

ANALYSIS OF AN EFL TEACHER EDUCATION CURRICULUM IN VIETNAM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCES

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the integration of social-emotional competences in the pre-service EFL teacher education curriculum of a pedagogical university in Vietnam. Document analysis was utilized and data analysis results show that although social-emotional competences are significantly represented in the curriculum, they are largely implicit and unevenly distributed across the five core social-emotional competences as well as their specific skills. Specifically, Self-Management and Relationship Skills are strongly emphasized while Self-Awareness, Responsible Decision-Making and Social Awareness are much less emphasized in the curriculum. Notably, Self-Awareness is the least emphasized competence among the five core competences. This uneven distribution is understandable as it reflects Vietnamese cultural and educational values, which tend to prioritize collective harmony over individual emotional expression. The findings of the study can offer valuable guidance for educational policymakers, curriculum developers and educators in promoting holistic teacher education and EFL instruction. Based on these findings, practical recommendations are provided, including explicit integration of social-emotional competences in the teacher training curriculum, especially in learning outcomes, course contents, separate modules, daily practices and assessment criteria.

PHÂN TÍCH MỘT CHƯƠNG TRÌNH ĐÀO TẠO GIÁO VIÊN TIẾNG ANH TẠI VIỆT NAM DƯỚI GÓC ĐỘ NĂNG LỰC CẢM XÚC – XÃ HỘI

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TỪ KHÓA

Học tập cảm xúc – xã hội
Năng lực cảm xúc – xã hội
Đào tạo giáo viên tiếng Anh
Giáo dục toàn diện
Phân tích chương trình

TÓM TẮT

Mục đích của nghiên cứu này là khám phá mức độ lồng ghép các năng lực cảm xúc – xã hội trong chương trình đào tạo giáo viên tiếng Anh tại một trường đại học sư phạm ở Việt Nam. Thông qua phân tích chương trình đào tạo, kết quả phân tích số liệu cho thấy các năng lực cảm xúc – xã hội tuy đã được lồng ghép trong chương trình, nhưng chủ yếu ở dạng gián tiếp và phân bố chưa đồng đều giữa năm nhóm năng lực cốt lõi cũng như các kỹ năng thành phần. Cụ thể, năng lực tự quản lý bản thân và xây dựng mối quan hệ là hai nhóm được thể hiện rõ nét nhất trong khi năng lực tự nhận thức về bản thân, ra quyết định có trách nhiệm và nhận thức xã hội xuất hiện với tần suất ít hơn. Đáng chú ý, tự nhận thức về bản thân là nhóm năng lực ít được đề cập nhất. Sự phân bố không đồng đều những năng lực này không khó hiểu vì nó phản ánh các giá trị văn hóa giáo dục Việt Nam vốn đề cao sự hài hòa tập thể hơn là biểu đạt cảm xúc cá nhân. Những phát hiện này sẽ giúp các nhà hoạch định chính sách, người xây dựng chương trình và giảng viên trong việc định hướng phát triển chương trình đào tạo giáo viên một cách toàn diện hơn. Trên cơ sở đó, nghiên cứu đề xuất một số khuyến nghị cụ thể như: lồng ghép các năng lực cảm xúc – xã hội vào chương trình đào tạo giáo viên một cách rõ ràng hơn, đặc biệt vào chuẩn đầu ra, nội dung học phần, mô-đun chuyên biệt, thực hành thường xuyên và tiêu chí đánh giá.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Rationale

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) has been increasingly recognized as an integral part of education in many parts of the world. SEL is valued by scholars worldwide for its positive impacts on students' academic outcomes, emotional well-being and social skills [1]. In teacher education, SEL has also gained increasing attention as researchers believe that SEL integration can foster social-emotional competences (SECs) for future teachers, which not only help them manage their classrooms effectively but also prepare them to model and teach these skills in their students [2] - [4]. With growing international recognition, teacher training programs worldwide are increasingly adopting explicit SEL frameworks such as those provided by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) to train future teachers with the hope that they will become not only academically proficient but also socially and emotionally competent.

In the field of EFL teaching and learning, SEL plays a very meaningful role. Research has demonstrated that language learning processes inherently involve emotional and social factors such as anxiety, shyness, lack of confidence, pressure and cross-cultural communication rules [5] - [8]. Therefore, EFL teacher education programs need to equip future teachers with essential SECs not only for their own sake but also for the benefits of their students. With strong SECs, teachers are more likely to model and foster SECs for their students [4], [9], [10]. These practices will contribute to promoting students' holistic development by enhancing their language proficiency and fostering their social and emotional skills at the same time.

When it comes to Vietnam, although its educational philosophy and practices are historically influenced by Confucian values, the country still recognizes the importance of holistic education. Therefore, it has introduced significant reforms. One of the most comprehensive reforms can be seen through the 2018 National General Education Curriculum, which has made a strong transition towards competency-based and holistic education [11]. This reform strongly emphasizes the importance of general and specific competences, values, attitudes and behaviors, not just knowledge acquisition. Basically, most of these qualities, values and skills align with SEL principles. Despite these favorable conditions, explicit SEL implementation in Vietnam remains limited [8], [12]. Similarly, systematic research on the integration of SEL in general and SECs in particular in EFL teacher education programs in Vietnam remains limited [9], [10], [12], [13]. This research gap highlights ongoing uncertainties about the extent to which SEL is currently integrated into the EFL teacher education curriculum and how well pre-service EFL teachers are equipped with essential SECs.

A thorough and detailed curriculum analysis, therefore, was conducted to fill this gap. This analysis focuses on analyzing the EFL teacher education curriculum of a pedagogical university in Vietnam to assess the extent to which the five core SECs and their specific skills are addressed. This analysis was guided by the CASEL framework, a globally well-established framework for systemic SEL as it offers a comprehensive framework with specific, actionable and measurable skills [1]. The findings of the study revealed the current status of SEL integration, identifying strengths and limitations of the curriculum in terms of SEL. These findings provided a firm foundation for the researcher to make practical recommendations for enhancing SEL implementation in Vietnamese teacher training programs.

1.2. Social Emotional Learning and the CASEL Framework

According to CASEL [1], SEL is *“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 has also developed a Framework for Systemic SEL, which outlines five core SECs along with their specific skills, which have been proven to be essential for success in school, life and professional contexts [14].

Figure 1 provides an overview of this framework, which lays the theoretical foundation for this study. At the center of the framework are the five core SECs, namely Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills and Responsible Decision-Making. Surrounding the core competencies are different layers of influence, including classrooms, schools, families and caregivers and communities. These layers indicate the support needed for effective SEL implementation, including SEL instruction and classroom climate, schoolwide culture, practices, policies, authentic partnerships and aligned learning opportunities.

The framework is built and continuously developed based on extensive research and best practices. Therefore, it has broad applicability and empirical validation. It provides educators with clear and comprehensive guidelines to support students' emotional intelligence and social competence, contributing to holistic development [2], [4], [14]. That is why the CASEL framework was selected as the analytical framework for the present document analysis. It offers a structured basis for examining how the five core SECs are embedded - either explicitly or implicitly; emphasized or neglected - within the curriculum of EFL teacher education. More specifically, this study employed the CASEL's competencies and their associated skill sets as a coding guide to systematically investigate the curriculum content.

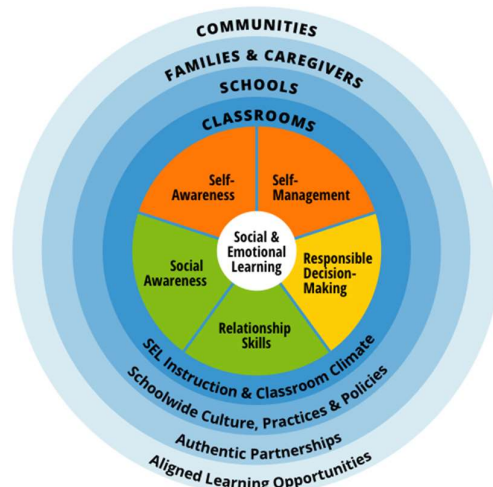


Figure 1. CASEL's 2020 Framework for Systemic SEL

1.3. Social Emotional Learning in Teacher Education

In recent years, many researchers and educators have acknowledged that preparing future teachers is not just about equipping them with content knowledge or teaching methods. They emphasized that it is also necessary to foster their own SECs so that they can better manage stress, regulate emotions and build stronger relationships with students. Strong SECs also enable teachers to effectively model, support and teach social and emotional skills for their students [3]. These competences and their specific skills are essential not only for teachers themselves but also for their students and other stakeholders. SEL can help build safe, inclusive and supportive learning environments, which are beneficial for both teachers and students [2] - [4], [10].

Both Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba [7] and Tran [10] emphasized that when SEL is explicitly taught, teacher candidates are more socially and emotionally competent. Lawlor [3] also showed that SEL should be integrated into every aspect of teacher education, from theory to practical applications. Similarly, Schonert-Reichl [4] documented that explicit SEL training can foster more socially and emotionally competent educators, highlighting the growing demand for training in SEL for both pre-service and early career teachers. Moreover, it was found that many teacher education programs still lack a structured SEL integration. In other words, SEL is often

insufficiently addressed, implicitly embedded, unevenly distributed and undervalued in teacher training curricula. These concerns call for the need to embed SEL as a core component of teacher education, not just as an optional or extra-curricular program [4].

In the context of teacher education in Vietnam, Huynh et al. [12] reported that many Vietnamese student teachers were unfamiliar with the term SEL and its related concepts. These pre-service teachers also showed uncertainty about how to teach SECs for their students, and expressed a clear need for more concrete training and practical strategies. Phan [13] also noted that although some elements of SEL were present in teacher training programs, they were typically embedded implicitly within general psychological or pedagogical courses rather than explicitly taught. Do and Zsolnai [9] also reported a lack of structured SEL training, which posed challenges for pre-service teachers to deal with the social and emotional aspects of teaching and learning satisfactorily. These findings point to a significant gap in how SEL competences and skills are addressed or covered in teacher education programs. This study, therefore, was conducted to address the gap. It aims to assess how each of the five core SECs and their specific skills are represented, integrated or perhaps overlooked in the EFL teacher education curriculum of a pedagogical university in Vietnam.

2. Methodology

This study utilized an in-depth document analysis to explore how SECs are integrated into the current EFL teacher education curriculum at a pedagogical university in Vietnam. This university was selected via “purposeful sampling” strategy because it offers a well-established undergraduate EFL teacher education program. In addition, the university is a familiar site to the researcher; therefore, it allows for easier access to data sources. The curriculum selected for document analysis was officially issued in 2022 by the rector of the university, and it was the official and most updated curriculum at the time of the study. The documents for analysis included both the overall curriculum framework and a collection of 78 detailed course syllabi. The analysis focused on five important components of the curriculum, including program learning outcomes, course outcomes, course contents, teaching methods and assessments [15].

The analysis adopted a deductive coding approach, and was guided by the five core SECs and their specific skills outlined in the CASEL framework [1] as can be seen in Figure 1. Both explicit and implicit SEL-related skills were considered and coded. For instance, a course learning outcome that mentions “*understand cultural values of other countries*” would be coded as an explicit reference to Social Awareness, whereas a course content such as “*write essays expressing viewpoints*” would be classified as an implicit reference to Self-Awareness. Data analysis was conducted on MAXQDA software. Text segments within the curriculum documents were highlighted and coded according to the predefined SEL skills in the coding guide. After the coding phase had been completed, MAXQDA's visualization tools were used to generate the overall pattern of the frequency of SECs within the coded data. Excerpts or direct quotations from the curriculum were then extracted from the software to illustrate the findings presented in the report. These techniques help ensure the credibility of the findings.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Findings

Figure 2 illustrates the overall assessment on the emphasis placed on each of the five core SECs within the EFL teacher education curriculum. The total number of instances identified is 238. This number indicates a significant coverage of SEL skills integrated into teacher preparation. However, the distribution across the five core competencies reveals notable differences: Self-Management (SEM) is the most emphasized with 82 occurrences, followed by Relationship Skills (RES) with 71, Responsible Decision-Making (RDM) with 43, Social Awareness (SOA) with 31 and Self-Awareness (SEA) with only 11 instances.

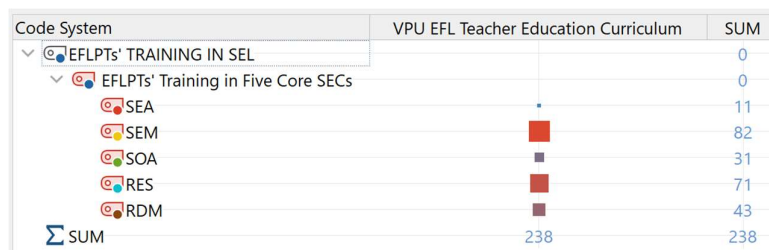


Figure 2. Distribution of SECs in the curriculum

Regarding Self-Awareness (SEA), Table 1 shows that the five specific skills under this competence are addressed in the curriculum to different extents. *SEA5. Maintaining self-confidence and optimism* is the most frequently addressed, with six references. This figure highlights the importance of maintaining confidence in language learning. Meanwhile, other skills of Self-Awareness such as *SEA3. Recognizing strengths and limitations* and *SEA4. Identifying personality and values* receive very little attention. Actually, each skill is addressed only one time in the curriculum.

Table 1. Specific Self-Awareness skills included in the curriculum

Self-awareness Skills	No.	Illustrative excerpts
SEA1. Identifying & expressing emotions	1	<i>Emotion understanding skills</i>
SEA2. Recognizing & asserting personal needs	2	<i>Write essays expressing viewpoints</i>
SEA3. Recognizing strengths & limitations	1	<i>Evaluate strengths & weaknesses</i>
SEA4. Identifying personality & values	1	<i>Understand personal qualities</i>
SEA5. Maintaining self-confidence	6	<i>Build self-confidence & positive thinking ...</i>

With regards to Self-Management (SEM), Table 2 shows that *SEM5. Being proactive in tasks* stands out at 53 out of the 82 references. *SEM6. Effective time management* also receives considerable attention (20 references). In contrast, *SEM1. Adapting to new situations* receives little explicit attention (only one reference). Other skills like *SEM3. Overcoming challenges* and *SEM4. Resisting negative behaviors* seem to be absent from the curriculum.

Table 2. Specific Self-Management skills included in the curriculum

Self-management Skills	No.	Illustrative excerpts
SEM1. Adapting to new situations	1	<i>Adapt to diverse working environments</i>
SEM2. Goal setting	8	<i>Develop lifelong learning and goal-setting skills</i>
SEM3. Overcoming challenges	0	<i>No explicit reference found in the curriculum.</i>
SEM4. Resisting negative behaviors	0	<i>No explicit reference found in the curriculum.</i>
SEM5. Being proactive in tasks	53	<i>Actively participate in class activities</i>
SEM6. Effective time management	20	<i>Complete tasks on time</i>

Coming to Social-Awareness (SOA), Table 3 reveals that the strongest emphasis is placed on *SOA5. Appreciating diversity* (10 references). Similarly, *SOA3. Understanding perspectives* (9 references) is frequently addressed. Other skills such as *SOA1. Showing empathy* and *SOA4. Respecting others* receive much less emphasis (5 references). *SOA2. Recognizing strengths and weaknesses* is the least emphasized with only 2 references.

Table 3. Specific Social-Awareness skills included in the curriculum

Social Awareness Skills	No.	Illustrative excerpts
SOA1. Showing Empathy	5	<i>Share with peers to resolve learning tasks</i>
SOA2. Recognizing others' strengths & weaknesses	2	<i>Apply knowledge about different learners</i>
SOA3. Understanding others' perspectives	9	<i>Analyze texts from multiple cultural perspectives</i>
SOA4. Respecting others	5	<i>Promote respectful classroom behavior</i>
SOA5. Appreciating diversity	10	<i>Understand cultural values of other countries</i>

Turning to Relationship Skills (RES), Table 4 shows that the most frequently addressed skills are *RES3. Working well in groups* (31 references) and *RES2. Effective communication* (26 references). In contrast, *RES4. Conflict resolution* and *RES5. Seeking and offering help* receive much less emphasis (6 references each). Finally, the curriculum's emphasis on *RES1. Building and maintaining relationships with diverse groups* is the least with only two references.

Table 4. *Specific Relationship Skills included in the curriculum*

Relationship Skills	No.	Illustrative excerpts
RES1. Building relationships	2	<i>Develop collaborative skills in diverse working environments</i>
RES2. Effective communication	26	<i>Enhance effective communication</i>
RES3. Working well in groups	31	<i>Effectively collaborate in learning activities</i>
RES4. Conflict resolution	6	<i>Develop cooperation and problem-solving skills</i>
RES5. Seeking & offering help	6	<i>Actively help other people</i>

Finally, when it comes to Responsible Decision-Making (RDM), Table 5 indicates that the most frequently addressed skill is *RDM3. Gathering information and proposing solutions*, with 20 references. *RDM4. Creative thinking and adapting to change* is also frequently addressed with 11 references. *RDM2. Considering diverse factors in decision-making* is moderately addressed (7 references). However, *RDM1. Identifying and clarifying complex information* is mentioned only once, and *RDM5. Evaluating consequences* is completely absent.

Table 5. *Specific Responsible Decision-Making skills included in the curriculum*

Responsible Decision-Making Skills	No.	Illustrative Excerpts
RDM1. Identifying & clarifying information	1	<i>Analyze, synthesize & compare information</i>
RDM2. Considering diverse factors in decision-making	7	<i>Apply legal knowledge to solve practical situations</i>
RDM3. Gathering information & proposing solutions	20	<i>Synthesize information into theory for application in practices</i>
RDM4. Creative thinking & adapting to change	11	<i>Creative problem-solving in real educational contexts</i>
RDM5. Evaluating consequences	0	<i>No explicit reference found in the curriculum.</i>

3.2. Discussion

The findings from this study reveal both strengths and gaps in the integration of SECs into the EFL teacher education curriculum at the selected pedagogical university. In general, SEL-related skills are frequently integrated into the curriculum; some are explicitly while some are implicitly embedded. This frequency indicates a clear recognition of the importance of SECs in pre-service teacher education. However, the distribution across the five core competencies as well as their specific skills indicates a great imbalance, which aligns with and extends the findings of previous studies in the field.

Self-Management (SEM) is the most emphasized competency in the curriculum. The first priority for this competence aligns with the Confucian values, which have long been embedded in Vietnamese education. These values expect Vietnamese people to show discipline, diligence, perseverance and personal responsibility [16]. The curriculum's strong emphasis on SEM-related skills such as proactive participation, self-regulation, goal setting and time management also reflects the society's expectations on teachers' responsibility and professionalism. This strong emphasis also aligns closely with the contemporary challenges of Vietnamese EFL teachers, who frequently encounter workplace stress such as large class sizes, diverse learner needs and achievement-driven, competitive educational environments [16].

Relationship Skills (RES), the second most addressed competence, are also frequently present. These include collaborative learning, communication, teamwork and conflict resolution, all of which are necessary in effective language classrooms. This finding is consistent with previous

studies such as Tran et al. [8] and Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba [7]. All of these studies stress that Relationship Skills are very important for EFL teachers and learners. Because of the interactive and communicative nature of language teaching and learning, teachers are expected to demonstrate good Relationship Skills as well as encourage collaborative learning environments for students to practice and foster their language skills in authentic contexts [5] - [8].

Responsible Decision-Making (RDM) is much less emphasized than SEM and RES. This modest coverage implies that future EFL teachers are not well-prepared for the complex decision-making challenges of modern classrooms [4]. Although this competence is moderately emphasized, the presence of Responsible Decision-Making in the curriculum still reflects Vietnamese cultural and educational values, which emphasize moral education and ethical behaviours [16]. These values also expect teachers to provide moral guidance, model ethical behaviors and support students in making responsible decisions. With good Responsible Decision-Making skills, teachers can effectively evaluate multiple factors such as learner diversity, cultural sensitivity and pedagogical effectiveness to be able to select the most appropriate teaching methods or assessment strategies.

Social Awareness (SOA) includes important skills like empathy, understanding diverse perspectives and cultural sensitivity for any language learner and teacher; however, this competence is not satisfactorily addressed, with only 31 references. This moderate coverage may limit pre-service teachers' preparation to understand and respect others, especially their students and their colleagues. Because of the inherently social and intercultural nature of English language teaching and learning, this is a concerning gap of the curriculum that needs to be addressed satisfactorily [7], [8]. Curriculum developers and teacher trainers could consider enhancing Social Awareness for pre-service teachers by introducing more group discussions, cross-cultural comparisons and empathy-building activities.

The most notable finding is that Self-Awareness (SEA) is the least emphasized competency, with only 11 references. This finding is not unexpected as it aligns with previous studies. For example, Schonert-Reichl [4] reported that Self-Awareness is rarely addressed in teacher education programs. This finding is also understandable in the context of Vietnamese culture, which tends to prioritize social harmony and collective identity over individual emotional expression [16]. However, this is a significant gap that needs to be addressed since Self-Awareness is foundational to other SECs within SEL frameworks [1].

In summary, document analysis results show that the curriculum covers a high frequency of SECs. This high frequency indicates that the pedagogical university recognized the importance of integrating SEL principles into its curriculum. However, there is a lack of balance across the five core SECs and the specific skills under each of the core competence. This uneven distribution aligns with previous studies around the world that teacher education programs often integrate SEL implicitly, unevenly and inadequately [4]. These gaps indicate the need for a more intentional, explicit and balanced integration of all the five core SECs across the curriculum. This structured SEL training would enhance teachers' own SECs and classroom effectiveness. It can also support the goals of competency-based and holistic education of Vietnam [11].

4. Conclusion

This study has investigated the integration of SECs in the pre-service EFL teacher education curriculum at a selected pedagogical university in Vietnam. A comprehensive document analysis of the curriculum shows that SEL skills are present in the curriculum. However, their integration tends to be implicit rather than explicit or direct. Self-Management and Relationship Skills were strongly emphasized. However, the curriculum pays limited explicit attention to Self-Awareness, Responsible Decision-Making and Social Awareness. This uneven emphasis is understandable in the context of Vietnam's cultural and educational values, which normally value collective harmony, moral conduct and societal responsibility than personal emotional well-being. To address this gap, the EFL teacher education curriculum needs to implement an explicit and balanced integration of SEL competencies

into course objectives, course contents, teaching methods, separate SEL training modules, daily instructional practices, assessment criteria and institutional policy. These strategies can significantly enhance pre-service teachers' SECs, empowering them to confidently model and teach SECs for their students, promoting competency-based and holistic education. In conclusion, this study yielded meaningful findings and made practical recommendations to enhance SEL integration into Vietnamese teacher education. Future research could base on these findings and conduct interviews or classroom observations to further investigate this issue.

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