

Edumaspul Journal Problems

p-ISSN 2548-8201 | e-ISSN 2580-0469 https://ummaspul.e-journal.id/maspuljr/

Exploratory Study of the Integration of Socio-Emotional Learning in English Language Learning in Primary School: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the forms and strategies of integrating Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in English learning in elementary schools, as well as identify opportunities and challenges that arise in its implementation. This study uses a qualitative approach with an exploratory study design. The research subjects consisted of six female English teachers who taught elementary school students in English course institutions. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and classroom observations, then analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. The results show that teachers have implicitly integrated SEL principles in learning practice through various strategies, such as creating a positive and inclusive learning atmosphere, using collaborative activities such as games and storytelling, and providing positive reinforcement to foster students' empathy and confidence. SEL integration has been proven to open opportunities for strengthening social relationships between students, increasing learning motivation, and developing a more balanced character between cognitive and affective aspects. However, this study also found a number of challenges, including time constraints, the dominant focus on learning aspects, and the lack of teacher training in the systematic implementation of SEL. The results of this study confirm the importance of institutional support and the development of contextual SEL-based learning models in English learning at the elementary school level.

Keywords: Social Emotional Learning; English for Young Learners; Opportunity; Challenge

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bentuk dan strategi integrasi Social Emotional Learning (SEL) dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris di sekolah dasar, serta mengidentifikasi peluang dan tantangan yang muncul dalam penerapannya. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi eksploratif. Subjek penelitian terdiri dari enam guru Bahasa Inggris perempuan yang mengajar siswa sekolah dasar di lembaga kursus Bahasa Inggris. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dan observasi kelas, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan pendekatan analisis tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa guru telah mengintegrasikan prinsip-prinsip SEL secara implisit dalam praktik pembelajaran melalui berbagai strategi, seperti menciptakan suasana belajar yang positif dan inklusif, menggunakan aktivitas kolaboratif seperti permainan dan storytelling, serta memberikan penguatan positif untuk menumbuhkan empati dan rasa percaya diri siswa. Integrasi SEL terbukti membuka peluang bagi penguatan hubungan sosial antara siswa, peningkatan motivasi belajar, dan pengembangan karakter yang lebih seimbang antara aspek kognitif dan afektif. Namun, penelitian ini juga menemukan sejumlah tantangan, antara lain keterbatasan waktu, fokus pembelajaran yang masih dominan pada aspek linguistik, serta kurangnya pelatihan guru dalam penerapan SEL secara sistematis. Hasil penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya dukungan kelembagaan dan pengembangan model pembelajaran berbasis SEL yang kontekstual dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris di tingkat sekolah dasar.

Kata Kunci: Social Emotional Learning; Bahasa Inggris untuk usia Dini, Peluang; Tantangan

Introduction

In the era of 21st century education, the function of schools is increasingly developing not only as a place for the transfer of academic knowledge, but also as a forum for the development of students' holistic competencies, covering cognitive, social, and emotional aspects. This shift in educational paradigm emphasizes the importance of character education and psychological well-being as the foundation of meaningful and sustainable learning. In this context, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is one of the globally recognized strategic approaches because it focuses on the development of five main domains. namely self-awareness. management, social awareness, relationship and responsible decision-making skills. (Fundamentals of SEL - CASEL, n.d.).

The concept of SEL has received widespread attention from researchers and education practitioners as a systematic approach that is able to shape students' ability to manage emotions, empathize, interact socially positively, and make responsible decisions. A meta-analysis study involving more than 270,000 students in different countries showed that the implementation of SEL programs in schools significantly improved students' socialemotional competence, prosocial behavior, and academic performance by up to 11 percent compared to the control group (Durlak et al., 2011). Similar findings were also confirmed by a follow-up analysis involving more than 82 SEL programs in 38 countries, which concluded that SEL-based programs contribute to improved mental well-being, learning motivation, and a positive school social climate (Miller et al., 2017).

In addition, the integration of SEL in the education system has been proven to support the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Number 4 on quality education, as it helps students develop 21st century skills such as empathy, collaboration, and social responsibility (Survey on Social and Emotional

Skills (SSES) | OECD, n.d.). In the Indonesian context, the importance of social-emotional learning is also reflected in the Pancasila Student Profile policy which emphasizes the dimensions of "faith, fear of God Almighty, and noble character", "independence", and "mutual cooperation" — values that are in line with the main principles of SEL (Kemendikdasmen RI, n.d.). Thus, the implementation of SEL is not only globally relevant, but also has local urgency to strengthen the character and emotional well-being of learners in Indonesian primary schools, making it an important foundation for long-term academic and social success.

On the other hand, language teaching, especially English, at the elementary school level plays a strategic role. English not only serves as a cross-cultural communication tool, but also as a means for learners to understand and interact in a global context, expand cross-cultural horizons, and build intercultural literacy from an early age (Rassaei, 2015). In addition, learning English at an early age has been proven to improve critical thinking, collaboration, and interpersonal communication skills, which are part of the 21st century competencies that are urgently needed in the era of globalization (Cameron, 2001; Richards, 2017).

Although the application of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in various educational contexts has been shown to be effective in improving students' emotional wellbeing, social skills, and academic performance, specifically studies that highlight integration of SEL in English language learning in primary schools are still very limited, especially in the context of developing countries such as Indonesia. Global studies confirm that the success of SEL programs depends on the relevance of cultural context and adaptation to the characteristics of certain subjects, including foreign languages (Corcoran et al., 2018; Zhao & Sang, 2025). However, most SEL research in Indonesia still focuses on general implementation or on character and religious education subjects, not on foreign language learning. For example, a study by (Waryani et al., 2025) and (Ani et al., 2025) affirms the effectiveness of SEL in improving the well-being of elementary school students, but does not mention how SEL principles can be applied in English teaching that has an interactive and cross-cultural character.

Furthermore, existing research English learning at the elementary level is still generally oriented towards linguistic skills, such as vocabulary and grammar mastery, while the social and emotional aspects of language interaction receive less attention (Cahyati & Madya, 2019; Laila et al., 2023). In fact, language learning is actually a social process that requires empathy, collaboration, and emotional awareness in communicating. The lack of exploratory research that maps teacher strategies, student perceptions, and supporting and inhibiting factors in integrating SEL into English classrooms is an important gap in the literature. Exploratory studies are crucial to uncover real practices in the field, understand the cultural context of Indonesian elementary schools, and develop SEL integration models that are in accordance with the characteristics of students and the national curriculum. Thus, this exploratory research is expected to be able to fill the empirical gap and provide a conceptual basis for more humanistic and characteroriented English learning innovations in Indonesia.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with an exploratory study type, which aims to deeply understand the phenomenon of integrating Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) in English language learning in elementary school. The exploratory approach was chosen because the topic of SEL integration in the context of English teaching in Indonesia is still relatively new and has not been extensively researched empirically. Thus, this research focuses on exploring practices, perceptions, strategies, and challenges faced by teachers in implementing

social-emotional values in English classrooms. This approach is in line with the view that qualitative research is suitable for studying complex phenomena that require a contextual and in-depth understanding of participants' experiences (Creswell, 2017).

The research was carried out for four months, from March to June 2025, at an English course institution in Enrekang, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The selection of locations was carried out by purposive sampling, taking into consideration that English has not yet become a compulsory subject in elementary schools at this time so it is very rare to find in districts that include English as a local content. The course institution that is the subject of this study has a number of elementary school students from various elementary schools in Maiwa District, Enrekang Regency. After confirmation, all course participants have also carried out the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) program in their respective schools. This condition allows researchers to observe the practice of integrating social and emotional values in the English learning process authentically.

The target of this study is English teachers at the institution of the course who teach for elementary school students and have integrated (or attempted to integrate) social and emotional elements in their learning. The research subjects consisted of six primary school English teachers (all female) with a range of teaching experience between 1 to 5 years.

This research was carried out through three main stages:

1. Preparation Stage

Includes literature studies related to the integration of SEL in language learning, preparation of interview guidelines and observation sheets, as well as licensing to English course institutions for the implementation of research.

2. Stages of Data Collection

It was conducted through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations.

Researchers interviewed six English teachers about their understanding of SEL, classroom implementation strategies, and the opportunities and challenges they faced. Observations are carried out directly in the classroom during the learning process to document the social-emotional interaction between teachers and students, the use of learning strategies, and students' responses to activities that contain SEL values.

3. Stages of Analysis and Reflection
After the data was collected, the researcher conducted an in-depth analysis with a thematic approach and conducted interpretive reflection with participants to increase the validity of the findings (Naeem et al., 2023).

Result and Discussion

The results of the interviews are presented in the form of the following table.

Table 1. SEL Integration Strategies in English Learning

Subtheme	Description of Findings	Representative Quotes
Opening of the classroom with positive social interaction	Teachers begin learning with warm activities such as personal greetings, prayers, or simple games to build emotional connections.	"Usually I start by playing while greeting the students one by one."
Use of media and cooperation- based activities	Activities such as games, storytelling, and group conversations are used to foster empathy and cooperation between students.	"We often play group games so that they learn cooperation and sportsmanship."
Praise and positive feedback	Teachers consistently provide verbal and nonverbal appreciation to increase students' motivation and confidence.	"I always praise and appreciate when children dare to speak."
Integration of SEL values in the context of language	Values such as self- control, empathy, and cooperation are taught through language activities such as role play and singing.	"We sing together to learn new words while controlling emotions."

Based on the results of the interviews, the SEL integration strategy appears to emerge naturally and intuitively in the teaching practice of English teachers. The teachers do not explicitly use the term Social Emotional Learning, but the activities they carry out have reflected the values of SEL. The early stages of learning are used to build social relationships and a positive atmosphere. Early interactions such as warm greetings and simple games are effective ways to foster students' sense of security and emotional attachment to the teacher. The selected activities are also communicative and collaborative, such as games, storytelling, and role-play, which encourage students to actively participate, listen to friends, and respect dissent.

The teacher plays the role of a facilitator who guides students not only in the linguistic aspect, but also in understanding their emotions and social behavior. These findings are in line with the results of the study (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) which shows that learning that prioritizes positive social relationships can increase academic engagement and student emotional regulation. In the context of language teaching, interactive activities such storytelling and role-play have been shown to strengthen the empathic dimension and social communication of children. This supports the results of interviews that show that even without formal training, teachers are able to apply the SEL approach through communicative teaching methods. Thus, the strategies found in this study emphasize the importance of humanistic and collaborative learning approaches as a form of effective SEL integration in basic English classrooms.

Table 2. SEL Integration Opportunities in English Learning

Subtheme	Description of Findings	Representative Quotes
Strengthening	Group	"They help each
social	activities	other when a
relationships	provide space	friend is
between	for students to	struggling."
students	interact, help	
	each other, and	
	build empathy.	
Increased	SEL-based	"Kids are more
motivation	learning creates	likely to speak
and	a fun	English because
confidence	atmosphere	of the relaxed
	that boosts	atmosphere."
	students'	
	confidence in	
	speaking	
	English.	
Support and	Course	"I hope that there
potential for	institutions are	will be an SEL
teacher	beginning to	workshop so that
development	realize the	teachers can
	importance of	better understand
	SEL and open	how to implement
	up training	it."
	opportunities	
	for teachers.	

The results of the analysis show that the application of SEL in English learning opens up a number of important opportunities, both for students, teachers, and institutions. From the student's side, collaborative activities in language learning strengthen their ability to interact socially, empathize, and respect each other. Students learn to understand the feelings of friends and develop more supportive communication. This opportunity reinforces the view that the application of SEL not only improves social skills, but also has a positive impact on academic outcomes. The results showed that a consistently integrated SEL program could improve academic achievement by up to 11% compared to the control group (Durlak et al., 2011).

In addition, an approach that prioritizes a positive classroom climate encourages an increase in students' intrinsic motivation and confidence. They feel safe to express themselves in English without fear of being wrong. This reinforces the findings (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) which states that a positive social-emotional environment contributes directly to academic engagement. Mercer & Gkonou Research (2022) also highlight that

teacher-student emotional connection in language teaching contributes to increased self-efficacy and active participation of students (Gkonou & Miller, 2023). This can be seen in the results of interviews where students are more courageous to speak and interact naturally when teachers build a supportive atmosphere.

From the perspective of institutions and teachers, professional development opportunities arise through training or workshops related to SEL. Many teachers expressed readiness to learn to apply this approach more systematically. Thus, the greatest opportunity lies in strengthening the capacity of teachers and institutional policies in integrating SEL into language teaching curricula and practices.

Table 3. Challenges and Barriers to SEL Integration

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Subtheme	Description of	Representative
	Findings	Quotes
Differences	Students have	"Not all children
in students'	different	can be directly
character	temperaments and	invited to
and	levels of empathy	cooperate, some
emotions	that make it	are easily
	difficult to instill	offended."
	SEL grades	(Daughter)
	evenly.	
Time	The pressure of	"Sometimes time
constraints	completing	runs out on
and material	academic material	grammar, so it's
pressure	reduces social-	hard to instill
	emotional	empathy values."
	reflection time.	(Ainul)
Lack of	Teachers have not	"We need training
SEL	received special	or modules to
guidance or	training on the	integrate SEL
training	implementation	with English."
	of SEL in the	(Khairunnisa)
	context of ELT.	

Table 3 shows that although teachers show a positive awareness of the importance of SEL, there are several main obstacles: Differences in students' character and emotions, which lead to difficulties in instilling social-emotional values evenly; Time constraints and academic pressure, especially since the English curriculum in the course emphasizes cognitive aspects such as grammar and vocabulary; Lack of formal guidance and training, where teachers

have not received systematic modules or guidelines for the implementation of SEL in language classrooms.

These results are consistent with research that highlights that successful **SEL** implementation is highly dependent on teacher readiness and institutional support (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Without adequate training, teachers tend to rely on personal intuition in applying SEL principles. Research in Indonesia by Suryana et al. (2022) It also shows similar obstacles: primary school teachers often face time constraints and pressure on academic achievement, making it difficult to balance cognitive and affective learning.

Barriers related to teacher training are important factors that need to be considered. Schonert-Reichl (2019) emphasizing that SEL teacher competence is a prerequisite for the successful implementation of SEL in the context of basic education. Thus, the challenges identified in this study reinforce the need for contextual SEL integration models and continuous professional training for English teachers at the primary school level.

The three themes above show that teachers have applied the principles of SEL intuitively through communicative and collaborative learning strategies. SEL integration opens up opportunities to strengthen social connections, increase student motivation, and create more humanistic English learning. However, without systematic guidance and institutional support, SEL implementation is still sporadic. This study emphasizes the need for contextual-based SEL integration models in ELT (English Language Teaching) as well as professional training for elementary school teachers to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of its implementation.

To confirm the results of the structured interviews, the research team has also carried out observations in the classroom using an observation checklist. The observation data included 21 indicators with the categories of tutor learning practices and social-emotional

behavior of students which were assessed on a scale of 1–5. The results of the observation can be seen through the following table.

Table 4. Average Observation Score of SEL Integration in Elementary English Learning

Observed Aspects	Average	Main
	Score	Interpretation
Learning Strategies	2.75	Tutors often
		implement
		interactive activities
		and a positive
		classroom
		atmosphere, but
		students' expression
		space is still limited.
SEL Integration	2.25	SEL values are
		present through
		praise and empathic
		communication, but
		cooperation between
01 / 1 /01 11	4.05	students is still weak.
Obstacles/Challenge	4.25	Time constraints,
S		student character
		variation, and
		cognitive focus are the main obstacles.
Self-Awareness &	3.50	Students are quite
Self-Management	3.30	capable of managing
Sen-Management		emotions and
		showing confidence.
Social Awareness	2.50	Empathy and respect
Social / twatchess	2.50	for friends' opinions
		still need to be
		strengthened.
Relationship Skills	1.67	Cooperation and
1		polite
		communication
		between students is
		still low.
Responsible	4.00	Students obey the
Decision-Making		tutor's instructions
		and choose safe
		actions during study.

From the interviews, the teachers said that they often use collaborative activities such as games, storytelling, and role play to foster empathy and cooperation. This is confirmed through observation, where a high score (4) is given on the indicator "tutor using interactive activities". Observations also showed that tutors routinely gave positive praise and encouragement (score 3) — as per the teacher's statement about the importance of appreciation to build students' confidence.

However, low scores on "student opportunity to express their opinions" (2) and "cooperation between students" (1) corroborate teachers' assertions that social-emotional

activities have not been systematically integrated. The strategies used are still spontaneous and depend on the teacher's intuition, not on curriculum-based planning.

Interviews show that teachers feel that students are more courageous to speak and interact when the classroom atmosphere is positive and fun. This is strengthened by the observation results, where the aspects of self-management (score 3.5) and responsible decision-making (score 4.0) stand out. Students are able to follow the teacher's directions, show discipline, and control emotions during the activity.

This opportunity is seen in the ability of teachers to create a supportive learning environment even without formal training. Teachers manage the emotional atmosphere of the classroom through humor, praise, and nonverbal interaction—essential elements in the development of SEL.

The integration between interviews and observations shows the great potential of the application of SEL to strengthen students' motivation and social relationships. This supports the results of a meta-analysis showing that SEL programs improve students' prosocial behavior and emotional well-being in a variety of cultural contexts (Taylor et al., 2017).

Teachers in interviews complained about differences in student character, time limitations, and lack of guidelines for the implementation of SEL. The results of the observations reinforced these findings — the top three indicators in the barrier section were "students' difficulty working together" (score 5), "limited learning time" (score 5), and "differences in student character" (score 5). Observation data showed that teachers faced difficulties in maintaining students' focus during activities, especially when activities required group cooperation.

The integration of the interview results and observations showed that teachers have applied the principles of SEL naturally, especially in building positive relationships and creating a supportive learning atmosphere. However, aspects of collaboration and empathy between students still need to be strengthened, in line with the need for guidance, training, and policy support that will enable teachers to integrate SEL more systematically into English learning at the primary school level.

Conclusion

This study shows that the integration of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in English learning at the elementary school level has taken place naturally even though it is not fully structured. English teachers at the course institute use a variety of strategies that reflect the principles of SEL, such as building a warm and inclusive classroom atmosphere, engaging students in collaborative activities such as games, storytelling, and role-play, providing positive reinforcement to foster confidence and empathy. This approach indirectly helps students develop socialemotional skills such as self-awareness, emotion management, cooperation, effective communication while increasing motivation to learn English.

On the other hand, this study also reveals significant opportunities and challenges in the implementation of SEL. The main opportunities arise from increased social relationships between students, emotional support in the classroom, and teachers' awareness of the importance of character-oriented learning. However, the implementation of SEL still faces obstacles in the form of time constraints, cognitive learning focus, and the lack of formal guidance or training for teachers. Therefore, the results of this study confirm the importance of developing a contextual SEL integration model in English language learning in primary schools, as well as the need for institutional support and continuous training so that its implementation can run more systematically and sustainably.

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