

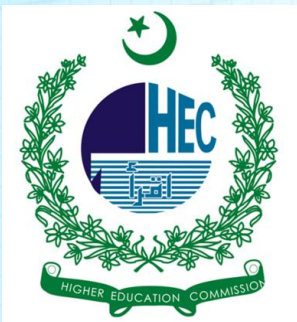
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Exploring the Role of Social and Emotional Learning in the ESL Classroom: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study



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Abstract

While traditional ESL teaching emphasizes cognition, language acquisition is inherently emotional and social. In Pakistani higher education, ESL classrooms are high-stress environments where socio-academic pressure affects learners' communicative competence. This qualitative study, using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), explores the lived experiences of 12 Pakistani undergraduates. Through semi-structured interviews and rigorous IPA protocols, this study examines how students manage socio-emotional challenges and perceive the role of social and emotional learning (SEL) in overcoming language barriers. Four superordinate themes emerged: (1) performance and foreign language anxiety; (2) self-awareness and emotion regulation as coping strategies; (3) peer empathy and relationship skills enabling safe practice; (4) teachers' socio-emotional competence boosting motivation. Integrating the CASEL framework with affective filter hypothesis, this study argues that SEL is not an "add-on" but a pedagogical necessity for second language acquisition. Findings advocate embedding SEL into ESL curricula and in-service teacher training to develop emotionally supportive language classrooms in Pakistan.

Keywords: affective filter; English as a second language; foreign language classroom anxiety; interpretative phenomenological analysis; social and emotional learning

1. Introduction

Traditionally, the learning of English as a second language (ESL) has been highly conceptualized in a purely cognitive and structural manner with emphasis on retaining grammar, syntax and vocabulary. In recent years, however, contemporary language studies have come to an understanding that language learning is not only a cognitive process but is also an emotional, psychological and social process (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). When learners enter the language classroom, they are not blank slates, but a complex network of emotions, insecurities and social dynamics that have significant impact on their ability to learn and produce a new language (Arnold, 1999). For this reason, the affective side of learning has been the subject of a lot of discussion and the development of the concept of social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL is a process in which people learn and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they need to form healthy identities, regulate their own emotions, and pursue individual and collective goals as defined in detail by the collaborative for academic, social, and emotional learning (CASEL, 2020). CASEL's five core competencies are: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

The implications of the connection between emotional well-being and learning languages in the context of higher education in Pakistan are especially important (see Amir, Mashooque & Siddiqui, 2023; Kumari, Younus, Jabeen & Memon, 2024; Manan, Haidar, & Amin, 2023; Tuan, Lap, Trinh & My, 2025). English is not only an academic discipline but also the state language, language of instruction in universities and the ultimate facilitator of upward socioeconomic mobility and success in Pakistan (see Ahmad, 2022; Channa & Manan, 2015; Khan, 2014; Manan, David & Dumanig, 2016; Rahman, 2020). Thus, the Pakistani under-graduates are under tremendous psychological stress to

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learn English to a higher level (Ahmed, Shaikh & Gul, 2025; Ain & Khan, 2025; Manan et al., 2023; Malik & Pervaiz, 2023; Mankash, Dahri & Naveed, 2024). This high-stakes situation frequently transforms the ESL classroom into a place of great anxiety, instead of a place where communicative practice is possible. Although the world has moved towards a holistic approach in education, the socio-emotional aspect of ESL learning in Pakistan is yet to be explored in detail and needs to be investigated qualitatively as to how the ESL learners emotionally struggle through the difficult path of second language acquisition (Shoaib, Ali & Kausar, 2025).

Although the role of affective factors (e.g., language anxiety, motivation and self-esteem) in the field of second language acquisition is well documented (see Kiruthiga & Christopher, 2022; Papi & Khajavy, 2023; Zheng, 2008), the ESL teaching in Pakistani higher education system is mostly traditional, teacher-centred and overemphasizes cognitive and structural linguistic aspects (Tariq, Iqbal & Rahman, 2023). The grammar translation method and the culture of rote learning are prevailing throughout the world and the socio-emotional needs of learners are always at the margins (Goleman, 2005). As a result, classroom contexts typically feature high pressure evaluation, resulting in a foreign language anxiety, low self-efficacy, and in particular poor communicative competence of undergraduate students (Alghamdi, 2024). Although there are quantitative studies (e.g., Hussain, Fareed & Akhtar, 2020; Rasool, Qian & Aslam, 2023) that are successful in measuring language anxiety among the students in Pakistan and are also statistically significant, literature is lacking of the qualitative realities of those students. There is a lack of depth of understanding about the socio-emotional experience, interpretation and navigation of the Pakistani undergraduate learners in the ESL classroom. In addition, it is unclear whether the students' potential understanding of the use of SEL (social emotional learning) skills to reduce their language difficulties. This is because pedagogical changes have to be superficial if they do not take into account these lived experiences. Hence, it is important to investigate within a phenomenological framework to gain a deeper understanding of the essent of learners' emotional experiences and to offer pedagogically oriented interventions focused on the students.

1.1 Research Questions

This phenomenological study used the following central research questions to address the identified problem:

1. What is the lifeworld of the Pakistani undergraduate students in terms of their social and emotional life, challenges and successes in the ESL classroom?
2. What is the undergraduates' perspectives on the importance of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies to reduce foreign language anxiety and to improve the general communicative competence?
3. How do students perceive the effects of an emotionally supportive classroom environment on their language learning processes, risk-taking behaviors, and communicative confidence?

1.2 Research Significance

The significance of this study is that it has the potential to change the pedagogical paradigm of teaching ESL from a purely cognitive approach towards emotionally responsive, holistic approach in the context of Pakistan. This study contributes to the collection of the literature in second language acquisition (SLA) by

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combining the CASEL framework with affective theories in SLA, and offers a unique perspective on the context in a developing and post-colonial nation where English has significant sociopolitical implications.

The results of this study will provide valuable and student-oriented information for various stakeholders in practice. The highly personal stories in this study will be useful to curriculum designers in Pakistan as empirical data to support the incorporation of SEL learning goals in ESL and English for academic purposes (EAP) curricula at a systemic level. Emotional wellbeing should not be an add-on to curriculum designs, but can be built into language tasks. For ESL practitioners and educators working with adult language learners, a better knowledge of the students' lived experiences will develop pedagogical empathy, which will help them to provide an emotionally safe learning environment where learners can develop communicative fluency and take risks. Lastly, this research will emphasize the need for a holistic teacher-training curriculum for higher education policy makers that will not only help the teachers in getting linguistic training but also will provide socio-emotional skills to cater to the needs of the contemporary learner of Pakistan higher education. Finally, it highlights that in order to achieve a more humane, equitable and effective language education, a voice of the students must be heard.

1.3 Research Limitations

Although this qualitative research is very deep and profound in understanding the affective domain in the language learning process, there are limitations. Firstly, the sample size was deliberately small (12 participants) and in line with the idiographic nature of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Therefore, the results cannot be generalized as a whole for all the ESL learners at all educational levels in Pakistan. Second, the data presented here are of a single public sector university in the province of Punjab and the typical socio-educational environment of the other provinces or in elite private-sector universities may not have been fully captured. Lastly, all information was self-reported and was used to draw conclusions about past events, which may sometimes be prone to memory lapses or the subject's interpretation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualizing SEL in Education

SEL goes back to the early psychological theories about emotional intelligence that brought about a more comprehensive understanding of human development in the learning process. SEL is now known as an integral part of good education today. The CASEL offers the most widely adopted and rigorously validated framework to understand SEL in the context of education. CASEL (2020) provides information on the five core competencies, which are interrelated. Self-awareness is the ability to know one's feelings, thoughts and values and how they affect behavior in various situations. Self-management involves managing emotions and behavior effectively; stressing and self-motivating. Social awareness involves being empathetic and aware of others' views, especially those of others who are different. Relationship skills include being able to develop and maintain positive relationships in a supportive way, communicate effectively and respond to conflict positively. Lastly, responsible decision making is about making constructive decisions regarding personal behaviour and social interaction (Eatough & Smith, 2017).

A vast body of educational research over the last 20 years has shown that the systematic incorporation of these SEL competencies has significant impacts. Zins,

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Weissberg, Wang & Walberg (2004) did a wonderful job of establishing that SEL programs are not only good for fostering psychological well-being and positive social behaviors, but they also have a direct impact on academic achievement. This enhances a student's emotional security, social integration and ability to enjoy learning content, overcome cognitive obstacles and cooperate with other students (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011). SEL is relevant in higher education contexts, which are characterized by a more complex transition and increased academic demands, as it is a protective factor against academic failure (Zhao, 2023).

2.2 The Affective Domain in Second Language Acquisition

The "affective turn" SLA research represents a paradigm shift in the understanding of the nature of language learning as emotion is one of the factors that has been recognized. At the core of this domain is Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis which suggests that a learner's affective state is like a filter that can either help or hinder language learning. Krashen (1982) believes that students who are highly motivated, confident and low on anxiety have a 'low' affective filter that will permit language input to the brain's language acquisition device to flow easily. On the other hand, learners who feel fear, stress or doubt have 'high' affective filter that hinders the learning of the language regardless of how intelligent they are and how good the teacher is in teaching the language (Gannoun & Deris, 2023).

Building on this, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) developed the foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) which is seen as a separate anxiety and is due to the specific requirements that are found in language learning. They broke down FLCA into three related performance anxieties: communication anxiety (fear of speaking or interacting); test anxiety (fear of academic evaluations); and fear of negative evaluation (fear of peer and teacher evaluations). FLCA has long been recognised as one of the main barriers to oral proficiency for a number of decades. In more recent times, however, SLA researchers have taken to positive psychology approach. To ease anxiety is only half the equation, teachers need to actively promote positive emotions. Foreign language enjoyment (FLE) is about the enjoyment of linguistic challenge, of peer solidarity and teacher support. Dual emphasis on reducing FLCA and improving FLE serves to illustrate the need for pro-active investment into the affective domain as a foundation for the implementation of structured socio-emotional approaches in language classes (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

2.3 Intersection of SEL and ESL

SEL and ESL teaching and learning is a new and exciting area of applied linguistics (Laakkonen, 2026). Recent global research shows that SEL interventions that are intentionally integrated into language courses have much more to offer than just language learning benefits. Language learning is a socially mediated and emotionally vulnerable process.

The alignment of the advantages of SEL for ESL learners with the CASEL framework is evident. For example, by making them aware of themselves, learners can identify their physiological manifestation of anxiety about language, such as a rapid heartbeat before a language task. Self-management teaches them how to use useful techniques to manage their emotions that can decrease this communication anxiety, such as deep breathing or positive self talk (Mammadova, 2024). In addition, the success of

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communicative language teaching (CLT) is directly related to the development of social awareness and relationship skills. When empathy and respect for each other is actively nurtured in the classroom, the fear of being negatively evaluated (an integral part of FLCA) is considerably reduced. Students are more inclined to conduct peer-to-peer dialogues, group negotiations and take risks without being ridiculed by peers. Empirical evidence from around the world shows that SEL-infused ESL classrooms have reduced attrition rates and a higher number of students with a stronger sense of communicative confidence and intercultural competence as well as higher intrinsic motivation to learn the target language (Papi & Khajavy, 2023).

2.4 The Pakistani ESL Context

Therefore, to better understand the affective experiences of the Pakistani undergraduate learners, the socio-cultural and educational context of Pakistan ESL essential to be analyzed. English carries a huge amount of prestige in Pakistan. It ascribes to elite social status, is a prerequisite for white collar jobs and the only language used in higher education (Haidar, 2019; Rahman, 2020; Raza, Imran, Abid, & Nadeem, 2025). Thus, the motivation to learn English may be very strong due to external pressure but the motivation for the language itself may be very low (Mammadova, 2024).

This pressure often goes hand in hand with the emotional burden of realities of the Pakistani ESL classroom. Especially in the public sector universities, classes are very large with more than fifty students per class. Teaching is still largely teacher-oriented, and the grammar translation method, rote learning and highly punitive error correction techniques are still highly employed. Shoaib et al. (2025) have pointed out that this authoritative pedagogical culture is a source of fear of negative assessment for the students in Pakistan. Grammatical mistakes in speaking English are often ridiculed among peers and may be severely punished by the teacher which results in great fear. English language classrooms may be an environment of high vulnerability and stress. The focus of the education system is on high-stakes tests, and communicative fluency is not given due consideration which results in consequences for the socio-emotional health of the learners. The Pakistani undergraduate classroom, which is reflective of this harsh socio-educational environment, is a significant and very suitable place to explore the underdevelopment and need for SEL.

2.5 Research Gap and Conceptual Framework

The review shows that there is a gap in the literature both in methodology and theme in the field of ESL in Pakistan. Although there have been many studies on language anxiety among the Pakistani students, most of these studies are of quantitative nature and have completely relied on the standardized tools and measures, such as foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS). Although these studies do well in quantifying the occurrence of anxiety, the how and why of the students' emotional experience is not well captured in these studies. There is a lack of qualitative, in-depth phenomenological investigations that focus on the learners' lived experiences and bring their socio-emotional concerns to light.

In order to fill this gap, this study is based on the conceptual framework which combines the SEL framework of CASEL (2020) and Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis. This study proposes that SEL competencies (e.g., self-management and relationship skills) are the exact mechanisms by which the affective filter can be reduced

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by combining these constructs. This integrated framework, in addition to being well suited to investigate the possible internal emotional processing and meaning making within the lived experiences of the Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners, also provides a sound theoretical lens to rigorously interpret and understand their lived experiences.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design which is capable of capturing and analyzing the subjective realities of language learners that are emotionally loaded. In particular, IPA was chosen as the methodological framework for guiding the analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The purpose of IPA is to provide an idiographic and hermeneutic approach and is not statistical in nature, aiming to establish frequencies or correlations, but is rather interested in a detailed examination of personal lived experiences and the meaning that is attributed to these experiences by individuals (see Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Eatough & Smith, 2017). Learning a language in an education system like the one in Pakistan is an intensely personal journey, and often very emotional; it is a journey tinged with anxiety, identity negotiation and vulnerability. The intersection of SEL and ELL (English language learner) would be considered more psychological in nature, and a strictly objective measure would underestimate the psychological barriers that learners encounter. It is a world which is complex and deeply personal and IPA is uniquely and ideally suited to explore such worlds. It permits the researcher to go through a 'double hermeneutic' process, that is, the researcher is attempting to make sense of a group of participants who are attempting to make sense of their own highly emotional experiences in the ESL classroom. Through the use of IPA, the present study focuses on the voices of the learners by giving a picture of their socio-emotional world.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

In line with the idiographic principles of IPA, a purposive and homogeneous sampling technique was used to select the participants in this study, in whom the research problem is highly relevant and profoundly experienced. The subjects of the study were 12 undergraduate ESL students (Table 1) from a large scale public university in Punjab, Pakistan. The study of IPA requires a relatively small number of cases to enable an in-depth microscopic analysis of each case and then move on to cross-case generalisations. Because of the desire for the richness of the data, inclusion criteria were carefully established to include participants who had (1) a strong desire to share their personal, sensitive emotional experiences, (2) were or have been an undergraduate student in a mandatory EAP or ESL course, and (3) were or have been an undergraduate student with significant language anxiety and/or socio-emotional issues in the language classroom. In order to get an overall picture of the phenomenon across gender and academic fields, the final sample comprised of 6 male and 6 female students from different faculties such as Engineering, Humanities and Business Administration. The wide range of academic backgrounds provided a good contrast to highlight the pervasiveness of ESL-related emotional issues throughout the University.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Academic Faculty	Discipline	/	Self-Reported Level	ESL	Anxiety
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Fatima	Female	20	Humanities (Literature)	High
Hamza	Male	21	Engineering	High
Bilal	Male	22	Computer Science	Very High
Ayesha	Female	20	Business Administration	Moderate to High
Zainab	Female	19	Social Sciences (Sociology)	High
Usman	Male	21	Engineering	Moderate
Sana	Female	22	Education	Low to Moderate
Ali	Male	20	Business Administration	High
Hira	Female	21	Natural Sciences (Physics)	Very High
Saad	Male	23	Humanities (History)	Moderate
Maryam	Female	19	Computer Science	High
Omer	Male	21	Natural Sciences (Biology)	Moderate to High

Note. Pseudonyms are used to protect participant anonymity. Self-reported anxiety levels were established during the initial rapport-building phase of the interviews.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

The design of data collection was carefully structured to obtain rich, in-depth and very personal narratives. The data collection technique used was in-depth semi-structured interviews, which is a characteristic of phenomenological studies. The interviews took about 45 to 60 minutes each and were held in a physically and psychologically secure environment on the university's campus. Before the formal questioning, a rapport building conversation was done to lessen power relationship and establish conversational trust. With the permission of all the interviewees, all the interviews were audio-recorded to capture both verbal and paralinguistic cues which are significant for emotional interpretation, including pauses, sighs, shifts in pitch etc. The interview schedule was carefully written with open-ended questions to gain insight into the ESL context while at the same time guiding the participants to address the CASEL competencies. Some of the prompts they were given were: "When was a time that you were really overwhelmed or really anxious when you were in your English speaking class? Describe what you were thinking and feeling; and, "What happens to your thoughts and feelings when you are asked to give a speech in English to your teacher? The semi-structured nature enabled the researcher to ask for further details of the students' interpretations of unexpected and emergent emotional feelings that happened.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data from the transcribed interviews were analysed in the multi-stage rigorous process outlined by IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Analysis began with an immersive stage of listening to the audio recording repeatedly, in conjunction with reading the verbatim transcript to get to know each participant's story. The initial coding of a single case was done line-by-line with exploratory notes on the margins on descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual aspects of the participant's emotional language. These wide-ranging exploratory notes were then distilled and translated into 'emergent themes' in step two that resonated with the psychological essence of the participant's experience. In the third step, links between the arising themes were established and the themes were grouped together according to the conceptual similarity and superordinate themes were formed for that particular person. This process was conducted thoroughly for each of the 12 transcripts, independently. Finally, a cross case analysis was performed in order to look for

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convergence and divergence among all the cases. This resulted in the creation of a final master table of superordinate themes that captured the commonalities and essence of the students' socio-emotional experiences within the ESL classroom but also were mindful of the idiographic meanings of each student in their lived experiences.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Since the subject of anxiety, fear of failure and peer judgement is sensitive, extreme ethical precautions were observed throughout the study. Ethical permission was obtained from the institution before the data are gathered. A detailed informed consent forms were given to all participants, explaining the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw the consent at any time without penalty, and the specific use of the research. Culturally appropriate pseudonyms (e.g., Fatima, Hamza, Bilal) were used for the participants to guarantee absolute anonymity and to prevent them from being identified by other people or from any potential academic consequences. Any contextual information that could potentially identify participants was changed or deleted. Confidentiality was kept in that all the tapes and the encrypted transcripts were stored on a secure hard drive, with the password that was only known to the main researcher. In addition, in order to achieve qualitative trustworthiness, the criteria suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were carefully followed. Member-checking was used to establish credibility: The participants were asked to read a summary of their interview transcriptions to validate the emotional interpretations. Confirmability was achieved by keeping a thorough and transparent audit that reflected all methodological decisions, coding cycles and reflexive comments by allowing the findings to be identified as having been derived from the participants' data, and not the researcher's interests.

4. Results

The interpretative phenomenological analysis (Table 2) of the narratives of the twelve participants has given rise to rich insights into the rich socio-emotional world of the Pakistani ESL classroom.

Table 2. Master Table of Superordinate and Subordinate Themes (IPA)

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes	Prevalence (n=12)
1. The Burden of Performance and Foreign Language Anxiety	1a. Somatic symptoms of panic and "mental fog" 1b. Fear of peer judgment and negative evaluation 1c. Cultural stigma of broken English	12/12 12/12 10/12
2. Self-Awareness and Emotional Regulation as Coping Mechanisms	2a. Recognition of physiological anxiety triggers 2b. Use of internal positive self-talk and reframing 2c. Concealed somatic regulation (e.g., deep breathing)	9/12 8/12 11/12
3. The Role of Empathy and Peer Relationships in Communicative Practice	3a. Small-group collaboration as a psychological safety net 3b. Shared vulnerability lowering the affective filter	11/12 10/12 9/12

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	3c. Detrimental effects of hyper-competitive peers	
4. The Impact of Teacher-Student Dynamics on Motivation	4a. Teacher empathy fostering Foreign Language Enjoyment	12/12
	4b. Punitive error-correction inducing silence	11/12
	4c. High power-distance vs. approachable facilitation	12/12

Note. The prevalence column (Table 2) indicates the number of participants whose transcripts provided substantive evidence for the specific subordinate theme, demonstrating high convergence across the dataset.

These lived experiences of these undergraduate learners have been organized into four superordinate themes which resonate with the socio-cultural realities of language learning in Pakistan as well as the central competencies of the CASEL framework.

4.1 Theme 1: The Burden of Performance and Foreign Language Anxiety

The most universal and affecting theme among all respondents was the weakening of FLCA. The lived experiences showed that the traditional Pakistani ESL classroom does not necessarily appear as a secure place for experimentation with language in play but rather as a harsh domain of inspection and surveillance. The participants reported a very low level of emotional security, and a direct correlation with a very high "affective filter" which paralysed their capacity to fetch words in memory or to construct grammatical sentences. The fear was primarily about the possibility of being socially stigmatised for poor English pronunciation and the fear of others' negative opinion.

Fatima, a second year student of humanities, put into words this paralyzing emotion. She reported somatic symptoms of her anxiety, and showed clearly that there was a lack of emotional support of the environment: When the professor asks a question and his gaze falls on me, I lose my mind to the point where I cannot think. I'd rather not answer, take no part and lose the marks than get laughed at for my poor grammar. It is a fog that is literally choking me.

In the same way, Hamza, an Engineering undergraduate, explained the hyper-competitive environment to increase this burden of performance, which stunts his language learning: "In our culture, if you speak good English, you are intelligent, if you stumble you are uneducated. Every time I open my mouth in the ESL class, I feel like my whole intellect is being judged not just my English. It is too much to bear that you are not learning, you are just trying to survive the class without being ridiculed.

These heart-wrenching insights highlight the dramatic severity of primitive fear and anxiety responses which can hijack the cognitive processes involved in second language acquisition if there is not a strong socio-emotional basis from which to learn. There is a lack of culturally competent SEL infused pedagogical approach that leaves students emotionally isolated.

4.2 Theme 2: Self-Awareness and Emotional Regulation as Coping Mechanisms

Even though much anxiety was found within their learning environments, the analysis found that several students had an intuitive ability to engage in internal processes that reflected CASEL's core competencies of self awareness and self

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management. Realizing how limiting their anxiety was, participants outlined the personal strategies they had to work out to control their feelings and to 'survive' oral presentations or spontaneous speaking tasks. This theme reveals the inherent resilience of the learners and indicates the large potential of formalizing these emotional regulation strategies in the ESL curriculum.

Historically, Bilal has had a significant stuttering history triggered by language anxiety, and outlined his lonely path moving towards self-management: "When I was called on, I noticed my breathing was very shallow; I realised if I let the panic take over I wouldn't be able to graduate. So I started observing my own body. I close my eyes for 10 seconds and I silently say to myself: 'It's just a language, it's not your worth. It doesn't make the English perfect, but it stops my voice from shaking.'"

In her role as a business student Ayesha spoke of how she is conscious about the way she reframes her internal narrative and had a high level of emotional intelligence and self-awareness: "Before I was being hard on myself for every mispronounced word which just made me feeling more nervous for the next class. I had to teach myself to be kinder. Now, I try to take care of myself and when I make a mistake and hear a snicker from the back of the room, I make a conscious effort to smile and correct myself out loud. I need to regulate that shame immediately or it will sink my confidence for the whole semester".

These quotes show with great force that the regulation of emotions is already a battle ground which ESL learners need to engage with. Students would not have to do all this emotional labour on their own if it were taught, normalized and modeled by instructors as part of a formal SEL curriculum.

4.3 Theme 3: The Role of Empathy and Peer Relationships in Communicative Practice

The third superordinate theme focuses on the significant role that peer relations (CASEL's superordinate themes of social awareness and relationship skills) play in the willingness to communicate of the learners. The phenomenological data revealed a significant difference between whole class teacher-led instruction which engendered anxiety and small group, peer collaborative task which engendered a sense of belonging and risk-taking. Students' affective filters dropped significantly when there was a feeling of mutual vulnerability and empathy among the students, enabling the real communicative practice.

Zainab described a unique project that changed her attitude to English speaking from threatening to an opportunity (i.e., a group project). "Our teacher divided us into small groups of three and prepared us a debate and for the first time, I wasn't performing for fifty persons, I was just talking with two friends, who were as confusing as me with tenses. We laughed about our own mistakes, we helped each other find the words, we put the fear aside, because we created a relationship first".

Usman expressed the same idea by stating that social awareness and empathy are very important prerequisites for any language classroom to be functional: The key to language learning is to make a fool of yourself. If you don't know how to say something, nod your head, keep going; if classmates show empathy (not whispering to one another, but giving you that nod of encouragement, etc.) when you are coming up with a way to say something, it changes it. It gives you the psychological safety net to actually try to use a complex sentence.

These experiences confirm the importance of incorporating relationship

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development and practice in ESL curriculum. Empathy, active listening and a supportive peer-to-peer dynamic is not a 'soft skill'. Rather, it is a language catalyst that directly contributes to oral fluency and communicative confidence.

4.4 Theme 4: The Impact of Teacher-Student Dynamics on Motivation

The last superordinate theme is about the tremendous amount of emotional force that the language teacher has. The participants' stories clearly showed that teachers who possessed good SEL traits (empathy, approachability, listening to students, etc.) had a strong impact on increasing their students' intrinsic motivation and foreign language enjoyment (FLE). Authoritative teachers with a high PD, on the other hand, only corrected errors and engendered dreadful environments which were detrimental to language production.

Sana gave a very strong comparison of two teachers of ESL that she had during her undergraduate: I think it was a third semester when my teacher was different; she would sense when we were nervous, before a big presentation she would take a few minutes to just talk to us about how it is normal to feel anxious, and how she struggled with learning Arabic. Her empathy made me want to study harder for her, to speak English so I could communicate with her.

Ali spoke of the need for emotional tuning in from the teacher: "A really good English teacher reads the room, and when my teacher notices how tired or stressed we are because of midterm exams, he changes the activity. He uses humour. If a teacher is emotionally intelligent enough to let you know that you are being treated like a person, not just a registration number, then you don't feel so anxious. And the mind is open to learning the language".

This theme confirms the idea that the socio-emotional competence of the teacher is the key designer of the emotional climate in the classroom. Teachers who demonstrate SEL behaviors are able to shift the affective tone of their students and make the often-chilling task of learning a second language an emotionally supportive and motivating experience.

5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to gain an insight into the lived socio-emotional experience and understand the perception of SEL in the ESL classroom among the undergraduate students of Pakistan. The phenomenological results strongly substantiate that the experience of learning English in the Pakistani higher education context is an extremely emotional and psychologically draining process as was pointed out in Research Question 1. The strong stories marked by physiological responses of panic, fear of being judged by peers, and ingrained cultural fears of not speaking English properly show that thinking, understanding, and learning in the L2 is often captured by unregulated emotional distress.

As part of Research Question 2, the data reveal how students are aware of the importance of the SEL competency skills (i.e., self-management, empathy, relationship skills) as critical skills necessary for survival and success in learning a language. Without explicit SEL lessons, students try to regulate themselves and yearn to be treated empathically in a safe and supportive setting that helps to reduce their defenses so they can learn. The lived experiences illustrate how SEL factors (see Gregersen & Mercer, 2022) like peer empathy and teacher emotional attunement can reduce foreign language

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anxiety to a great degree and communicative risk-taking thrives when present. Finally, the results suggest that SEL is not an added option or an off-the-shelf application for the classroom, but rather a necessary pre-condition to effective second language learning in high-pressure settings.

The findings of this qualitative study (Table 3) are very relevant to the existing and current literature in the field of SLA. As Fatima and Hamza reported, the anxiety and 'mental fog' experienced by the participants is vivid qualitative evidence of Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis. If fear and the threat of negative evaluation is great, the affective filter effectively blocks comprehensible input and other cognitive language learning is useless. In addition, the types of fears expressed by the learners fit in perfectly with Horwitz et al.'s (1986) idea of FLCA and its two types of fear namely fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension.

Table 3. Alignment of the CASEL Framework with Emergent Pakistani ESL Classroom Needs

CASEL Core Competency	Application / Manifestation in the ESL Classroom Context (Based on Findings)	Impact on Second Language Acquisition (SLA)
Self-Awareness	Recognizing one's own linguistic insecurities, fear triggers, and emotional responses to making grammatical errors.	Allows the learner to identify the "affective filter" before it entirely blocks cognitive processing.
Self-Management	Employing breathing exercises, positive self-talk, and emotional regulation before speaking English publicly.	Directly mitigates communication apprehension and prevents panic-induced linguistic paralysis.
Social Awareness	Understanding the shared struggle of language learning; reading the emotional state of peers during presentations.	Replaces the culture of peer judgment/ridicule with mutual respect, reducing the fear of negative evaluation.
Relationship Skills	Active listening, collaborative peer-to-peer negotiation of meaning, and providing constructive feedback.	Fosters a safe micro-environment (small groups) necessary for authentic Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).
Responsible Decision-Making	Choosing to participate, ask questions, and take linguistic risks despite the possibility of making a mistake.	Increases target language output, oral fluency, and overall active classroom engagement.

Note. Table 3 synthesizes the theoretical CASEL (2020) framework with the qualitative realities of ESL acquisition, and illustrates SEL's direct utility in mitigating language anxiety.

But this study adds to the existing literature by using the CASEL (2020) framework as a lens to examine actionable mechanisms to respond to this anxiety in the socio-emotional world. The stories illustrating the effectiveness of self-regulation strategies and empathetic peer collaboration merge directly with CASEL's competencies of self-management, social awareness and relationship skills. In comparing these results with those from other countries, an interesting cultural aspect comes into view. Western SLA literature also focuses on individual intrinsic motivation; but, as mentioned by Shoab et al.

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(2025), in the high power-distance culture and collectivist culture of Pakistan, external factors (teacher authority and peer judgment) have much more weight in influencing the emotional states of a learner. Shameful acts around language mistakes, which are already very strong in English-medium institutions, are further enhanced by the prestige of English that has been inculcated in Pakistan for centuries. This makes SEL, especially empathetic and emotional safe spaces, more important in this geographical space than in more equal education contexts.

5.1 Pedagogical Implications

The deep emotional revelations gained from this phenomenological research highlight the need for persistent pedagogical changes in the education system of Pakistan in higher education. First, there is a need for curriculum developers to make a clear choice to break away from the traditional, evaluative grammar translation approach to language and teaching, and fully adopt the collaborative CLT approach which naturally incorporates SEL goals. Syllabi should be planned to incorporate clear teaching of how to regulate emotions, as well as to normalize the anxiety that comes with learning and teaching language and to teach learners strategies to manage themselves.

Second, the results highlight the critical need for SEL to be a part of teacher training. As well as pedagogical grammar, the University ESL teacher needs to have an advanced socio-emotional intelligence. Training should emphasize empathetic classroom management, listening, and how to develop classroom spaces where there is low anxiety, emotional safety, and the emphasis is on communicating and taking risks rather than creating a safe classroom for the purpose of grammatical correctness. Last but not least, assessment paradigms need to be rethought. The use of ongoing, low stakes, collaborative assessment instead of end-of-course high-stakes, oral exams can have a significant impact on reducing the affective filter, enabling Pakistani undergraduate learners to approach the learning of English with confidence, authenticity and pleasure.

6. Conclusion

This is an interpretative phenomenological study, which has critically examined the highly complex, emotionally charged lived experiences of the Pakistani undergraduate learners in the ESL classroom. The research clearly shows that a learner's socio-emotional well-being is closely related to language acquisition. The results showed that in Pakistan, the traditional ESL classroom setting which is more cognitively based may increase FLCIA resulting in the high affective filter which erodes the communicative competence. The study also, however, illuminates the transformative power of SEL. Learners' linguistic anxiety is greatly reduced when they have opportunities to use self-regulation strategies and when they are immersed in peer empathy and collaborative relationships and emotionally attuned teaching. Thus, this research draws the conclusion that SEL skills are not just an "add-on" in education, but rather have the potential to act as powerful devices of ESL learning to actively reframe linguistic anxiety to communicative confidence.

Subsequent studies are highly recommended to use a well-designed mixed approach to complement these rich qualitative depths with a larger statistical information from other universities in Pakistan. Also, there is a great need for quantitative, quasi-experimental research that can measure the effect of specific, structured SEL curriculum interventions over time on actual ESL test scores and objective oral proficiency rubrics. A study could develop and test a targeted syllabus for ESL which incorporates SEL and

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compare statistically the communicative outcomes and attrition rates to another group of students who are not following such a syllabus. In addition, exploring the socio-emotional experiences and pedagogical challenges of the ESL teachers themselves (e.g., emotional labour and readiness to implement SEL) would present a significant complementary lens to gain a more holistic understanding of how to provide a more comprehensive educational reform in the region.

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