Social Emotional Learning Practices in Learning English as a Second Language

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**Recommended Citation**

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Social-Emotional Learning Practices in Learning English as a Second Language

Abstract

Social and emotional factors are two main aspects of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), which are also crucial in the development of L2 competence. Drawing examples from English as a second language (ESL) classrooms, this paper discusses how learners’ affective factors such as motivation, attitude, and anxiety (Henter, 2014) contribute to the L2 learning process through a social learning experience when learners engage in social interaction. Further examination of research findings from SEL classroom provides a thorough analysis of the lack of discussion on SEL in second language learning (SLL).

Keywords: Social Emotional Learning (SEL), second language learning (SLL), affective, classroom practices.
Social-Emotional Learning Practices in Learning English as a Second Language

The growth of research in Social Emotional Learning (SEL) over the past decades generates the need to examine the role of SEL in the second language (L2) teaching and learning. SEL is the process of developing one’s ability to integrate thinking, feeling, and behavior in order to achieve important goals in life (Zins, 2004). It concerns the enhancement of learners’ cognitive ability in its association with physical, social, and emotional systems. Research shows the connection between social conduct in the classroom with positive learning outcomes (e.g., DiPerna & Elliott, 1999; Haynes et al., 2003; Pasi, 2001) and in predicting performance on standardized achievement tests (e.g., Malecki & Elliot, 2002; Welsh et al. 2001). On the contrary, antisocial behavior often co-occurs with low academic performance (Hawkins et al., 1998). Nevertheless, beyond such correlational findings, there is a lack of discussion on what way social practices and emotional states are influential for L2 learning, and what empirical evidence is available from L2 learning classrooms.

Learning an L2 is believed to involve a mental process of which “language acquisition resides mostly, if not solely, in the mind” (Davis, 1995, p. 427). In a different view, the Sociocultural Theory (SCT) conceptualizes L2 learning as a social practice that occurs in collaboration with others situated in specific sociocultural contexts. Exploring the role of SEL in SLL, this paper argues that L2 learning is primarily a social activity and can only take place through collaboration with other people. Learning is defined as changes resulting from practices and experiences (Ambrose et al., 2010), and collaboration is defined as a process involving two or more people working together toward a common goal through knowledge sharing (Marinez-Moyano, 2006). Borrowing the concept of SCT, this paper discusses how social interaction and learners’ affective states promote the development of L2 competence. It further presents research findings on the nature of SEL and its implementation on English language learners (ELLs) and ends with a conclusion of the current state of affairs.

Affective Factors in Second Language Learning

Affective factors in SLL have appeared as a predictor of performance in a remarkable number of research studies. They include motivation, attitude, and anxiety (Henter, 2014). Falling into a distinct category, these variables are strongly linked to language performance and dependent upon different contexts of exposure. Having a significant impact on learning, it is important that they are not overlooked as they contribute to students’ input, output, and all around development of English proficiency.

Research shows that although ELs may be exposed to the same instruction, they individually process information differently, which results in different language learning experiences. Farzana (2012) explained that ”The affective side of the learner is probably one of the most important influences on language learning success or failure” (p. 22). Supported by humanism, great emphasis is placed on the significance of the inner world, human being’s thoughts, feelings, and emotions remaining an integral part of human development (Wang, 2005). As the term affective relates to emotional being, the relevancy of a learner’s emotions, self-esteem, empathy, anxiety, attitude, and motivation have an extensive meaning (Farzana, 2012). Each, despite deep complexity, can play a role or be the difference in successful or unsuccessful completion of learning tasks or assessments for L2 learners.
One of the main determinants in learning a foreign language is motivation. The socio-educational model of language learning associated with R.C. Gardner postulates that “integralization and attitude towards learning situations are two correlated variables that support individual motivation to learn a foreign language, but motivation is responsible for the results in learning a foreign language” (Henter, 2014, p. 374). Including five variables (integralization, attitude towards the learning situation, motivation, integrative orientation, and instrumental orientation), the effects of the results towards a learning situation are indirect as they act through motivation. Research shows that motivation can predict about .35 of performance in SLL (Alizadeh, 2016). Consequently, having an elaborate understanding specifying the learner’s readiness to communicate a language, whether the degree of construct is intrinsically or extrinsically, is vital in explaining the success or failure of any complex task.

As language learners vary enormously in how successful they are in learning an L2, some learn with ease and others with difficulty, but experiencing views of self and motivation to succeed, are extremely relevant to social-emotional issues and needs (Castro-Olivio et al., 2011). Defined by Gardner (1982), motivation is composed of three elements; the time spent studying and the drive of the learner, the yearning to become proficient in the language, and the emotional reactions of the learning towards studying. Thus, effort, desire, and affect collaborate in order to achieve social reward through L2 achievement (Carrio-Pastor & Mestre, 2013).

Carrio-Pastor and Mestre (2013) conducted a qualitative study on integrative and instrumental motivation and the correlation between the form of motivation and successful SLL at higher education level. Group A used a handbook as classroom material with references to the economic and social environment of engineering, and Group B used on-line material with mixed grammatical and cultural contents. Motivation was contrasted to determine whether integrative motivation (measured by means of the positive attitudes shown by students toward the target language and culture) and instrumental motivation (assessed by the gain-related motivation) played relevant roles. Results revealed that motivation played a vital role in determining the needs and expectations of the learners. Findings indicated motivation as an essential factor in L2 achievement, and highlighted the importance of identifying the type and combination of motivation and the necessity of viewing motivation as the main variable of interrelated factors unique to language learning (Carrio-Pastor & Mestre, 2013).

Additional research inevitably links motivation with L2 achievement and the development of language skills. Henter (2014) analyzed how affective factors contribute to first-year Psychology and Educational students’ English proficiency. After being tested with the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMBT) designed by Gardner, correlations showed that out of the affective factors, motivation, and anxiety are strongly linked to English performance. According to Ditual (2012), learners were highly motivated with positive attitudes towards learning English, and Lucas (2010), explained that learners are intrinsically motivated to learn speaking and reading skills and are also intrinsically motivated through knowledge and achievement. Al-Hazemi (2000) concluded that learners with a strong desire to learn a language obtained a high level of competence in the target language. These studies contribute to the need for identifying the important role of affective factors in SLL.
Among various factors contributing to SLL success, including motivation, the degree of attitude is a powerful determinant of learning behaviors. Conditions on language can be generalized before starting to learn and research shows that a positive attitude increases efficiency in learning foreign languages (Henter, 2014). In relation to this perspective, Oroujlou and Vahedi (2011) expressed the significance of realizing the place of the English language in today’s world. Having this foundation as an attitude can indicate a series of valuable reactions or obstacles toward L2 learning. Several studies indicate that attitude in tandem with motivation appears associated with the performance and results on language tests (Henter, 2014). To distinguish between the two, an attitude is a set of beliefs and motivation is a reason for doing something (Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011). Negative attitudes and lack of motivation of learners can become obstacles to language learning. According to Gardner, motivation depends on attitude, and motivation is the combination of attempt plus desire to obtain the aim of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward learning the language (Alizadeh, 2016). Oroujlou and Vahedi (2011) strongly emphasized that motivation and attitude provide “primary impetus to initiate learning language” and a driving force to sustain the long term learning process (pg.994). Therefore, inattention to these factors can lead to deficiencies in learning a second language.

Ushida (2005) conducted a study that investigated the role of motivation and attitudes on student L2 learning in an online (LOL) L2 course context. It examined students’ attitudes and motivation in relation to an L2 learning environment. Students’ attitudes and motivation were examined within a socio-educational framework while learning contexts were examined based on Dörnyei’s (1994) components of foreign language learning motivation. The result shows equal importance of students’ motivation and attitudes in L2 study and that motivated students can take advantage of instruction. Evidence showed that motivated students studied regularly and productively to take every opportunity to develop their language. In addition, teachers created a unique class culture, which affected students’ motivation and attitudes toward studying L2 in the LOL context (Ushida, 2005). A study by Tercanlioglu (2001) concluded that Turkish learners have positive attitudes towards reading because they read both for intrinsic and extrinsic motives. Results from these studies clarify that motivation and attitude have great roles in raising the proficiency and efficiency of L2 students.

While both attitudinal and motivational factors influence SLL, language anxiety has been explained by researchers to contribute as well. Horwitz (2001) described language anxiety as complex proprioception, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors that occur during learning in the classroom due to the uniqueness of a learning language. Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis assumed that affective factors, including anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence, play facilitative roles in the influence and success of learning a foreign language (Du, 2009). As a filter, which provides specific input in learners’ brains, individuals with high affective filters will lower their intake, whereas people with low affective filters allow more input into their Language Acquisition Device (LAD). In line with Krashen’s theory, learners acquire an L2 if their affective filters are low enough to allow the input (Du, 2009). Understanding the affective filter, which can be a barrier to the acquisition process, may help teachers conduct instruction in ways that are efficient to language learners.

Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis explains an affective filter that “acts before the LAD and restricts the desire to seek input if the learner does not have such motivation” (Romeo,
More specifically, the affective filter is responsible for the individual variations experienced in SLA. Learners with lower affective filters acquire and encounter “more profound input, and a higher affective filter limits the amount of comprehensible input that reaches the language acquisition centers” (Baaqeel, 2020, pg. 44). Combined with Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences and Krashen’s Filter Hypothesis, a synthesis of research has proven that motivation and specific attitudinal factors affect the ability to learn English as an L2 while proposing alternative perspectives. Similarly, Ellis (1994) asserted that the acquisition of language skills for students who use English as an L2 depends on their motivation, while Xiaoqiong and Xinxiong (2008) expressed that teachers should acknowledge low motivation as one of the issues that can impede both the learning and teaching of language.

**Social Factors in Second Language Learning**

Socio-Cultural Theory (SCT) has had an increasing influence on SLA research regarding the essential role of social interaction. SCT argues that human mental functioning is fundamentally a mediated process that is organized by cultural artifacts, activities, and concepts (Ratner, 2002). Within this framework, the development of L2 competence is facilitated by learners’ participation in cultural, linguistic, and historically formed settings such as family life and peer group interaction, and in institutional contexts like schooling, organized sports activities, and workplaces. Vygotsky (1989) asserts that social interaction produces new, elaborate, advanced psychological processes that are unavailable to the organisms working in isolation. The term scaffolding is used by which knowledgeable participants (teachers or students) can create supportive conditions where students of lesser proficiency can participate or solve a problem that they could not solve on their own through social interaction (Donato, 1994).

Through participation in a scaffolded interaction, students of lesser proficiency can extend their current skills and knowledge to higher competence (Donato, 1994). In other words, they can jointly construct with their more knowledgeable partner in a zone of proximal development (ZPD), “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Through scaffolded help, learners can develop an interest in a task, simplify learning tasks, maintain their learning goal, notice language features and discrepancies, control emotional state during problem-solving tasks, and demonstrate their performance. From this perspective, social interaction facilitates the inter-mental (shared between individuals) learning process to intra-mental (within the individual; Mitchell & Myles, 2004), allowing learning experiences to be systematically shaped by others.

Gholami (2012) investigated the value of social context as an indirect trigger in EFL contexts. According to the research, the “social context is believed to have an influence on students’ attitude and motivation by providing learning opportunities that will enhance learners’ outcomes” (Montero et al., 2014, pg.437). Based on this interpretation, students acquire a language by using social interaction with speakers of that language. As the social context is often underestimated and overlooked, different social conditions influence the effective learning of an L2 and have proven to be crucial in language acquisition process. In this regard, the research deemed this aspect advisable to take into consideration in addition to vocabulary,
pronunciation, grammar, etc., while the information also elucidating that language learners’ affective and social factors are distinguishable in the L2 learning process (Montero et al., 2014).

Social factors along with many additional aspects determine the way in which language learners assimilate and develop the skills needed to learn a new language. The fact that there are several integral roles should be considered relevant and significant to the multifaceted SLL process. Depending on the context of language learning, both opportunities and challenges will exist and must be identified in order to develop the necessary abilities to succeed in the acquisition of an L2.

**Classroom Practices on Social Emotional Learning in ELL**

Classroom practices related to SEL can be broken down into two distinct types: those that are taught isolated from the regular classroom curriculum, and those that are taught integrated into the classroom curriculum. Recent existing research into either type of classroom practice shows preference to studies relating to early childhood education (Brown et al., 2012; Cho et al., 2019; Crean & Johnson, 2013; Duncan et al., 2017; Fishbein et al., 2016; Jacoby & Lesaux, 2019; McGlynn-Stewart et al., 2019; Novak et al., 2017) with little explicit focus on ELLs. This leaves a large gap in the research related to secondary education and minority groups, such as ELLs.

SEL can be taught explicitly, isolated from the regular curriculum using programs like Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS), Positive Action (PA), and Second Step. The literature on PATHS and PA in the classroom does not provide any insight into how ELLs SEL is impacted by these programs. However, limited research has been conducted with attention to ELLs for the Second Step program (Brown et al., 2012). It is important to note that the findings regarding all three programs can be used as a starting point for considering adaptations that would show similar impacts for ELLs as they do for non-ELLs.

PATHS is a SEL program and is meant to be implemented over multiple years from pre-K through sixth grade. This program is meant to provide students with social and emotional skills in order to facilitate academic success (PATHS Program, n.d.). Research shows that PATHS has positive impacts on pre-K through elementary students’ behavior (Crean & Johnson, 2013; Fishbein et al., 2016), and their psychological well-being (Panayiotou et al., 2020), but little impact is seen for high-risk students (Novak et al., 2017). At the same time, the existing research provides no insight into how the program impacts ELLs, specifically. PA is another SEL program that provides curriculum broken up by grade level from pre-K through eighth grade, and a set for high school grades combined. The program is based on the idea that when students feel good about themselves, they will demonstrate more positive actions, which will lead to a willingness to learn (Positive Action, n.d.). Research has shown that PA has a positive impact on student behaviors in elementary, middle, and high schools (Duncan et al., 2017; Stalker et al., 2018), but provides no insight for these programs’ impact specifically on ELLs. Both of these programs could be extended to ELLs through appropriate scaffolding, integration with technology, and the implementation of explicit vocabulary instruction, and embedded supports. Scaffolds should be implemented based on language proficiency (Baecher et al., 2012). For these two SEL programs, educators could implement these scaffolds including intentional flexible grouping. The grouping should allow for ELLs to work with peers of varying
levels of English proficiency, removing any social stigma related to continued use of homogeneous groupings (Baecher et al., 2012). Vocabulary supports can improve ELLs comprehension of the content (Bowles, 2004), and technology embedded supports in the curriculum can improve ELLs’ word learning (Leacox & Jackson, 2014) and comprehension of the material (Proctor et al., 2007), making it possible for the ELLs to show improved comprehension and thus, improved chances of acquiring SEL skills alongside their peers.

Second Step is another SEL program designed for pre-K through eighth-grade students that is broken into units that are focused on social-emotional skills, bullying prevention, and child protection (Committee for Children, n.d.). Research indicates that this program shows limited positive impacts on elementary and middle school students (Espelage et al., 2015; Low et al., 2015) though the research pays little attention explicitly to these programs’ impact on ELLs, specifically. However, one study did focus on ELLs using the Second Step program. Brown et al. (2012) conducted a study using data from 165 preschools through fourth-grade students, over three-quarters of whom were ELLs. The study administered pre and post-assessments for the students and found an increase in social and emotional knowledge, but no increase in behavioral and emotional functioning, especially for the students in third grade. These results suggested that Second Step meets the goal of teaching students, including ELLs, about social and emotional skills, but fails to show improvement of negative behaviors based on the self-reported post-test. The authors acknowledge a limitation of the study is that the students’ results may be due to their language acquisition, in other words, they may be better able to understand the self-reflection questions in the post-test because of their exposure to the English language, rendering their pre-test scores to be less accurate. The findings in this study mirror the findings with non-ELL students, showing limited success.

Research regarding classroom practices that are integrated into the classroom curriculum demonstrates more of an explicit focus on ELLs. For example, McGlynn-Stewart et al. (2019) conducted a study that sought to understand the impact of using an app called Talking Stickers, combined with dual language picture books, on preschool students’ social, emotional, and literacy learning. Talking Stickers is an app that uses scannable stickers in picture books to reading stories in multiple languages, as well as allows the users to record themselves. The 21 student participants, most of whom came from bilingual or multilingual homes, were observed over a four week period, and the teachers and parents were interviewed. The study found that the use of this technology provided native language literacy support bolstered relationships in the classroom, and provided opportunities for positive social and emotional interactions.

Similarly, Jacoby and Lesaux (2019) interviewed 20 Head Start teachers regarding their beliefs about how to foster development in dual language learning (DLL) preschoolers. Their study concluded that both monolingual English-speaking teachers and bilingual teachers felt that using Spanish in the classroom was an effective way to improve the students’ SEL. They reported that the reason for this was that it was a way to build relationships and provide a welcoming classroom environment.

Finally, Cho et al. (2019) conducted a study that sought to understand teacher perspectives of refugee students’ social-emotional competencies, and the practices they used related to those competencies. Their study found that teachers reported positive behavioral
outcomes by using strategies like individualized instruction, small group activities, creating an inviting environment, collaborating with support staff and parents, and explicitly teaching SEL. Through the interviews, however, it became clear that the majority of participating teachers viewed refugee students’ social-emotional behaviors negatively and felt that they were the authority in interactions with the parents. These existing teacher perceptions could have impacted the self-reported findings published in this study.

In another study, Rodriguez-Mojica (2019) conducted classroom research based on the SCT idea that interaction can result in language learning. When studying fourth-grade language arts students, the study found that through peer to peer scaffolding, emergent bilingual students were likely to receive useful help from peers less than half of the times that they asked. It also speculates that students who were given the correct answer would move on in the assignment, but likely did not gain new knowledge as a result. This suggests the need for classroom practices that encourage authentic collaboration in order to foster genuine discourse between ELLs and their peers in order to improve their SEL and academic understanding.

Further support for peer interaction’s positive impact on ELLs growth can be found in a study by Greenfader and Brouillette (2017) that uses the Teaching Artists Project (TAP) a curriculum that integrates movement and dance into classroom lessons, in order to bolster interaction and thus improve oral language development for ELLs in elementary school. The teachers in the study were trained to use this program over three years and implemented it into their classrooms. The findings showed that ELLs, at all levels of language proficiency, who participated in the TAP classes showed improvement in oral English skills. This finding is significant as it demonstrates a classroom practice that uses peer interaction in order to improve ELLs language proficiency.

Conclusion

Social and affective factors are the two main components in SEL. Although SEL studies on SLA is still limited, SEL promotes social interaction, allowing L2 learners to link their cognitive and affective factors to develop their second language competence. Under some circumstances, learners’ emotional states may be a hindrance in the L2 learning process. Existing research provides some insight into how SEL programs can be taught in isolation or integrated into the curriculum in classrooms with ELLs. Through the lens of SCT, research substantiates the use of student interaction and scaffolded learning to improve ELLs’ language proficiency.

As part of a complex process, the relationship between social and affective factors are vital to the achievement of language learners. While lack of attention can lead to inefficiencies, identifying key roles along with implementation of efficient strategies can lead to positive learning outcomes and raise the proficiency of second language learners. Along with the social and emotional factors that are crucial to students’ learning, a key element in the language acquisition process lies within the responsibility of teachers and instructors, who are first responders to language proficiency challenges in L2 classrooms.
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