

INCORPORATING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN THE ENGLISH CLASSES AT MILITARY ACADEMIES

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ABSTRACT

As military students navigate the demanding transition to the post-pandemic learning environment, there is a growing recognition of the importance of addressing social and emotional learning (SEL) needs. Drawing on existing literature as well as on empirical evidence, the present paper focuses on the unique benefits that this type of learning has for cadets and on the potential that foreign language classes can have as a platform for promoting Social and Emotional Learning competencies such as more involvement in the English classes, an increased resilience level, better relationship skills, or increased academic performance. The article also presents some potential challenges for the implementation of SEL in English classes at military academies, including alignment with existing curriculum standards, faculty training and support, and assessment of SEL outcomes. Furthermore, the paper suggests modalities in which SEL can be incorporated in the English classes by means of projects, role-plays, problem solving, etc. and pinpoints the role that educators play in facilitating SEL integration. By addressing these challenges and capitalizing on the expertise of teachers and military leaders, academies can create inspirational learning environments that promote the social, emotional, and academic growth of their cadets, preparing them for the 21st century.

KEYWORDS: academy, English, military, SEL students

1. Introduction

During the last two decades the methods of teaching all disciplines and especially foreign languages have changed considerably, moving from teacher centred to student centred, from the meaningless to the meaningful, from the teacher as omniscient imparter of knowledge to the teacher as facilitator, organizer, and participant. From the very moment the teacher comes into contact with a new class, he/she has to make sure that they create an environment where the students feel safe and supported where their mistakes are corrected, but where they are not judged for their opinions.

There is a call to action for military educators and leaders to prioritize SEL within the English language curriculum and to recognize its role in preparing cadets for the multifarious challenges of military leadership in the 21st century.

2. Benefits of Incorporating SEL into English Classes

Focusing on social and emotional learning during the English classes enables students to hone and gain both academic as well as essential life skills. The students whose self-awareness, self-regulation and impulse control are well developed tend to perform better academically as they can

stay more focused on their studies, become more motivated and the lower levels of stress enable them to be more engaged in the curricular activities. Furthermore, the enhancement of the social skills provided by SEL will contribute to the bettering of the students' communication with one another, of their collaborative work, and the teacher will notice more productive peer interactions. The positive atmosphere during the classes and the encouraging learning environment will lead to higher academic outcomes:

- *“Students participating in SEL at school have higher levels of <<school functioning>>, as reflected by their grades, test scores, attendance, and homework completion.*

- *SEL builds social and emotional skills that increase student engagement and lead to improved academic performance.*

- *SEL interventions that addressed the five core competencies increased students' academic performance by 11 percentile points, compared to students who did not participate” (***, 2024).*

The level of resilience and the adaptability of the students also increase when attention is paid to SEL. SEL will equip learners with the necessary instruments to confront unpredictable situations and changes, at the same time developing as persons and as professionals.

The social distancing imposed during the Covid pandemic put a strain on interpersonal relationships, producing and enhancing the already existing feeling of loneliness. This is another reason to bring SEL in the English classes to reconstruct relationships through active listening, empathy and conflict resolution

The pandemic's social distancing measures strained interpersonal relationships, leading to feelings of loneliness and disconnection. SEL plays a crucial role in the rebuilding of the sense of community and in the strengthening of relationships. SEL helps individuals

develop their empathy and their active listening abilities, contributing thus to a more cohesive community.

By including SEL during the English classes, the teachers also consolidate effective communication in a polite manner, active listening and engagement in fruitful discussions avoiding misinformation and miscommunication. At the same time, SEL elements will foster a sense of responsibility and the inculcation of values like compassion, empathy, fair competition, ethical decision making.

By cultivating empathy, tolerance, respect, collaboration, and critical decision making during the foreign language classes, teachers also help their learners to develop a sense of social responsibility, of interconnectedness, of understanding. These will experience a higher degree of well-being, there will be fewer behavioural problems and they will be more willing to get involved in the life of the community and of the society they belong to.

The Covid-19 pandemic caused major disruptions in the education of children and young adults, the quality of education during lockdowns being severely diminished. We strongly believe that a conducive learning environment and a positive university culture will be decisive elements that will facilitate the students' making up for the loss of information and competences that occurred because of the pandemic by increasing their engagement, their motivation, and last, but not least, their academic performance.

3. Challenges

One of the primary challenges regarding the integration of SEL into English classes at military academies is represented by the mandatory alignment with existing curriculum standards and educational objectives. Military academies typically have very strict curricular guidelines and academic requirements, and this may leave to less flexibility when it comes to the incorporation of SEL elements.

Another challenge is the necessity for adequate training and support for the teachers that will deliver SEL-infused language instruction. There will be some who may lack the necessary knowledge, skills or resources to effectively integrate SEL into their teaching practices. There is also the issue of the workload as adding more tasks to be fulfilled “*Creating student-centered classrooms with a collaborative learning environment where students focus on inquiry-based and authentic experiences demands much more than a teacher-centered classroom where the teacher transmits information to students*” (Dibbon, 2004). “*This context requires new skills from teachers, necessitating familiarity with different curricula, theories and methods of teaching and learning, IT application, lesson planning, leadership, etc.*” (Zydzianaite et al., 2022).

Assessment of SEL Outcomes: Assessing the impact of SEL initiatives on cadet learning and development poses a significant challenge. Traditional assessment methods may not capture the multifaceted nature of SEL outcomes, such as improved communication skills, empathy, and resilience, making it difficult to measure the effectiveness of SEL interventions accurately.

4. Recommendations regarding the Incorporation of Social and Emotional Learning in the English Classes

During the English classes the cadets have plenty of opportunities to express their feelings more or less directly, maybe more than in the case of real sciences classes due to the nature of the activities they are asked to do: role-play situations where they have to take the role of dissatisfied customers or in which they assume they have various roles, engaging in debates, writing informal correspondence or writing essays on various topics.

The speaking activities build a sense of community and also enable the teacher to become aware of the emotional states of the students. During the discussions that ensue in class, the teacher should intervene as little as possible, without humiliating the student, and should correct only at the end of the speaking activity, after the means of getting the student correct his/her own mistakes have failed. The one who teaches should understand that even though mistakes are generally frowned upon “*these may just be an indicator that learning is taking place that our students are trying to make room for a new piece of information in their personal repository of language. This can sometimes disrupt pre-existing connections and links, meaning it may take some time until new items are fully integrated in this complex web*” (***, 2022).

We have also found that in the diary entries the students are asked to write they convey not only their experiences but also their thoughts and emotions and, at the same time, they also feel encouraged to reflect on feelings and on their personal growth. “*With reflective journaling, students can explore each of the CASEL competencies without even realizing they’re doing it. By giving them a safe way to open up, vent, or simply share their thoughts, they can begin to process how a situation (such as a bullying or peer-pressure incident) made them feel. Identifying these emotions helps them understand their role in a situation, as well as how their reactions escalated or deescalated the incident. This insight can help them manage similar situations in the future. As a result, better decision-making and stronger problem-solving skills are formed, which leads to healthier relationships in the future and a better community overall*” (Klinger-Krebs, 2021).

For the exercises done to hone all the four language skills, we try to choose texts to which they can relate, most of the time

with a military flavour, which are of interest to them. Occasionally, the cadets themselves can choose the texts to study or suggest topics that are of interest to them. The same freedom of choice is sometimes allowed in the case of the speaking, writing and even listening topics, but we always have in mind the topics of the STANAG exam level 2, the requirements of which we must fulfil. These texts also give them the opportunity to comment upon the feelings and the motivations of the protagonists, why they react in a certain way to events, encouraging the cadets to connect at an emotional level with them.

The role-plays are one of the most helpful types of activities to improve the speaking skill as the students can act out various scenarios, which sometimes entail finding a solution to a conflict by negotiation, understanding the perspectives of the other interlocutors. The environment in which they are used becomes entertaining and for a short while rivalries and competition disappear, the participants turning assuming different, freer, funnier identities. Jo Budden insists upon the benefits of using role-plays due to the fact that *“Incorporating role-play into the classroom adds variety, a change of pace and opportunities for a lot of language production and also a lot of fun! It can be an integral part of the class and not a ‘one-off’ event. If the teacher believes that the activity will work and the necessary support is provided, it can be very successful”* (Budden, 2013).

The problem-solving and communication skills can also be developed by means of projects that are done individually but also in pairs and in groups. Projects like presentations, posters, leaflets or newsletters require working in teams, showing respect to the members, understanding their point of view and dividing the work in a fair manner. Another element that pertains to social and emotional learning promoted by projects is

the expression of gratitude and appreciation for the effort done by the colleagues and this increases self-esteem and contributes to the creation of a positive atmosphere in the classroom. It is cooperation *“that moves the classroom towards a more natural language and learning situation and away from the artificiality of the teacher-fronted environment”* (Chowda, Chilakapati & Parthu, 2014).

The debates and the discussions that are organized in class focus mostly on military and social issues, giving the cadets the occasion to present their opinions in a polite way, at the same time allowing others to express theirs too. Active listening and conflict resolution skills are also developed during these debates.

We also noticed the fact that the foreign guest speakers and the foreign cadets that delivered speeches in which they shared personal experiences helped the students not only to better their English level, but also to become aware and to connect at an emotional level with real issues that exist in the world.

During the English classes the students should be prompted to reflect on the progress they made in the learning of the language, to discover their linguistic strengths and weaknesses, to identify the areas in which they need to work more, their self-awareness and self-regulation being thus enhanced. *“Reflection is a necessary component of learning. Through reflective assignments and tasks, students are given opportunities to evaluate their learning and analyze strategies they use while acquiring and applying course material. Reflections also help students assess and think deeply about the information presented in class and thus better retain it. Through reflecting on their learning, students are also given the opportunity to formulate goals for future improvement”* (Taylor, 2023).

What is of the essence is the idea that there is no need for special classes in which

social and emotional learning to be taught as its principles can be incorporated into the activities and interactions that normally exist in the language classes. The foreign language classes represent one of the best occasions to include SEL, an important step towards the creation of an individual that can think in a critical way, has high emotional intelligent, eager to explore various perspectives, is endowed with essential life skills.

We consider conducting follow-up evaluations in the years to come in order to observe the changes that occur in the students' social and emotional learning as, by means of the longitudinal data, we intend to obtain helpful insight into the effectiveness of the English teaching methods employed during the classes.

5. Conclusion

Through SEL, students not only enhance their academic performance but also develop valuable intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. They become better equipped to handle challenges, manage conflicts, and build positive relationships with peers and authority figures. Additionally, as they grow in emotional awareness and empathy, they become more compassionate citizens, capable of understanding and respecting the unique experiences of others.

The integrating of SEL in the English classes can address the concerns regarding the well-being of the learners who will be

better equipped to cope with stress, isolation, anxiety or depression. The students will feel that they are not only taught, but also that they are seen and heard and that their opinions are valued.

The implementation of SEL in the foreign language classes should be done after the teachers have received the appropriate training and resources. It is an action that cannot be successful without permanent collaboration between cadets, teachers, management and beneficiaries.

In conclusion, by actively implementing social and emotional learning in our classes, we achieve faster a holistic approach to education that will empower cadets to get better academic results, are in charge of their emotions, can connect to the others, and make a difference in the world. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought to the forefront the significance of social and emotional learning, stressing once more the necessity to make it a priority in the teaching of all ages. The effort to include SEL in the classes that we teach represents an investment in the health and reconstruction of our society as it helps learners to acquire and develop resilience, emotional intelligence, and a plethora of soft skills needed to tackle looming challenges in a successful manner. The students exposed to SEL in a consistent manner will prove to be more empathic, more socially responsible and will no doubt have a say in the creation of a better post-pandemic society.

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