

EFL Teacher Educators' Perspectives on Embedding Social-Emotional Learning into EFL Teacher Education in Vietnam

Tran Thi Yen^{1*}, Nguyen Thi Mai Huong²

¹Faculty of Foreign Languages Education, Thai Nguyen University of Education, Thai Nguyen, Vietnam

²University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam

*Corresponding author's email: yentt@tnue.edu.vn

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1825-1190>

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ABSTRACT

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Social-emotional learning (SEL) has received growing attention, but little is known about how it is understood and enacted in EFL teacher education in Vietnam. This qualitative study examined how five EFL teacher educators at a Vietnamese pedagogical university perceived and enacted SEL. Data from semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically. Most were unfamiliar with SEL as a formal framework; however, they considered its principles relevant to Vietnamese values, effective teaching, and students' development. They reported modelling SEL-related skills, using group work and extracurricular activities, and including these skills in assessment. These practices, however, were mostly based on experience and were not explicitly connected to SEL. Major reported barriers included limited training, time, resources, large classes, and insufficient institutional support. Participants suggested integrating SEL into existing courses, providing professional development, and strengthening collaboration. The study shows that teacher educators are willing to adopt SEL but need clear guidance and sustained institutional support.

Introduction

Nowadays, the growing demands of modern education require a transition towards a more holistic approach that educates children as whole individuals and prioritizes social-emotional growth, as focusing only on academic skills is no longer enough (Jones & Kahn, 2017). A growing body of research has shown that fostering social-emotional competencies (SECs) for students is just as important as developing their intellectual abilities (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones & Kahn, 2017; OECD, 2024). All of these competencies would help prepare them for the challenges of modern education, life, work, and society (Jones & Kahn, 2017; OECD, 2024). In this context, social-emotional learning (SEL) has emerged as a transformative educational framework that integrates aspects of emotional, social, and academic growth (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020; Greenberg et al., 2003). Educators in many countries around the world have recognized the potential of SEL not only to enhance social-emotional competencies but also to facilitate teaching and learning (Bridgeland et al.,

2013; Durlak et al., 2011; OECD, 2024).

In Vietnam, there are both opportunities and challenges in integrating SEL into the educational system, especially since the country's 2018 General Education Curriculum, issued by the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), marked a comprehensive shift toward competency-based education. In the new National General Education Curriculum, qualities such as autonomy, effective communication, problem-solving, compassion, and accountability are emphasized, aligning with the principles of SEL (CASEL, 2020; MoET, 2018; Tran & Le, 2023). In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, the significance and relevance of SEL is even more prominent (Pentón Herrera, 2024; Tran & Le, 2023). Learning a language is an inherently social and emotional process where learners have to constantly get involved in interpersonal communication, cultural sensitivity, and managing emotional or affective factors like motivation, confidence, anxiety, or fear of error (Arnold & Brown, 1999; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Vo, 2025; Vygotsky, 1986). SEL has the potential to support students in managing these social-emotional factors to engage successfully in the learning process and improve linguistic proficiency (Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2022; Pentón Herrera, 2024). Accordingly, nowadays, EFL teachers are expected not only to teach linguistic skills but also social-emotional skills. This context requires EFL teachers and EFL teacher educators to integrate SEL into their professional practices (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

Although the benefits of SEL have been recognized universally (Durlak et al., 2011; OECD, 2024), effectively embedding it into educational practices is challenging (Elias et al., 2003; Tran & Le, 2023). It requires EFL teachers who are not only knowledgeable in SEL theories but also capable of modeling, teaching, and assessing SEL skills during their teaching practices (Huynh et al., 2022; Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Tran, 2025; Yoder, 2014). This raises important questions about the extent to which EFL teachers feel prepared for integrating SEL in their daily teaching practices, and how teacher education programs prepare EFL pre-service teachers (EPTs) for such responsibilities, especially in contexts like Vietnam (Corcoran & O'Flaherty, 2022; Huynh et al., 2022; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). More specifically, are teacher education programs equipping EPTs with both social-emotional competencies (SECs) and SEL instructional competence (SELIC) so they can implement SEL effectively in their future classrooms (Do & Zsolnai, 2022; Tran, 2025)?

In this process of teacher preparation, the role of teacher educators is extremely important (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). If teacher educators advocate for SEL and actively promote SEL, they can equip pre-service teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to implement SEL successfully (Lawlor, 2016; Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). In other words, teacher educators' perceptions and practices of SEL can significantly impact how pre-service teachers understand, value, and apply SEL in their future teaching practices. However, the extent to which EFL teacher educators (ETEs) in Vietnam perceive and practice SEL is not thoroughly examined (Do & Zsolnai, 2022; Huynh et al., 2022; Tran, 2025). This research gap indicates the need for research that examines how ETEs perceive and practice SEL within teacher education programs.

To fill this gap, this study was conducted to explore how ETEs at a pedagogical university in Vietnam perceive and practise SEL. It focuses on exploring their understanding of SEL, their perspectives on its relevance to EFL education, their perceived roles in implementing SEL, their reported strategies for integrating SEL into teacher education, the challenges they face and the recommendations they could make to overcome these challenges. The findings of the study

reveal how SEL is currently interpreted and enacted within one EFL teacher education program in Vietnam, offering practical recommendations for integrating SEL more effectively into EFL teacher education to prepare future EFL teachers to foster students' SECs alongside linguistic proficiency. All of these efforts can create meaningful changes in teacher education and promote holistic education in Vietnam.

Literature Review

This literature review provides an overview of the conceptual and contextual grounding of SEL in EFL teacher education. It begins with major conceptualizations of SEL along with its theoretical frameworks, followed by a summary of its benefits. It also reviews teachers' perspectives on SEL and examines existing research on SEL in EFL teacher education in Vietnam to identify gaps that establish the focus and contribution of the present study.

Existing conceptualizations of SEL

The concept of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) was first introduced in 1994 by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a non-profit organization headquartered in Chicago, United States, that plays a leading role in advancing SEL research, policy, and practice. SEL is defined as

“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.”
(CASEL, 2020, p. 1)

Since its formal introduction in 1994, SEL frameworks, particularly those proposed by CASEL, have been continually developed and refined to identify and specify five core social-emotional competencies (SECs), namely self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, as well as the specific skills under these competencies. They are viewed as interrelated, developmental, and teachable through everyday classroom practices (CASEL, 2020; Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Yoder, 2014).

SEL has been increasingly recognized as an essential or integral part of modern education (Greenberg et al., 2003; Jones & Kahn, 2017; OECD, 2024). Jones and Kahn (2017) claim that SEL has the potential to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment in which students can develop comprehensively not only in social-emotional aspects but also in academic domains. In the same vein, Markowitz and Bouffard (2020) and Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba (2022) emphasize the active and integrative nature of SEL. They argue that SEL should not be seen as a static, optional, supplementary, separate, or stand-alone program but as a continuous, integrative process that needs to be integrated into daily lesson content and teaching practices. From these perspectives, SEL is viewed as a holistic approach to educating well-rounded students, who are not only academically excellent but also socially and emotionally intelligent. These perspectives place significant instructional responsibility on teachers and teacher educators (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

While existing research largely focuses on learners' and teachers' personal SECs, less attention has been paid to teachers' SEL instructional competence (SELIC) (Do & Zsolnai, 2022; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Tran, 2025). This limitation is particularly concerning in teacher education, where pre-service teachers require not only awareness of SEL but also explicit guidance on how to integrate SEL into teaching, learning, and assessment (Pentón Herrera,

2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). To address this gap, several scholars have begun to conceptualize SEL not merely as personal competencies, but also as a professional instructional competence (Do & Zsolnai, 2022; Huynh et al., 2022; Phan, 2021; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Tran, 2025). Tran (2025), based on existing empirical studies, introduces the construct of SELIC to address teachers' ability to design, implement, model, and evaluate SEL within subject teaching. This construct highlights the need to distinguish between possessing SECs and intentionally fostering them in students.

Benefits of SEL implementation

Many studies have been conducted, and all have confirmed the significant impact of SEL on students' social, emotional, and even academic outcomes (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Durlak et al., 2011; Jones & Kahn, 2017; OECD, 2024). These studies consistently show that SEL can help students foster essential skills such as emotional regulation, empathy, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. All of these social-emotional skills can contribute to stronger intrapersonal intelligence and interpersonal relationships; better mental health; improved classroom behaviors and attitudes; enhanced academic engagement, motivation, persistence, and achievement for students; and better future personal lives and professional careers (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones & Kahn, 2017; OECD, 2024).

In EFL and language learning contexts, SEL has also been found to play an important role in addressing affective factors such as anxiety, motivation, and learner engagement, thereby supporting sustained participation and successful language acquisition (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Tran & Le, 2023; Vo, 2025). In addition to its benefits for students, SEL offers both professional and personal benefits for teachers. SEL can help teachers enhance teaching effectiveness, improve classroom management, foster supportive learning environments, reduce stress, avoid burnout, and achieve greater job satisfaction (Braun et al., 2020; Collie et al., 2012; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). These reported benefits help explain why SEL has gained global interest and confirm its relevance not only for students but also for teachers and the entire educational system, establishing a strong empirical rationale for its integration into EFL teacher education (Corcoran & O'Flaherty, 2022; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

Teachers' perspectives on SEL

Teachers' perspectives on SEL play an important role in determining its effective integration into educational practices (Brackett et al., 2012; Buchanan et al., 2009). Previous research findings reveal a limited formal understanding of SEL concepts, with knowledge often fragmented or incomplete (Buchanan et al., 2009; Burgin et al., 2021; Ee & Cheng, 2013). Despite this, research shows that even without familiarity with SEL concepts and frameworks, teachers naturally or intuitively promote SECs for their students through everyday classroom practices such as relationship building, classroom management and collaborative learning (Buchanan et al., 2009; Burgin et al., 2021; Yoder, 2014). They generally recognize the positive impacts of SEL on developing students' social skills, academic performance and emotional resilience (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Burgin et al., 2021; Ee & Cheng, 2013).

At the same time, the literature consistently emphasizes teachers' roles as facilitators, role models, and emotional supporters in promoting SEL (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015), yet studies like Ee and Cheng (2013) reveal that only a minority of teachers perceived themselves as active agents responsible for explicitly teaching SEL. More recent studies have reinforced this concern by highlighting a persistent belief–practice gap: teachers may highly value SEL but lack the pedagogical knowledge, confidence or institutional support

to integrate it systematically (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Tran & Le, 2023). This gap highlights the need for teacher education programs to move beyond awareness-raising toward strengthening teachers' personal SECs as well as their instructional capacity to design, implement, and assess SEL explicitly (Corcoran & O'Flaherty, 2022; Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Tran, 2025). It also highlights the importance of teacher educators' own understanding, modeling, and instructional use of SEL, as these may shape how preservice teachers learn to enact it in their future classrooms (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

SEL in EFL teacher education in Vietnam

SEL in Vietnamese teacher education is gaining attention; however, it remains an emerging area of interest (Do & Zsolnai, 2022; Huynh et al., 2022; Tran, 2025). The recent educational reforms, particularly the competency-based orientation of the 2018 General Education Curriculum, have created policy-level opportunities for integrating SEL-related principles into teaching and learning (MoET, 2018; Tran & Le, 2023); however, empirical research on SEL within Vietnamese teacher education remains limited and fragmented (Do & Zsolnai, 2022; Huynh et al., 2022; Tran, 2025). Research suggests that although SEL is not explicitly labeled in many teacher education programs, its principles are often integrated into courses such as teaching methods, educational psychology, and classroom management, which emphasize emotional intelligence, stress management, and building positive student-teacher relationships (Do & Zsolnai, 2022; Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

However, existing Vietnamese studies suggest that such implicit integration is insufficient to ensure coherent and effective SEL implementation (Huynh et al., 2022; Phan, 2021; Tran, 2025). For instance, Phan (2021) found that preschool teachers had a limited understanding of SEL and could not prioritize or organize SEL-focused activities. Similarly, Huynh et al. (2022) reported that Vietnamese pre-service teachers demonstrated only moderate perceived competence in implementing SEL and faced difficulties conceptualizing SEL and applying its components coherently in teaching. Despite this emerging evidence, empirical research on SEL within EFL teacher education in Vietnam remains extremely limited, particularly with respect to how SEL is understood, advocated, and enacted by EFL teacher educators (Huynh et al., 2022; Tran, 2025; Tran & Le, 2023).

In summary, although there is a substantial body of research on SEL, they primarily focus on students (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2003; Jones & Kahn, 2017) and in-service teachers (e.g., Brackett et al., 2012; Buchanan et al., 2009; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). There have been few studies on the perspectives of teacher educators, who play an essential role in shaping how SEL is conceptualized and implemented in teacher preparation programs (Corcoran & O'Flaherty, 2022; Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). This gap is even more pronounced in the context of EFL teacher education (Pentón Herrera, 2024; Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2022; Tran, 2025). Within the Vietnamese context, existing studies on SEL have largely concentrated on learners' or pre-service teachers' competencies (Huynh et al., 2022; Tran, 2025), with very limited empirical research examining EFL teacher educators' perspectives and practices. As a result, there remains insufficient understanding of how SEL is interpreted, advocated and integrated at the level of teacher education to prepare pre-service teachers to implement SEL effectively in their future EFL classrooms.

To address this gap, the present study was conducted to investigate the perspectives on SEL among EFL teacher educators at a pedagogical university in Vietnam. The study focuses on exploring their understanding of SEL, their beliefs about its benefits, their perceived roles and

reported strategies for integrating SEL into teacher education, the barriers they face and their proposed recommendations.

Methods

Research paradigm and design

This study adopted a constructivist research paradigm, which views reality not as a fixed, objective entity but as socially constructed by the subjective beliefs, actions, experiences and interpretations of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Following the constructivist paradigm, a qualitative research design was selected as it is suitable for exploring a complex and context-specific phenomenon such as the perspectives on SEL among ETEs at a pedagogical university in Vietnam (Patton, 2015). The adoption of a constructivist paradigm and a qualitative research design can provide an in-depth exploration of how EFL teacher educators perceive SEL, how they report incorporating SEL-related principles into their teacher education practices, as well as how they handle the challenges and opportunities to promote SEL within a specific EFL teacher education program.

Research Setting and Participants

This study was conducted at a Vietnamese pedagogical university, which offers an undergraduate EFL teacher education program preparing pre-service teachers to teach English at secondary levels. The EFL teacher education program includes coursework in language skills, linguistics, teaching methodology, assessment, educational psychology and teaching practice. This setting was selected because pedagogical universities play an important role in shaping future EFL teachers' professional knowledge, beliefs and skills. In addition, the site was accessible and feasible for in-depth qualitative inquiry thanks to the researcher's institutional affiliation, which facilitated access to participants. This combination of relevance, accessibility and feasibility made the setting appropriate for exploring EFL teacher educators' perspectives on SEL integration in EFL teacher education.

The participants were five EFL teacher educators (coded as ETE01-05) from the selected pedagogical university, recruited using purposive sampling, following the principle of maximum variation to ensure the collection of sufficient data and diverse perspectives (Patton, 2015). The participants were varied in gender, age, qualifications, teaching experience, expertise and roles within the teacher education program (see Table 1). The five selected participants included two teacher educators with doctoral degrees and three with master's degrees in TESOL or Education. These teacher educators held different positions within the EFL teacher education program: one faculty dean, two heads of division (English Language Teaching Methodology and Languages & Cultures), and two instructors with teaching-only responsibilities, including one foreign instructor. Their professional experiences also vary considerably in the range between 9 and 32 years, during which they have designed and taught a wide range of courses within the program, such as ELT, micro-teaching, language skills, curriculum development, research methods, study skills, information technology, psychological counseling and linguistic courses. This diversity can help the researcher gather data on different aspects of SEL such as leadership, curriculum development and classroom practices within the EFL teacher education program.

Table 1.**Profile of the semi-structured interview participants**

Code	Gender /Age	Qualifications	Position/ Professional Experience	Courses designed and taught
ETE01	Female 46	MA (TESOL)	Teaching only; 24 years of experience	ELT; practicum; micro-teaching; IT; language skills, PBL, etc.
ETE02	Female 37	PhD (TESOL)	Former Head of the ELT Division; 15 years	ELT; micro-teaching; language skills; research methods, testing & assessment
ETE03	Male 55	MA (TESOL)	Former Head; currently teaching only; 32 years	Language skills; culture & literature; phonetics & phonology; grammar & syntax; lexicology
ETE04	Female 42	PhD (Education)	Dean of the Faculty; 19 years of experience	ELT; micro-teaching; curriculum development; study skills; psychological counseling
ETE05	Male 32	MA (TESOL)	Teaching only; American; 9 years of experience	ELT; micro-teaching; English language skills

Data collection method and procedure

The study chose semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. This method can gather rich, detailed data and offer flexibility for probing, clarification, and the emergence of unanticipated themes to explore ETEs' perspectives on SEL (Patton, 2015). The interview questions were built based on established, validated instruments such as those developed by Elias et al. (2003), Greenberg et al. (2003) and Buchanan et al. (2009), but they were adapted to the specific context of EFL teacher education in Vietnam. The interview protocol includes twelve open-ended questions, focusing on eliciting detailed responses from ETEs about their understanding of SEL, their perceptions of its relevance and benefits, their perceived roles in SEL implementation, their reported strategies for its integration, the barriers they face, and their recommendations for strengthening SEL integration in teacher education. To ensure that the protocol was clear, relevant, and practical enough, it was reviewed by two academic experts and then piloted with two experienced ETEs who were not included in the main study. Feedback from these review and piloting processes helped the researcher refine the question items, probing strategies, and the coherence of the whole protocol, ensuring that the questions were clear and aligned with the research aims.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face at the workplace of the selected ETEs to ensure that they felt comfortable in their familiar environments. This choice of interview format encouraged ETEs to share their experiences and perspectives through an open and reflective discussion. The participants could also choose either English or Vietnamese in the interviews based on their linguistic preference to minimize linguistic constraints and enhance clarity, expressiveness, and comfort during the interview. Four Vietnamese participants chose to be interviewed in Vietnamese, while the American participant chose to conduct the interview in

English. Depending on the participant's responses, each interview session lasted between one and two hours.

Before the interviews, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality procedures; written informed consent was then obtained. With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim to preserve linguistic accuracy and contextual meaning, and only coded segments were translated into English for analysis and reporting. These coded segments include excerpts reflecting ETEs' beliefs about SEL, reported classroom practices, and reflections on challenges and training needs in EFL teacher education. Member checking was then used to ensure that the participants' perspectives were faithfully translated, analyzed and interpreted in the study.

Data analysis

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed by the researcher using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This data analysis technique offers a systematic approach to identifying, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting recurring patterns and themes within the data. Thematic analysis followed the six-step procedure, including familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2022). MaxQDA Analytics Pro 2020 software was utilized to facilitate the data coding, organization, and management process.

The coding process combined deductive and inductive elements. Deductive categories were predefined based on the objectives of the study, including ETEs' conceptual understanding of SEL, perspectives on the relevance and benefits of SEL in EFL education, perceived roles in SEL implementation, advocacy for developing SECs and SELIC among EPTs, perceived barriers to SEL integration in teacher education, and strategies proposed for promoting SEL within EFL teacher education programs. Inductively, additional codes and subthemes were generated directly from the data to explore unanticipated perspectives and reported practices related to SEL in EFL teacher education in Vietnam. Throughout the analytic process, themes were reviewed, refined, and redefined to ensure their internal coherence and clear distinctions.

Results/Findings

This section presents the main findings of the study based on the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with the five selected ETEs. The findings are organized into the categories of ETEs' conceptual understanding of SEL, their perspectives on the relevance of SEL in EFL education, their perceived roles in developing SECs and SELIC for EPTs, their reported strategies for integrating SEL into teacher education, the barriers they faced, and finally their recommendations for enhancing SEL integration within EFL teacher education. All of these findings could provide a detailed exploration of how ETEs at the selected pedagogical university understand, value, and practice SEL within EFL teacher education.

ETEs' conceptual understanding of SEL

The findings of the study indicate that, in general, ETEs are not familiar with the term SEL. They openly acknowledged their unfamiliarity with the term. For example, ETE05 admitted,

"I'm not familiar with this term specifically. S-E-L? No."

ETE03 also remarked,

"This is the first time I've been exposed to this term; before this, I did not have this topic

in mind."

Similarly, ETE04 described the concept as *"quite new to me."* These statements clearly indicate a concerning gap in ETEs' formal knowledge of SEL, implying that SEL has not yet been systematically conceptualized or labeled within their professional discourse.

Despite this initial unfamiliarity with the term SEL, after being provided with a brief introduction to SEL during the interview process, ETEs began to recognize some hidden aspects of SEL in their existing teaching practices. They admitted that they are acquainted with many of its basic principles, such as fostering collaboration and building positive classroom relationships. For instance, ETE04 reflected,

"I think I may have encountered the contents of the SEL concept somewhere."

This response implies that although the term itself is new, the principles behind it align with their existing teaching beliefs and practices. Similarly, ETE02 shared,

"Naming something like SEL is quite new to me. However, the contents are quite similar to what I know. For example, relationship skills are clearly reflected in group work activities and I see that group work is very effective in my classes."

This response indicates that although SEL as a formal framework is not explicitly addressed in their professional discourse, its practical applications, such as fostering teamwork and social interaction, are implicitly and intuitively integrated into their daily teaching practices.

It can be seen that although ETEs have limited familiarity with the formal term SEL, they are already familiar with many of its basic components and engaged in practices aligned with SEL principles without knowing that those practices are related to a formal SEL framework. In other words, without conceptual understanding, the interviewed ETEs still use implicit SEL-related concepts such as emotional regulation, empathy, and relationship skills. However, the limited awareness of SEL and the lack of formal knowledge about SEL prevent them from intentionally and explicitly designing, articulating, modeling, and assessing SEL for pre-service teachers. Actually, ETEs did not view these practices as intentional efforts to develop SECs for EPTs; instead, they described them as part of effective teaching strategies. This concerning gap indicates a need for more explicit, systematic training or professional development in SEL for teacher educators so that these intuitive practices can be intentionally designed, articulated and modeled within the EFL teacher education program.

ETEs' perspectives on the relevance and benefits of SEL in EFL teaching and learning

ETEs consistently emphasized the importance of SEL for effective EFL teaching and learning. Firstly, they stressed that emotional and social factors are foundational to successful language learning as they help create emotionally supportive classrooms that maximize student engagement and facilitate the language learning process. ETE05 illustrated this point:

"If I'm in a happy place, I'll be a much more effective learner. And if I'm in an uncomfortable place and angry or sad or stressed, yes, I cannot learn well."

This statement indicates that ETEs view SEL as an integral component of effective EFL teaching, not an optional element.

ETEs further advocated for SEL as a means of fostering greater student autonomy and at the same time reducing teacher workload. ETE04 observed,

"If our learners fully develop these competencies, the teacher's burden will decrease because students will be able to self-regulate; they will take responsibility for their own

learning.”

This perspective emphasizes that SEL helps students take greater responsibility for their learning, thereby reducing teachers' instructional burden. Conversely, ETE04 pointed out that students lacking SECs tend to avoid taking risks in learning tasks, which negatively affected their academic outcomes:

“Students with limited social skills usually don't achieve high academic results and often avoid taking risks in learning tasks.”

This reflection indicated the importance of SEL in preventing disengagement and enhancing learning outcomes.

Beside the immediate benefits for learning processes, SEL is also viewed as having cumulative and sustained benefits for teacher development, particularly in preparing pre-service teachers for their future teaching roles. ETE04 articulated this long-term impact:

“When EPTs are happy and satisfied with their learning, they will be successful learners, and in the future, when they become teachers, I'm sure they will be successful teachers.”

This perspective highlights the cyclical or downstream effect of SEL, where socially, emotionally competent EPTs are more likely to succeed as future teachers, who can sustain and amplify SEL practices in their own classrooms to foster SECs for their students.

ETEs also viewed SEL as an integrative approach rather than an isolated component of instruction. ETE05 explained,

“I would see it more as an approach they can look at to design teaching and learning activities.”

It means that SEL should be integrated into the teaching and learning processes, and should not be viewed as something to be taught separately in extra-curricular courses such as life-skills education. They also emphasize SEL's growing importance in modern technology-mediated educational contexts. ETE04 explained,

“I believe SEL will become a teaching approach, especially in a rapidly developing society like ours, where information technology is advancing rapidly and education can no longer focus solely on knowledge transmission.”

This advocacy for SEL as a holistic educational approach highlights the shift toward developing SECs that equip learners with the self-regulation, adaptability, collaboration, and ethical awareness to function productively in the contemporary digital age, where information overload, rapid changes, and increased social interaction demand more than content knowledge.

In addition, ETEs advocated for SEL's universal relevance beyond the EFL classroom. ETE04 remarked,

“I believe that all subjects are suitable for integrating SEL; teaching any subject must consider the social and emotional factors of the learners.”

This perspective highlights the belief that SEL is not confined to EFL education but serves as a fundamental element of effective teaching practices across diverse subjects such as Literature, History, and Arts.

Finally, ETEs recognized that SEL aligns with Vietnamese long-standing cultural values, and emphasized that it is relevant within the Vietnamese educational context. ETE03 highlighted this connection by referencing a very popular traditional saying in Vietnam: *“Tiên học lễ, hậu*

học văn” (First learn propriety, then learn knowledge). This cultural emphasis on respect, discipline, appropriate behaviors, relationships, and collective harmony aligns with SEL principles. It means that SEL not only addresses global educational trends but also remains relevant to Vietnamese culture.

ETEs’ perspectives on the roles of teachers in SEL implementation

The interviewed ETEs emphasized that educators are not just conveyors or transmitters of knowledge but also caretakers of students’ social-emotional development. ETE05 remarked,

“I think it is part of a teacher’s responsibility to instruct students how to behave with one another. Maybe they have some negative social, emotional attributes that I can help with as a teacher.”

ETEs also emphasize the lasting impact teachers can have on students’ emotional-social growth. ETE05 explained,

“Inside the classroom, we can try to create a safe, healthy and happy learning environment for our students. And hopefully, what we teach them, they’re able to use outside of the classroom in the future too, in terms of social-emotional development.”

This perspective highlights the role of teachers in equipping students with SECs needed to handle real-life challenges, not only academic tasks. In addition, ETEs describe the teacher-student relationship as a collaborative and supportive partnership essential for social-emotional growth. ETE04 likened teachers to *“a companion, someone who walks alongside, designs and helps construct these SECs for the learner.”* This metaphor indicated that teachers need to guide, support, and model SECs for students through ongoing interaction and everyday teaching practices rather than through isolated instruction in separate lessons.

ETEs’ perspectives on the need to develop SECs and SELIC for EPTs

ETEs emphasized the importance of equipping EPTs with SECs and SELIC. While SECs are viewed as personal competencies, SELIC is viewed as a professional teaching capacity which enables teachers to intentionally design, facilitate, and evaluate students’ SECs within EFL classrooms. ETEs emphasized that all of these competencies are essential for dealing with the social-emotional challenges that arise in EFL classrooms. As ETE05 observed,

“Socially, there’s always some students who are... it’s hard to get them involved... There’s bullying all over the world... You have to manage all of these social dynamics between learners and groups.”

This perspective highlights the need to foster SECs and SELIC for pre-service teachers so that they can foster emotionally safe learning environments where all students feel valued and supported.

ETEs also stressed the significant impact of a teacher’s emotional state on the whole classroom atmosphere and the learning processes, thereby confirming the need to equip EPTs with the skills to regulate their own emotions and model positive social-emotional behaviors. ETE02 observed,

“When the teacher is passionate and brings a lot of energy, that energy spreads to the students.”

Therefore, *“it’s essential to equip EPTs with the knowledge and skills to handle social-emotional issues,”* emphasized ETE01. Similarly, ETE05 reflected,

“If they are emotionally, socially competent, they will teach their students the same skills

and it just multiplies... very, very important.”

This perspective illustrates how equipping EPTs with SECs and SELIC creates a foundation for cultivating socially and emotionally competent learners in the next generation.

Balancing cognitive and non-cognitive skills is another recurring emphasis in the interviews with ETEs. While expertise in subject matter remains essential, ETEs argued that it must be complemented by SECs to address the complexities of modern classrooms. ETE03 remarked,

Both elements are equally important. We need teachers who are well-rounded, excellent in their expertise but also passionate about their students.”

This holistic perspective reflects the growing expectations for teachers to be able to not only deliver academic content but also manage the complex social-emotional dimensions of their classroom.

However, during the interviews, ETEs pointed out concerns about gaps in SEL training for EPTs. ETE05 shared,

“They need sufficient training in SEL. I graduated with my master's and I heard about this topic... not very in depth.”

This limited exposure to SEL in teacher education programs leaves EPTs underprepared to apply SEL intentionally and effectively in their teaching practices; consequently, they graduate, enter the teaching profession, but feel confused about how to address social-emotional issues in their classroom, and eventually get burnout. ETEs also stress that SEL training should extend beyond pre-service teacher education to continue throughout a teacher's professional career. ETE05 remarked,

“Every teacher should have more training in SEL, even teachers who have been teaching for 20 years.”

This highlights the need for continuous professional development to enhance and sustain SECs and SELIC for not only pre-service but also in-service teachers.

ETEs' reported strategies for integrating SEL into EFL teacher education

In the semi-structured interviews, ETEs reported different practical strategies that they associated with integrating SEL-related principles. These strategies include embedding SEL into existing coursework; modeling SECs through personal and professional practices; incorporating SEL-related criteria into assessment practice; utilizing group work, learning projects, extra-curricular activities and social media; continuous observation and responsiveness; and advancing SEL through continuous professional development. These strategies indicate that some practices compatible with SEL principles may already be present within the existing EFL teacher education program, but in an implicit and intuitive manner.

Embedding SEL naturally but implicitly in existing coursework

One of the primary strategies reported by ETEs involves embedding SEL-related principles naturally into existing courses instead of introducing it as separate or stand-alone lessons. ETEs suggested that some social-emotional elements might already be addressed implicitly in regular classroom activities, such as group work, discussion tasks, and other communicative activities. ETE05 illustrated this point:

“I think we can naturally incorporate emotional-social skills into our lessons because if we create a group of students and they don't have any of these skills, then it will be a disaster.”

In this context, social-emotional skills, such as collaboration, emotional regulation, empathy, and problem-solving, have become a natural or integral component of EFL teacher education. ETE05 reinforced this view:

"Even if we don't think about self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, we're still teaching them."

This point implies that even without conscious reference to SEL terminology, they are still fostering SECs for EPTs as part of normal teaching routines. ETE05 elaborated on how group work can foster these SECs such as collaboration, empathy and problem-solving:

"We can teach it passively by doing group work, seeing how students interact with each other."

This perspective highlights how SEL seamlessly aligns with academic objectives; therefore, it should be viewed as an essential condition for effective academic learning, not as an additional task.

Modeling SEL in EFL teacher education practices

Another reported strategy is to model SECs and SELIC for EPTs in everyday instructional practices. Through their behaviors and attitudes, such as respectful communication, emotional regulation in stressful situations, supportive feedback and problem-solving, teacher educators act as role models for pre-service teachers. ETE03 emphasized this role-modelling by referencing a very popular Vietnamese proverb, "*Thầy nào trò ấy*" ("*like teacher, like student*"), to illustrate how SECs and SELIC modeled by ETEs leave a lasting formative impact on EPTs. This highlights the cultural expectation in Vietnam that teacher educators need to lead by example. As ETE03 explained,

"Teacher educators, through their accumulated experience and knowledge, inevitably influence their pre-service teachers."

However, modeling SEL is often an unintentional and implicit process as ETEs naturally embody these skills without explicitly articulating them as SECs or SELIC. ETE05 reflected:

"I don't think I have explicitly told my students this, but just leading by example and hopefully, if they think I'm a good teacher, they will take the parts of me that they like and use it."

This highlights how EPTs may learn essential SECs and SELIC by observing how ETEs demonstrate them in authentic teaching contexts rather than by listening to formal instruction. Although modeling is, to some extent, effective and culturally appropriate, its implicit nature limits its transparent impacts. Without explicit articulation, EPTs may fail to fully understand the underlying principles or learn how to intentionally apply them in different teaching situations. This finding reinforces the study's central argument that implicit modeling, although effective, needs to be complemented by explicit instruction and reflection in order to support the systematic development of pre-service teachers' SECs and SELIC.

Incorporating SEL-related criteria into assessments

Integrating SEL-related criteria into assessment emerged as an effective strategy for fostering SECs for EPTs. ETE02 shared:

"When designing learning activities, I include and inform my students about the social-emotional criteria in the assessment rubric. Previously, the focus was on academic content, but now interaction and body language are also assessed, pushing students to

work on these skills.”

ETE02 observed that these changes encouraged EPTs to prioritize social-emotional skills like collaboration, leadership, and teamwork alongside academic objectives. ETE02 elaborated:

“Students began making more effort in group activities and leadership. For example, they now focus on how they work with others, not just on showing off their knowledge.”

This strategy fosters a deeper connection between academic tasks and social-emotional growth, making learning more relevant and meaningful for EPTs. It also indicates that assessment practices play an important role in legitimizing SEL as important learning outcomes alongside academic objectives.

Using group work, learning projects, and social media to develop SECs

In the context of large classes, where individualized attention may be constrained, group work becomes more important. ETE02 shared how group work could help overcome participation barriers:

“I’ve tried to address this by having students do more group work and participate in more projects.”

ETE05 reinforced this view,

“Whenever we have students work together in pairs or groups, all of these skills will be happening at the same time.”

Similarly, ETE02 highlighted its broader impact:

“Group work activities, in the classes I teach, are very effective. It doesn’t just build social skills but develops all of the skills in this SEL model. Group work not only enhances social awareness but also improves relationship skills.”

The collaborative nature of group work and learning projects may provide EPTs with opportunities to practice emotional intelligence, self-regulation, relationship skills and accountability. Social media platforms provide an additional channel for EPTs to develop SECs. ETE02 explained,

“I also create activities that encourage them to interact on social media, which provides more opportunities for them to practice and develop their skills.”

This strategy not only enhances communication and teamwork but also prepares EPTs to apply digital tools effectively in their own teaching and learning processes.

Using extracurricular activities to extend SEL opportunities

Extracurricular activities complement the formal curriculum by providing EPTs with opportunities to practice essential SECs such as social interaction, teamwork and emotional regulation in real-world environments. ETE04 emphasized the value of these opportunities:

“In addition to the formal content in the training program, we also have many activities, such as cultural performances and sports events, which I think contribute to the development of these competencies.”

Volunteer opportunities were also highlighted as instrumental in building SECs, offering real-world contexts for EPTs to apply SEL-related skills such as empathy, relationship-building and problem-solving. ETE04 elaborated on this point:

“Our students join these activities as volunteers, accompanying us to secondary schools

to help organize these activities.”

Additionally, the presence of different clubs and events within the university provides extra opportunities for EPTs to enhance their SECs. As ETE05 noted,

“The university is doing a good job of having clubs and events available to students so that they feel like more of a community together.”

These activities not only complement the academic curriculum but also foster a holistic approach to teacher preparation.

Fostering continuous observation and responsiveness

ETEs emphasized the important role of continuous observation and responsiveness in identifying and addressing students’ emotional and social needs during lessons. ETE03 highlighted this practice:

“During the lesson, I observe the students’ expressions and reactions to the content being taught.”

ETE02 further stressed,

“In every course I teach, I always pay attention to students’ emotions.”

Such attentiveness not only ensures that students feel recognized and understood but also creates a supportive learning environment. ETE05 also shared:

“My specific strategy is trying to connect with each student on a personal level to see what is going on in their life... I need to change my strategy with that specific student to try to connect with them so they learn as well as possible.”

This personalized approach not only demonstrates the importance of flexibility in teaching but also highlights the role of fostering a sense of connection and trust for effective learning.

In summary, ETEs reported a variety of practices that they associated with SEL integration in EFL teacher education. This reflects their attempts to prepare EPTs for the social-emotional dimensions of EFL teaching and learning. However, their strategies tend to be implicit, intuitive and fragmented without being anchored to a formal theoretical framework. This situation highlights the need for additional support to turn these personal aspirations into more systemic instructional design.

ETEs’ perceived barriers to SEL integration in EFL teacher education

Although the interviewed ETEs generally valued SEL, they encountered multiple barriers that could constrain the incorporation of SEL into EFL teacher education, including limited formal training, fragmented understanding, curriculum overload, limited instructional time, large class sizes, resistance to perceived additional responsibilities, and insufficient institutional support. One of the most significant barriers identified is the limited availability of training and professional development programs focused on SEL. ETE05 reflected on his own experience:

“As a younger teacher in the past, I think this might have been a huge challenge for me. Why is this student not learning? Why is this student more focused on something else instead of me?”

This quote highlights the challenges of newly graduated teachers in recognizing and addressing students’ social-emotional problems due to insufficient preparation in social-emotional dimensions of the classroom.

Balancing the dual demands of academic instruction and social-emotional development was

identified as another significant challenge. ETE05 described time constraints and curriculum pressure as limiting opportunities to attend to SEL:

“I think the biggest difficulty would be balancing time. You want them to develop these competencies socially and emotionally, but time management for teachers is a big challenge.”

Similarly, ETE01 acknowledged that academic requirements often take precedence over holistic approaches:

“Academic requirements will likely take precedence; SEL remains secondary.”

These comments highlight the systemic prioritization of academic outcomes, which leaves little room for ETEs to foster SECs for EPTs in daily classroom practices.

Educator resistance or reluctance to adopting new approaches or taking on additional responsibilities was identified as another barrier to SEL integration. ETE04 noted,

“The first challenge is the psychological resistance of teachers; they see it as adding to their burdens.”

ETE01 shared this opinion:

“At the start, teachers might see this as adding more work; their main task is to teach the subject matter, not focus on other factors like social-emotional skills.”

This resistance may come from a lack of understanding; these ETEs may fail to recognize that SEL can actually complement and support academic goals. In other words, SEL is an integral part of the teaching and learning process, not a separate element that adds instructional burdens. If educators view SEL as an add-on, they will regard it as an additional burden; consequently, they may hesitate or refuse to adopt SEL strategies. To overcome this barrier, it is necessary to provide professional development for ETEs to demonstrate the alignment between SEL principles and academic objectives.

Large class size is another significant challenge for ETEs when implementing SEL. ETEs reported that in a class with too many EPTs, they cannot address students' individual social-emotional needs. ETE02 raised this issue:

“In my class, there are more than fifty EPTs. I can't pay attention to all the emotions or problems of each pre-service teacher.”

This is a very common problem in Vietnamese education, where there are often too many students in a class. This condition was perceived as limiting opportunities for personalized social-emotional support.

Finally, limited resources could also hinder the integration of SEL in the EFL teacher education program. ETE04 suggested that

“We need to consider the resources we have to successfully implement SEL.”

It means that the successful integration of SEL requires not only suitable teaching materials and adequate training but also support from the institution and national policies. ETE04 further explained:

“Implementing SEL requires not only the willingness of teacher educators but also the support of the institution.”

This statement implies that without institutional support such as clear SEL policies, actionable guidelines, SEL-focused professional development, and sufficient funding, many ETEs may

find it hard to integrate SEL into the teacher education program.

ETEs' proposed recommendations for enhancing SEL integration in EFL teacher education

ETEs proposed a range of practical recommendations to address the challenges and opportunities to promote SEL in EFL teacher education programs. These recommendations reflect their commitment to fostering SEL competencies for EPTs.

Embedding explicit SEL instruction in teacher education curricula

Although SEL-related elements have already been naturally incorporated into the program, ETEs expressed concerns about the lack of explicit and formal focus on these elements. Current SEL-related practices tend to be implicit, fragmented and unintentional, relying on individual educators' personal beliefs, experiences and dispositions rather than intentional, systemic instructional design. ETE04 highlighted this issue:

"It's unfortunate that these elements are not clearly named or presented in the training program."

This lack of explicitness may result in SEL being undervalued in the curriculum. To address this gap, ETEs recommended more explicit attention to SEL within existing teacher education curricula. ETE04 elaborated,

"If we clearly outline these competencies in the curriculum, it would help both teacher educators and pre-service teachers focus on them more. It could shape many of the activities in the teaching plan."

This approach would not only validate SEL as an essential aspect of teacher preparation but also provide a clearer framework for incorporating these competencies into lesson planning, instructional strategies, assessment criteria, and other classroom interactions.

Raising awareness of SEL among teacher educators and pre-service teachers

To successfully integrate SEL into EFL teacher education programs, it is also necessary to raise awareness of SEL for ETEs and at the same time foster proactive engagement from EPTs. ETE04 emphasized that it is necessary to change instructors' perceptions through workshops or professional development programs to ensure that SEL becomes a core component of their teaching philosophy and practice. Equally important is the active involvement of EPTs. In the process of developing SECs and SELIC, pre-service teachers themselves must take ownership of their growth. ETE04 highlighted this responsibility:

"It is not just the training program that will shape and develop these competencies, the students themselves must be very active and proactive and must also recognize that developing these competencies is very important."

This idea reflects the belief that EPTs must internalize the value of SEL to ensure these competencies are fully internalized and effectively applied in their future teaching practices.

Advancing SEL through continuous professional development

Another recommendation made by ETEs for enhancing SEL competencies among EPTs is investing in continuous professional development. They argued that SECs and SELIC cannot be fully developed through pre-service training alone but require lifelong learning opportunities, such as mentoring, in-service training, and reflective communities of practice. ETE05 explained,

"I don't think any teacher who is starting is ever prepared enough; you learn a lot by

doing; they won't fully learn these skills until they have their own class and they're on their own."

This highlights the necessity for ongoing professional development opportunities that allow teachers to continually refine their SEL skills through repeated cycles of practice, challenges, reflection, and growth. Although pre-service training offers valuable early exposure to classroom dynamics, ETE05 emphasized that it cannot fully replicate the challenges of independently managing a classroom. ETE05 noted:

"The best way to learn these skills is just from doing it themselves and encountering the challenges, being self-aware of their triumphs and failures."

This iterative process of trial, reflection, and growth is integral to building SECs, and SEL is required for effective teaching.

Building collaborative partnerships to prioritize SEL in teacher education

In addition to individual commitment, the effective integration of SEL in teacher education requires strong collaborative partnerships among various stakeholders. ETE05 emphasized the need for this collaboration:

"I don't think we can say only teachers. I think teachers are a big factor in this process. Hopefully, the parents are helping, but maybe the third party would be a school counselor or a psychologist, I think it would take a team."

This statement indicates the need for shared responsibility and cooperation among teacher educators, parents, and other stakeholders in fostering SEL. ETE02 added:

"This isn't something that should fall on teachers alone but should be a collective effort of the entire educational community."

Similarly, ETE03 emphasized the essential role of the surrounding environment:

"The environment where EPTs practice and learn, such as schools and society, plays an essential role in developing their SECs."

This perspective indicates that effective SEL integration in EFL teacher education requires not only individual goodwill but also coherent, collaborative partnerships among all stakeholders across different levels of the education system and society as a whole.

Discussion

The findings of the current study reveal how ETEs understand, value, advocate, and implement SEL within the EFL teacher education program of a pedagogical university in Vietnam. The most noticeable finding is that despite their limited initial familiarity with SEL as a formally named framework, the interviewed ETEs generally perceived it as relevant and supported more explicit attention to it in EFL teacher education after receiving a brief explanation of the concept. In addition, they recognized potential roles for teacher educators in supporting SEL integration. Their positive perceptions are consistent with global research findings on SEL, which have demonstrated the great impacts of SEL on students' academic, social, and emotional development (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones & Kahn, 2017; OECD, 2024). For example, Jennings and Greenberg (2009) claim that SEL can help build positive learning environments, where students feel safe, valued, and motivated to engage fully and actively in the learning process. At the same time, the findings complement existing research on teachers' beliefs and practices related to SEL by extending the focus from in-service school teachers to teacher educators.

Previous studies have shown that teachers generally hold positive attitudes toward SEL and often incorporate SEL-related practices intuitively in their classrooms (Brackett et al., 2012; Bridgeland et al., 2013; Buchanan et al., 2009; Ee & Cheng, 2013; Yoder, 2014). The present study complements this line of research by demonstrating that similar patterns of strong advocacy coexist among EFL teacher educators, who play a formative role in shaping pre-service teachers' perceptions and practices of SEL.

In the field of EFL instruction, the participating ETEs recognized the potential of SEL to address the social and emotional dimensions, such as communication, interaction, learner engagement, and confidence, that can significantly influence language acquisition. Their view aligns with sociocultural theory, which emphasizes that language learning is inherently social and mediated through interaction (Vygotsky, 1986). They understand that language learning is inherently social; therefore, they frequently utilize activities like group discussions, peer collaboration, and interactive tasks to build not only linguistic skills but also social skills for EPTs. They also believe SEL helps PTEs manage emotional or affective factors such as anxiety, stress, and fear of failure, which encourages PTEs to take risks, persist through challenges, and remain engaged in the language learning process (Arnold & Brown, 1999; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Tran & Le, 2023; Vo, 2025). This perspective aligns with affective theories of second language acquisition, which emphasize the important role of positive emotions in sustaining learner motivation and willingness to communicate (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Vo, 2025). For ETEs, SEL is not perceived as an additional workload or a separate lesson but as an essential component of effective EFL instruction that enhances, not detracts from, language learning (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Tran & Le, 2023). This perception challenges a common concern that SEL integration may increase teachers' workload (Buchanan et al., 2009; Ee & Cheng, 2013). Instead, the findings suggest that SEL needs to be woven into EFL instruction to facilitate language acquisition and enhance SECs for EPTs.

The participating ETEs not only expressed support for SEL in their interview responses but also described a range of instructional practices that they subsequently associated with SEL principles. They reported using various strategies that combine cultural traditions with global best practices to promote SEL-related elements within the EFL teacher education program. The strategies they use include integrating SEL into existing teacher education courses, modeling SECs and SELIC for EPTs, using group work, using digital tools, and organizing extracurricular activities. These practices reflect their commitment to transforming teacher education so that future educators (EPTs) can support both the academic and social-emotional development of their students. These practices are consistent with international recommendations emphasizing curriculum integration, teacher modeling, and whole-program approaches to SEL in teacher education (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

Although ETEs advocate for SEL, most of their conceptual understanding and classroom practices are intuitive and implicit rather than formalized and explicit. In other words, although ETEs recognize the importance of social and emotional factors in education and already incorporate SEL-related practices in their daily instructional routines, they do so implicitly, without being guided by official frameworks, shared terminology, or explicit learning objectives. Actually, without sufficient conceptual understanding and continuous professional development in SEL, their current SEL practices remain fragmented, uneven, and dependent on individual commitment rather than structured implementation. This pattern suggests that SEL in Vietnamese EFL teacher education is not absent, but it is not formalized, explicitly addressed, guided, or evaluated.

These findings complement previous studies showing that teachers often implement SEL intuitively through everyday teaching practices without explicitly articulating or linking it to a formal framework or approach (Buchanan et al., 2009; Burgin et al., 2021; Ee & Cheng, 2013; Yoder, 2014). This implicit nature of SEL integration is a notable gap within the EFL teacher education program, where SEL risks being rendered as an “add-on” rather than a core component, especially in achievement-oriented contexts like Vietnam (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Tran & Le, 2023). Consequently, EPTs may develop fragmented or inconsistent understandings of how to design, implement, and assess SEL in their future classrooms (Huynh et al., 2022; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Tran, 2025). This problem supports Schonert-Reichl’s (2015) concern that implicit training may limit EPTs’ ability to recognize, articulate, and intentionally implement SEL in their future classrooms. This issue, again, emphasizes the importance of explicit professional development in SEL for ETEs to enable them to integrate SEL intentionally and explicitly into the teacher education program (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Tran, 2025).

It is also interesting to find that, in this study, ETEs frequently relate SEL to Vietnamese cultural values and assert its compatibility with the country’s long-standing educational traditions. They cite the Vietnamese proverb “*Tiên học lễ, hậu học văn*” (First learn propriety, then learn knowledge) to demonstrate that SEL principles align with the educational values of the country. This recognition is significant because it means that ETEs do not view SEL as an external or foreign concept but as a continuation or expansion of national educational values to meet the evolving demands of contemporary education (MoET, 2018; Tran & Le, 2023). It indicates ETEs’ acceptance of integrating SEL in culturally acceptable ways. However, a closer examination reveals a conceptual confusion or misalignment, where “*lễ*” encompasses externally regulated behaviors like respect, obedience, and appropriate conduct, while SEL involves internal competencies such as self-awareness, empathy, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). This confusion is particularly problematic, since if pre-service teachers are led to believe that traditional propriety already encompasses SEL, they may no longer perceive the need for training in SECs and SELIC. Therefore, it is necessary to provide explicit professional development in SEL for ETEs to strengthen their conceptual understanding of SEL, especially the differentiation between “*lễ*” and SEL.

Finally, a very encouraging theme emerging from the study is the strong openness and willingness among ETEs to engage in professional development in SEL so that they can integrate SEL more effectively, explicitly, and systematically into EFL teacher education. This willingness indicates the important role of formal guidance and targeted professional development in equipping teacher educators with the essential formal theories, specific skills, and practical strategies to implement SEL effectively within the EFL teacher education program (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Talvio et al., 2013). If ETEs are provided with adequate professional development in SEL, they can turn intuitive SEL efforts into intentional, explicit, and impactful practices within the EFL teacher education program, thereby strengthening the development of SECs and SELIC for EPTs, and then the long-term academic, social, and emotional outcomes of future learners (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Pentón Herrera, 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Talvio et al., 2013).

In summary, the findings suggest that integrating SEL into EFL teacher education in Vietnam is both necessary and achievable. Strong advocacy for SEL, cultural alignment, and professional willingness provide a fertile foundation for sustainable and effective SEL integration. What is now required is institutional support and structured professional development targeted at formal SEL frameworks and best practices to transform existing SEL integration from implicit, intuitive, and fragmented practices to explicit, intentional, and

systemic instructional design. These reforms have the potential to create a meaningful and lasting impact, preparing future EFL teachers to foster both linguistic proficiency and social-emotional skills for students.

Conclusion

This study investigated EFL teacher educators' perspectives on integrating SEL into the EFL teacher education program of a pedagogical university in Vietnam. Guided by a constructivist paradigm, a qualitative research design along with semi-structured interviews with five purposefully selected ETEs, the study explored their understanding, beliefs, reported practices and proposed recommendations for promoting SEL within the EFL teacher education program. A key finding of the study is the strong advocacy of ETEs for SEL as an essential framework for holistic EFL teacher education despite their unfamiliarity with the formal term of SEL. Interestingly, ETEs also demonstrated how SEL aligns with the country's cultural values and educational traditions such as moral education, respect, and social harmony. These perspectives indicate a promising vision for EFL education in Vietnam. Their positive attitudes and advocacy for SEL have the potential to transform EFL teacher education, promoting a more holistic and effective approach to EFL teaching and learning.

ETEs also reported a range of practices that they associated with SEL-related principles in teacher education. These include embedding SEL implicitly in existing coursework, modeling SECs for pre-service teachers, incorporating SEL into assessment criteria, using group work, social media and extracurricular activities. These practices indicate that ETEs, to some extent, already integrate SEL principles into the EFL teacher education program; however, these practices are largely intuitive, implicit, and fragmented. Despite their strong advocacy for SEL, they faced significant barriers in implementing SEL. These barriers include limited SEL training, time constraints, teacher educators' resistance, resource limitations, large class sizes, and insufficient institutional support. Aware of these barriers, they expressed strong willingness for targeted professional development in SEL to enhance their capacity to integrate SEL into teacher education.

These findings have important implications for EFL teacher education in Vietnam. First, it indicates the need to provide SEL-focused professional development opportunities for teacher educators to enhance their theoretical understanding of SEL and their practical capacity to teach and assess it. This will help transform their intuitive SEL practices into an impactful, intentional instructional approach. Second, it highlights the importance of adapting SEL to the country's cultural values to make SEL more relevant for educators and learners. This cultural alignment would reduce resistance to SEL integration, as it respects the country's long-standing cultural and educational traditions while addressing contemporary educational demands. Finally, the study suggests the need for collaboration among key stakeholders, including teacher educators, curriculum designers, institutional leaders, and policymakers, to foster shared responsibility and coherence in SEL implementation. These changes would help prepare future EFL teachers who can foster students' social and emotional development alongside linguistic proficiency, thereby contributing to the realization of the country's holistic education goals and keeping pace with global educational trends.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Study

Despite its significant contributions, the study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. The first limitation is related to the small sample size of five ETEs purposefully selected from only one pedagogical university in Vietnam. Although purposive sampling and

maximum variation could ensure the collection of diverse perspectives within this specific context, the findings remain context-bound, neither transferable to other teacher education institutions nor representative of all EFL teacher education programs in Vietnam. Future research, therefore, should expand the sample size and include more ETEs from other teacher education institutions across the country to provide a more comprehensive understanding of SEL integration in EFL teacher education in Vietnam. Another limitation involves the exclusive reliance on self-reported data collected from semi-structured interviews, which represent ETEs' stated perspectives and reported practices, not verified or observed actual behaviors. This type of data can be subject to potential biases such as social desirability and selective recall, hence limiting the credibility of the findings. To address this limitation, future research should adopt a triangulated research design by combining interview data with other data sources such as classroom observations, curriculum analysis and surveys with other stakeholders.

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Biodata

Tran Thi Yen is a lecturer at Thai Nguyen University of Education, Vietnam. She has over 15 years of teaching experience in TESOL and teacher education. Her research interests include teaching methodology, Social Emotional Learning (SEL), and integrating SEL into EFL teaching practices. She is dedicated to promoting holistic development in education.

Nguyen Thi Mai Huong is an Associate Professor at the University of Languages and International Studies - Vietnam National University, Hanoi. With a PhD in Teacher Education from the University of Nottingham, UK, she specializes in English teacher education and

professional development. She has taught MA courses in Vietnam and abroad and led numerous teacher-training workshops nationwide.

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