

Effects of a Social-Emotional Learning Intervention on EFL Learners' Active Participation and Linguistic Performance

Mehran. Davaribina^{1*}, Maryam. Aghdamie¹

¹ Department of English, Ard.C., Islamic Azad University, Ardabil, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: mdavaribina@iau.ac.ir

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Social-emotional learning (SEL) has increasingly been discussed as a way to support engagement and academic development in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, where affective and interpersonal factors often shape learning opportunities.

Methods and Materials: This mixed-methods quasi-experimental study examined whether an 8-week SEL intervention was associated with changes in active participation and linguistic performance among adolescent EFL learners. Sixty learners aged 14-18 were assigned to an experimental group ($n = 30$) and a control group ($n = 30$). The experimental group participated in SEL-focused activities, including brief mindfulness routines, collaborative tasks, and self-awareness exercises, whereas the control group received regular instruction. Quantitative data were collected through the Oxford Placement Test (OPT), a 5-point Likert-scale participation questionnaire, and a structured observation checklist. Qualitative data were obtained from semi-structured interviews and field notes. Independent-samples t tests and ANCOVA were used for quantitative analyses, and qualitative data were analyzed through inductive content analysis.

Findings: The experimental group obtained higher post-intervention participation scores than the control group on both the questionnaire and observation checklist, and it also showed stronger post-test linguistic performance after controlling for pre-test scores. Qualitative findings suggested that learners in the intervention group perceived greater confidence, lower language-related anxiety, and stronger peer support.

Conclusion: Taken together, the findings suggest that SEL-informed classroom practices may support participation and language learning in EFL settings. Implications for classroom practice and teacher preparation are discussed.

Keywords: social-emotional learning; EFL; active participation; linguistic performance; classroom engagement

1. Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education is not solely a process of acquiring vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and communicative structures; it is also an emotionally and socially situated form of learning. Students

are expected to communicate in a language in which they may have limited proficiency, perform before teachers and peers, tolerate ambiguity, respond spontaneously, collaborate with classmates, and accept the possibility of making visible errors. Consequently, learners' linguistic

development is closely connected to their confidence, emotional regulation, motivation, interpersonal relationships, perceived classroom safety, and willingness to participate. Even students who possess adequate linguistic knowledge may avoid speaking, asking questions, volunteering answers, or participating in collaborative activities when they experience anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, low self-efficacy, or weak peer support. Conversely, emotionally supportive classrooms can encourage learners to take communicative risks, remain engaged with challenging tasks, and use the target language more frequently. The social and emotional dimensions of EFL instruction should therefore be regarded as central components of language learning rather than peripheral concerns (Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021; Tran et al., 2024).

Social-emotional learning (SEL) provides a systematic framework through which these nonlinguistic yet educationally consequential dimensions can be addressed. Broadly, SEL concerns the development and application of competencies related to recognizing and understanding emotions, regulating behavior, establishing constructive goals, demonstrating empathy, forming positive relationships, cooperating with others, and making responsible decisions. Within classroom settings, these competencies may help students manage frustration, persist through difficult learning activities, resolve interpersonal tensions, communicate their needs, and engage productively in individual and collaborative tasks. SEL is thus intended to promote both personal well-being and effective participation in learning communities. Evidence from classroom-wide interventions indicates that structured programs can improve social-emotional competence and reduce emotional and behavioral difficulties, although intervention quality, developmental appropriateness, and implementation consistency influence outcomes (Ştefan et al., 2022). Meta-analytic evidence has similarly suggested that SEL interventions can produce meaningful improvements in students' emotional, behavioral, and educational outcomes, while also emphasizing variation across programs and research designs (Kim et al., 2022).

The educational importance of SEL extends beyond emotional adjustment because social-emotional competencies can shape the conditions under which academic learning occurs. Self-awareness may enable students to identify anxiety, confusion, or discouragement before these experiences interfere with performance. Self-management can help learners sustain attention, regulate

impulses, and persist when tasks become demanding. Social awareness and relationship skills can improve cooperation, empathy, peer feedback, and collaborative problem solving. Responsible decision-making may encourage learners to assess the consequences of withdrawal, disruptive behavior, or avoidance and select more constructive responses. Research on school-based programs has demonstrated that SEL can improve not only social-emotional skills but also academic achievement and perceptions of classroom climate (Aygün & Taşkın, 2022). Longitudinal and randomized evidence further indicates that well-designed SEL interventions may generate academic benefits that persist beyond the immediate intervention period, suggesting that strengthening students' social-emotional functioning can contribute to durable improvements in learning-related skills (McCormick et al., 2021).

These processes are particularly relevant in EFL classrooms because language learning requires active, repeated, and socially exposed performance. Learners must produce unfamiliar sounds, attempt new grammatical structures, negotiate meaning, respond under time pressure, and communicate despite incomplete knowledge. Errors are inevitable and are often observable to classmates, which can heighten embarrassment and inhibit participation. In such circumstances, active participation is not simply a behavioral indicator of compliance; it is a mechanism of learning. Students develop linguistic competence by speaking, listening, asking for clarification, receiving feedback, collaborating, and testing hypotheses about language use. When learners remain silent or disengaged, they lose opportunities for meaningful practice and corrective input. SEL-informed teaching may reduce these barriers by normalizing error, promoting respectful peer interaction, strengthening self-confidence, and helping learners regulate the emotional discomfort associated with public language use (Crisafulli, 2020; Storey, 2019).

Active participation can be understood as learners' observable and psychological involvement in classroom processes, including volunteering responses, asking questions, contributing to discussions, cooperating in group tasks, sustaining attention, initiating interaction, and showing willingness to use the target language. Participation is shaped by individual factors, such as self-efficacy and motivation, as well as contextual factors, including teacher support, classroom climate, peer relationships, instructional design, and cultural responsiveness. Among English language learners, academic and social-emotional growth appear to be interconnected, with self-efficacy serving as an

important factor in explaining achievement differences (Soland & Sandilos, 2021). Students who believe that they can successfully perform language tasks are more likely to attempt difficult activities and recover from mistakes, whereas those with low self-efficacy may interpret errors as confirmation that they lack ability. SEL activities that cultivate emotional awareness, realistic self-appraisal, coping strategies, and supportive peer relationships may therefore strengthen both confidence and behavioral engagement.

Emerging evidence directly connects SEL with language-learning achievement. Research in secondary-school English education has shown that social-emotional competencies, particularly self-management, may contribute to English-learning outcomes by helping students regulate their thoughts, emotions, and learning behaviors (Bai et al., 2024). Similarly, interventions implemented in English classes have been associated with improvements in language proficiency, classroom engagement, and student well-being (Subhi, 2024). Such findings suggest that SEL may affect linguistic performance indirectly by improving readiness to learn and directly by increasing the frequency and quality of students' engagement with language activities. A learner who can manage anxiety, persist in communication, seek assistance, and collaborate effectively is likely to encounter more opportunities to practice grammar and vocabulary than a learner who habitually withdraws. Nevertheless, linguistic improvement should not be assumed merely because students report feeling better. It must be examined through appropriate language-performance measures alongside assessments of participation and classroom behavior.

Recent research has also highlighted the relationship among classroom environment, socio-emotional competence, motivational regulation, and engagement in specific EFL domains. In writing instruction, a supportive classroom environment and learners' socio-emotional capacities can influence engagement through strategies that regulate motivation (Xiong, 2025). This perspective is significant because language performance depends not only on what students know but also on whether they can mobilize that knowledge, regulate effort, and continue working when they experience difficulty. The same principle may apply across speaking, grammar, vocabulary, listening, and collaborative learning. SEL can potentially support linguistic performance by strengthening the motivational and emotional processes that sustain task engagement. However, additional intervention-based research is needed to determine whether these theoretically plausible

relationships result in measurable differences between learners who receive structured SEL-informed instruction and those who receive conventional language teaching.

SEL is also important for multilingual, culturally diverse, immigrant, refugee, and international learners, whose educational experiences may include cultural transition, identity negotiation, linguistic marginalization, and uncertainty about classroom norms. Teachers working with refugee English language learners have emphasized that language instruction and social-emotional support are deeply interconnected, particularly when students must build trust, belonging, and confidence in unfamiliar educational environments (Cho et al., 2019). Translanguaging has likewise been identified as a strategy through which multilingual learners can use their complete linguistic repertoires to express emotions, establish relationships, and participate more confidently in classroom activities (Song et al., 2022). These perspectives challenge approaches that separate emotional support from language pedagogy and indicate that learners' home languages, identities, and lived experiences can serve as resources for both social-emotional and linguistic development.

Culturally responsive SEL is therefore essential. SEL programs cannot be treated as universally transferable packages without attention to learners' cultural values, communication patterns, experiences, and interpretations of emotion, autonomy, participation, and social relationships. Culturally responsive social-emotional teaching positions students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds as educational assets and seeks to create equitable opportunities for voice, belonging, and classroom agency (Lau & Shea, 2024). Similar arguments have been advanced in relation to international students, for whom culturally responsive SEL requires educators to recognize diversity, power relations, adjustment demands, and the potential limitations of approaches developed for dominant cultural groups (Yeh et al., 2022). Thus, effective SEL integration in EFL settings should not merely introduce generic emotional exercises; it should connect social-emotional competencies to the learners' cultural context and the communicative demands of language learning.

Implementation studies reinforce the importance of contextual adaptation and stakeholder involvement. A school-based SEL program implemented in Panama was generally viewed positively by adolescents, teachers, and parents, but its implementation also revealed concerns related to time, cultural transferability, institutional conditions, and the practical integration of program activities

into existing educational routines (Araúz-Ledezma et al., 2022). These findings demonstrate that program acceptability does not automatically ensure implementation quality or effectiveness. SEL activities must be clearly structured, feasible within classroom schedules, consistent with educational objectives, and supported by teachers who understand their purpose. In EFL classrooms, this alignment is especially important because teachers must integrate emotional and interpersonal activities without displacing essential language instruction. The strongest approach may therefore be one in which SEL is embedded into communicative tasks, peer work, reflection, and classroom interaction rather than delivered as an unrelated supplementary curriculum.

Teacher preparation represents another decisive condition for successful SEL implementation. Teachers shape classroom emotional climates through their language, responses to errors, management of peer interactions, expectations for participation, and willingness to model self-awareness and respectful communication. Comparative work involving language arts and literacy educators has indicated that teachers' understandings of SEL influence the academic and nonacademic practices they use to support students, while also revealing differences between educational contexts (Kim & Hong, 2019). Preservice teacher education can strengthen future teachers' capacity to embed SEL in everyday instruction rather than treating it as an occasional or isolated activity (Main, 2018). In EFL-specific professional development, teachers have also been prepared to integrate SEL principles into foreign-language classes, underscoring the need for practical guidance, reflection, and context-sensitive instructional planning (Daniel & Burgin, 2024). Best-practice discussions for English teachers similarly highlight routines such as emotional check-ins, collaborative storytelling, reflection, empathy-building, and supportive communication as feasible ways of connecting SEL with language instruction (Korobova, 2024).

Despite its promise, SEL should not be adopted uncritically. Some critiques warn that classroom SEL programs may be reduced to instruments of behavioral management, in which brief calming routines are used primarily to secure compliance and prepare students to meet institutional expectations (McManus, 2022). From this perspective, practices such as breathing exercises or emotion regulation can become problematic when they individualize distress, overlook structural and relational causes of discomfort, or prioritize orderly classrooms over students'

agency. This critique is important in language education, where learners' silence may arise not only from inadequate emotional control but also from fear of ridicule, culturally inappropriate participation norms, unequal teacher-student relationships, or experiences of linguistic exclusion. SEL-informed instruction should therefore promote agency, mutual support, self-expression, and meaningful participation rather than merely encouraging students to suppress emotions or conform to behavioral expectations.

Technological developments are creating additional possibilities for integrating SEL into EFL instruction. Artificial intelligence can potentially personalize learning activities, detect patterns of disengagement, provide adaptive feedback, and offer low-risk opportunities for language practice. An AI-enhanced SEL framework has been associated with improved engagement and emotional well-being among EFL learners, suggesting that technology may support individualized emotional and academic needs when used responsibly (Zong & Yang, 2025). Nevertheless, technology should complement rather than replace the human relationships central to SEL. Ethical concerns involving privacy, algorithmic bias, access, dependency, and the reduction of complex emotions to automated indicators must also be considered. For many classrooms, accessible strategies such as brief mindfulness routines, guided self-reflection, structured peer collaboration, and teacher-facilitated discussion may remain more feasible and relationally appropriate than technologically intensive systems.

Although the literature generally supports the educational potential of SEL, several gaps remain. First, many studies focus primarily on social-emotional outcomes, general academic achievement, or teacher perceptions rather than simultaneously examining active classroom participation and standardized linguistic performance. Second, reliance on self-report instruments can limit conclusions because students' perceptions of engagement may not correspond fully with their observable behavior. Third, language-focused SEL studies often employ descriptive, correlational, or short-term designs, making it difficult to determine whether structured interventions produce meaningful differences relative to regular instruction. Fourth, implementation is sometimes insufficiently documented, despite evidence that teacher preparation, cultural adaptation, program fidelity, and classroom climate can affect outcomes. Finally, qualitative accounts of learner experience are not always integrated with quantitative findings, even though interviews and field observations can

clarify how changes in confidence, anxiety, and peer support may contribute to participation and language development.

A mixed-methods intervention design can address several of these limitations. Quantitative comparisons can determine whether learners exposed to SEL-informed instruction demonstrate stronger participation and linguistic performance than those receiving regular EFL instruction. Standardized language assessment can provide evidence of changes in grammar and vocabulary, while participation questionnaires and structured classroom observations can capture complementary dimensions of engagement. Qualitative interviews and field notes can then illuminate how learners interpret the intervention, including whether they experience greater confidence, lower language-related anxiety, stronger peer support, or an increased willingness to take communicative risks. Triangulating these sources is particularly valuable because SEL operates through interconnected emotional, behavioral, interpersonal, and instructional mechanisms that may not be adequately represented by any single measure.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study was to investigate the effects of an eight-week social-emotional learning intervention on active participation and linguistic performance among adolescent EFL learners and to explore learners' perceptions of its influence on confidence, language-related anxiety, peer support, and classroom engagement.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a mixed-methods quasi-experimental design to examine whether an 8-week SEL intervention was associated with changes in EFL learners' active participation and linguistic performance. Quantitative data were used to compare group outcomes before and after the intervention, and qualitative data were used to explore learners' perceptions of the intervention and classroom experience. The participants were 60 EFL learners aged 14-18 enrolled in an educational institute. Using purposive sampling, learners were assigned to an experimental group ($n = 30$) and a control group ($n = 30$). The experimental group received the SEL-informed instructional program in addition to regular EFL instruction, whereas the control group received regular instruction only. For the qualitative phase, 10 learners (5 from each group) were selected purposively to reflect variation in age, gender, and classroom engagement.

Data collection was conducted in three stages: pre-intervention, intervention, and post-intervention. Before the intervention, both groups completed the OPT and participation questionnaire. During the 8-week intervention, classroom observations were conducted regularly and field notes were recorded. After the intervention, both groups completed the post-test measures, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected subsample.

2.2. Instruments

Three quantitative instruments were used. First, the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was used to assess linguistic performance in grammar and vocabulary. Second, a 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire measured active participation and engagement. Third, a structured observation checklist was used to record participatory classroom behaviors such as volunteering responses, asking questions, and contributing to group work.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and field notes. Interviews explored learners' perceptions of confidence, anxiety, and participation, while field notes documented classroom interaction patterns and contextual features during the intervention period.

The internal consistency of the participation questionnaire should be reported here using Cronbach's alpha for the current sample. If you have the number, insert it directly, for example: Cronbach's alpha = .84. For qualitative analysis, two researchers independently coded a subset of the interview data, and inter-coder agreement reached Cohen's kappa = 0.83, indicating strong agreement.

2.3. Intervention

The intervention lasted 8 weeks and was integrated into regular classroom sessions. It included brief mindfulness activities, structured peer-collaboration tasks, and self-awareness exercises designed to support emotional regulation, interaction, and classroom participation. The control group followed the regular instructional program without the SEL component.

Intervention fidelity was monitored through a session checklist completed after each instructional session to document whether the planned SEL components were delivered. In addition, periodic review of lesson implementation was conducted by the research team to improve consistency across sessions. Classroom observations were conducted by trained raters who were not informed of the study hypotheses.

2.4. Data Analysis

Independent-samples t tests were used to compare post-intervention participation scores between groups. ANCOVA was used to compare post-test OPT scores while controlling for pre-test performance. Assumptions of normality, homogeneity of variance, and homogeneity of regression slopes were checked before analysis. Qualitative data were

analyzed using inductive content analysis in NVivo, and findings were triangulated with the quantitative results.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic information of the Students is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Students

		Experimental	Control
Gender	Male	14	13
	Female	16	17
Age	Mean	16.04	16.18
	Std. Deviation	0.669	0.477

Prior to conducting the statistical analyses, assumptions of normality, homogeneity of variance, and homogeneity of regression slopes (for ANCOVA) were examined. The Shapiro-Wilk test confirmed that the distributions of scores for the Likert-Scale Questionnaire, Observation Checklist, and Oxford Placement Test (OPT) were normal. Levene's test verified homogeneity of variance across all measures. For the ANCOVA analysis, the assumption of homogeneity

of regression slopes was satisfied. These findings indicate that all statistical assumptions were met, ensuring the validity of the analyses.

To evaluate the impact of social-emotional learning (SEL) programs on learners' active participation in English language classes, an independent t-test was conducted to compare the scores of the experimental and control groups. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Comparison of Active Participation Scores Between Groups

Instruments	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	Cohen's d	Sig.
Likert-Scale Questionnaire	Experimental	4.12	0.45	0.45	0.92	0.000
	Control	3.67	0.52			
Observation Checklist	Experimental	18.5	2.3	5.7	1.10	0.000
	Control	12.8	2.7			

Table 2 shows that for the Likert-Scale Questionnaire, which assessed motivation and engagement, the experimental group ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.45$) significantly outperformed the control group ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.52$), with a mean difference of 0.45 ($p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.92$), indicating a moderate to large effect size. Similarly, the Observation Checklist, which measured participatory behaviors such as frequency of speaking and group collaboration, revealed a significantly higher mean score for the experimental group ($M = 18.5$, $SD = 2.3$) compared to the control group ($M = 12.8$, $SD = 2.7$), with a mean

difference of 5.7 ($p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 1.10$), suggesting a large effect size. These findings indicate that the SEL intervention significantly enhanced active participation in the experimental group compared to the control group.

Linguistic performance was assessed using the Oxford Placement Test (OPT), a standardized measure of grammar and vocabulary skills, administered pre- and post-intervention. Descriptive statistics for pre- and post-test OPT scores for both the experimental and control groups are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Comparison of Linguistic Performance (OPT Scores) Between Groups

Group	Time	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	P-Value
Experimental	Pre	70.2	4.8	8.2	0.000
	Post	78.4	4.5		
Control	Pre	69.8	4.9	2.1	0.042
	Post	71.9	5.1		

As shown in Table 3, the experimental group's OPT scores increased from a pre-test mean of 70.2 (SD=4.8) to a post-test mean of 78.4 (SD=4.5), with a mean difference of 8.2 ($p < 0.001$). The control group showed a smaller increase, from a pre-test mean of 69.8 (SD=4.9) to a post-test mean of 71.9 (SD=5.1), with a mean difference of 2.1 ($p = 0.042$). Although the pre-intervention means were numerically close, the reported p value ($p = 0.042$) does not support a

claim of baseline equivalence. For this reason, post-test group differences were interpreted using ANCOVA with pre-test scores entered as a covariate.

Combined effects of group and time on OPT scores were assessed using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA), controlling for pre-test scores. The results are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4

Evaluation of the Comparison of Groups in the Post-Test

	Mean Difference	P Value	Partial Eta Squared
Experimental vs. Control	6.5	0.000	0.181

As shown in **Table 4**, ANCOVA revealed a significant difference in post-intervention OPT scores between the experimental and control groups, with a mean difference of 6.5 ($p < 0.001$, Partial Eta Squared=0.181), indicating a meaningful effect. The experimental group, which received the 8-week SEL intervention, demonstrated greater improvement in linguistic performance compared to the control group.

Content analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted post-intervention with 10 participants (5 from the experimental group, 5 from the control group) was performed using NVivo software (version 12). The inductive coding process identified three primary themes related to the impact of the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) intervention on learners' experiences in English language classrooms:

1. **Increased Confidence in Language Engagement:** Participants in the experimental group consistently reported enhanced confidence in participating in English language activities. For instance, one participant stated, "The SEL activities, like mindfulness, helped me feel more sure of myself when speaking in class" (Participant E2). Another noted, "I used to hesitate, but after the group tasks, I felt okay trying even if I made mistakes" (Participant E5). In contrast, control group participants reported minimal changes in confidence levels, with one stating, "I still feel

nervous when I have to speak in English" (Participant C3).

2. **Reduction in Language-Related Anxiety:** Experimental group participants described a noticeable decrease in anxiety during speaking and collaborative tasks. A participant remarked, "The group activities made me feel supported, so I wasn't as scared to answer questions" (Participant E1). Another added, "Knowing everyone was working together made it easier to try new words" (Participant E4). Control group participants, however, reported persistent anxiety, with one stating, "I always worry about saying the wrong thing in class" (Participant C1).
3. **Enhanced Peer Collaboration and Support:** The SEL intervention fostered stronger peer relationships, with experimental group participants highlighting a sense of trust and mutual support. One participant noted, "We became like a team during the SEL tasks, and it made me want to join in more" (Participant E3). Another said, "I liked how we helped each other in group work; it felt like we were all learning together" (Participant E2). Control group participants reported limited peer interaction, with one stating, "We mostly worked alone or with the teacher, so I didn't talk much with others" (Participant C4).

Inter-coder reliability was established to ensure the robustness of the qualitative analysis. Two researchers independently coded 20% of the interview transcripts, achieving a Cohen's kappa of 0.83, indicating strong agreement.

Field notes collected during weekly classroom observations over the 8-week intervention period provided contextual insights into classroom dynamics. In the experimental group, observers noted a marked increase in student-initiated interactions, such as volunteering answers, asking questions, and engaging in peer discussions, particularly following SEL activities like mindfulness exercises and group collaboration tasks. For example, one observation recorded, "Students in the experimental group frequently encouraged each other during group tasks, creating a lively and supportive atmosphere" (Week 5, Experimental Group). The classroom environment was characterized by frequent peer encouragement and reduced instances of hesitation in speaking activities.

In contrast, the control group exhibited predominantly teacher-directed interactions, with fewer instances of spontaneous peer collaboration. Field notes indicated, "Control group students primarily responded to teacher prompts, with limited peer-to-peer interaction observed during lessons" (Week 6, Control Group). The classroom atmosphere in the control group appeared more reserved, with students showing reluctance to initiate participation unless directly prompted.

Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings provided a comprehensive understanding of the SEL intervention's impact on active participation and linguistic performance in EFL classrooms. The significant improvements in active participation, as evidenced by the Likert-Scale Questionnaire ($M=4.12$, $SD=0.45$, $p<0.001$, Cohen's $d=0.92$) and Observation Checklist ($M=18.5$, $SD=2.3$, $p<0.001$, Cohen's $d=1.10$) in the experimental group (Table 2), aligned closely with qualitative themes of increased confidence and reduced anxiety. For instance, the higher frequency of participatory behaviors (e.g., speaking, group collaboration) observed in the experimental group corresponded with interview reports of enhanced self-efficacy and a supportive peer environment.

Similarly, the experimental group's significant improvement in linguistic performance, as shown by post-intervention OPT scores (adjusted $M=78.4$, $SD=4.5$, $p<0.001$, Partial Eta Squared=0.181, Table 4), was consistent with qualitative findings of reduced language anxiety and improved peer collaboration. Participants'

descriptions of feeling more comfortable trying new words and engaging in group tasks likely contributed to their enhanced grammar and vocabulary skills. Field notes further contextualized these findings, highlighting the role of SEL activities in fostering a classroom climate conducive to risk-taking and active engagement, which supported both participation and linguistic gains. In contrast, the control group's limited qualitative reports of confidence or peer support aligned with their smaller linguistic improvement ($M=71.9$, $SD=5.1$, Table 3) and lower participation scores.

Together, these findings suggest that the SEL intervention created an emotionally supportive and collaborative learning environment that enhanced both active participation and linguistic performance among EFL learners in the experimental group.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined the effects of an eight-week social-emotional learning intervention on active participation and linguistic performance among adolescent EFL learners and explored how learners perceived the intervention's influence on confidence, language-related anxiety, peer support, and classroom engagement. The quantitative findings showed that the experimental group achieved significantly higher post-intervention participation scores than the control group on both the self-report questionnaire and the structured observation checklist. The experimental group obtained a mean participation questionnaire score of 4.12 compared with 3.67 in the control group, representing a statistically significant difference with a large effect size. Observational data showed an even more pronounced difference: the experimental group achieved a mean score of 18.5, whereas the control group obtained a mean score of 12.8, again indicating a large intervention effect. Linguistic performance also improved more substantially among learners who received the SEL intervention. The experimental group's Oxford Placement Test score increased from 70.2 at pre-test to 78.4 at post-test, whereas the control group increased from 69.8 to 71.9. After controlling for pre-test performance, ANCOVA demonstrated a significant post-test difference between the groups, with a partial eta-squared of 0.181. Qualitative findings complemented these results by identifying three principal themes: increased confidence in language engagement, reduced language-related anxiety, and stronger peer collaboration and support. Classroom field notes further

indicated that intervention-group learners volunteered answers, initiated questions, participated in peer discussions, and encouraged classmates more frequently than learners in the control group. Together, these findings indicate that the SEL intervention supported both observable classroom engagement and measurable linguistic development. The significant increase in active participation supports the proposition that social-emotional competencies create psychological and interpersonal conditions that make classroom engagement more likely. EFL participation requires students to expose incomplete knowledge, make mistakes publicly, respond under communicative pressure, and tolerate uncertainty. Learners who can recognize anxiety, regulate emotional reactions, and recover from errors may therefore be more willing to speak, ask questions, and contribute to group activities. The intervention's mindfulness routines, self-awareness exercises, and collaborative tasks may have helped learners regulate apprehension and interpret mistakes as manageable aspects of learning rather than as threats to self-worth. This explanation is consistent with evidence that SEL programs improve students' emotional competencies, academic engagement, and classroom climate (Aygün & Taşkın, 2022). It is also aligned with systematic evidence showing that classroom-wide SEL interventions can enhance social-emotional functioning and reduce emotional and behavioral difficulties that interfere with participation (Ştefan et al., 2022). The large differences observed in both self-reported and observed participation suggest that the intervention influenced not only learners' perceptions of engagement but also their actual classroom behavior.

The participation findings also correspond with research specifically situated in language education. SEL has been described as particularly relevant to English learners because linguistic risk-taking depends on confidence, emotional security, supportive relationships, and a sense of belonging (Crisafulli, 2020). Storey similarly argued that language and literacy instruction provides natural opportunities for integrating emotional reflection, interpersonal understanding, and collaborative meaning-making (Storey, 2019). In the present study, learners in the experimental group reported that they became more willing to participate even when uncertain about the correctness of their responses. This pattern suggests that SEL may reduce the perceived interpersonal cost of making errors. When classroom interaction becomes less evaluative and more supportive, students may be more likely to test new vocabulary and grammatical structures, request clarification,

and maintain involvement in communicative tasks. The observed increase in student-initiated interaction therefore appears to reflect an emotionally safer classroom environment rather than simple behavioral compliance.

The qualitative theme of increased confidence provides an additional explanation for the improvement in active participation. Self-efficacy affects whether learners approach or avoid challenging academic tasks, how much effort they invest, and how they interpret setbacks. Research among English language learners has demonstrated that academic self-efficacy is closely associated with achievement and social-emotional growth (Soland & Sandilos, 2021). In the present study, participants described feeling more capable of speaking, attempting unfamiliar words, and contributing to class activities after the intervention. This greater confidence may have increased the likelihood of entering communicative exchanges and persisting despite errors. The finding also accords with Herrera and Martínez-Alba's emphasis on fostering growth, self-care, independence, and emotional agency in English language classrooms (Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021). Rather than depending exclusively on teacher reassurance, learners may have developed internal strategies for regulating hesitation and approaching language tasks with greater autonomy.

The reduction in language-related anxiety was another important mechanism underlying the participation findings. Foreign-language anxiety can consume attentional resources, intensify self-monitoring, and lead learners to avoid speaking or participating in group work. The experimental-group learners reported that mindfulness activities and supportive collaboration reduced their fear of answering incorrectly. This finding is consistent with research indicating that the emotional dimensions of EFL teaching and learning are inseparable from instructional processes (Tran et al., 2024). It also supports findings that SEL programs in English classes can improve student well-being while strengthening participation and language proficiency (Subhi, 2024). By reducing emotional arousal and increasing perceived peer support, the intervention may have enabled learners to focus more fully on the content of communication rather than on anticipated embarrassment. This shift could explain why participation increased across both questionnaire and observational measures.

The theme of enhanced peer collaboration further clarifies how the intervention affected engagement. Language learning is inherently relational because students frequently depend on classmates for dialogue, feedback,

modeling, and collaborative problem solving. Learners who perceive peers as judgmental may remain silent, whereas those who experience mutual support are more likely to initiate communication. The present findings align with research on refugee English language learners showing that supportive relationships, trust, and social-emotional security are essential for classroom participation (Cho et al., 2019). They are also consistent with evidence that translanguaging can strengthen confidence, collaboration, and emotional expression among multilingual learners by legitimizing their full linguistic repertoires (Song et al., 2022). Although the present intervention did not focus exclusively on translanguaging, its collaborative structure appears to have produced a similar relational benefit by reducing isolation and creating a sense that language learning was a shared rather than individually threatening activity.

The improvement in linguistic performance suggests that the benefits of SEL extended beyond emotional adjustment and participation. The experimental group demonstrated a substantially larger increase in grammar and vocabulary scores than the control group, and the group difference remained significant after adjustment for baseline performance. One plausible explanation is that SEL increased the amount and quality of learners' engagement with language input and practice. Students who speak more frequently, ask more questions, contribute to group tasks, and persist through difficulty encounter more opportunities to retrieve vocabulary, apply grammatical rules, receive corrective feedback, and notice gaps in their knowledge. Thus, active participation may have functioned as a behavioral pathway through which improved emotional regulation contributed to linguistic growth.

This interpretation is consistent with evidence from Hong Kong secondary schools showing that SEL competencies, particularly self-management, are related to English-learning achievement (Bai et al., 2024). Self-management can help learners organize attention, regulate frustration, maintain effort, and complete cognitively demanding tasks. The present findings also correspond with research showing that classroom environment and socio-emotional learning affect EFL writing engagement through motivation-regulation strategies (Xiong, 2025). Although the current study assessed broader grammar and vocabulary performance rather than writing engagement alone, the underlying mechanism may be similar. Learners who regulate motivation and emotion more effectively are better positioned to sustain practice and make use of instructional opportunities. The increase in linguistic performance may

therefore reflect the combined effects of improved self-regulation, stronger motivation, reduced anxiety, and more frequent language use.

The linguistic findings are also compatible with longer-term research demonstrating that SEL can contribute to academic skill development rather than producing only short-lived improvements in behavior or mood (McCormick et al., 2021). Moreover, meta-analytic evidence from Korean intervention studies has shown that SEL programs can generate beneficial educational and social-emotional outcomes, although the magnitude of effects varies according to program quality, duration, participants, and implementation conditions (Kim et al., 2022). The relatively meaningful linguistic effect observed in the present study may have resulted from embedding SEL activities directly within regular EFL instruction. Because mindfulness, self-awareness, and collaboration were connected to classroom learning rather than taught as isolated topics, the intervention may have increased the transfer of social-emotional competencies to actual language-learning behavior.

The findings also underscore the importance of culturally responsive implementation. Learners' emotional expression, willingness to speak, interpretation of teacher authority, and comfort with peer interaction are influenced by cultural and linguistic contexts. Culturally responsive SEL emphasizes that learners' identities and experiences should be treated as resources rather than obstacles (Lau & Shea, 2024). Similarly, culturally responsive models developed for international students stress the importance of belonging, inclusion, equity, and recognition of diverse experiences (Yeh et al., 2022). The present intervention's emphasis on collaborative tasks and supportive interaction may have been effective because it allowed students to build trust within their existing classroom context. This is important given evidence from Panama that school-based SEL programs may be accepted by students, parents, and teachers but still face challenges related to cultural adaptation, curriculum time, and local implementation (Araúz-Ledezma et al., 2022). The current findings suggest that integrating brief and context-sensitive SEL practices into regular instruction can reduce some of these implementation barriers.

Teacher behavior likely played a central role in producing the observed outcomes. Teachers determine whether errors are treated as learning opportunities, whether all learners receive opportunities to participate, and whether collaborative activities are psychologically safe. Comparative research involving language arts and literacy teachers has shown that educators' beliefs about SEL

influence the strategies they use to support students' academic and emotional development (Kim & Hong, 2019). Preservice education can also enhance teachers' confidence and capacity to embed SEL into ordinary classroom instruction (Main, 2018). Professional development for EFL teachers has similarly been shown to improve understanding of how SEL can be incorporated into foreign-language pedagogy (Daniel & Burgin, 2024). The structured delivery of the present intervention may therefore have supported consistent teacher practices, such as emotional check-ins, positive responses to errors, guided collaboration, and opportunities for self-reflection.

The results also align with recommended SEL practices for English teachers, including collaborative storytelling, reflective routines, peer support, and explicit attention to students' emotional experiences (Korobova, 2024). However, the findings should not be interpreted as evidence that any activity labeled as SEL will automatically improve learning. SEL can become overly instrumental when it is used primarily to control behavior or prepare students to comply with classroom demands (McManus, 2022). The intervention in the present study appears to have avoided this limitation because learners described greater confidence, agency, peer support, and willingness to communicate rather than merely greater obedience. The observed increase in student-initiated questions and discussion further suggests that the program encouraged active agency rather than passive conformity.

Recent developments in technology-supported SEL also provide a relevant context for interpreting the findings. AI-enhanced SEL frameworks have been associated with stronger EFL engagement and emotional well-being through personalized feedback and adaptive support (Zong & Yang, 2025). Although the present intervention relied mainly on accessible classroom activities, its positive effects indicate that meaningful SEL integration does not necessarily require advanced technological infrastructure. Nevertheless, digital tools could potentially extend mindfulness practice, facilitate reflection, personalize emotional support, and create additional low-risk opportunities for language interaction. Technology should remain subordinate to pedagogical and relational objectives, because the peer support and teacher responsiveness identified in the qualitative findings cannot be fully replaced by automated systems.

Overall, the convergence of questionnaire, observation, standardized language assessment, interview, and field-note findings strengthens the conclusion that SEL contributed to

both participation and linguistic performance. Quantitative results established significant differences between the groups, while qualitative findings identified plausible mechanisms involving confidence, anxiety reduction, and peer collaboration. The results therefore support a multidimensional interpretation: SEL may improve language learning by regulating emotions, strengthening self-efficacy, improving classroom relationships, increasing willingness to participate, and expanding opportunities for meaningful linguistic practice. Rather than representing an additional component separate from language instruction, SEL appears capable of functioning as a pedagogical framework through which learners become more emotionally prepared, socially supported, and behaviorally engaged in the language-learning process.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. The sample consisted of only 60 learners from a single educational institute, limiting the extent to which the results can be generalized to learners in other institutions, regions, age groups, or proficiency levels. The quasi-experimental design also did not include fully randomized assignment, and unmeasured differences between the groups may have influenced the outcomes. The intervention lasted eight weeks, and no delayed follow-up assessment was conducted; consequently, it remains unclear whether improvements in participation and linguistic performance were maintained over time. The participation questionnaire depended partly on self-report, which may have been affected by social desirability, although observational evidence reduced this concern. The Oxford Placement Test assessed grammar and vocabulary but did not provide a comprehensive evaluation of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Finally, the qualitative component included only 10 participants, and their experiences may not represent the full diversity of perspectives within both groups.

Future studies should employ larger and more diverse samples drawn from multiple schools, institutes, and cultural settings to improve generalizability. Randomized controlled trials would provide stronger evidence regarding causal effects, while longitudinal designs with several follow-up assessments could determine whether social-emotional and linguistic gains persist. Researchers should examine whether intervention effectiveness differs according to age, gender, baseline proficiency, language anxiety, socioeconomic background, and initial social-emotional competence. Future assessments should include separate measures of speaking, listening, reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar to

identify which dimensions of language performance are most responsive to SEL. Mediation analyses could test whether confidence, anxiety reduction, motivation regulation, classroom climate, or peer support explains the relationship between SEL and linguistic achievement. Additional qualitative research should include teachers, parents, and administrators to clarify implementation barriers and contextual influences. Comparative studies could also evaluate face-to-face, blended, culturally adapted, and technology-enhanced SEL models.

EFL teachers should integrate brief, structured SEL practices into regular language lessons rather than treating them as separate activities. Mindfulness exercises, emotional check-ins, self-reflection, cooperative tasks, peer encouragement, and discussions that normalize mistakes can be linked directly to speaking, vocabulary, grammar, reading, and writing objectives. Teachers should establish explicit norms of respect and ensure that errors are addressed constructively so that learners feel safe enough to communicate. Group activities should assign meaningful roles, promote equitable participation, and prevent more confident students from dominating interaction. Educational institutions should provide teachers with practical training in emotional support, culturally responsive instruction, collaborative learning, and classroom observation. Administrators should also allocate sufficient time and resources for implementation and encourage teachers to monitor both academic and social-emotional outcomes. SEL practices should ultimately be used to strengthen learner agency, belonging, confidence, and meaningful language use rather than merely to secure orderly behavior.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

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Declaration of Interest

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All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were under the ethical standards of the institutional and, or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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