
Revealing students' social-emotional competence of the English education department**Muhamad Laudy Armanda*, Agus Widyantoro**

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ABSTRACT

Beyond equipping pedagogical competence, English Education students are increasingly expected to navigate diverse classroom environments, cultivating social and emotional competence (SEC) to confront cultural sensitivity in today's 21st century. SEC is crucial for pre-service teachers as they prepare to educate future generations. Although extensive research has been carried out on SEC in foreign language learners, no study portrays English Education students' SEC across programs. Through a quantitative survey research design, this study investigates the perceived levels of English Education students' SEC and measures to what extent their levels vary according to their gender and education levels. A questionnaire survey of the social-emotional foreign language learning scale (SEFLLS) was distributed to the participants. Descriptive analyses (mean, standard deviation) and inferential statistics (Mann-Whitney U test) were conducted to analyze the data. The significant findings highlighted that English education students have high levels of overall social-emotional competence in both programs. Besides, findings indicated no significant difference based on participants' gender in their SEC and dimensions. Similarly, no significant differences were found between participants' education levels regarding their self-regulation and social relations. Yet, a significant difference was detected in the decision-making dimension and overall SEC. Subsequent studies could examine SEC factors across different cultures or socioeconomic levels in the context of language learning.

Keywords: English education students, pre-service teachers' well-being, social-emotional competence**Article history**

Submitted:

25 August 2024

Accepted:

15 January 2025

Published:

31 March 2025

Citation (APA Style):

Armanda, M. L., & Widyantoro, A. (2025). Revealing students' social-emotional competence of the English education department. *LITERA*, 24(1), 11-20. <https://doi.org/10.21831/ltr.v24i1.77277>

INTRODUCTION

Debate continues about the issue of higher education students' mental health and well-being, which has been extensively explored over the past several decades. Concerning social and academic demands in higher education can provide significant challenges for students unprepared with social expectations, heightened workload, and academic rigor (Simion, 2023). This diversity can enhance knowledge and experiences, but it may also cause difficulties in communication, understanding, and interactions with others (Destin et al., 2021). Further, this topic in recent publications has mentioned that university student's mental health can be significantly affected by the many changes that they are required to adapt to, such as the increased difficulty of coursework, the increased frequency and length of due dates, and the increased breadth and depth of course material (Bashir et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2023; Guzmán et al., 2023; Olivera et al., 2023).

A well-known problem with this situation has been identified in the English Education Department. They tend to feel anxiety about losing self-identities and learning difficulties among the heavy burdens for English as a foreign language students due to the difference in the cultures of the native and target languages (Hashemi, 2011; Horwitz et al., 1986). As Gardner (1985) stated, learning involves the acquisition of new language structures and the integration of new cultural and social notions. Thus, it is required to develop students' awareness of the cultural context to acquire competency in intercultural communication of the target language (Zaimoğlu & Sahinkarakas, 2021). To succeed in intercultural communication, students must be self-aware, able to engage with others, accept others' worldviews, and appreciate and negotiate differences (Kramsch, 1998). All of these are associated with social and emotional competencies, significantly influencing students' academic achievement at higher

education levels (Zaimoğlu & Sahinkarakas, 2021).

Prior studies have used various terms and concepts to describe Social and Emotional Competence (SEC). However, the operational characterization of social-emotional competence lacks consensus, leading to inconsistency in the terminology used to describe this competence (Zhang et al., 2022). Examples of different terms used include “emotional intelligence” (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), “emotional literacy” (Park et al., 2003), and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) by CASEL. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) pertains to the key elements of social and emotional skills as defined in prominent theoretical models, and it is widely approved by educators and scholars in various areas of education as a complete framework to measure the social and emotional skills of children and adolescents. (Zhou & Ee, 2012; Gresham et al., 2020; Martinez-Yarza et al., 2023). SEL, as defined by CASEL, encompasses the acquisition and application of knowledge, skills, and attitudes by individuals of all young people and adults to acquire healthy identities, control emotions, accomplish personal and collective objectives, demonstrate empathy towards others, foster and sustain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2022). SEL aims to promote students’ SEC, which covers a range of skills that address both interpersonal and intrapersonal levels (CASEL, 2022, as cited in Zhang et al., 2022).

Following the CASEL concept, they propose five competence areas for social and emotional skills. First, self-awareness is the individual’s ability to diagnose emotions, thoughts, values, strengths, and weaknesses that affect behavior across contexts. Second, self-management involves the individual’s ability to manage emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Third, social awareness can be identified as the individual’s ability to empathize with others and respect different perspectives, especially those with diverse backgrounds, cultures, and circumstances. Fourth, relationship management refers to the individual’s ability to establish healthy and supportive relationships. Fifth, responsible decision-making enables individuals to make caring and constructive decisions concerning their behavior and social interactions in distinct situations. Overall, the CASEL framework entails five core domains of competencies, each of which includes multiple sub-capacities that are designed to be taught and implemented at different levels (Çelik & Erbay Çetinkaya, 2022).

A growing body of research shows that SEC has a positive effect on students’ academic engagement (Zins et al., 2007), grades (Elias & Haynes, 2008; Durlak et al., 2011), academic attitudes and emotions (Wang et al., 2016), and interpersonal relationship (Delay et al., 2016), achievement (Wang et al., 2019), performance (Portela-Pino et al., 2021). Based on the prior evidence, strengthening social and emotional skills can be particularly essential considering the growing skills demand due to its benefits in different aspects of individuals’ (Chernyshenko et al., 2018; Pancorbo et al., 2020; Martinez-Yarza et al., 2023).

Take into account that students who studied in the English Education Department are expected to be future educators, which requires them to perceive high social and emotional competence in order to cope with burnout symptoms due to heavy workload. As Körkkö & Lutovac (2024) declared, teachers’ social and emotional competence (SEC) is crucial for effectively navigating complicated situations in the various relationships they encounter in their professional roles. Moreover, initial teachers’ education does not provide exact training with respect to SEC in terms of interpersonal competences, which is being able to identify and effectively control their emotions and behaviors, as well as monitor their own progress towards reaching goals (SchonertReichl et al., 2017). Specifically, pre-service teachers must acquire and retain their social-emotional competence to effectively apply it in their future careers as professional teachers and to acquire and maintain adequate academic achievement while studying at the university (Hermana et al., 2021). To expand the research on this demand, it can be assumed that if foreign language students develop through recognizing their SEC, they will have a chance to get along with their difficulties (Zaimoğlu & Sahinkarakas, 2021).

However, Chaplin and Aldao (2013) argue that gender and age are two of the many factors that possibly impact the SEC, along with culture and peer interactions. Curby et al. (2015) found that men are often less self-aware, sensitive, cooperative, and aggressive because they struggle to pay attention and manage their emotions. Meanwhile, Garner et al. (2014) discovered that women are more likely to positively express and control their emotions than men are. This is because women have a better grasp of the reasons and consequences of different types of emotional expression and are better educated about the nuances of delivering different kinds of emotions. As a result, it would be of special interest to explore English Education students across gender and education levels to enrich this uncharted area.

While the investigation of SEC in preschool students, k-12 students, teachers in k-12 schools, and undergraduate students has now been well-documented, no study has yielded whether students' SEC levels vary according to gender and education levels, especially those who studied in the English Education Department. Ultimately, this study tried to fill the gap, as Gilar-Corbi et al. (2018) recommended, who considered future research on the follow-up of achievements in acquiring socio-emotional competences in the postgraduate phase. Following this, the present study set out to examine the answers to the following research questions: a) What are the perceived levels of English Education students' SEC across education levels? b) Do English Education students' SEC levels vary according to their gender and education levels?

METHOD

A quantitative survey research design was performed in this study, which aims to scrutinize the perceived levels of English Education students' SEC and measure to what extent its levels vary according to their gender and education levels. The participants in this study were selected using convenience sampling, which Fraenkel and Wallen (2006) describe as "a group of individuals who are conveniently available for study". A total of 187 undergraduate and graduate students who enrolled in the English Education Department from two universities in Java, Indonesia, voluntarily participated in the study. They came from various regions and cultural backgrounds, which enriched the sample's study by providing a broader understanding of how different cultural perspectives influence the development of SEC in English language learning. The SEFLLS questionnaire developed by Zaimoğlu and Sahinkarakas (2021) was adopted to collect information on the participants' SEC. The instrument had 24 items on a 4-point Likert Scale (1: Strongly Disagree to 4: Strongly Agree). They were tested for validity, which obtained that all items' scores (r-value) were higher than 0.148 (r-table), indicating were valid. The internal consistency reliability estimate for the 24 items SEFLLS in the present study is 0.88, meaning they were considered reliable. Extending this line of inquiry, content validity results were also gathered from an expert judgement to ensure whether the instrument was suitable and aligned with its intended purpose and sample.

In order to answer the first research question, descriptive analyses (percentage, mean, and standard deviation) were carried out on the sample. Since the data was categorized as ordinal and did not meet the normality assumption, this study applied the Mann-Whitney U test to compare participants' average scores according to gender and education levels as a response to the second research question.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Student participants profile

Initially, the current study presents the English Education students' demographics in terms of gender and education levels to understand a detailed profile of the participants.

Table 1. Descriptive data of the sample

	Demographics	N	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	50	26.7%
	Female	137	73.2%
	Total	187	100%
Education level	Undergraduate	153	81.8%
	Graduate	34	18.1%
	Total	187	100%

As shown in Table 1, the demographic data shows a predominantly female sample (73.2%), and a little over a quarter of the total participants were males (26.7%). Of those 187 responses, the large majority of the participants came from undergraduate students (81.8%), while a small minority were graduate students (18.1%).

English Education students' SEC

Since the current study adopted a 24-item scale by Zaimoğlu and Sahinkarakas (2021), Table 2 demonstrates the results of cumulative means and the square root of the variance under a three-factor structure: self-regulation, social relations, and decision-making.

*Participants' perceived SEC dimensions***Table 2. Mean scores and standard deviations of the SEC and its subscales**

Dimension	N	Mean	Std.Dev
Self-Regulation	187	3.07	0.67
Social Relations	187	3.21	0.59
Decision-Making	187	3.31	0.52
Total SEC	187	3.18	0.62

According to the data, the mean scores suggest that participants generally rate their competencies in decision-making highest ($M=3.31$, $STD=0.52$), followed by social relations ($M=3.21$, $STD=0.59$), and self-regulation lowest ($M=3.07$, $STD=0.67$). A similar finding was reached by Çelik and Erbay Çetinkaya (2022), who reported that the high mean scores suggest that they have a sense of future responsibility and the ability to make decisions based on values. Besides, the items on the decision-making dimension are related to the decision-making process determined by their personal values and potential consequences (Zaimoğlu & Sahinkarakas, 2021). This process can lead them to give up on their difficulties or support them in their future careers. For example, choosing to become a lecturer or a teacher can be a life-changing decision. Those pursuing to become lecturers must take a graduate or doctoral degree. Yet, if they cannot decide independently, others may influence them. That is why decision-making has become crucial in order to avoid the worst life scenarios. Bear in mind that the majority of our participants were undergraduate students who would be English pre-service teachers. Hermana et al. (2021) obtained a similar pattern of findings and commented that the pre-service teachers demonstrated a high level of responsible decision-making competence, as they could decide something by carefully considering and evaluating the potential outcomes and consequences.

As discussed in the introduction, Hecht and Shin (2015) argue that culture is believed to be the basis for SEC. In the meantime, Buttjes (1990), as cited in Albantani and Madkur (2018), suggests that language teaching is culture teaching. Viewed together, the role of culture in teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) pedagogy is crucial to several factors (Anuyahong et al., 2024), one of which is the impact of culture on language learning provides teachers' instructional decisions, supporting them to apply teaching method and materials as concerned as meet the students' diverse needs (Mohammed, 2020). In addition, students' cultural background is one of the aspects that the teacher must consider (Albantani & Madkur, 2018). For this reason, participants as prospective English teachers should maintain their responsible decision-making competence because it enables them to select and adapt instructional demands that are culturally responsive in accordance with students' needs.

Despite this, the participants in this study believed they also had good self-regulation and social relations. As Zaimoğlu and Sahinkarakas (2021) exposed, self-regulation covers self-awareness and self-management, which describes the ability to achieve goals by shifting and focusing one's attention towards a social setting, stimulating and controlling behaviour, and managing behaviours and emotions. This response highlighted the participants' capability to understand their feelings, thoughts, and values, and anticipate the impact of their actions on others by analyzing prejudices and biases and applying stress-management strategies. Reviewing the previous dilemma, students who learn English tend to feel about losing self-identities, so maintaining local culture must be paid attention to by English teachers. By doing this, participants as English pre-service teachers who perceived good self-awareness and self-management should be promoted as awareness of their local and target language culture. Behind it is none other for incorporating local culture on behalf of national identity (Sudartini, 2012). The integration of local cultural values can support students in preparing their cultural background and identity, fostering a sense of nationalism within them (Shrestha, 2016). Building upon this, teachers can enhance students' linguistic competency and cultural awareness by exposing them to cultural artifacts, including literature, music, art, and social behaviors (Byram, 1997, as cited in Anuyahong et al., 2024).

Besides, social relations comprise social awareness and relationship skills, depicting participants' social, verbal, and physical interactions as they exchange thoughts and emotions with their peers, teachers, and those in their vicinity. This finding ties well with previous studies wherein participants had enough competence in understanding others and dealing with their own emotions and friendships

(Wirajaya et al., 2019). Since some of our participants had already become English teachers, having a high level of social-emotional competence in the area of relationship skills allows them to establish meaningful connections with their students, enhancing the quality of interactions and making the teaching-learning process more enjoyable (Anisa et al., 2019). As it is known that language learning certainly involves many social interactions, Deardorff (2006) states that the capacity to engage successfully and responsibly with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds is associated with the essence of cultural integration in TEFL to promote cultural competence development. Students develop empathy, tolerance, and respect for diversity by exploring cultural nuances in language use, which are values important in a society that is becoming increasingly globalized (Kramsch, 1993, as cited in Anuyahong et al., 2024). Delving deeper into our context, one would expect that participants did learn not only linguistic fluency but also intercultural skills through holistic views in achieving meaningful communication across cultures.

Taken together, the total SEC score combines all dimensions showing a mean of 3.18 and a standard deviation of 0.62, which indicated that the participants believed themselves to have good social-emotional competence. Through teachers' views, SEC empowers them to effectively navigate and confront life's obstacles by fostering personal growth and cultivating meaningful connections while also demonstrating effective and ethical work and performance (Durlak et al., 2015; Tolan et al., 2016). Above all, the data also confirm the consistency and variability of the participants' responses ($M > STD$), which uncover that the population came from the same variety.

Participants' perceived levels of SEC

Having discussed the particular findings in each SEC dimension, Table 3 portrays their perceived levels of SEC.

Table 3. The score distribution of participants' SEC

Interval	Category	N	%	Mean	Std.Dev
73-96	High	110	58.8%	76.37	7.56
49-72	Moderate	77	41.1%		
24-48	Low	0	0		

Primarily, it can be seen that the overall mean score is 76.37 and the standard deviation is 7.56. According to the score distribution, where the score interval 24-48 (low category) means too weak level of SEC, 49-72 (moderate category) medium level of SEC, and 73-96 (high category) high level of SEC. The participants appeared to have the highest percentage of 58.8% ($M=110$), which tends to high category level. A substantial minority was considered in the moderate category of 77 participants (41.1%). Interestingly, none of them was put into the low category level. These findings prove that they already possessed good SEC, which involves personal, social, situational, and environmental factors.

With reference to the theoretical background, Martin and Collie (2016) view that teachers who possess higher levels of social-emotional competence are more likely to feel enhanced well-being and motivation. Additionally, they are better equipped to integrate social-emotional learning strategies and foster favorable academic, social, and emotional outcomes in their students. They are more adept at handling various issues that may arise in the teaching-learning environment, including classroom management and emotional regulation (Anisa et al., 2019). From these views, it is clear that participants from undergraduate or graduate programs could perform as educators to contribute to this positive picture of social-emotional learning offered to educator candidates in the English Education Department.

Group difference based on demographic characteristics

We are now moving to answer the second research question: whether English Education students' SEC levels vary according to gender and education levels.

The effect of gender on participants' SEC

The following are the Mann-Whitney U test results for the data in order to investigate the difference between male and female English Education students in terms of their levels of social-emotional competence dimensions.

Table 4. The Mann-Whitney U test results for the effect of gender on participants' SEC

	Gender	N	Mean Rank	U	p
Self-Regulation	Male	50	90.68	3259.000	.610
	Female	137	95.21		
Social Relations	Male	50	93.46	3398.000	.934
	Female	137	94.20		
Decision-Making	Male	50	91.07	3278.500	.648
	Female	137	95.07		
Total SEC	Male	50	90.59	3254.500	.602
	Female	137	95.24		

*p<0.05

Statistical analysis data apparently revealed that there were no statistically significant differences between male and female English Education students concerning their SEC and its dimensions (male MR=90.59; female MR=95.24; U= 3254.5; p=.602). Not one of these differences was statistically significant. Following this, both male and female participants have similar levels of SEC and its dimensions, which is proven by our data that the average score of males was 75.9 and that of females was 76.5. Although females' scores were higher on SEC subscales, the differences were not significant from males' scores. This is also supported by Hyde's (2005) hypothesis, which claims that gender (males and females) are more alike than different on most psychological variables. However, this is inconsistent with what has been presented in the introduction, in which it is possible that the SEC can be influenced by gender. Regardless, it is important to note that those previous theories were intended for a children's level. Surprisingly, our finding aligns with the study conducted by Ummah and Fitriarsari (2019), which proved that the SEC of children did not have a significant difference based on gender. Another relevant study, Meshkat and Nejati (2017), found no significant difference between the genders in undergraduate English major students' total scores in terms of emotional intelligence. Likewise, Taylor and Hood (2010) revealed that women self-rated their demonstration of emotional and social competence similar to men. Admittedly, gender does not significantly influence social-emotional skills development, reinforcing that educational strategies and interventions can be broadly applied without needing gender-specific modifications.

The effect of educational levels on participants' SEC

In contrast to what was previously thought, Table 5 underlines the results for the effect of educational levels on participants' SEC and its dimensions.

Table 5. The Mann-Whitney U test results for the effect of education levels on participants' SEC levels

	Education Level	N	Mean Rank	U	p
Self-Regulation	Undergraduate	153	91.03	2146.000	.109
	Graduate	34	107.38		
Social Relations	Undergraduate	153	93.46	2519.000	.772
	Graduate	34	96.41		
Decision-Making	Undergraduate	153	88.10	1698.000	.001*
	Graduate	34	120.26		
Total SEC	Undergraduate	153	89.93	1978.000	.029*
	Graduate	34	112.32		

*p<0.05

The statistical analysis data confirm any significant differences between participants who came from undergraduate and graduate programs in terms of decision-making dimension (MR=1698.0; p=.001). However, there were no statistically significant differences with regard to self-regulation (MR=2146.0; p=.109) and social relations dimensions (MR=2519.0; p=.772). Even so, a significant difference was found regarding participants' SEC (MR=1978.0; p=.029). Portrayed by this evidence, the confirmation of significant differences between undergraduate and graduate students indicates that the level of education significantly impacts the variable studied. In other research on the difference between undergraduate and graduate students, Artino and Stephens (2009) reported that both groups have different levels of experience learning and show different levels of motivation and self-regulation

while learning, specifically in the context of learning online. In addition, a study by Illovsky (2010), who discussed the psychological comparisons of education students, suggested that either undergraduate or graduate students are individuals who do not always reflect their group's profile. These findings underscore the notion that both groups have different levels of aspirations since graduate students certainly have abundant experience in academic life. Even so, this does not mean that college students are obligated to behave based on their characteristics.

Moving to our topic, Purwanti et al. (2021) conducted a study that explored postgraduate students' self-awareness, self-regulation, and academic burnout. They found that there is a correlation among those variables simultaneously. Through their findings, it is generally agreed upon that English Education graduate students' SEC, especially self-regulation, potentially contributes toward professionalism as a teacher and teacher's burnout symptoms due to heavy workload. Overall, our findings highlighted the need for tailored educational strategies to support the specific developmental stages and needs of these different student groups.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the present study tried to answer two research questions. Our findings broadly focused on undergraduate and graduate program participants who reported high and moderate category levels. It is generally agreed that they are believed to have good-quality social-emotional competence, which potentially supports them during university learning or, subsequently, future careers. As such, these conclusions are relevant within the specific context of this study sample and should be interpreted with caution. Notwithstanding, the findings cannot be generalized beyond this group or assumed to apply universally without further research in broader contexts.

A further conclusion that can be drawn is that there is no significant difference based on the gender of participants concerning their SEC and its dimensions. With such consideration, prior studies have shown comparable results that their participants did not significantly influence social-emotional skills development toward genders (Taylor & Hood, 2010; Ummah & Fitriyari, 2019). Building upon this, no significant differences were found between participants' education levels regarding their self-regulation and social relations. However, the significant difference between undergraduate and graduate students was detected in the decision-making dimension, and overall, their SEC. As a whole, our study provides insight into the fact that psychological factors toward social-emotional competence are not determined by gender. Therefore, educators and program developers might consider that, within this context, both male and female students possess comparable levels of social-emotional competence. Nevertheless, it may be possible for graduate students to possess better SEC than undergraduate students due to the abundance of experience.

It must be noted that this study was conducted in two universities with English majors, so the results cannot be generalized beyond other university departments. In addition, future research should aim for a more balanced representation of gender and educational levels (especially graduate and/or post-graduate students with a large sample). This could involve targeted recruitment strategies to ensure a broader participant pool. Lastly, to emphasize the underlying interrelationship of various demographic characteristics variables between measuring beyond the SEC factor structure and the observed data, conducting confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) or path analysis is suggested.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Agus Widyantoro, who supported and granted me permission to conduct this research, as well as the financial and academic resources to finish it. I would also like to thank the 5th International Conference on Teacher Education and Professional Development (InCoTEPD) in collaboration with SEAMEO and JETA, which provides a platform to present my research and gives me an opportunity to submit to LITERA: Jurnal Penelitian Bahasa, Sastra, dan Pengajarannya, which exceeded my expectations.

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