

**UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL  
INSTITUTO DE LETRAS**

**LUCIANA EHLERS FERNANDES**

**SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCES AND TEACHER WELLBEING IN  
SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING**

**PORTO ALEGRE**

**2023/1**

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Monografia apresentada como requisito parcial para a obtenção do título de Licenciatura em Letras – Inglês – pelo curso de Letras da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul.

Orientadora: Prof. <sup>a</sup> Dr. <sup>a</sup> Ana Beatriz Arêas da Luz Fontes

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## RESUMO

Este trabalho fala da influência das emoções e como as competências socioemocionais ajudam nos contextos de sala de aula e no ensino e no aprendizado de uma segunda língua. Através de uma revisão de literatura, apresenta conceitos sobre a aprendizagem socioemocional e as competências socioemocionais de vários autores e instituições. Relatos mostram não só uma melhora no aprendizado, mas inclusive no relacionamento de professores com alunos e de alunos com alunos e consequentemente no ambiente escolar e no bem-estar do professor.

**Palavras-chave:** Competências socioemocionais; Aprendizagem socioemocional; Bem-estar do professor.

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses the influence of emotions and how social and emotional skills help in classroom contexts and second language teaching and learning. A literature review presents concepts about Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Social and Emotional Competences from different authors and institutions. Reports show not only improvements in learning, but also in teacher-student and student-student relationships, and consequently in the school environment and teachers' wellbeing.

**Keywords:** Social and Emotional Competences; Social and Emotional Learning (SEL); Teacher wellbeing.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Emotions play a crucial role in learning and teaching as people of all ages seek activities and occupations that make them feel good, and tend to avoid activities or situations where they feel bad (Fonseca, 2016). Oxford (2015) says emotion is crucial to living and learning. According to Hargreaves (1998), teaching and learning are not only concerned with knowledge, cognition, and skill but also with emotional practices. Immordino-Yang (2015, p. 79) affirms we can no longer “think of learning as separate from or disrupted by emotion.” In accordance with Macintyre and Gregersen (2012a; 2012b), as students, teachers, and researchers, we should think about how emotions work and how we can harness them in the service of cognition and learning, because not understanding how emotions work keeps us from moving forward. Also, MacIntyre (2002, p. 61) says that emotion is “the primary human motive,” and it amplifies the energetic intensity of human behaviour, including language learning. In fact, for learning to occur, because of the importance of emotion in cognition, a climate of safety, care, and comfort needs to be created around the learning situations or challenges (Fonseca, 2016).

In my experience, social awareness and relationship skills are essential in a teacher, as language teaching depends on these skills, which take into account the intercultural, social and interpersonal nature of communication in a foreign language (Gkonou; Mercer, 2017). Once I learned how to manage my own emotions, understand the emotions of students, and empathise with them, I realized that teaching was not about the content alone, but about the student’s willingness to learn, the variety of didactic and pedagogical strategies, the student’s involvement in the subject, and about the care, comfort, and safety. Then, my classes started to be more relaxed, and the success of the students was greater.

Much is currently studied and researched about the role of emotions in the context of teaching and learning (Dewaele, 2010, 2013; Dewaele *et al.*, 2017, Macintyre; Gregersen, 2012a; 2012b; Mercer, 2018; Oxford, 2015; Pekrun, 2014). Dewaele, Petrides, and Furnham (2008) observed that multilingual adults with higher emotional understanding had lower levels of foreign language anxiety in distinct situations and they were more capable, for example, of dealing with their own stress and feeling confident when socializing in another language (Dewaele, 2013). Nevertheless, little is still researched about teachers’ emotions and wellbeing and how



should they deal with their emotions during the process of teaching and learning. How to understand and act when faced with situations that involve emotion? The present study will, through a corpus of literature related to the topic, the use of socioemotional competences in the context of L2 teaching, discuss these questions and show how important it is for teachers to know and understand emotions, to better recognize students' actions and reactions and deal with them in the classroom, and to create a safe learning environment for all.

In Brazil, we now have a mandatory reference for the preparation of schools' curriculum and pedagogical proposals, the BNCC (Base Nacional Comum Curricular) (Brasil, 2018), which, among other knowledge, advocates for the teaching of socioemotional skills in the classroom. According to the document, students must learn self-knowledge to appreciate themselves and take care of their physical and emotional health. However, to be able to teach these skills, it is important for teachers to know themselves emotionally and, above all, to know how to take care of their physical and emotional health. By prioritising their wellbeing, they are benefiting themselves and positively influencing their students' lives.

As language teachers, we have the opportunity to help our students immerse in social awareness as they learn a new language and enrich their world through being in contact with different cultures. Speaking two or more languages not only has a positive effect on the brain, enhances cognitive abilities, and delays symptoms of Alzheimer's disease (Bialystok; Craik; Freedman, 2007), but also, as Moura (2014) says, knowing other cultures is important to create attitudes of respect and tolerance, especially because these attitudes can vary along different cultures. Learning foreign languages may affect students' attitudes in a positive way in society; thereby, we should promote learning through the integration of emotion, cognition, and language.

Teachers must cope and act in multi-diverse classrooms, keeping students calm and motivated while they learn a new language and culture. As Dörnyei (2003, p. 04) affirms, when learning an L2 we create a social and cultural bond, "which makes language learning a deeply social event." Teaching may be at times emotionally demanding and teachers must be committed to their work, and yet, as O'Connor (2008, p. 117) states, "the caring nature of the teaching role is largely neglected in educational policy and teacher standards."

This paper first presents a theoretical framework that introduces Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), its skills and its positive impact on education according to

several authors and institutions, followed by the presentation of the concept of two specific skills, Social Awareness and Relationship Skills, within empathy and healthy relationships respectively. The third part discusses the influence and importance of these socioemotional skills on the wellbeing of teachers. Finally, I bring in my experience as a second language teacher by reporting on situations I have experienced in the classroom where I have used some socioemotional skills and then present suggestions and materials from the authors read for this review.

## 2 SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

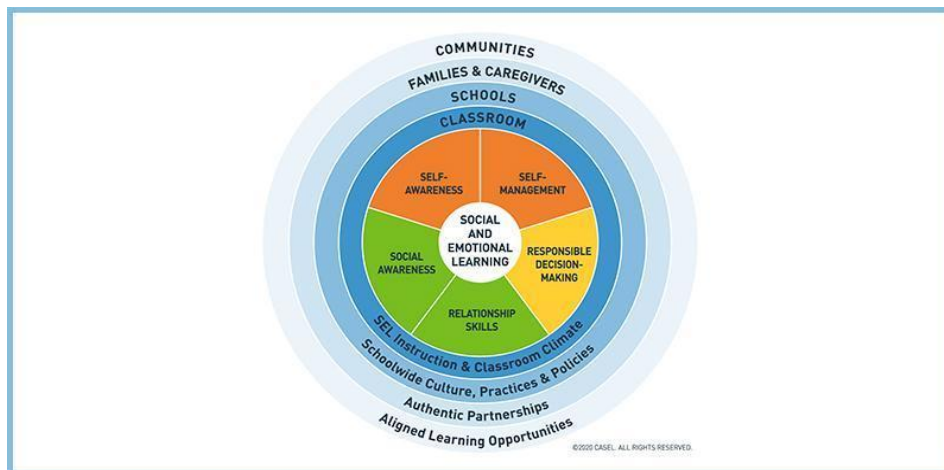
The way teachers and students deal with emotions and react to them plays a crucial role in education, affecting their social, emotional, and cognitive development (Brackett; Rivers, 2014). Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) refers to a framework or approach to education that focuses on the development of social and emotional skills in students. The purpose is to provide people with the means to understand and regulate their emotions, set and achieve goals, cultivate healthy relationships, and make responsible decisions (Elias *et al.*, 1997 *apud* Brackett; Rivers, 2014). It covers many skills and competences such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2023; Figure 1). It integrates these skills with academic learning and everyday life, supporting the wellbeing and success of students in school and beyond. As Singh and Duraiappah (2020) report, socioemotional learning empowers all students to recognise and manage their emotions, cultivate conscious engagement, and demonstrate proactive behaviour, human flourishing, and the building of a peaceful and sustainable planet.

Research has shown that SEL programs and initiatives can have numerous positive effects on students, including improved academic performance, increased social and emotional competence, enhanced mental health, reduced behaviour problems, and greater engagement in learning (Brackett; Katulak, 2006; Cambridge University Press, 2020; Singh; Duraiappah 2020). SEL is often implemented through explicit instruction, curricular integration, and the creation of a supportive school environment that fosters positive relationships and emotional wellbeing. For instance, teachers can conduct specific SEL lessons that focus on teaching students various social and emotional skills, such as empathy, self-awareness, conflict resolution, and responsible decision-making. They can also introduce mindfulness exercises, like deep breathing, which I have tried with my students and help them to slow down their hyperactive minds. In curricular integration teachers can choose books and literary texts, or even lessons that include discussions and explore themes of empathy, resilience, and emotional growth, providing opportunities for students to talk and reflect on these topics (Mahoney *et al.*, 2021; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2023).

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a leading organisation in this field, has played a significant role in advocating for SEL as an essential component of education and providing guidance and resources to educators, policymakers, and researchers. It has also developed a widely recognized and influential framework known as the “CASEL Five Core Competencies of SEL” (Figure 1). These competences are:

1. Self-Awareness: Recognizing and understanding one’s own emotions, thoughts, and values;
2. Self-Management: Regulating emotions, setting and achieving goals, and demonstrating self-discipline and self-motivation;
3. Social Awareness: Showing empathy, understanding others’ perspectives, and appreciating diversity;
4. Relationship Skills: Establishing and maintaining healthy relationships, communicating effectively, and resolving conflicts;
5. Responsible Decision-Making: Making ethical and responsible choices, considering consequences, and evaluating situations.

Figure 1 - CASEL Five Core Competencies of SEL



Source: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, n. p.

CASEL collaborates with educators and school leaders to implement effective SEL programs and practices and engages in research and evaluation efforts to advance the understanding of SEL’s impact on students, schools, and communities. The organisation also advocates for policies and funding that prioritise SEL as an essential component of education, emphasising the benefits of SEL for academic

achievement, mental health, and the development of essential life skills. Based on CASEL's assumptions, social and emotional learning is not a distraction from academics, but rather a crucial foundation for learning in all areas being essential to prioritise both academic success and mental wellbeing.

Another team of researchers from the Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning Laboratory (the EASEL lab) in the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) also produced a report in 2022, in which they state social and emotional learning (SEL) is a topic rapidly expanding. The report also states that researchers studying child and youth development, education and health all agree that social and emotional skills are vital to learning and life outcomes. Their report was designed to assist educators and organisations working with young people to choose a SEL program that best suits their needs.

The University of Cambridge is another example of an institution that has published a guide for teachers and educational managers on how to integrate 21st century skills into English language programmes. They called the Cambridge Life Competencies Framework (2020), which proposes the same skills, such as empathy and relationship skills, mentioned by other institutions to develop social and emotional learning. In their words: "Emotional development is an important foundation for success at all ages and emotional skills underpin and support both social and cognitive development in learners" (Cambridge University Press, 2020, p. 05).

On this path, according to UNESCO, socioemotional learning and teaching is an essential topic to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development from the United Nations. That is especially true when talking about goal number 4, which refers to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2023, n. p.). UNESCO's Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP) is an organisation under UNESCO that focuses on promoting peace and sustainable development through education. In 2020, they published a document discussing the importance of SEL in preparing students for the challenges of the 21st century saying it is important to recognise that individuals are complex beings with social and emotional aspects, and their overall welfare relies on acquiring the skills to effectively express their needs and navigate their emotions in a positive manner (Singh; Duraiappah, 2020).

In addition to institutions and organisations, scholars such as Henri Wallon (1879-1962), Vygotsky (1896-1934), Piaget (1896-1980) and Ausubel (1918-2008) have already highlighted the importance of affectivity and the social environment in the evolutionary process of the teaching-learning relationship. Wallon argues that the person is the result of the integration between affectivity, cognition and movement and defines affectivity as the ability of the human being to be influenced in a positive or negative way by internal (hunger, sleep, memories) and external (looks, objects, comments) sensations, with emotion being the first expression of affectivity, the first resource of interaction of the individual with the environment. Emotion is something that disorganises and stimulates human behaviour at the same time. For him, who studied affectivity genetically, the events around us stimulate both body movements and mental activity, which in turn interfere with development (Mahoney; Almeida, 2005; La Taille; Oliveira; Dantas, 2019).

Vygotsky, in turn, also drew attention to the importance of human activity in the process of formation of complex functions of thought. For him, motivation and attention are fundamental in learning; he associates motivation to learn with the affect level. To understand cognitive functioning (reason or intelligence), one must understand the emotional aspect as well, as both processes are one unit and affect interferes with cognition and vice versa. Cognition is constituted by social experiences, and the environment in this approach is fundamental (Souza *et al.*, 2021; Palangana, 2015; La Taille; Oliveira, Dantas, 2019).

Although not a factor of great weight and not enough to promote alone the logic of thought, for Piaget, social interactions are necessary, even as a secondary element. They show that mental operations are built through action in the physical and social contexts and to adapt to the environment is to build a set of relationships. Yet, it is not enough to have a provocative environment if the person does not participate in it, or is unable to be sensitised by the stimuli offered and react to them (Palangana, 2015; La Taille; Oliveira, Dantas, 2019).

From Ausubel's perspective, pleasure can be part of the very act of learning. He stresses the theory of meaningful learning, as it involves recognising the connections between concepts, which allows them to be retained in long-term memory. When we are positively affected by something, the brain region responsible for pleasure produces a substance called dopamine. The activation of these centres generates wellbeing, which mobilises our attention and reinforces our behaviour in relation to

what has affected us. It is in and by social interaction that cognitive functions are elaborated (Souza *et al.*, 2021; Moreira, 1999).

By integrating SEL practices into various aspects of school life, educators can help students develop essential social and emotional skills, leading to improved wellbeing, academic success, and positive relationships within the school community. It is important to note that while SEL is commonly associated with schools and education, its principles and strategies can also be applied in other settings, such as families, workplaces, and communities to promote healthy social and emotional development. In Cozolino's words:

In a safe community with strong families that value education and support the schools, a competent teacher can do a good job. In a dangerous community with few resources, fragmented families, and indifference to education, it takes a hero to be a successful teacher (Cozolino, 2013, p. xix).

Schools facing resistance from families to address such issues need to show the importance of social and emotional education. We, teachers, possess some of the most critical tools for impacting learning, which include fostering solid relationships and creating a sense of belonging. Schools should be a listening, welcoming space, with emotional aspects integrated into the educational project, thus creating a safe, friendly, open and supportive community. That way, people may trust schools as a safe place and students may feel comfortable to talk about their feelings. That is, we need to bring families back to participate in decisions taken inside the schools. Developing social and emotional skills means that the entire school ecosystem is impacted.

As Immordino-Yang (2015) states, emotions and feelings are triggered when social interactions are involved in learning, which occurs in contexts where learners interact with others. She affirms every human brain develops to enable social and emotional skills and executive, cognitive, affective, psychomotor, intellectual, and other mental functions are part of the human learning process.

Fonseca (2016) mentions that many mental health problems at school can be the result of chronic stress and emotional distress, as many students with learning difficulties are unable to meet social expectations because their neurodiversity is not respected or compatible with the demands of school learning. For him, emotion drives, leads, and guides cognition. Learning cannot be understood without recognising its role in such an important human adaptive function (Fonseca, 2016). Brackett and Katulak (2006) say we need to enhance teachers' and students' social and emotional

skills by incorporating the topic in our educational agenda as it is already shown that these skills are associated with success in many areas of life, including effective teaching, student learning, quality relationships, and academic performance.

Emotions can enhance or hinder learning depending on their nature and intensity. By recognising and nurturing the emotional aspect of learning, educators can create a more enriching and effective educational experience for their students. Every student is unique, so it is essential to be flexible and adaptable in our approach. By prioritising socioemotional wellbeing, we can create a positive learning environment that promotes both academic success and personal growth (Singh; Duraiappah, 2020; Immordino-Yang, Darling-Hammond; Krone, 2018).

Cooper (2011) emphasises the importance of educators in guiding students towards a broader comprehension of concepts beyond their personal scope. For her, this involves creating occasions for students to engage in sharing, offering suggestions, interacting, and discussing external topics. Throughout this process, it is crucial for teachers to remain mindful of students' emotional responses and reactions, fostering a supportive and considerate learning environment.

As educators, we should be aware that the emotional experiences of our students have an impact on their learning. Immordino-Yang (2015) states that the brain builds complex emotional experiences which help us learn, socialise, and act morally. She claims that our ability to learn depends on our ability to feel emotions. Students benefit when their emotions are taken advantage of and respected by educators in the classroom.

Teachers can create a positive environment that encourages learning through challenging, creative, and unpredictable activities that have clear benefits and purpose. Teachers can facilitate task completion by providing constant praise, encouragement, and feedback in a humorous manner (Saito *et al.*, 2018).

As the review of the literature conducted so far shows, SEL has been a worldwide concern for more than a decade, and here in Brazil, it is not different. In 2018 we had the implementation of the Brazilian National Common Curricular Base (BNCC), one of the latest curriculum reforms approved for all basic education. This normative document defines the knowledge, competences, and essential skills that all students have the right to develop throughout basic education in the Country. In addition to the learning objectives for each stage of basic education, from early childhood to high school, it also includes general competences to develop



socioemotional skills such as critical thinking, creativity, cooperation, and ethics. It thus seeks to promote a broad vision of education, valuing not only academic knowledge but also the socioemotional and citizenship skills of students (Brasil, 2018).

In this scenario of integration of socioemotional competences, I want to highlight the role of the educator, who will be the mediator at the forefront of these competences to be developed in his/her educational routine. The teacher today should be aware of the impact of emotions on the pedagogical process because emotions interfere with the process of retaining information, and as the literature suggests, we need motivation to learn, and attention is fundamental to learning (López; Aguilar, 2013; Dörnyei, 2003; Oga-Baldwin; Fryer, 2017).

To strengthen children's academic learning, we need to prepare our students with the skills and experiences that go beyond simply learning an additional language. As second language teachers, we can play a crucial role in supporting the socialemotional development of our students because when using a foreign language people can express their points of view, thoughts, and emotions. But, for this to happen, we need to develop socialemotional skills in ourselves, only then we will be able to assist our students. I understand this is a process that will take time and patience and it will not happen overnight; however, the future calls for socioemotional skills and we need mentally healthy teachers that are able to cope with the challenges.

Educators require help to promote socialemotional learning in the classroom and curriculum as their role is emotionally demanding. Nonetheless, as O'Connor (2008, p. 117) states, "the caring nature of the teacher role is largely neglected in education policy and teacher standards." Developing meaningful connections with students, showing interest in their wellbeing and establishing a solid relationship of trust is critical to a good relationship. We must spare time to understand their strengths, challenges, and cultural backgrounds. To do that, we need to develop the two skills I consider the most significant: social awareness (empathy) and relationship skills (healthy relationships and effective communication). These two are Core Areas within Emotional Development in the Cambridge Life Competencies Framework (Cambridge University Press, 2020), which identifies empathy and relationship skills as crucial to understanding and supporting others, building and maintaining healthy relationships and managing conflict sensitively.

## 2.1 SOCIAL AWARENESS: EMPATHY

Krznaric (2014) says empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings, emotions, and perspectives of others. He claims it involves putting oneself in someone else's shoes, seeing the world from their point of view, and experiencing their emotions as if they were one's own. Empathy is a fundamental aspect of emotional intelligence and is crucial for building meaningful relationships, fostering compassion, and promoting understanding among individuals and within communities (Goleman, 2005). Decety *et al.* (2016) believe that empathy is a natural way of perceiving and being sensitive to the emotions of others. It may or may not involve the desire to take care of their wellbeing.

Krznaric (2014, p. 02) states: "Empathy is the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide your actions." He brings three components of empathy. The first is cognitive, which is about perspective taking, and the drive to identify what the other person might be thinking or feeling, imagining what is going on in their minds. The second, the affective component, is the emotional reactions to somebody else's thoughts and feelings; it is about shared emotional response. For Krznaric (2015), the first two components must be combined to create a third component which is an emotional response of compassion and concern that leads us to care about the other person's welfare and to want to act if they are in need. Therefore, empathic concern involves the will for action, to do something for the other person – cognitive and affective empathy alone are not enough for pro-social behaviours.

Gordon (2009) says that empathy reduces aggression, increases sharing, caring, and inclusion, and promotes resilience, wellbeing, and positive mental health. For her, developing social skills requires empathy and emotional awareness and by developing these skills, we can enhance children's interactions today and influence the quality of human interaction in future generations. She stresses that if we become more attentive and responsive to one another, we can avoid people feeling drained and exhausted.

According to Carl Rogers (1975), empathy is a skill that can be cultivated through training. Many experts (Cooper, 2011; Gordon, 2009; Krznaric, 2014) agree that our ability to empathise can be continually improved throughout our lives,

suggesting that empathy is not a fixed trait but something we can develop over time. Rogers' perspective aligns with the idea that empathy is a dynamic ability.

The development of empathy is influenced by various factors, including early experiences. The parent-child relationship, in particular, plays a significant role in fostering empathy. Research by Donaghy (2022) highlights that children who receive empathetic treatment during their childhood are more likely to develop empathy themselves. This underlines the importance of providing nurturing and empathic experiences for children, as it can contribute to their long-term emotional growth.

## 2.2 RELATIONSHIP SKILLS: HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AND EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Building strong connections with students helps to understand their perspectives and empathise with their lives outside the classroom. We can create a caring classroom community by doing simple things that promote mutual respect, something that will also support effective classroom management.

The connection between teachers and students, according to Gkonou (2021, p. 275), is "perhaps the most important in the school context." She says positive teaching and learning outcomes can be achieved through healthy interpersonal relationships between teachers and learners. Effective communication, expression of feelings and thoughts, and open sharing of concerns about progress are all essential elements for successful interaction, and they are significant not only because they happen frequently, but also because of how they occur and how each participant interprets them. Gkonou (2021) claims that teachers who involve their students in classroom decision-making and embrace their differences can increase learner engagement and promote positive attitudes toward the class. Additionally, emotionally supportive teachers who show sensitivity to their students' feelings and personal difficulties are better equipped to help them achieve their goals and perform better in school.

According to Gkonou (2021), consistent interactions among individuals lead to the establishment of relationships. These relationships are guided by relationship schemas, which allow individuals to differentiate between positive connections, characterised by warmth, affection and open communication, and hostile relationships, characterised by negativity, conflict, and a lack of open communication even in the

early stages of interaction. They also enable people to predict future behaviour in subsequent encounters.

In her studies, Rimm-Kaufman and Sandilos (2010) affirm that relationships between students and teachers have significant, beneficial, and enduring effects on the academic and social growth of students. Their research shows that it is not simply by improving relationships that performance increases, but that those pupils who have positive and supportive relationships with their teachers are more likely to succeed than those who have conflicting relationships. They also brings some suggestions on how to improve this relationship, for example, by interacting with students in a responsive and respectful manner. In the same sense, López and Aguilar (2013) propose that teachers inspire trust, confidence and a motivating learning environment by showing a genuine interest in students' learning processes. As reported by Saito *et al.* (2018), teachers can create a positive environment that encourages learning through challenging, creative, and unpredictable activities that have clear benefits and purpose. Teachers can facilitate task completion by providing constant praise, encouragement, and feedback in a humorous manner.

There are several strategies that can be used to build quality relationships between teachers and learners. Gkonou and Mercer (2018) suggest frequent use of students' names and encouraging them to do the same, addressing students by name to engage everyone, being aware of and respecting students' backgrounds and experiences, using non-verbal cues effectively, exploring the classroom space and sitting close to students, incorporating students' humour (often self-deprecating) into lessons, using students' first language (L1) when appropriate, and establishing consistent routines.

Ollerhead and Taylor-Leech (2019) mention that teachers have been advised to avoid using students' native languages during English lessons for a long time, but that:

[...] drawing on students' home language and cultural backgrounds in classroom teaching validates their identities and provides a strong foundation for additional language learning ... teachers should use students' home languages as a tool for thinking and communication while simultaneously learning and developing proficiency in the language of instruction (OLLERHEAD; TAYLOR-LEECH, 2019, n. p.).

Like other teachers, I was taught not to use native language in the classroom, but letting students speak, and translate to their home language actually benefits the

learning of an additional language as they are not able to learn something they do not understand. Heugh *et al.* (2019) affirm that in a British Council guide for teachers, adding that not letting students use their native language in class stops them from learning and denies them their language rights. Not using L1 in some situations, such as student shyness, may prevent teachers from benefiting from the knowledge and experience students can offer as teaching resources.

Apart from all the benefits already mentioned, establishing a good relationship with students still improves the lives of teachers. As Gkonou (2021) emphasises, establishing positive relationships between teachers and learners provides several benefits, including enhancing teacher professional endurance, fostering positive teacher identities, and lowering work-related stress levels in teachers. So, reducing teachers' stress is crucial because building strong interpersonal relationships with students contributes to teachers' wellbeing and, consequently, to their ability to teach effectively. In Gkonou and Mercer's words "quality relationships in class are not only beneficial for pupils but for teachers too" (Gkonou; Mercer, 2017).

### 3 TEACHER WELLBEING

Extensive research highlights the key role teachers play in facilitating effective learning (Dewaele, 2010, 2013; Dewaele *et al.*, 2017; Gkonou, 2021; Macintyre; Gregersen, 2012a; 2012b; Mercer, 2018; Oxford, 2015; Pekrun, 2014). Their actions, thoughts, emotions, and beliefs significantly shape the dynamics of the classroom and affect student outcomes. Interestingly, while the field of language learning psychology focuses predominantly on students, teachers have received comparatively limited attention. It is imperative that we now immerse ourselves in the psychology of language teachers with the same depth and breadth as student psychology has been explored. Recognising the significance of teacher psychology, the interaction between teacher and student psychology, and the unique challenges faced by language educators should be a priority (Mercer, 2018).

According to Macintyre, Gregersen, and Mercer (2020, p. 102352), “teaching often is listed as one of the most stressful professions” and many teachers struggle with finding a balance between their personal and professional roles; this balance is a really challenging task. That is why it is so important to improve professional endurance and promote positive teacher identities, reducing stress levels related to their work. The authors highlight that stress typically refers to a psychological response to environmental circumstances with multiple consequences, ranging from heightened physical arousal to potential harm to wellbeing. They say coping, on the other hand, is the response to stressors by using one or more available techniques or strategies. The way a teacher employs coping mechanisms in response to stressors significantly influences their psychological adaptation and overall wellbeing. In the same study, they mention an array of stressors experienced by educators, which includes the pressure of heavy workloads, time constraints, work-life imbalances, reduced autonomy, excessive administrative responsibilities, strained relationships with peers and school leaders, emotional labour, fear of losing control of the class, anxiety about evaluation, and diminished professional self-esteem, among others. In their words: “Being a teacher is stressful at the best of times, learning how to cope with the stress is therefore an invaluable skill that all pre-service and in-service teacher education programs should be integrating as a fundamental professional competence” (Macintyre, Gregersen; Mercer, 2020, p. 102352).

For instance, in a case study, Saleem (2018) reached the conclusion that teacher education and professional development programs often centre around cultivating instructional strategies and pedagogical skills. Nonetheless, these programs could be broadened to encompass an understanding of teachers' psychological dynamics. This would assist trainees in comprehending potential impacts on their personal and professional lives, and in effectively managing these influences to ensure a positive sense of professional wellbeing (Durr *et al.*, 2014 *apud* Saleem, 2018). A proposition involves integrating activities like, for example, psychological reflections into teacher development programs. These activities would allow teachers to discern between their personal and professional psychological experiences, recognise the patterns of their psychology and contemplate how these patterns can shape their approaches (Mercer *et al.*, 2016 *apud* Saleem, 2018).

There is an urgent need not only for research but also for proposals on the mental health of our teachers. It is essential to raise awareness of the needs and challenges that teachers face in their daily work as professionals. My intention with this work is not to impose or establish any rules, but to demonstrate that there is a possibility of turning our profession into a more rewarding and less stressful one, especially after the period of isolation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. We are still dealing with the impacts of this isolation, which has influenced many aspects of our social and emotional life.

For Gkonou and Mercer (2017), teaching language relies on emotional and social skills due to the intercultural, social, and interpersonal nature of communication in a foreign language. Gkonou and Mercer (2018) claim to be sure that social and emotional intelligence is critical to the survival and development of language teachers. In their words, "evidence is clear. The relationship between teachers and pupils is vitally important for effective teaching and learning" (Gkonou; Mercer, 2018, p. 161). They say teachers may have the best materials and resources available, but if they do not build the right connections with their students, they will not reap the rewards of what was available.

As reported by Gkonou and Mercer (2017), teaching is a social activity that requires teachers to focus on relationships in the classroom, including how those relationships are formed, influenced, and carried out. For them, teachers need to recognise their own emotions and interpret learners' behaviours to manage classroom relationships effectively. Developing teachers' social and emotional intelligence skills

can promote these competences. They go on saying that teachers with high social intelligence build positive relationships with colleagues, exchange materials and ideas, and experience personal and professional wellbeing. Gkonou and Mercer (2017) affirm that social and emotional intelligence are essential for language teaching training programs as teachers with strong social and emotional intelligence have multiple benefits; for instance, they can cope with the emotional demands of contemporary classrooms and experience lower levels of teacher stress and higher levels of job satisfaction. They can create classroom environments that help learners maintain their motivation, reduce conflict, bullying, aggressiveness, and antisocial behaviour.

Suggesting teachers' training should begin by cultivating a growth mindset among teachers. Gkonou and Mercer (2018) say this approach aims to foster attitudes that facilitate learning, making teachers more open to enhancing their skills in these domains. They carry on saying this mindset emphasises progress and improvement over fixed abilities and limitations. Thus, by embracing a growth mindset, teachers can effectively encourage students to accept challenges, learn from mistakes, and reach their maximum potential.

Teaching requires a wide range of skills and flexibility in curriculum delivery; therefore, in Cozolino's words, "a one-size-fits-all model of education is doomed to fail the majority of students and teachers" (Cozolino, 2013, p. xvii) He says teachers are unique individuals, as are their students, and the relationships they build create learning opportunities, especially for students with cognitive, emotional, and social challenges. Dewaele and Mercer (2018, p. 178) argue that "the effects of a healthy teacher psychology imply a better teacher in terms of pedagogy and didactics too." Mercer (2018) states that teachers are valuable actors in the teaching and learning process; their psychology and professional wellbeing are linked to the quality of their teaching and the performance of their students.

For Sahakyan, Lamb and Chambers (2018), teachers' motivation is linked to their desire to achieve professional success and it should be a major concern for education policymakers and researchers because passion for teaching has been shown to influence teacher behaviour, which in turn affects learner motivation and achievement. The authors say it also affects job satisfaction and psychological wellbeing, and that motivated teachers support progressive education reform as they strive to improve and implement change.



In a study from 2018, Dewaele and Mercer concluded that teachers need to reflect on their socioemotional skills, not simply for their professional wellbeing, but also for the nature of the relationships they build with students in their classrooms (Dewaele; Mercer, 2018).

For foreign language (L2) teachers, the role goes beyond simply teaching the language itself. Increasingly, we need to consider the students' identity as a central factor. This means not only imparting vocabulary and grammar but also encouraging students to connect with the culture associated with the target language. An effective approach can involve encouraging students to explore and identify with the cultural aspects of the language they are learning, thereby perhaps triggering an internal desire to learn motivated by their enjoyment and interest, and this in turn requires an understanding of the emotional dimension of language learning (King; Ng, 2018)

Teachers should adjust their teaching to suit learners and their ongoing needs and moods to accommodate learners' individuality. Creating potential methods to improve the meaning of their work can positively impact the psychological wellbeing of language teachers, both in their careers and personal lives. Teachers need to be realistic and moderate in their expectations when dealing with their students as no teacher training program includes a topic such as "how to deal with emotions in the classroom." Reducing both burnout and the number of teachers quitting the profession is an urgent need of our time.

## 4 CONCLUSION

In this section of the paper, I will present some changes that I have made to my teaching philosophy, based on SEL, that are making an enormous difference to the weight of the profession that many of my colleagues report. Then, I will discuss some ideas from the authors, institutions, and organisations, which I have mentioned throughout the paper with the intention of helping readers gain a deeper understanding of socioemotional learning and teaching.

### 4.1 FROM MY EXPERIENCE

Firstly, I must confess that I love what I do; every time I walk into a classroom I feel like Alice in Wonderland. Although I have been teaching English for many years, I only managed to study Languages after my 40s. I am always researching and trying to keep up to date professionally, which I do not see as a burden, but rather a joy. I take great care of my mind and yet I still have difficulties, such as concentrating. When I tell my students what happens to me when I struggle focusing, and how I try to solve my problem, many of them identify with me and we share experiences. I tell them about my difficulties regarding writing and focus, especially. I believe opening myself up to students like that shows them we are similar and diminishes the socially established sense of authority between us, which is something I aim for.

Currently, I am teaching a pre-university course, where the classes are usually large, and emotions are bubbling over, especially anxiety. Whenever I start a semester, in the first class I already let the students know I have difficulties focusing, so when I am explaining something very important, I ask them not to interrupt me, otherwise, I might forget part of the explanation. As expected in a large group of adolescents, disruptions happen constantly, but they are happy to help me remember what I was talking about. This is wonderful because it makes both me and them feel welcome and equal, without hierarchies. I have students who choose to study Spanish for the exam, but still attend my English classes because they say they like the simplicity of the explanations; we speak the same language.

In 2019, I had the opportunity to participate in the Portuguese for Foreigners Project (PPE) at UFRGS. I believe this was a turning point in my teaching career because it was when I really understood that, above anything else, empathy and

relationship skills are the most important skills a teacher must possess. Even though I have been a language teacher for many years, in the beginning, I did not like studying languages very much. Nonetheless, for those students, who came from so far away, most of them from different countries in Africa and some from Haiti, to live and study in Rio Grande do Sul, I had to study once again in order to teach, this time Portuguese.

I have to admit the first classes were quite tense, even though I shared the work with another teacher. First, because the students spoke only French, a language that I have not yet mastered, and then, because they were new to the country, they knew neither the language nor the city. This scenario made me go back to when I was their age and had the same experience of living and studying abroad and going through many difficulties, especially because there was no internet, mobile phones, or personal computers at that time. I guess for this reason I identified with them all and teaching became easier and more enjoyable, both for me and for them. After a month of having classes every day and with different teachers, they were already speaking good Portuguese and it was easier to communicate. At the closure of our classes with them we made a tour through the centre of Porto Alegre, visiting museums and historical points of the city. In the final class, we had an art activity where students had to create drawings or sculptures. It was wonderful to see their blossoming: upon arriving in the city they were afraid, shy, and closed to affection, but by the end of the semester, they were feeling comfortable enough to show their big, beautiful smiles, despite previously covering them with their hands. We created such a strong bond that to this day we exchange messages and when I meet one of them on the street in Porto Alegre it is always a celebration of affection and happiness.

Bringing another experience, since 2021 I have been working individually with a teenage student who really hated learning English. Before becoming my student, he had studied in many different English courses and was still not doing well in school. Again, at first, it was not easy, but when I gave him space to talk and tell me about his personal and social life using his home language, Portuguese, his motivation began to change. He felt more comfortable and secure speaking Portuguese and that helped build our relationship, which, in turn, impacted his willingness to learn English.

By applying this strategy, even though at the time I did not know it was one, I could help my student to succeed and even progress in school. It also helped me to connect with him and his family in such a way that he is doing better in other school subjects he was struggling with. Sometimes I feel their various non-academic problems

are more of a priority than developing their English skills, which they find a way to develop alone once they are more confident and after they express what is distressing them.

In my practice, I often meet parents struggling to support their children when they come to see me. In these moments, I remind them of their adolescence and ask them if it was easy. Usually, the answer is no. In such cases, I share some of my experiences as a teenager with concentration problems. Through these experiences, I try to show that with support and a collaborative effort, we will all be authors of the final success. It is essential to understand that we are social beings, unable to bear and solve all the adversities of life on our own. From birth to the end of the journey, we need support. We all had bad and good experiences with teachers while learning at school, University, or any other course we have taken in our lives. I did not like to study English, I never understood why I should learn languages and only when it became meaningful because I started teaching, I realised how important and easy it was.

Even though I am not a parent myself, I strongly believe in the significance of establishing connections with parents whenever feasible. Drawing from my experience as an educator and someone who has navigated challenges during my own school years, I aim to empathise with students' educational journeys while also fostering collaboration with their families. This holistic approach can create a more supportive and comprehensive learning environment.

As a long time second language teacher, I have had a lot of different experiences, bad and good ones, with students of all ages. Of course, at the beginning, as an inexperienced teacher, I did not have a clue about how to deal with some students' behaviours. I had never thought about their emotions or feelings toward language learning, let alone mine. I had several bad moments in class, such as when I entered a teenagers' classroom and all of them, with no exception, turned their backs to me in protest of the teacher change; they wanted their previous teacher back. In another difficult situation, I dealt with adult students testing me as they thought I was not able to teach because I looked very young. With time, I have gotten softer and learned that maybe some of the reactions are consequences of something prior to the lesson. Therefore, I learned that some students just want, and need, to be heard and noticed, but not only them, sometimes the parents also need comfort and help.

To improve my work as a caring and empathetic teacher, in the first semester of 2023, I participated in a course on Multilingualism and the Development of

Socioemotional Skills. In the first class, there were 12 people – 11 English teachers from different states of Brazil, two of them living in Europe, and our wonderful teacher from Argentina. Two things caught my attention: the small number of students, and that we were all women. During the course, we worked with texts and books from a multitude of authors from different parts of the world. Reading and exchanging ideas every week we had the opportunity to share concrete cases of our past and present experiences. For me, it was wonderful to discover that I am not alone in this journey of making school a lighter environment for students and teachers, but for some colleagues, it was very difficult. Three teachers said they were diagnosed with Burnout due to the level of stress and pressure for results in schools where they worked and decided to resign. This demonstrates the need for more attention to teachers' mental health and wellbeing, as I have pointed out throughout this paper.

Considering my personal experience, I agree with Gkonou and Mercer (2017) when they say quality relationships are beneficial for pupils and teachers. I have had the chance to experience these benefits just by being more empathic and less strict and demanding with my students. Such practice does not imply they learned less; they were very successful in their tasks, and it also helped them to feel more relaxed.

#### 4.2 FROM THE LITERATURE

Rimm-Kaufman and Sandilos (2010) give some suggestions on how to develop positive relationships with students. They say it is crucial to create an environment that fosters positive engagement and growth among students and that it is equally important to be responsive to students' needs, showing we enjoy being with them, whether by answering their questions or supporting their academic and social aspirations. They also suggest teachers should encourage students to reflect on their cognitive and learning skills in their educational journey and that we should recognise and demonstrate knowledge of their backgrounds, interests, emotional strengths, and academic levels. Rimm-Kaufman and Sandilos (2010) add that not showing irritation or impatience is critical to a healthy teacher-student relationship. In addition, they declare that promoting the importance of peer relationships within the school community encourages students to embrace a culture of kindness and respect, which promotes a harmonious learning environment for all.

CASEL suggest starting the school year or spending time before and after the first class with a nice student-teacher chat is important to show our commitment to them, and it helps engaging and relationship building. It also develops a sense of trust that is crucial to our teacher-student bond/connection. If one class is not enough to conduct such a conversation with students, it may be done over the period of the semester, in small doses. We have to bear in mind that building relationships with students is a gradual process that demands ongoing commitment. Building these relationships requires genuine interest and empathy, so it is important to prioritise them in the early stages of the academic year. Embrace self-reflection and a humble attitude to ensure your interactions with students and the school community are respectful. This will foster an atmosphere of reciprocity and consideration, which ultimately leads to positive academic achievement. All this conversation will also help the teacher to memorise students' names, something that makes a huge difference when it comes to a sense of belonging and a feeling of affection.

There are also numerous websites available for teachers to seek help promoting socioemotional learning and teaching. For instance, CASEL (<https://casel.org/>) has a website with directions for teachers, schools, administrators, families, communities, and anyone else willing to learn and improve about SEL. PBS Education (<https://www.pbs.org/education/>) is another website, which has very interesting material and ideas to improve and help teachers with a vast range of videos, templates, texts, and trending topics to use in a classroom. Edutopia (<https://www.edutopia.org/>), a Foundation dedicated to improving education, has a wide range of material on socioemotional education for teachers to enjoy. The Harvard Graduate School of Education (<https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas>) has great tips on how to engage with students, create a pleasant environment, promote meaningful learning opportunities, encourage dialogue and many more. There is also the British Council (<https://www.britishcouncil.org/>), where teachers can find support on articles, books and webinars besides school and teachers' resources to use in the classrooms. Cambridge University Press & Assessment (<https://www.cambridge.org/>) has a range of resources, courses, and professional development opportunities. Their Life Competencies Framework helps us to introduce socioemotional skills in our classes and brings activities to do so.

The idea, according to Jones et al. from the EASEL Lab, is to create a safe and inclusive space where students feel respected, valued, and supported. Teachers

should encourage open communication, active listening, and empathy among students. Similarly, they should provide opportunities for students to express their feelings, thoughts, and personal experiences. Introducing and teaching vocabulary related to emotions and feelings is a way to enhance teachers' and students' ability to communicate and manage emotions effectively. Also, there is a need to pay attention to yourself and try to understand your emotions, strengths, and weaknesses. As a teacher, one should research and use activities that focus on building social skills, such as active listening, conflict resolution, empathy, and cooperation. Fostering a growth mindset, emphasising effort, resilience, and self-motivation is important, as well as introducing mindfulness exercises, breathing techniques, or short relaxation activities to promote emotional wellbeing and stress reduction. These practices can help students and teachers manage anxiety, improve focus, and regulate their emotions. And again, practise active listening, show empathy and validate yours and your students' feelings and experiences.

## 5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is hard to see someone else's perspective unless you can see the world through their lens. There is no better way to really know our students than to look into our lives, past and present, and remember what it was like. When we are able to understand our own emotions and recognize those of others, we can establish meaningful connections and that is the reason why we need to reach students before teaching them. Having empathy is crucial in the classroom as it fosters unity and safety, builds comprehension, and cultivates a positive group atmosphere.

Instead of dismissing someone's feelings by saying "It was nothing," we need to be more supportive to acknowledge student's difficulties and let them know that we are there for them. Saying "I know it's hard, but I am here with you" can make a big difference. By supporting my students when they fail their tests at school, I can see them relax and get more comfortable telling me about their difficulties. So, together, we discover their strengths and weaknesses, knowing the latter we need to work on more willingly.

I understand when it comes to socioemotional development that some educators express concern about whether or not it is their responsibility. However, it is undeniable that teachers have always provided this "emotional" training and guidance. The world is changing and with it education. In my view, students lack socioemotional skills more than ever; they do not know how to deal with their peers' differences, as they do not have social skills due to a high reliance on social media and internet interactions. The vast majority of students no longer read books or more than a paragraph on social media, and as a result, can no longer interpret texts and sometimes not even spoken discourse. Teachers should thus work with school peers and seek guidance or resources from other professionals to increase support. In short, teachers should respect and take care of themselves, not just physically but also mentally. We should breathe and be mindful of our time and that of our students. We should be resilient to move forward.



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