

Book Review

Social-emotional Learning in the English Language Classroom: Fostering Growth, Self-care, and Independence

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Pentón Herrera, L. J., & Martínez-Alba, G. (2021). *Social-emotional learning in the English language classroom: Fostering growth, self-care, and independence*. TESOL Press.

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“Stress is a language learning killer,” notes one longtime ESL educator in *Social-Emotional Learning in the English Language Classroom*. In this slim book, educators Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba take a deep dive into methods language teachers can use to address affective factors, such as stress, that impact language learning. Through teacher and student vignettes as well as activities that can be tailored to various learning contexts, the authors effectively illustrate how social-emotional learning (SEL) practices can acknowledge, address, and help alleviate language learners’ stress, and thus enhance learning. And, beyond stress relief, SEL techniques can equip students with the social-emotional skills to succeed beyond the classroom, such as adopting a growth mindset and engaging in emotional management.

The authors bring complementary and broad experience to the book. Gilda Martinez-Alba is Provost Fellow for Diversity and Inclusion, and Director of the Graduate Reading Program at Towson University. Luis Javier Pentón Herrera has taught Spanish and ESOL at the K-12 and university levels. He serves as Adjunct Professor at University of Maryland, Global Campus, and the George Washington University.

To be effective English language teachers, Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba argue that our focus must broaden beyond syntax, grammar, and vocabulary. Reflecting on his first year as an educator, Pentón Herrera writes:

Witnessing my students' social-emotional struggles made me realize that academics were only one part of the equation for their success. In many instances, my students were not able to fully participate or were not mentally present because of social-emotional conflicts they were battling alone. I began to make shifts in my teaching practices. I started to incorporate activities in our daily routines where we could explore essential topics such as feelings, emotions and human relationships, all while learning language and literacy. (4)

Some social-emotional learning practices, such as mindfulness, date back centuries. It wasn't until 1994, however, that these practices were codified by the Collaborative for Social, Academic, and Emotional Learning (CASEL.org). It describes SEL's five core competencies: 1) self-awareness, 2) self-management, 3) social awareness, 4) relationship skills, and 5) responsible decision-making.

In the first half of the book, Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba make the case for addressing these competencies in English language teaching at all levels and in all contexts. Because SEL competencies are culture-specific, an English language class is an excellent venue for giving learners a safe space to learn about what the authors call "the unwritten social-emotional practices of their new host country" (8). Six considerations for implementing SEL practices into a classroom are presented, such as creating an intentional space, and using student input to build classroom values and procedures.

The book also advocates for incorporating evidence-based SEL training in TESOL teacher training programs. Nine SEL frameworks are introduced, such as the University of Chicago's Consortium framework and the Forum for Youth Investment framework. Each focuses on different audiences and teaching contexts. The book argues that these tools and others, such as CASEL's "Measuring SEL" page, are vital resources every practitioner of language teaching should be aware of in order to address affective factors that impact language learning.

One prescriptive chapter describes eight self-care activities teachers can take for their own well-being. Many can be used to connect with students or model behavior for them. They can even be a springboard for language learning. For example, you might ask students as they arrive in class (via chat for a Zoom class) to share one self-care activity they do. In one classroom, a student responded, "birdwatching" and that led to conversations about birdwatching, connections with other birdwatching classmates, and language lessons based on birding websites.

The book's second half, *Practical Applications of Social-Emotional Learning*, devotes a chapter each to mindfulness, peace education, and restorative practices. It provides three lessons for each practice, noting that they are modifiable to any learning context and age group.

Social-emotional learning practices can help address affective factors that can impact learning. While they don't serve to (or seek to) turn teachers into counsellors, training in implementing SEL practices into the classroom is vital. Effective SEL practices respect not only the age of your students and context of your class, but also students' comfort levels with sharing information beyond the academic subject. This book provides sensitive yet detailed tools and evidence for incorporating such practices in a way that can benefit language learners, not only linguistically but wholistically.

Author

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