

Fostering an ecological language classroom for social emotional learning

Justina C. Anyadiegwu

Department of English, Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe, Anambra State;

justinaanyadiegwu@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: justinaanyadiegwu@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO	Abstract
Keywords: <i>Ecological classroom, language classroom, social emotional learning</i> ©2026 Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International 	<i>This paper explores the intersection of ecological classroom environments and social emotional learning (SEL), especially in the language classroom, highlighting the critical role that SEL plays in promoting student academic achievement, social-emotional development, and overall well-being. By examining the nested systems of the ecological classroom environment, including microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems, this paper demonstrates how SEL can be integrated into language classroom practices to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Through a comprehensive review of the literature, this paper synthesises the existing research on SEL and ecological classroom environments, providing insights into the mechanisms underlying effective SEL implementation and the benefits of SEL for students, teachers, and schools. The position of this paper has implications for educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking to create positive and supportive learning environments that promote student success.</i>

Introduction

The twenty-first Century challenge for educators, families, and community members is seeking to raise and educate children who are knowledgeable, responsible and socially competent. A few generations ago, the priority of schools was teaching the traditional subjects, such as reading, writing, arithmetic and basic science. Today, young people are now spending more years in school and are more exposed to issues of depression, social isolation and other problems. This requires that these young people develop concentration, impulse control, and emotional regulation (Lopes and Salovey, 2004). Being responsible and socially competent, developing impulse control and having emotional regulation manifest in relationships. Who we are and what we become are determined by our experiences especially during our formative years and the time we spent in school. Our relationship with people and the experiences we gather from such help shape our personal identity. This underscores the need to ensure that our students have positive self-identities. Positive self-identity influences academic achievements positively. While academic achievement is important for successes in life, positive emotions and 'soft skills' that support all areas of student development are equally important. Our students therefore, need to have both academic intelligence and emotional intelligence. To this end, the ecology of the classroom should support and optimise academic and emotional development. One of the main contributing factors to emotional development is Social Emotional Learning (SEL).

Classroom Ecology

Classroom ecology refers to the complex system of relationships and interactions that occur within a classroom environment. It is an approach that views the classroom not just as a physical space, but as a dynamic "microsystem" where various elements constantly influence each other. Think of it like a natural ecosystem, where plants, animals, and the environment are all interconnected.

Classroom ecology entails different factors that help shape students' academic and social development. It considers what components of a positive classroom culture should be established for an optimal learning environment. The classroom is a highly dynamic place in which teachers, students and the environment all influence learning outcomes. In essence, classroom ecology is about understanding the holistic picture of the classroom – how the physical space, social interactions, and instructional practices come together to create a unique learning environment that either nurtures or hinders a child's development (Pianta, 1999).

Theoretical Framework

The concept of classroom ecology is hinged on **Bronfenbrenner's (1974) Ecological Systems Theory**. It posits that an individual's development is influenced by a series of interconnected environment ranging from the immediate surroundings e.g. family, to a broad societal structure. The theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the many factors that affect development. Bronfenbrenner identifies five series of nested systems around children and young people's lives which all influence each other in complex ways. The five systems are:

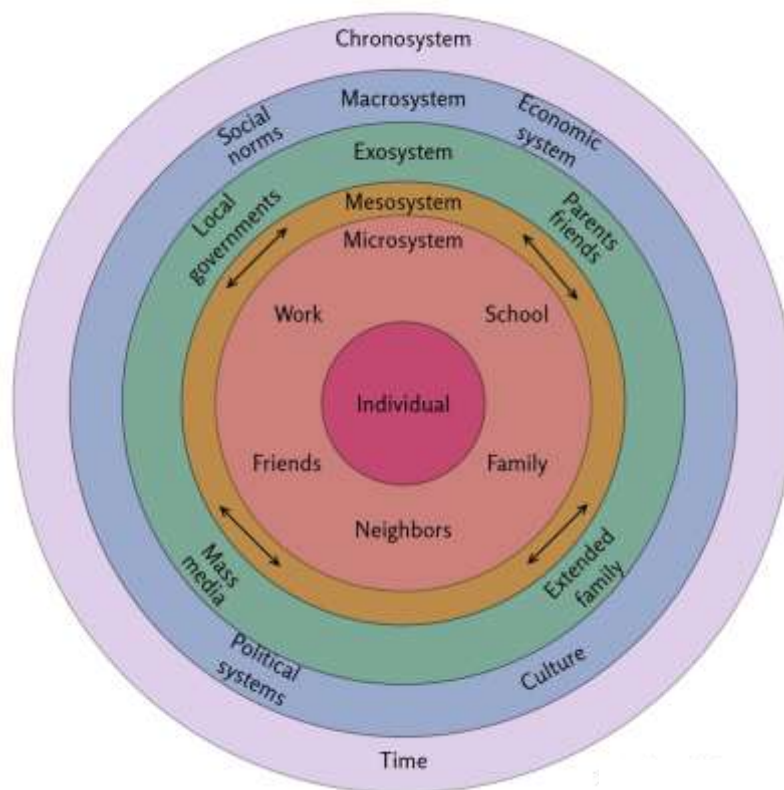
1. *Microsystem*: The microsystem is the most immediate environment in which an individual directly interacts with; including family, school, and peers. This system is the one that is closest to the child's everyday life. Research has shown that the microsystem plays a critical role in shaping an individual's social and emotional development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The microsystem is characterised by face-to-face interactions and direct relationships between the individual and his environment. For example, a child's microsystem might include his parents, siblings, and teachers, who all play a significant role in shaping his development.
2. *Mesosystem*: The mesosystem refers to the interactions between multiple microsystems, such as between home and school or between school and peer group. Research has highlighted the importance of mesosystem interactions in promoting consistency and coherence in an individual's environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). The mesosystem can have a significant impact on an individual's development, particularly if there are inconsistencies or conflicts between different microsystems. For example, a child's parents attending a school event; or a teacher visiting the child's home to find out why he is unable to come to school on time. Another example is that of a child who experiences a supportive and nurturing environment at home but a more rigid and structured environment at school; such may struggle to navigate these different expectations.
3. *Exosystem*: This system includes the broader community the child lives in. It refers to the external environments that indirectly affect an individual's development, such as parental workplaces, community services, and social networks. It includes everything from extended family members, parents' workplaces, neighbours, family friends, mass media, health, education and social welfare services as well as political systems and policies. The child does not necessarily have any direct contact with this system but because the people in the other systems closer to the child are affected by the exosystem, it affects the child as well. Research has shown that the exosystem can have a significant impact on an individual's development; particularly in terms of access to resources and opportunities. The exosystem can influence an individual's development through various mechanisms, such as parental stress, access to community resources, or social support networks. For example, a child whose parents work long hours may experience reduced parental involvement and support, which can impact his development.
4. *Macrosystem*: This system covers things going on at a bigger societal level and how these influence the other systems around the child. It is the broader cultural and societal context in which an individual develops. It includes cultural norms, ideologies, values, institutions, attitudes, laws and customs of a particular culture or subculture. Research has highlighted the

significance of the macrosystem in shaping an individual's development and opportunities. The macrosystem can influence an individual's development through various mechanisms, such as cultural values and norms, educational policies, and economic systems. For example, a child growing up in a society that values education and provides access to quality educational resources may have greater opportunities for development and success.

5. *Chronosystem*: The chronosystem refers to the temporal dimension of an individual's development, including the timing and duration of life events and experiences. This system refers to how people experience things over their lifetime. It includes big life changes such as being displaced from one place to another; and other more usual events such as marriage (and divorce), downward trend in family's fortune, the birth of a baby, changing schools when parents relocate for work, which may cause stress, etc.

Research has shown that the chronosystem can have a significant impact on an individual's development, particularly in terms of the accumulation of experiences and the development of resilience (Elder, 1998). The chronosystem can influence an individual's development through various mechanisms, such as the timing of life events, the duration of experiences, and the accumulation of experiences over time. For example, a child who experiences a significant life event, such as a parental divorce, at a young age may be more vulnerable to its effects than an older child.

Bronfenbrenner's (1974) five series of nested system



Other Ecological Factors

In addition to the nested systems framework proposed by Bronfenbrenner, there are other ecological factors that can influence an individual's development and learning. These factors can be broadly categorised into several key areas: interpersonal relationships, instruction and classroom management, composition of students as well as physical environment.

6. *Interpersonal Relationships*

Interpersonal relationships, including those with peers and teachers, play a critical role in shaping an individual's social and emotional development (Pianta, 1999). Positive relationships with teachers and peers can provide support, encouragement, and a sense of belonging, which can in turn promote academic achievement and social-emotional learning (Hattie, 2009). Research has shown that teacher-student relationships are particularly important, as they can influence student motivation, engagement, and academic achievement (Hamre&Pianta, 2001). Similarly, peer relationships can provide opportunities for socialization, friendship, and support, which are essential for social-emotional development (Hartup, 1999).

7. *Instruction and Classroom Management*

Instruction and classroom management are critical ecological factors that can influence student learning and development. Effective instruction and classroom management can promote a positive learning environment, reduce disruptions and misbehaviour, and increase student engagement and motivation (Emmer & Stough, 2001). Teachers who use evidence-based instructional strategies, such as formative assessment and differentiated instruction, can promote student learning and achievement (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Similarly, teachers who establish clear expectations and routines, and who use proactive strategies to manage classroom behaviour, can create a positive and productive learning environment (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006).

8. *Composition of Students*

The composition of students in a classroom or school can also influence an individual's development and learning. Diverse classrooms and schools can promote social-emotional learning, empathy, and understanding of different perspectives (Steele, 1997). However, diverse classrooms and schools can also present challenges, such as increased conflict and decreased sense of community (Tatum, 1997). Teachers and schools can promote positive outcomes in diverse classrooms by using strategies such as cooperative learning, restorative justice, and culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

9. *Physical Environment*

The physical environment of a classroom or school can also influence an individual's development and learning. A well designed physical environment can promote student engagement, motivation, and learning (Earthman, 2004). Features of well-designed physical environment include natural light, comfortable temperatures, and adequate space for movement and activity (Tanner, 2009). Additionally, physical environments that incorporate elements of nature, such as plants and green spaces, can promote student well-being and reduce stress (Kaplan, 1995).

Language Classroom

The language classroom is a unique ecological environment that presents both opportunities and challenges for students and teachers especially when it is done in a culturally diverse setting. In this context, Social Emotional Learning (SEL) can play a critical role in promoting language learning and use. The contexts of language classroom in Nigeria pose a lot of challenges for learners. Language learners may experience anxiety and stress when communicating in a new language, especially, the English Language. This can negatively impact their language use and overall well-being (Horwitz et al., 1986). Learners may also struggle with identity formation as they navigate multiple languages and cultures (Norton, 2000).

Social Emotional Learning

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) can be defined as the capacity to recognise and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationships with others (CASEL, 2003).

It is the process by which people develop their social and emotional competencies for success in school and in workplace, including the skills necessary to recognise and manage emotions, develop care and concerns for others, form positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and successfully handle the demands of growing up in today's complex society (CASEL, 2012). According to Durlak et al., 2011, SEL is critical for academic achievement, social emotional development, and future success. Emotions can facilitate or impede children's academic engagement, commitment and ultimate success since relationship and emotional processes affect how and what we learn. Thus, schools and families must effectively address these aspects of the educational process for the benefit of all students. SEL is not just about teaching students new skills; it is about helping them develop the competencies they need to succeed in school and beyond (Elias et al., 1997).

CASEL (2003) recommends that SEL programmes should have as direct targets, five key competencies:

1. **Self-awareness:** The ability to understand one's own emotions, personal goals and values. This includes assessing one's strengths and limitations, and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism.
2. **Self-management:** Ability to regulate emotions and behaviours. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, and setting and working towards achieving personal and academic goals.
3. **Social awareness:** Ability to take perspective from different cultures and backgrounds.
4. **Relationship skills:** Ability to provide students with tools they need to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships.
5. **Responsible decision making:** Ability to consider ethical standards, safety concerns, and accurate behavioural norms for risky behaviours, to realistically evaluate the consequences of various actions, and to take the health and well-being of self and others into consideration.

These five competencies reflect intrapersonal and interpersonal domains and are essential for success in virtually every area of life, from education to employment, to family and community relationships. These are critical in our language classrooms.

Benefits of SEL in the Language Classroom

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is a vital component of a comprehensive education, enabling students to develop essential life skills, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2003). By incorporating SEL into instruction, teachers can create a supportive and inclusive learning environment that promotes students' academic achievement, social emotional development, and future success (Durlak et al., 2011).

The benefits of SEL in the classroom are well-documented, including:

1. Improved academic achievement: SEL has been shown to improve academic achievement and reduce behavioural problems (Durlak et al., 2011).
2. Better relationships: SEL helps students develop positive relationships with their peers and teachers, essential for academic and social success (Pianta, 1999).
3. Increased empathy: SEL promotes empathy and understanding for others, critical for social awareness and relationship skills (CASEL, 2003).
4. Improved mental health: SEL can help students develop healthy coping mechanisms and reduce stress and anxiety, promoting overall well-being (Elias et al., 1997).

Others benefits are:

- Fewer behavioural issues
- Less emotional distress
- Positive social behaviour

- Better teacher-student relationships
- Less bullying
- Improved career readiness
- Improved graduation rates
- Less teacher stress
- Positive school climate

Strategies for Teaching SEL in the Language Classroom

It is obvious that SEL competencies are necessary for student success. But how can teachers teach students to imbibe these competencies and soft skills effectively? In general, certain instructional practices can elicit and engage students in SEL. It can also be done by focusing class discussions, activities, and assignments on thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, while situating such discussions in context. The following SEL competencies are necessary for teachers if they must drive success.

To implement SEL in the classroom, teachers can:

1. **Integrate SEL into existing curriculum:** Teachers can integrate SEL into existing curriculum by incorporating SEL skills into lesson plans and activities (CASEL, 2003).
2. **Use SEL-specific programme:** Teachers can use SEL-specific programme and curricula to teach SEL skills, such as the CASEL framework (CASEL, 2003).
3. **Model SEL skills:** Teachers can model SEL skills themselves, such as self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness, promoting a positive classroom environment (Noddings, 2005).
4. **Provide opportunities for practice:** Teachers can provide opportunities for students to practice SEL skills through activities and projects, reinforcing SEL skills and promoting transfer to real-life situations (Elias et al., 1997).
5. **Reflection:** Providing opportunities for students to reflect on their learning and experiences, fostering self-awareness and self-management skills are valuable. (e.g., What went well? What was challenging? How does it apply outside the classroom?) (Goleman, 1995). And the experience of learning something new (e.g., What did they like and dislike? How did they feel?). This can be done in a variety of ways, including class discussion, journaling, or quick check-ins.
6. **Feedback:** Offering supportive and authentic feedback that focuses on skills and effort, promoting a growth mindset and building confidence (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Frequent supportive, authentic feedback that focuses on the skills and effort students display by stating things such as “You did a nice job sounding that out,” or “I’m glad that you asked that clarifying question.” This helps students develop SEL and allows them to view a model of how they can provide supportive feedback to their peers as well.
7. **Check-ins:** A teacher can help students set small and large goals for themselves and check in with them regularly to assess progress. Examples of Social-Emotional Learning goals include the ability to use positive self-talk, anticipate consequences, evaluate outcomes, and so on. Integrating SEL goals and competencies can be done across the academic curriculum in a range of content areas.
8. **Collaborative group work** This entails encouraging students to work together to develop cooperation, negotiation, and leadership skills, essential for social awareness and relationship skills (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Regular group work activities enable students to learn how to cooperate and negotiate, build leadership skills, imbibe team spirit, and identify their strengths in a group setting. Collaborative learning can help to foster connectedness among students and increase their cultural awareness by interacting with others who are different from themselves. Collaborative activities focusing on

problem-solving and decision-making skills allow students to work together to identify and overcome different challenges.

9. **Role-playing** is a great way for students to develop empathy and resolve conflicts by putting themselves in someone else's shoes. Role-playing activities can be used to develop empathy and conflict resolution skills, critical for social awareness and relationship skills (Elias et al., 1997).
10. **Responsible decision-making:** It is important to teach students how to make constructive choices while considering potential ethical implications, safety concerns, social norms, and direct and indirect consequences. It encourages students to exercise self-control and develop their independence and self-confidence.
11. **Class meetings:** Holding regular class meetings to discuss topics such as bullying, kindness, and responsibility, promoting social awareness and relationship skills (Noddings, 2005).

Other SEL activities are:

- Debating;
- Playing cards and games;
- Allowing time for talking (turn taking);
- Encourage expression through writing and art.

By incorporating SEL into our language instruction, teachers can create a supportive and inclusive learning environment that promotes students' academic achievement, social emotional development, and future success.

Language Teachers as Social Workers in the Ecological Classroom

As language teachers, we are social workers. The social worker in a school setting plays a vital role in supporting students' academic, social, and emotional well-being. Language teachers can serve as social workers by providing counselling, case management, crisis intervention, advocacy, and others. As social workers, language teachers can help students develop essential life skills, including self-awareness, self-management, and relationship skills. They can also provide individualised support to students who may be struggling with personal or academic issues. Noddings (2005) identified some of the key roles and responsibilities of teachers as social workers. They include:

1. *Counselling:* Providing individual and group counseling to students to address issues such as mental health, relationships, and academic struggles.
2. *Case management:* Identifying and assessing student needs, developing plans, and connecting students and families with resources and services.
3. *Crisis intervention:* Responding to crises such as bullying, conflicts, or traumatic events, and providing support and guidance.
4. *Collaboration:* Working with teachers, administrators, and parents to develop strategies for supporting students' success.
5. *Advocacy:* Advocating for students' rights and interests, and promoting a safe and inclusive school environment.
6. *Assessment and referral:* Identifying students' strengths and challenges, and referring them to appropriate resources and services.
7. *Group work:* Facilitating groups for students with similar needs or concerns, such as social skills groups or support groups.
8. *Family engagement:* Working with parents and caregivers to address concerns, provide support, and promote student success.

9. *Community outreach*: Connecting students and families with community resources, services, and programme.
10. *Prevention and education*: Providing education and prevention programme for students, staff, and parents on topics such as mental health, bullying, and substance abuse.

By serving as social workers, language teachers can help students develop the skills and support they need to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally.

Conclusion

Increased focus on academic benchmarks and testing scores has left teachers with less time to teach “soft skills” – those personal qualities that help students connect with others. These soft skills can be a significant part of a student’s overall education. It is important to remember that students develop socially and emotionally at the same time they are developing academically. Ignoring social and emotional skills development will have an adverse effect on academics. That is why it is important for language educators to be intentional when implementing social and emotional learning. Our ultimate goal as language teachers is to empower students to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally, and to promote a positive and supportive school environment. Investing in students by teaching social and emotional learning in the language classroom does more than improve academic success. Schools that include SEL as part of their curriculum are not only helping to educate academically, they are helping future employees develop critical soft skills. In the long-term, not only do employers seek individuals with the very traits that SEL develops: problem-solving, teamwork, character, etc., but we turn out for our society, individuals that are knowledgeable, peaceful, responsible, socially and emotionally sound.

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