waajid et al., 2013). The teachers' efforts to infuse SEL practises into EFL content were evident but they demonstrated uncertainty in building learners' SECs within EFL lessons. While various resources and EFL strategies were utilised, there was a lack of overt emphasis on building SECs. This highlights a gap in teachers' readiness to incorporate SEL into their instructional practises, suggesting the necessity for PD tailored to support SEL integration (Burgin et al., 2023; Mels, 2023; Rivero Cancela, 2017).

With regards to the second research question, the findings show that although the EFL elementary teachers and supervisors are invested in improving the integration of SEL in EFL instruction, the discrepancies between the UNS' observational data and existing SEL literature and the researchers' perspectives suggest the need for SEL PD that supports EFL supervisors' knowledge and ability to guide EFL teachers in their SEL integration. The findings suggest the need for systematic training and coaching to support teachers' implementation of SEL into EFL instruction.

This research serves as a catalyst for Uruguayan educational stakeholders to reconsider the support mechanisms for teachers in promoting SECs effectively. The findings encourage teachers' and supervisors' reflection on the implications of effective SEL instruction in Uruguayan schools, stimulating discussions on SEL design and implementation. Successful PD supports seamlessly incorporate targeted SEL learning alongside other relevant domains, ensuring the integration of SEL practises and concepts into classroom settings (CASEL, 2024a). Thus, the authors note that elementary EFL educators and supervisors in Uruguay need opportunities to gain SEL foundational knowledge, comprehend its significance, and effectively incorporate it in their school and classroom routines.

Finally, the study acknowledges three key limitations: observer bias, participant bias, and limited sample size. Strategies such as employing multiple observers and emphasising the non-evaluative nature of observations were employed to mitigate biases. While this qualitative research prioritised depth over breadth, future studies could benefit from larger and more diverse samples to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings and delve further on the effective implementation of SEL in EFL instruction.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in the submitted manuscript.

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