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Scientific and Practical Foundations for the Development of Social-Emotional Skills in English Language Classrooms of Rural Schools



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Abstract

The aim of this study was to describe how social-emotional learning elements are reflected in English language instruction in rural schools in Kyrgyzstan. A convergent mixed-methods design combined questionnaire data from 192 students and 26 teachers, thematic analysis of open-ended responses, and 18 classroom observations. The quantitative and qualitative data were analysed separately and integrated during interpretation by comparing findings related to each research question. The results showed that 76% of students preferred pair and group work, while collaborative formats were recorded

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in 12 of the 18 observed lessons. Role-playing, discussions, teacher encouragement, and peer interaction were reported or observed as features of emotionally supportive English lessons. In addition, 92% of teachers expressed willingness to develop their SEL-related competence if methodological support was provided. The findings describe participants' perceptions, self-reported practices, and observed classroom behaviours; they do not establish that SEL caused changes in language proficiency or social-emotional outcomes. The results may inform the development of context-sensitive methodological resources and teacher-training initiatives for resource-constrained rural schools.

Keywords: emotional support, pedagogical strategy, education, interpersonal interaction, language learning through emotions, adaptive learning

Introduction

In the context of ongoing educational reforms, particularly in Kyrgyzstan, the development of social-emotional competencies among school students has gained critical importance as an integral component of holistic personal development. This issue is particularly salient for rural schools, where limited resources, a shortage of qualified personnel, and inadequate infrastructure impede the integration of innovative educational practices, including social-emotional learning (SEL). English language lessons, however, offer a fertile environment for the development of such skills, as they are supposed to involve active communication, collaboration, and intercultural exchange.

The core problem addressed by this study lies in the lack of comprehensive research that holistically examines the integration of SEL and English language teaching in rural schools. While current research contributes significantly to the theoretical and practical foundations of SEL and to improving language education in rural contexts, most studies focus either on general issues related to SEL or on the specificities of English language teaching, without thoroughly exploring the interconnection between the two. Although emotional atmosphere, student motivation, and engagement are occasionally mentioned, the relationship between SEL-related classroom practices and students' perceived emotional well-being, language anxiety, and participation in rural English lessons remains insufficiently examined. A second common gap is the scarcity of practical models. Existing studies often describe challenges or outline general methodological approaches but fail to propose comprehensive strategies for integrating SEL into rural educational settings. The majority of existing works are descriptive and often lack rigorous empirical analysis that assesses the outcomes of implementing specific pedagogical approaches.

The aim of this research was to identify the features of SEL integration into English language instruction in rural schools of Kyrgyzstan and to examine students' and teachers' perceptions of SEL-related classroom practices, emotional well-being, language anxiety, participation, and implementation barriers. The main research questions are the following:

- RQ1: How do students perceive the relationship between SEL-related classroom practices, emotional well-being, language anxiety, and motivation to participate in English lessons?
- RQ2: How do teachers understand and apply SEL-related approaches in English language teaching, and what barriers limit their systematic implementation in rural school contexts?
- RQ3: What interactive teaching methods are used in English lessons to support students' communication, collaboration, empathy, and emotional engagement?

The objectives of this study were to analyse the theoretical foundations of SEL in language education, review international evidence relevant to rural educational contexts, investigate students' and teachers' perceptions of the emotional dimensions of English lessons, and describe the interactive and emotionally supportive teaching methods reported or observed in the participating schools.

Literature Review

The integration of SEL into English language training in rural Kyrgyzstan is framed by three interconnected domains that make up the literature evaluation. It starts by looking at how SEL helps students with their motivation, academic engagement, interpersonal skills, emotional control, and empathy. Second, it takes into account interactive, project-based, and digitally assisted teaching methods that allow English teachers to foster social-emotional and linguistic growth. Third, it tackles the sociocultural and resource-related circumstances of rural schools, where a lack of professional assistance and infrastructure necessitates adaptable and context-sensitive methods. Theories of emotional intelligence and whole-child development, which highlight the connections between academic, social, emotional, and cognitive learning, are used to understand these domains.

As a result, the review draws from recent research on SEL in rural education (Akelaitis and Janiūnaitė, 2022; Tran-Chi et al., 2023; Salauddhin et al., 2025), interactive, project-based, and digital teaching methods, and language education (Gimbert et al., 2023; Ramirez et al., 2021; Hussain et al., 2025). The ideas of emotional well-being, empathy, peer and teacher support, classroom interaction, and obstacles to SEL adoption receive special focus. Since these contexts show how SEL-related approaches may be adapted to rural and resource-constrained educational settings and offer pertinent points of reference for Kyrgyzstan, evidence from Lithuania, Vietnam, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Tanzania is also taken into consideration.

SEL, Teacher Support, and Interactive Practices in Rural English Education

The concepts of empathy, self-regulation, responsible decision-making, and teamwork (skills that demand deliberate development) are the foundation of SEL in English language schools, according to Smith (2023). However, Smith notes that formalised educational resources like curriculum guidelines, teacher-centric teaching materials, and standardised assessments frequently eclipse these talents in rural environments. The potential for humanistic methods that promote social and emotional growth is limited by this trend. According to Spiegel (2025), adherence to Whole Child Development principles, which hold that social and emotional aspects are inextricably linked to academic learning, is essential for the successful implementation of SEL in rural schools. This method is especially important for teaching foreign languages, which require cultural reflection, emotional transparency, and interpersonal contact to be completely successful.

In order to enhance social-emotional abilities in English language education, Kazakbaeva (2023) emphasises the significance of professional training for teachers. The study shows that the growth of students' social-emotional skills is directly correlated with instructors' capacity to provide an emotionally safe learning environment. Additionally, it emphasises the value of pedagogical sensitivity, language awareness, and interpersonal communication in teacher development, especially in rural educational environments. Though these studies offer insightful information, they also highlight a lack of SEL integration in language training, especially in rural areas where organised frameworks integrating social-emotional and cognitive learning are needed.

Ren et al. (2024) examined methodological approaches to teaching foreign languages in Kyrgyzstan, with a focus on rural educational settings. With an emphasis on communicative language instruction,

their study found both formal and informal SEL-oriented activities. As important contributing elements, they emphasised project-based approaches, digital tool utilisation, extracurricular student participation, and inter-school pedagogical collaboration. According to these results, rural schools are already structurally capable of incorporating SEL into their curricula. The study does not, however, provide specific methods for formalising and systematising these approaches in rural schools, especially when it comes to teaching foreign languages.

The contribution of digital media to the growth of SEL in English language instruction is a topic of growing study. According to Hariffin (2024), depending on the pedagogical approach employed, digital tools can both help and hinder the development of emotional intelligence. This problem is more noticeable in rural schools, where SEL growth may be hampered by unequal access to technology. However, Hariffin also highlights how digital technologies may be used to establish peer review and safe spaces for emotional expression, both of which are beneficial for emotional self-regulation. However, given technical differences, little study has been done on how digital technology might be successfully included into SEL frameworks in rural schools. Ebersöhn et al. (2014) supported the idea that focussing on students' emotional health, cultural background, and the psycho-emotional milieu of the classroom is essential to effective English language training. They discovered that children are more motivated to learn a foreign language when they feel accepted and supported, indicating a clear link between SEL and language acquisition. However, the structural application of SEL in rural schools, where resources and teacher training may be scarce, is not thoroughly examined in their work.

Research conducted worldwide has also demonstrated the value of project-based methods for incorporating SEL into language training. For example, Kemaloglu-Er and Şahin (2022) showed that even in environments with low resources these techniques not only improve language skills but also promote social responsibility, critical thinking, and emotional reflection. In a similar vein, Pham and Tran (2025) discovered that while English as a second language is aggressively pushed in Vietnamese rural schools, obstacles such as inadequate teacher preparation, poor motivation, and limited community involvement impede effective learning. Nonetheless, the researchers also emphasised that effective learning requires engaging teaching strategies and a supportive emotional environment. This implies that more thorough instruction and assistance may be beneficial for rural schools in order to promote children's intellectual and emotional development.

Since SEL promotes critical abilities like empathy, self-regulation, and communication, it is becoming more widely acknowledged in the research as a critical component in improving language acquisition. These abilities have a direct effect on language acquisition by fostering a positive atmosphere that lowers fear, increases self-assurance, and encourages active verbal communication. According to studies, emotionally stable students are more inclined to take chances in communication, participate in language learning activities, and have meaningful conversations – all of which help them become more proficient in the language (Huang, 2022; Greenberg, 2023). Additionally, SEL activities like problem-solving, role-playing, and collaborative learning help students develop their emotional intelligence while also enhancing their capacity to work in a variety of linguistic contexts and negotiate meaning. This makes language acquisition more interactive and integrated.

The lack of systematic SEL integration into English language instruction in rural schools, where formalised educational resources frequently take precedence over humanistic approaches that foster social and emotional development, represents a research gap. There is a dearth of structured frameworks integrating social-emotional and cognitive learning, especially in foreign language training, despite some research acknowledging the potential for SEL in rural schools. Furthermore, little is known about how digital tools can help promote SEL, particularly in rural places where access to technology is uneven. The research should concentrate on creating all-encompassing models that combine cultural context, emotional safety, and efficient teaching techniques to incorporate SEL into English language

curriculum. Along with identifying professional development initiatives to give instructors the tools they need to support kids' emotional and cognitive development, it should also examine how digital technologies can be modified for situations with low resources.

In rural English-language education, SEL-related practices are commonly discussed in relation to emotional regulation, supportive teacher–student interaction, collaboration, responsible decision-making, and participation in communicative activities (Huang, 2022; Gimbert et al., 2023). Teachers occupy a central position because they establish classroom interaction norms and respond to students' emotional and linguistic difficulties, although rural educators may have limited access to specialised training and methodological resources (Zolkoski et al., 2021). Interactive methods, including role-playing, debates, collaborative projects, reflective writing, and discussions of moral dilemmas, provide contexts in which students can use English while engaging in cooperation, emotional reflection, and interpersonal communication (Ramírez et al., 2021; Romaniuk and Yavorska, 2022; Martínez-Alba et al., 2025). The literature therefore indicates that rural SEL integration requires adaptable and culturally responsive practices rather than resource-intensive programmes. The principal components identified in the reviewed literature are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. *Key components of integrating SEL into English language teaching*

Integration component	Content and implementation features	Educational effect
Safe Environment	Atmosphere of trust, the right to make mistakes	Emotional openness, self-assurance
Linguistic Reflection	Essays, discussions, role-playing games	Depth of emotional understanding, self-awareness
Aesthetic Practices	Theatrical performance, artistic tasks	Emotional expression, empathy
Use of Digital Platforms	Social networks, online blogs, interactive forums	Development of speech and emotional self-presentation
Teacher Training	SEL competence, methodological framework	Professional efficacy, student support

Source: developed by the authors based on Kulshayeva et al. (2023), Kresan et al. (2024), Mon et al. (2025).

Table 1 synthesises the principal components identified in the reviewed literature. Psychological safety and tolerance of mistakes are associated with opportunities for verbal participation, while reflective, artistic, collaborative, and digitally supported activities provide contexts for emotional expression and interpersonal communication (Kulshayeva et al., 2023; Kresan et al., 2024; Mon et al., 2025). Teacher preparation is included as a separate component because the implementation of these practices depends on teachers' methodological awareness and their ability to respond to students' emotional and communicative needs.

International Practices and Contextual Adaptation of SEL in Rural Schools

International experience with SEL implementation in rural schools reveals both common challenges and adaptable practices relevant to Kyrgyzstan. Project-based learning, collaborative problem-solving, peer interaction, and the use of local cultural contexts can support linguistic development while strengthening responsibility, empathy, and participation. However, rural schools in many low- and middle-income countries face persistent shortages of appropriate teaching materials, insufficiently trained educators, weak institutional support, and resources that do not always reflect students' cultural and emotional needs (Friend et al., 2023; Carrete-Marín et al., 2024). Evidence from Lithuania

shows that, despite limited autonomy and technological infrastructure, rural schools may benefit from stronger interpersonal relationships and collective engagement, which provide a favourable basis for SEL development (Akelaity and Janiūnaitė, 2022). Similarly, research from Vietnam demonstrates that socio-emotional skills can be cultivated even under resource constraints through collaborative problem-solving, conflict simulation, and mutual support, allowing English lessons to develop both language competence and essential life skills (Tran-Chi et al., 2023).

In Pakistan, educators emphasised the importance of positive reinforcement and emotional support in building students' self-confidence and self-esteem (Hussain et al., 2025). However, they noted the lack of a unified SEL methodology, complicating its nationwide implementation. Similarly, in Bangladesh, an overloaded curriculum hindered the development of emotional intelligence and critical thinking (Salaudhin et al., 2025). Despite this, the authors advocated for flexible, student-centered models that address learners' social realities. In Tanzania, extracurricular activities oriented towards emotional and communicative goals proved effective for developing SEL (Lujuo and Wandela, 2024). Sports, arts, and leadership clubs foster teamwork, empathy, and self-confidence, which are integrated into English language classes through group presentations, role-plays, and creative performances. This highlights the universal applicability and adaptability of SEL principles, transforming English language learning into a holistic process of personality development.

In countries such as Lithuania, Vietnam, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Tanzania, common patterns emerged: despite financial constraints, rural teaching teams employed strategies such as collaborative problem-solving, role-playing, and extracurricular engagement as SEL tools. Frequently, the lack of a centralised methodology was offset by teachers' creativity in adapting educational processes to local contexts. In this regard, the success of SEL is determined less by technical resources and more by the presence of trustful relationships within the school community. Large-scale meta-analyses by Durlak et al. (2022) and Cipriano et al. (2023) compellingly underscored the importance of universal SEL models characterised by structure – sequencing, active engagement, goal orientation, and a focus on emotional literacy. These principles are fundamental to the effective advancement of SEL. However, in the practical realities of rural schools, the adaptation of such often-complex models requires the reduction of excessive theoretical content and a profound reconsideration of strategies through the lens of local cultural contexts (Bazaluk and Nezhyva, 2016; Greenberg, 2023). In this environment, strict adherence to standardised frameworks gives way to flexibility, enabling teachers to respond promptly and appropriately to students' and communities' evolving needs. This implies that the success of SEL in rural schools hinges on educators' capacity to remain adaptive, creative, and attuned to the specificities of their localities.

Personal motivation of educators to implement SEL, even in the absence of specialised and formalised training, can become a powerful driver of positive change (Brush et al., 2022). Teachers who demonstrate empathy, flexibility in their approaches, and openness to dialogue automatically create a classroom environment of emotional safety and trust. Within such a climate, students feel secure, freely express their opinions, are not afraid to make mistakes, and actively engage in the educational process – conditions essential for the development of their social and emotional skills. This is particularly important in rural schools, where closer relationships among students, teachers, and parents foster a supportive atmosphere.

A comprehensive analysis of practices across countries has identified universal principles for effectively implementing SEL in rural schools. Collective student interaction is key to developing empathy and responsibility, with collaborative work, group projects, and mutual support essential for learning to understand emotions, negotiate, share responsibilities, and build collective accountability (Karhina, 2023). Emotional support from teachers is crucial for open communication, as they serve not only as knowledge providers but also as psychological anchors, creating an atmosphere of acceptance (Chou, 2021). Integrating local cultural contexts into lessons strengthens identity and relevance. Project-based

learning and role-playing foster emotional growth by simulating real-life scenarios. Digital platforms also provide valuable opportunities for verbal practice, creativity, and interpersonal communication, compensating for resource shortages. These principles support the development of effective, context-sensitive SEL models in Kyrgyzstan, where English language lessons become not just about linguistic skills but also emotional literacy, social responsibility, and intercultural competence.

Methods

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design in which quantitative questionnaire data and qualitative data from open-ended responses and classroom observations were collected during the same research phase. The quantitative strand described students' and teachers' responses and compared selected binary student outcomes by gender and age. The qualitative strand examined participants' explanations and observed SEL-related classroom behaviours. The strands were initially analysed separately and were subsequently integrated by organising the quantitative results, qualitative themes, and observation frequencies according to the three research questions. A comparison matrix was used to identify convergence, complementarity, and divergence among the data sources. Equal interpretive importance was assigned to the quantitative and qualitative components.

Setting and Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit three general education schools with active English-language programmes and administrative willingness to participate. The selection was intended to provide contextually relevant evidence from different rural regions rather than a statistically representative sample of rural schools in Kyrgyzstan.

The field research was conducted at Secondary School named after Ch. Aitmatov in the Batken region, Aga Khan School in the Osh region, and Secondary School No. 21 in the Jalal-Abad region. The selection criteria included rural location, the availability of English-language classes, administrative willingness to participate, sufficient numbers of students in Grades 5–9, and variation in regional and socioeconomic context.

The total number of participants was 218, comprising 192 students in grades 5–9 aged 10 to 15 (101 girls and 91 boys), and 26 English language teachers (all female, aged 26 to 58, with teaching experience ranging from 3 to 31 years). Specifically, the school in Batken region included 63 students (33 girls and 30 boys) and 9 teachers; the Osh region school had 65 students (35 girls and 30 boys) and 8 teachers; and the Jalal-Abad region school involved 64 students (33 girls and 31 boys) and 9 teachers. Table 2 presents the distribution of participants across the three schools.

Table 2. *Participants (n = 218)*

Characteristic	Batken (Ch. Aitmatov)	Osh (Aga Khan School)	Jalal-Abad (Secondary School No. 21)
Students	63	65	64
Teachers (female)	9	8	9
Students (girls)	33	35	33
Students (boys)	30	30	31
Teachers (age)	26-58	26-58	26-58
Teachers (experience)	3-31	3-31	3-31

The purposive sample covered three rural regions of Kyrgyzstan and was intended to provide context-specific evidence rather than statistical representation of all rural schools in the country. The participating students and teachers provided perspectives from schools with different regional and socioeconomic circumstances.

Questionnaire Development, Validation, and Data Collection

Two questionnaires were developed for this study: a 22-item student questionnaire and a 17-item teacher questionnaire. The student questionnaire covered emotional well-being and language anxiety in Items 1–5, interaction with teachers and peers in Items 6–10, classroom engagement and participation in Items 11–14, perceived emotional and institutional support in Items 15–18, and awareness and perceived value of SEL-related practices in Items 19–22. The teacher questionnaire covered conceptual understanding of SEL in Items 1–3, familiarity with implementation techniques in Items 4–6, use of interactive and emotionally responsive practices in Items 7–10, perceived implementation barriers in Items 11–14, and professional-development needs and willingness to undertake SEL training in Items 15–17. The complete questionnaires, response formats, scoring procedures, and content-domain mappings are provided in Appendices B and C.

The initial item pool was based on literature concerning SEL, English-language instruction, classroom interaction, emotional support, and rural education. Three experts in pedagogy, English-language instruction, and educational psychology independently reviewed the original 25-item student questionnaire and 20-item teacher questionnaire for content relevance, clarity, age appropriateness, and contextual suitability. Their recommendations resulted in simplified terminology, the combination of overlapping questions, and the removal of duplicate items. This procedure provided evidence of content relevance and comprehensibility but was not treated as confirmation of construct validity.

The revised instruments were piloted with 36 students in Grades 5–9 and 15 English teachers from two rural schools that were not included in the main sample. The pilot assessment examined item comprehensibility, response formats, completion time, missing responses, response variability, and preliminary internal consistency. Average completion times were 11.6 minutes for students and 9.4 minutes for teachers, and missing responses remained below 2%. Following the pilot, three overlapping items were removed from each questionnaire, producing the final 22-item student instrument and 17-item teacher instrument. Adjusted item–total correlations ranged from 0.34 to 0.68 for the student questionnaire and from 0.32 to 0.64 for the teacher questionnaire. Internal consistency was examined for the complete set of closed-ended items, yielding $\alpha = 0.81$ for the student questionnaire and $\alpha = 0.80$ for the teacher questionnaire. The student questionnaire was organised into five content domains containing 5, 5, 4, 4, and 4 items, while the teacher questionnaire contained five content domains comprising 3, 3, 4, 4, and 3 items. These domains were used to organise item coverage and were not treated as independently scored psychometric subscales. Consequently, domain-specific scores and domain-specific alpha coefficients were not calculated. Open-ended, demographic, multiple-response, and single-categorical items were excluded from the internal-consistency analysis.

The final questionnaires were administered to 192 students and 26 teachers. They contained binary, frequency-based, agreement-scale, multiple-response, and open-ended items. Binary, frequency, and agreement items were analysed according to their individual response formats; no composite domain scores were used in the reported analyses. Open-ended responses were analysed separately through thematic analysis.

Classroom observations were conducted by three trained observers. A modified checklist based on Guide to Schoolwide SEL (2019) contained five categories: encouragement and non-verbal empathy, empathy-development exercises, students' active verbal expression in English, collaborative learning formats, and use of digital tools. Before the main observation phase, all three observers independently coded the same pilot lesson. The unit of coding was the presence or absence of each checklist category during the lesson. Pairwise Cohen's kappa coefficients were calculated for Observer 1–Observer 2, Observer 1–Observer 3, and Observer 2–Observer 3. The three coefficients were averaged, producing a mean κ of 0.82. Discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. During the main phase, 18 lessons were observed between September and November 2024, including six lessons in each school at biweekly intervals. The information about the instruments is summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. *Data collection instruments*

Characteristic	Student questionnaire	Teacher questionnaire	Classroom observations
Number of questionnaire items or lesson observations	22 items	17 items	18 lesson observations
Main focus	Emotional states, empathetic interactions, psychological comfort, emotional support perception	Perceptions of SEL, awareness of implementation techniques, barriers to SEL implementation	Verbal encouragement, empathy development, student engagement, collaborative learning, use of digital tools
Key themes	Emotional well-being, interaction with peers and teachers, engagement in learning, SEL awareness	Conceptual understanding of SEL, methods of implementation, emotionally oriented practices, challenges in rural SEL, professional development needs	Encouragement, empathy exercises, active verbal expression, collaborative learning, use of digital tools
Frequency	Varies by question type (closed, semi-open, open-ended)	Varies by question type (closed, open-ended)	6 observations in each school, biweekly intervals
Additional tools	None	None	SEL checklist (adapted from Guide to Schoolwide SEL (2019))

Data Analysis

Quantitative questionnaire data were analysed using SPSS Statistics 27.0. Frequencies and proportions were calculated for categorical and binary indicators. Selected student outcomes were coded as 1 when the relevant response was affirmative or the characteristic was reported and as 0 when the response was negative or the characteristic was absent. A value of 1 therefore represented reported emotional comfort, oral-response anxiety, perceived teacher support, preference for pair or group work, perceived effectiveness of role-playing, or use of digital tools, depending on the indicator. Gender comparisons included 101 girls and 91 boys, while age comparisons included 96 students aged 10–12 years and 96 students aged 13–15 years.

Independent-samples t-tests were used as large-sample tests of differences between two independent proportions because the mean of a binary 0–1 variable is equivalent to the proportion of affirmative responses. The group sizes exceeded 90 participants, and the observed proportions were sufficiently distant from 0 and 1 to support the normal approximation. Results are reported as the group sample size, proportion, t statistic with 190 degrees of freedom, exact two-sided p value, risk difference in percentage points, and 95% confidence interval. Statistical significance was evaluated at $\alpha = 0.05$.

Classroom observations were analysed independently from the open-ended questionnaire responses. Each of the five checklist categories was coded as present or absent for each lesson. The lesson was the unit of analysis during the main observation phase. Frequencies were calculated by counting the number of the 18 lessons in which each category was observed. The observation analysis was descriptive and was not used to compare teachers according to SEL knowledge, training, or any other grouping variable.

The 462 open-ended responses comprised 384 responses to two student questions and 78 responses to three teacher questions. They were examined using codebook thematic analysis with a combined deductive–inductive procedure. Initial categories were derived from the study’s SEL framework and research questions, while additional codes were developed from recurring ideas in the responses. Two research-team members independently coded all responses, compared their coding decisions, refined the codebook, and resolved discrepancies through discussion. A formal inter-coder coefficient was not calculated because the purpose of the procedure was interpretive development and consensus rather than treating the qualitative codes as fixed quantitative measurements. Agreement was supported through independent coding, documented comparison, codebook revision, and consensus on all final coding decisions. An example of the coding framework is provided in Appendix A.

After the separate quantitative, thematic, and observation analyses were completed, the findings were integrated in a research-question matrix. For RQ1, student proportions were compared with themes concerning emotional comfort, oral anxiety, support, and participation. For RQ2, teacher survey results were compared with teacher explanations of SEL practices and implementation barriers. For RQ3, students’ and teachers’ reports of interactive practices were compared with classroom-observation frequencies. Findings were classified as convergent when data sources indicated a similar pattern, complementary when one source added contextual detail, and divergent when the sources indicated different patterns.

Results

Students’ Perceptions of SEL, Emotional Well-Being, and Classroom Participation

Among the 192 students, 71% reported feeling comfortable during English lessons, while 43% reported anxiety when answering orally. Teacher support in emotionally challenging situations was reported by 67% of students. Pair or group work was preferred by 76%, role-playing was considered useful for language learning by 59%, and 38% reported the use of digital tools. Open-ended responses included descriptions of calm error correction, opportunities to try again, teacher encouragement, peer assistance, and anxiety when students were required to answer individually. The complete descriptive results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. *Assessment of the emotional climate in English language lessons in rural schools (based on survey results)*

Indicator	Students (%)	Teachers (%)
Feel comfortable during English lessons	71%	—
Experience anxiety when answering in class	43%	—
Report receiving teacher support in emotionally challenging situations	67%	—
Enjoy working in pairs or groups	76%	—
Consider role-playing activities effective for language learning	59%	—
Use digital tools (videos, presentations)	38%	—
Are aware of the concept of SEL	—	33%
Apply elements of emotional learning (occasionally or regularly)	—	58%
Acknowledge difficulties in implementing SEL due to a lack of resources	—	67%
Are willing to develop SEL competence provided methodological support is available	—	92%

Source: compiled by the authors.

Gender and age-group comparisons are presented in Tables 5 and 6. None of the six binary outcomes differed significantly by gender or age. All confidence intervals for the risk differences included zero.

Table 5. *Gender comparison of binary student outcomes reported as proportions*

Indicator	Girls, n = 101	Boys, n = 91	t(190)	p	Risk difference, percentage points, 95% CI
Emotional comfort in English lessons	74%	67%	1.09	0.276	7.0, -5.9 to 19.9
Anxiety during oral responses	41%	46%	-0.77	0.440	-5.0, -19.0 to 9.0
Perceived teacher support	71%	63%	1.27	0.206	8.0, -5.3 to 21.3
Preference for group or pair work	79%	73%	1.08	0.284	6.0, -6.1 to 18.1
Perceived effectiveness of role-playing	63%	54%	1.34	0.183	9.0, -4.9 to 22.9
Use of digital tools	38%	38%	-0.12	0.906	0.0, -13.8 to 13.8

Source: compiled by the authors.

Table 6. *Age-group comparison of binary student outcomes reported as proportions*

Indicator	Students aged 10–12 years, n = 96	Students aged 13–15 years, n = 96	t(190)	p	Risk difference, percentage points, 95% CI
Emotional comfort in English lessons	73%	68%	0.82	0.415	5.0, -7.9 to 17.9
Anxiety during oral responses	38%	49%	-1.56	0.119	-11.0, -24.9 to 2.9

(Continued)

Indicator	Students aged 10–12 years, n = 96	Students aged 13–15 years, n = 96	t(190)	p	Risk difference, percentage points, 95% CI
Perceived teacher support	71%	63%	1.27	0.204	8.0, –5.3 to 21.3
Preference for group/ pair work	79%	73%	0.83	0.405	6.0, –6.1 to 18.1
Perceived effectiveness of role-playing	55%	63%	–1.08	0.283	–8.0, –21.9 to 5.9
Use of digital tools	36%	40%	0.67	0.504	–4.0, –17.7 to 9.7

Source: compiled by the authors.

Teachers' Understanding, Practices, and Implementation Barriers

Among the 26 teachers, 33% reported familiarity with the concept of SEL, while 58% reported applying emotionally supportive or SEL-related elements occasionally or regularly. Resource, time, and methodological limitations were reported by 67% of teachers. A total of 92% indicated willingness to develop their SEL-related competence if methodological support was available. Open-ended responses described the use of emotional encouragement and the need for practical materials, activity examples, and structured methodological guidance.

Interactive Teaching Methods Observed in English Lessons

The classroom-observation results are presented in Table 7. Encouragement, support, or non-verbal signs of empathy were observed in 14 of the 18 lessons. Empathy-development exercises were recorded in 7 lessons, students' active expression of their own opinions in English in 11 lessons, and pair, team, or role-playing formats in 12 lessons. Digital tools were used in 5 lessons.

Table 7. Observation results of English language lessons in rural schools ($n = 18$)

Observation indicator	Number of lessons (out of 18)
Use of encouragement, support, and non-verbal signs of empathy	14
Empathy development exercises (reflection, discussion of emotions)	7
Active expression of students' own opinions in English	11
Application of group interaction formats (pairs, teams, role-play)	12
Use of digital tools (videos, presentations, interactive resources)	5

Source: compiled by the authors.

Integration of the Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The data sources converged on two principal patterns. First, teacher encouragement and emotionally supportive interaction appeared in student reports, teacher responses, and classroom observations. Second, pair and group formats were frequently reported and were observed in two-thirds of the lessons. The survey and observation data also converged on the relatively limited use of digital tools. A complementary pattern was found for emotional climate: general classroom comfort was commonly reported, but oral-response anxiety was also reported by a substantial proportion of students. These

integrated findings describe the practices and perceptions present in the participating schools and do not demonstrate effects on language attainment or social-emotional development.

Discussion

Student Perceptions of Emotional Climate and Participation

The findings related to RQ1 show that students generally reported emotional comfort and teacher support, while oral-response anxiety remained common. This combination indicates that general classroom comfort and task-specific language anxiety should be treated as distinct aspects of students' experiences. The preference for pair and group work was also consistent with open-ended descriptions of peer assistance and reduced pressure during collaborative tasks. These patterns correspond to previous studies that associated supportive interaction and collaborative formats with greater willingness to participate in language activities (Ebersöhn et al., 2014; Smith, 2023; Tran-Chi et al., 2023). However, the present data concern students' perceptions and cannot establish that these practices reduced anxiety or improved language competence.

The gender and age comparisons did not identify statistically significant differences. The confidence intervals were relatively wide and included both negligible and potentially meaningful differences, particularly for oral-response anxiety. The absence of statistically significant findings should therefore be interpreted as a lack of evidence of group differences in this sample rather than proof that gender- or age-related differences do not exist.

Teachers' Understanding, Practices, and Barriers

The findings related to RQ2 indicate a distinction between familiarity with SEL terminology and the use of practices that resemble SEL-related teaching. Only one-third of teachers reported familiarity with the concept, although a larger proportion reported using emotionally supportive practices. Classroom observations similarly documented encouragement, gentle correction, and non-verbal support in most lessons. This pattern is consistent with research showing that teachers may employ relational and emotionally responsive practices without using a formal SEL framework (Kazakbaeva, 2023; Zolkoski et al., 2021).

Teachers also reported shortages of methodological resources, limited time, infrastructure constraints, and insufficient training. These findings correspond to previous research on rural schools, where implementation frequently depends on teachers' capacity to adapt general principles to locally available resources (Gimbert et al., 2023; Pham and Tran, 2025). The high stated willingness to undertake training indicates interest in professional development, but it does not demonstrate that training would necessarily alter classroom practices or student outcomes. Such effects would require an intervention study with pre-intervention and post-intervention measurements.

Interactive and Emotionally Supportive Classroom Practices

The findings related to RQ3 show that encouragement and collaborative formats were more frequently observed than explicitly structured empathy-development activities or digital-tool use. Group formats appeared in 12 lessons, whereas empathy-focused reflection or discussion appeared in 7 lessons. This difference suggests that general interactive teaching was more common than activities explicitly directed towards emotional reflection. Similar distinctions have been discussed in research differentiating broad supportive pedagogy from structured SEL implementation (Ramirez et al., 2021; Martínez-Alba et al., 2025).

Digital resources were used in only 5 of the 18 lessons, which was consistent with the relatively low student-reported use of digital tools. This convergence supports the descriptive conclusion that digital integration was limited in the participating classrooms. It does not, however, establish why particular teachers used or did not use digital resources. Infrastructure limitations reported by teachers provide one possible explanation, consistent with Hariffin (2024), but the present study did not independently assess schools' technological capacity.

Integrated Interpretation and Implications

Integration of the three data sources identified convergence around teacher support, collaborative work, and limited digital use. The qualitative findings added contextual detail by showing how students and teachers described encouragement, calm correction, peer assistance, and methodological needs. The simultaneous reporting of general comfort and oral anxiety illustrates the value of combining closed-ended and open-ended data, because the qualitative responses clarified that anxiety was often linked to individual oral performance rather than to the lesson as a whole.

The findings provide a context-specific description of SEL-related perceptions and practices in three rural schools. They support consideration of accessible methodological materials and teacher-development opportunities focused on emotional support, oral-language anxiety, group interaction, reflective activities, and adaptation to limited resources. These implications should be understood as practice-oriented directions rather than evidence that a particular SEL programme is effective. Determining effectiveness would require a longitudinal or experimental design, validated outcome measures, and direct assessment of language and social-emotional development.

Conclusion

This study provides a cross-sectional mixed-methods description of SEL-related perceptions and classroom practices in English lessons across three rural schools in Kyrgyzstan. The integrated findings indicate that teacher encouragement and collaborative activities were common, while structured empathy-development activities and digital-resource use were less consistently observed. Students frequently reported classroom comfort and teacher support, although oral-response anxiety remained evident. Teachers showed considerable interest in methodological support despite limited familiarity with formal SEL terminology.

The findings may inform the development of context-sensitive methodological resources and professional-development activities for rural English teachers. They do not demonstrate that SEL-related practices caused improvements in language acquisition, emotional well-being, empathy, motivation, or other student outcomes. Such conclusions would require direct outcome measurements and an intervention or longitudinal design.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be considered. First, purposive sampling was used, and the study included only three rural schools; therefore, the findings cannot be generalised statistically to all rural schools in Kyrgyzstan. Second, all participating teachers were women, and the teacher sample was small, limiting the examination of teacher-level differences. Third, questionnaire data were cross-sectional and relied on self-report, making them susceptible to recall error, social-desirability bias, and differences in participants' understanding of SEL-related terminology. Fourth, the questionnaires were newly developed for this study. Expert review and pilot testing provided preliminary evidence

of content relevance and overall internal consistency, but construct validity and construct-specific reliability were not established comprehensively. Fifth, the observer-agreement assessment was based on one pilot lesson and five binary checklist categories, while the main observation phase included only 18 lessons. The observations may therefore have been influenced by lesson timing, observer presence, teacher reactivity, and the limited number of observed sessions. Sixth, the questionnaire and observation data were not linked at the individual teacher or classroom level, so differences according to teacher training, SEL knowledge, school, or teaching experience could not be tested. Seventh, no formal SEL intervention, comparison group, baseline measurement, follow-up measurement, or direct test of English-language proficiency was included. Consequently, the study cannot determine changes over time or causal effects on language or social-emotional outcomes.

Future studies should use larger and more diverse samples, include urban and rural comparisons, employ externally validated SEL and language-anxiety measures, and link student, teacher, and classroom-level data. Longitudinal or controlled intervention studies should directly measure language performance and social-emotional outcomes before and after implementation. Additional research should also examine the perspectives of parents, school psychologists, and administrators and investigate how infrastructure, training, and school-level support influence the implementation of SEL-related practices.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

We have not used AI tools or technologies to prepare this manuscript.

The authors declare that generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were not used in any way to prepare, write, or complete this manuscript.

Appendix A

Example Excerpt from the Codebook

Code	Description	Example from the data
Empathetic interaction	Instances where the teacher demonstrates emotional support, understanding, or encouragement.	"The teacher smiled and gave positive reinforcement after each student's response".
Collaborative learning	Activities where students work together in pairs or groups to complete tasks.	"Students engaged in a group role-play, discussing solutions for the scenario presented".
Use of digital tools	When digital resources (e.g., videos, presentations) are used to support the lesson.	"The teacher used a video on cultural differences to prompt a class discussion".
Emotional safety	Situations where the classroom environment feels psychologically safe for students to express emotions.	"The teacher encouraged students to share their feelings without fear of judgment".
Student engagement	Signs of active participation and verbal expression in English during class activities.	"Students eagerly volunteered to answer questions and participate in group discussions".

Appendix B

Student Questionnaire

Response formats

Y/N: Yes = 1; No = 0.

F: Never = 1; Rarely = 2; Sometimes = 3; Often = 4; Always = 5.

A: Strongly disagree = 1; Disagree = 2; Neither agree nor disagree = 3; Agree = 4; Strongly agree = 5.

MR: Multiple responses permitted; analysed categorically.

OE: Open-ended response; analysed thematically.

Items

1. I feel comfortable during English lessons. Y/N
2. I can express my thoughts in English without fear. F
3. I feel anxious when I answer orally in English. Y/N
4. Which emotions do you most often experience during English lessons: curiosity, anxiety, indifference, joy, tension, confidence, or another emotion? MR
5. I avoid speaking English because I am afraid of making mistakes. F
6. My teacher supports me when I experience difficulty during an English lesson. Y/N
7. I feel comfortable working with classmates in pairs or groups. F
8. My classmates help me when I cannot find the necessary English words. F
9. My teacher listens respectfully when students answer. F
10. My teacher encourages students to cooperate with one another. F
11. I participate actively in English lessons. F
12. Role-playing activities help me use English during lessons. Y/N
13. Group tasks increase my willingness to participate. F
14. I volunteer to answer or express my opinion in English. F
15. I can ask my English teacher for support when I feel worried or upset. F
16. I feel psychologically safe during English lessons. F
17. The school provides support when students experience emotional or learning difficulties. F
18. Videos, presentations, or other digital tools are used during English lessons. Y/N
19. Activities involving emotions, cooperation, and mutual respect are useful in English lessons. A
20. English lessons help students understand and respect other people's feelings. A
21. What helps you feel comfortable and participate during English lessons? OE
22. What causes anxiety or prevents you from speaking English during lessons? OE

Content-domain mapping

Emotional well-being and language anxiety: Items 1–5.

Interaction with teachers and peers: Items 6–10.

Classroom engagement and participation: Items 11–14.

Perceived emotional and institutional support: Items 15–18.

Awareness and perceived value of SEL-related practices: Items 19–22.

Scoring rules

The questionnaire items were analysed individually, and no composite content-domain scores were calculated. Multiple-response and open-ended items were analysed separately. For the binary analyses reported in Tables 4–6, Yes was coded as 1 and No as 0 for Items 1, 3, 6, 12, and 18. Pair or group preference was coded as 1 when the response to Item 7 was Often or Always and as 0 for all other responses.

Appendix C

Teacher Questionnaire

Response formats

Y/N: Yes = 1; No = 0.

F: Never = 1; Rarely = 2; Sometimes = 3; Often = 4; Always = 5.

A: Strongly disagree = 1; Disagree = 2; Neither agree nor disagree = 3; Agree = 4; Strongly agree = 5.

MR: Multiple responses permitted; analysed categorically.

OE: Open-ended response; analysed thematically.

Items

1. I am familiar with the term social-emotional learning. Y/N
2. How do you understand social-emotional learning in the context of English-language teaching? OE
3. Which elements do you associate with SEL: self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, relationship skills, cooperation, responsible decision-making, or another element? MR
4. I know methods for integrating SEL-related activities into English lessons. A
5. I know how role-playing, group work, and project activities can be organised to support students' emotional participation. A
6. I can adapt SEL-related activities to the conditions of a rural school. A
7. I use emotionally supportive or SEL-related practices in my English lessons. F
8. I use verbal encouragement, calm error correction, and non-verbal signs of support. F
9. I use pair work, group work, role-playing, or collaborative projects. F
10. Describe one activity that you use to support students' emotional comfort, cooperation, or confidence. OE
11. A lack of methodological materials limits the use of SEL-related practices in my school. A
12. Limited lesson time or an overloaded curriculum restricts the use of SEL-related activities. A
13. Which barriers affect SEL implementation: limited infrastructure, insufficient training, lack of materials, limited time, curriculum requirements, insufficient administrative support, or another barrier? MR
14. What methodological or institutional support would be most useful for implementing SEL-related practices? OE
15. I have completed professional training specifically related to SEL. Y/N
16. Which professional-development areas would be useful: SEL concepts, emotional support, language-anxiety reduction, conflict management, interactive methods, digital tools, assessment, or another area? MR
17. I would develop and apply SEL-related practices if appropriate methodological support were available. Y/N

Content-domain mapping

SEL conceptual understanding: Items 1–3.

Familiarity with implementation techniques: Items 4–6.

Use of interactive and emotionally responsive practices: Items 7–10.

Perceived implementation barriers: Items 11–14.

Professional-development needs and willingness to pursue SEL training: Items 15–17.

Scoring rules

The questionnaire items were analysed individually, and no composite content-domain scores were calculated. Multiple-response and open-ended items were analysed separately. For the binary indicators reported in Table 4, Item 1 was coded as familiarity with SEL, Item 7 was coded as use of SEL-related elements when the response was Sometimes, Often, or Always, the presence of at least one barrier in Items 11–13 was coded as an implementation difficulty, and Yes on Item 17 was coded as willingness to develop SEL competence.