

Enhancing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Among Military Students in English Language Classes

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In the last years, socio-emotional skills have played an important role in student development. Military people often face unique educational challenges due to frequent relocations, exposure to diverse cultures, and a high-stress lifestyle connected to family obligations. These circumstances, while enriching, can also disrupt the traditional learning trajectory and affect their emotional and social well-being. Given these factors, integrating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) into English language classes offers a valuable way to support military students, future military leaders, holistically. This article explores strategies for enhancing SEL in English language learning, promoting emotional regulation, communication, and resilience in military students.

Socio-emotional skills; military students; English language learning; SEL strategies, emotional regulation.

1. Introduction

Social-emotional learning is a crucial element to learning and educational success

“the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.” (Fundamentals of SEL, n.d.).

The military profession implies a discipline which is based on conscious adherence, situational awareness and competence and which must be built through training. Education and training must therefore aim to develop situational intelligence,

through the development of general culture. In certain units, such as Special Forces, the mode of organization and command during missions puts rank in the background to rely more heavily on the competence of each individual and on the intelligence of the situation of which each is capable. The military profession cannot be accomplished in extreme or tense situations if it does not implement, more than in other professions, major qualities, such as courage, respect, mutual trust, and respect for commitments made. These qualities cannot develop and assert themselves if they have not been the subject of in-depth and constant training. In the military, the dependence of subordinates on the leader is real: the subordinate acts very much depending on what the leader does (which gives the latter even greater responsibility), depending on the orders he gives, but also depending on his behaviour, the example he sets through his attitude.

Therefore, there are several core competencies that the teachers concentrating on Social and Emotional Learning try to cultivate in their students: self-awareness, grit, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. In other words, socio-emotional learning enables the control of emotions, the accomplishment of objectives, the formation and maintenance of relationships, as well as the advancement towards an beneficial self-identity (Gimbert et al., 2021).

2. Key Skill Areas for SEL Development in Military Students

Researchers have demonstrated that these so called ‘non-cognitive’ abilities are increasingly important for students’ academic and long-term achievement, hence the motivation to study them. In this section we will define into detail three of these concepts used to measure students’ social emotional learning.

2.1. Grit

We defined grit as students’ capacity to endure difficulties to attain essential objectives over an extended period. According to Morell et al. (2021), Christopoulou et al. (2018), grit includes two subdivisions: ‘consistency of interests’ and ‘perseverance of effort’. Consistency of interests comprises systematically expressing interest and efforts, as opposed to perseverance of effort that refers to showing increased intensity of tenacity despite confronting situations of real setbacks or failures. Interest is related with meaning rather than pleasure in terms of immediate short-term enjoyment. People should first ascribe a personal importance to a long-term objective and show desire to face the challenges and difficulties that could arise while achieving it. A long-term objective must be both relevant and engaging in order to sustain an individual’s work and vitality. Both elements of grit are key components of success, because endurance of effort leads to mastery despite lack of success, and constancy of interest is required in participating in intentional practice to gain mastery (Jin, 2023).

As stated by the authors, grit is conceptually separate from theoretically relevant qualities like conscientiousness and resilience (Datu, 2021). Grit was associated to increased levels of academic performance in adults, academic success in university students, and finishing military training for a number of first-year cadets pursuing studies in the United States Military Academy.

Grit means working tirelessly toward a difficult objective by overcoming problems and challenges, and by maintaining sustaining interest and effort in the course of time in spite of unsuccessful attempts, hardship, and stagnant development (Tang et al., 2019). Endurance is the prerogative of gritty students, who perceive success as a long-distance race, and keep going regardless of disappointment and boredom. Grit is seen as a personal trait shared by leaders, as well as an essential predictor of success and brilliance in any discipline, independent of giftedness or aptitude.

Similarly, in their study, Duckworth et al. (2007) revealed that grit is essential to high accomplishment, differentiating great performers from the rest, even though they did not appear to be as brilliant as others at first, they managed to succeed due to their outstanding and continuous devotion to achieve their goals. Similarly, many people were surprised that their exceptionally gifted friends did not make it to the top of their profession.

2.2. Self-Management

Panorama SEL defines self-management to be the students' capacity to control their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours across various occasions and this is the definition that we embrace. In a similar manner, self-management is also described as the journey that helps people learn skills and techniques for dealing with physical, social, and psychological impacts. Abdullah and Maktuf (2022) provide a theoretical and a procedural definition of self-management. Thus, as a theoretical concept, self-management is the capacity of an individual to control their own life successfully and efficiently by demonstrating a variety of personal and social abilities displayed as the ability to work in stressful situations, the ability to invest time and management, the ability to adapt to various situations, and the ability to cope with and manage frustrating situations

Among the non-cognitive skills (grit, self-management, social awareness or self-efficacy) that enable students to perform, researchers have discovered that self-management predicts achievement among learners quite well (Al-Abyadh & Abdel Azeem, 2022; Claro & Loeb, 2019). As shown by research, self-management, also named self-regulation or self-control, is a better indicator of the percentage of graduates than the results of standardized tests and impacts greatly on educational performance in comparison to different personality qualities such as pleasantness, extrovert behaviour and willingness to try new things.

Moreover, researchers mentioned that among other things appropriate self-management for higher education students increase educational achievement. Students

with successful organizational abilities understand how to work efficiently toward important objectives; how to successfully deal with problems; how to think with optimism when faced with educational issues; how to make use of resources; how to control their environment to accomplish their aims; and how to think critically on the underlying factors of unsuccessful attempts and set goals for potential development. Time and resource management, learning monitoring, stress and anxiety control, and study perseverance are all examples of skills that contribute to academic success (Yarbro & Ventura, 2018).

In addition to many definitions of self-management, scholars have also mentioned other terms for a comparable set of abilities. Thus, self-management is synonymous with self-discipline, self-control, self-regulation, willpower, and ego strength. The relevance of self-management for academic performance has been repeatedly demonstrated by research. However, self-management is not important only to achieve success in education but also within the workplace and in life. People with higher self-control mentioned fewer disorders, higher self-esteem, more positive connections, and stronger interpersonal skills.

2.3. Social Awareness

In a broad perspective, social awareness is an important component of student development due to the connections between social awareness and social change, as well as the development of critical thinking abilities. Higher education institutions are being asked to educate citizens who are capable of recognizing and resolving a wide range of societal challenges and for this reason social awareness needs to be considered.

The capacity to identify and sympathize with people from diverse origins and cultures is referred to as social awareness. Social awareness entails the following abilities: evaluating other people's differences, understanding and accepting their perspectives, caring for them, demonstrating compassion and sensitivity, sympathy, and empathy for other people's thoughts and feelings (Huynh, 2018). Scholars define social awareness as an individual's flexibility, behavioural change, and adaptation in response to specific situations. Understanding other people's feelings in diverse situations, including compassion and empathy, is a fundamental component of social awareness.

3. Benefits of Integrating SEL in the English Language Classes

Incorporating SEL into English language classes can help address the social-emotional necessities of military students, aiding both their personal growth and academic performance. Research demonstrated that students who possess good social and emotional skills have better academic results. Social and emotional competencies enhance students' capacity to concentrate, study, and participate in the educational process by fostering a good and encouraging learning environment. Emphasizing social and emotional skills also helps

schools foster a pleasant educational environment by promoting cooperation, empathy, and respect among students and between students and educators. As a result, the learning atmosphere becomes more welcoming and encouraging.

In the military, implementing socio-emotional learning (SEL) in language teaching offers promising avenues for strengthening both individual resilience and unit cohesion, fostering a more adaptive, emotionally aware, and socially responsive force. By embedding SEL into military training and culture, service members can develop greater emotional intelligence, empathy, stress management, and interpersonal skills that enhance operational effectiveness. This approach not only boosts individual performance but also contributes to a positive and supportive military environment, especially in high-stress, high-stakes situations.

SEL techniques can

- enhance engagement: when students feel supported emotionally, they are more likely to engage actively in the learning process, improving language acquisition outcomes.
- improve communication skills: SEL practices, such as group discussions, role-play, and empathy-building activities, help students develop effective interpersonal skills and encourage authentic, expressive communication.
- increase emotional regulation and resilience: SEL enables students to manage emotions constructively, which is essential when learning a language. Building confidence and emotional control can translate into improved classroom behaviour and academic success. It can also empower service members to better manage stress, anxiety, and emotions—key components in maintaining composure and effectiveness under pressure. Through targeted exercises in self-awareness and emotional regulation, personnel learn to recognize and control their emotions, leading to clearer decision-making and reduced impulsive actions. Techniques such as mindfulness, grounding exercises, and breathing practices could be incorporated into physical training routines, enhancing stress tolerance and supporting mental health, a critical aspect given the high prevalence of PTSD and related mental health issues in the military.
- improve team dynamics and cohesion: SEL strengthens interpersonal skills, making soldiers more adept at communication, conflict resolution, and empathy. In the military, where teamwork is paramount, SEL's focus on understanding and respecting others' perspectives fosters stronger relationships among team members. By encouraging open communication and active listening, SEL can help to reduce misunderstandings and tension within units, leading to enhanced trust and a more cohesive fighting force. This aspect is particularly valuable in multinational operations or joint missions where collaboration with diverse personnel is essential.
- develop leadership skills: SEL fosters leaders who are not only tactically proficient but also emotionally intelligent, adaptable, and empathetic. Military leaders

with strong socio-emotional skills are more capable of understanding the emotional states and needs of their subordinates, allowing for more supportive and responsive leadership. Leaders trained in SEL are better equipped to recognize signs of burnout, mental health struggles, or interpersonal conflicts, intervening in a way that strengthens morale and retains high-performing personnel. This approach is especially important for young officers who are learning to balance authority with empathy, setting a tone of respect and mutual trust.

These skills are particularly useful in the workplace, where emotional intelligence is increasingly appreciated and can be a key differentiator in career success (Huet & Le Bot, 2008).

4. Strategies for Enhancing SEL in English Language Classes for Military Students

The value of classroom effort during all phases of formal education has long been acknowledged. Achievement in education is not possible without consistent effort, regardless of the educational institution or the socioeconomic status of students. Academic effort can be described as the quantity of energy and time that people devote to academic pursuits. Furthermore, students who express great academic effort are more likely to perform properly and persevere when presented with challenging assignments.

Several studies have found a correlation between student effort and student learning. According to Fredrickson, J. (2018), student effort refers to the time and effort students spend in academically useful tasks, such as time invested in activities, number of hours spent studying, and level of an individual's effort involved in acquiring knowledge. We also embrace this definition of classroom effort.

Rieger et al. (2022) argue that working hard on schoolwork is associated to good academic results such as higher performance, better grades, and lower percentage of academic dropouts, and is a significant variable in academic learning theory frameworks.

On the other hand, Steele (2020) offers a more detailed definition of effort distinguishing between objective and subjective effort to provide an accurate description of effort throughout task competition and to provide a uniform comprehension across subjects. Steele (2020) defined 'objective effort' as concrete and quantifiable endeavours that indicate the level of effort dedicated to an activity, including the duration of study, the number of tasks accomplished, or the results achieved on assessments of specific knowledge. In addition, 'subjective effort' can be defined as the internal and intangible experiences and perceptions associated with an endeavour or aim, including motivation, self-efficacy, and goal orientation (Hanushek et al., 2020).

An inclusive and supportive classroom environment is foundational for SEL. Teachers should establish a welcoming atmosphere by implementing activities that foster peer connections and reduce the sense of isolation. Ice-breaker exercises, team-based

projects, and collaborative storytelling can encourage students to share about themselves in comfortable, non-intimidating ways. Such activities make students feel seen and valued, strengthening their sense of belonging (*Formation pour les Conseiller-ère-s Militaires Genre*, n.d.)

4.1 Building Empathy and Cultural Awareness

Activities that promote cultural understanding and empathy are especially relevant in English language classes for military students. Role-play scenarios that explore different perspectives or group discussions about cultural narratives can help students practice empathy, learn to appreciate cultural diversity, and develop interpersonal skills. By addressing cross-cultural situations, students gain a better understanding of the social nuances required for authentic communication in a new language.

4.2 Integrating Reflection and Journaling

Reflection and journaling activities provide students with opportunities to process their emotions, recognize personal growth, and express their identity. Instructors can integrate prompts that encourage students to reflect on experiences, emotions, and personal achievements. For military students, these practices not only strengthen language skills but also provide an outlet to address the challenges they face, like relocation or adapting to a new school.

4.3 Teaching Self-Regulation and Stress Management

Helping military students manage stress and self-regulate is essential. By introducing mindfulness activities, breathing exercises, and stress management strategies in class, instructors provide students with tools to navigate academic pressures effectively. For example, before exams or presentations, instructors can lead short relaxation exercises, helping students focus and feel more at ease. Furthermore, by discussing realistic life scenarios, educators can give students the chance to apply SEL principles in contexts relevant to their everyday experiences, promoting resilience.

4.4 Examples of Successful SEL Integration

One practical example of integrating SEL into an English language lesson is a storytelling activity in which students are encouraged to share personal anecdotes or cultural experiences. This activity allows students to connect on a deeper level, practicing language skills while also building empathy and understanding within the group. A lesson might involve students discussing a time they faced a challenging transition, followed by a reflection on how they navigated their feelings. Such activities serve dual purposes: reinforcing language skills while also providing emotional support and perspective-sharing among students.

To maintain student motivation, the fun aspect is a preferred option. Challenge cards can be used to practice socio-emotional skills (Beaudry-Vigneux & Hébert, 2021). These cards bring together different actions divided according to the five main areas of skills, both intrapersonal and interpersonal. They constitute a versatile tool that can be used in a structured or more random manner. Each challenge can be launched to the entire group or to a young person individually. Here are some examples:

Self-awareness (intrapersonal) challenge cards:

I identify two values which are important to me.	I identify three personal strengths and I give an example for each.	During a conflict, I explain how I feel.
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Self-management (interpersonal) challenge cards:

When I don't like something, I give myself time before reacting.	When I face an obstacle, I use my strategies and I ask for help if needed.
I set a goal for myself, and I reward myself when I reach it.	In a conflict, I allow time to the other student to self-regulate on his side.

Social consciousness (intrapersonal) challenge cards:

I find two ways to please to a person who needs it.	I do a favour for someone important to me.
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Social awareness (intrapersonal) challenge cards:

Faced with a choice, I think about the action that would be the most equitable for others and for me.	To contribute to the well-being of my living environment, I collect my waste and the ones I see lying around.
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Decision making (intrapersonal) challenge cards:

On a sheet of paper, I write the consequences (positive and negative) of a gesture I made today.	Faced with a choice, I find two advantages to justify my decision. I take the time to think before acting.
I name a decision that I have taken by myself and of which I am proud.	Faced with a problem, I ask about possible options and I think about their impacts before making a decision.

Relational skills (intrapersonal) challenge cards:

During cooperative work, I ensure that my team integrates the ideas from all members.	When I feel discouraged in front of a job, I ask for help.	When I chat with someone, I take the time to listen to his point of view until the end.
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Using interactive videos also offers many benefits. Besides being a complementary tool, it is a trigger. It makes everything more concrete than just using discussion. Videos put into words what students are experiencing, we name the real emotions and we also model behaviours.

4.5 Challenges in Implementing SEL for Military Students

Implementing SEL in a traditionally hierarchical and regimented institution like the military is not without challenges. There may be resistance among personnel who view SEL as at odds with the traditional toughness expected in military culture. However, emphasizing SEL's role in enhancing performance and resilience may help to bridge this cultural gap. Tailoring SEL programs to align with military values, such as discipline, honour, and duty, can reinforce its relevance and value within a military context. Additionally, offering SEL training in an engaging, practical format that mirrors operational demands can help ensure that it resonates with service members and is retained in high-pressure situations.

5. Conclusion

Social and Emotional Learning offers essential support for military students facing the challenges of relocation, stress, and cultural adaptation. SEL strategies in English language classes can enhance students' engagement, communication, and emotional resilience, making their learning experience more effective and fulfilling. By implementing SEL practices, educators can contribute to military students' long-term emotional and social well-being, fostering a stronger sense of community and self-assurance that benefits them beyond the classroom.

English language educators have the opportunity to empower military students by adopting SEL principles, building classrooms that not only teach language skills but also strengthen students' social and emotional health. This commitment to SEL ensures military possess the necessary skills they need to navigate both their educational journeys and the unique challenges of military life.

In conclusion, integrating socio-emotional learning into military language learning presents a forward-looking approach to developing well-rounded, resilient, and socially attuned service members. SEL not only strengthens the individual's mental health and adaptability but also fortifies the bonds within units and enhances leadership effectiveness. This holistic approach aligns with the evolving nature of military operations, where mental resilience and emotional intelligence are as essential as physical fitness and tactical skills.

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