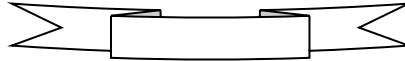


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**BUILDING SOFT SKILLS IN ESP THROUGH SOCIAL EMOTIONAL
LEARNING STRATEGIES**

The article examines the potential of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies to enhance soft skills development within English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses at the tertiary level. In light of current global labour market demands, soft skills such as analytical thinking, resilience, communication, leadership, adaptability, and emotional intelligence have become central to professional success. Drawing on recent international research, including The Future of Jobs Report 2025, the study argues that ESP, due to its communicative orientation and task-based nature, is uniquely positioned to support the formation of these competencies. The research employs a comprehensive analysis of scholarly sources and integrates instructional materials designed around authentic professional contexts. SEL strategies aligned with the five CASEL competencies are embedded in ESP tasks to foster self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The implementation of activities such as role plays, case studies, collaborative projects, reflective writing, perspective-taking tasks, and digital-tool-supported learning demonstrates that SEL-informed ESP instruction systematically cultivates key soft skills including critical and analytical thinking, creativity, negotiation, empathy, technological literacy, and leadership. The discussion highlights the dual impact of SEL: strengthening linguistic proficiency while creating emotionally supportive, collaborative, and cognitively challenging learning environments. The study concludes that integrating SEL into ESP can significantly enhance learners' readiness for contemporary professional demands. Further research will involve a pedagogical experiment to evaluate the effectiveness of SEL-based methodologies in developing soft skills in ESP classrooms.

Keywords: soft skills; Social Emotional Learning; ESP instruction; higher education; emotional intelligence; analytical thinking; communication skills; resilience; leadership; professional competency.

1 INTRODUCTION

Problem statement. Soft skills play a pivotal role in today's global and rapidly transforming world. Penetrating and integrating into all spheres of life, they are indispensable for success in both personal and professional domains. Profound knowledge alone is no longer sufficient. Employers increasingly value a broad range of transferable skills that enable future professionals to collaborate effectively, communicate with others, solve problems, adapt to change, and achieve their goals.

The Future of Jobs Report 2025 (World Economic Forum, 2025) shows the results of the survey, where more than 1,000 global employers, who have more than 14.1 million workers, shared their perspectives on the core skills for their workforce. It highlights analytical thinking as the most essential skill for workers (69%), followed by resilience, flexibility and agility (67%), leadership and social influence (61%), creative thinking (57%), and self-awareness (52%), technological literacy (51%), empathy, and active listening (50%). Together with curiosity, lifelong learning and service orientation, these skills show that success in today's workplace depends on balancing cognitive, technical, and interpersonal abilities.

To add to this set of core skills, the research conducted at Harvard University states that, as work becomes more complex, social skills, like communication and collaboration are essential for keeping teams productive. Equally important are critical thinking and problem-solving, which help people adapt their expertise as technology and markets change. However, it's no longer possible for people to learn one universal set of skills that fits every job or field; the modern economy increasingly requires workers to develop more specialized and interconnected skills – often through long periods of education and practical experience – tailored to specific professions or industries (Koval, 2015; Hosseinioun et al., 2025).

English for Specific Purposes as a subject provides an excellent platform for fostering soft skills, as its core competence lies in communication. Beyond acquiring the ability to speak, read, write, and listen in English, learners gain a wide range of additional competencies (Saienko et al. 2020; Tevdovska, 2016). They practice problem-solving through role plays, develop active listening skills in authentic interactions, and strengthen their capacity to negotiate and reach compromises. Leadership qualities are enhanced through activities, such as advocating for others, delivering presentations and sharing responsibilities in project work. Moreover, the ability of English teachers to motivate, inspire, and guide learners contributes significantly to teamwork and career development. The skills, such as self-organization, critical thinking, time management, and problem-solving allow students to use their time and resources more effectively. Adaptability and flexibility, which are essential in mastering a foreign language, also foster resilience and prepare learners to meet challenges with confidence.

Analysis of recent research and publications. Extensive research has sought to clarify the nature and scope of soft skills. According to a study conducted within the framework of the USAID Workforce Connections project, *Key “Soft Skills” That Foster Youth Workforce Success* (Lippman et al., 2015), soft skills encompass “a broad set of skills, competencies, behaviours, attitudes, and personal qualities that enable individuals to effectively navigate their environment, work well with others, perform efficiently, and achieve their goals.” These skills are widely applicable and complement technical, vocational, and academic competencies, thereby enhancing overall workforce readiness.

Other scholars have proposed similar definitions. Kans (Kans, 2012) characterizes soft skills as “personal, social, communication, and self-control behaviours,” emphasizing their role in interpersonal and intrapersonal functioning. Tribble (Tribble, 2009) highlights their association with self-improvement, interpersonal relationships, communication, career preparation, leadership, teamwork, self-discipline, self-confidence, and a strong work ethic. From Stumpf's (Stumpf, 2007) perspective, soft skills include honesty, team building, problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication abilities. Collectively, these definitions underscore that soft skills are essential not only for professional performance but also for personal development and social interaction.

Scholars have proposed various approaches to categorizing and defining the number and types of soft skills. For instance, Haselberger et al. (Haselberger et al., 2012) identified 22 distinct soft skills, including communication, customer/user orientation, teamwork, learning skills, creativity and innovation, decision-making, analytical skills, management skills, adaptability to change, leadership, organizational commitment, results orientation, continuous improvement, negotiation, professional ethics, stress tolerance, self-awareness, life balance, conflict management, cultural adaptability, networking, and research and information management skills.

Knyaz and Chuchno (Knyaz & Chuchno, 2012) offer an alternative classification, dividing soft

skills into three categories: personal skills, social skills, and content-dependent skills. Shobron et al. (Shobron et al., 2020) proves the importance of continuing soft skills development and define the following methods to be applied: direction (gives students an understanding of the activities); training (meaning life training); assignment (for strengthening the skills); habit, escort (all the tasks and activities are guided); efforts of students and approach to be used. The researchers classify soft skills into personal, social and content-reliant.

Lavrysh (Lavrysh, 2016), based on her research, identified five critical soft skills recommended for implementation in Ukrainian universities: social skills, communication skills, higher-order thinking skills, positive self-concept, and self-control. She emphasizes that each of these skills encompasses a range of sub-skills. According to this research, social skills foster effective interpersonal interaction and include sub-skills such as leadership, respect for others, and conflict resolution. These skills play a transformative role in facilitating employment, enhancing workplace performance, and contributing to organizational success. Communication skills encompass oral, non-verbal, and listening abilities applied in diverse workplace situations and with various audiences. While communication skills are formally included in most university curricula, Lavrysh notes that many graduates still face challenges in presenting their ideas and thoughts clearly. Higher-order thinking skills involve problem-solving, critical thinking, and decision-making, as well as the ability to apply knowledge creatively, innovatively, and analytically. These skills are highly valued by employers, as they significantly contribute to professional effectiveness. A positive self-concept relates to an individual's personality and underpins traits such as self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-efficacy. These skills not only promote professional development but also foster personal growth. Finally, self-control skills involve managing emotions and behavior, thereby supporting successful communication, decision-making, and problem-solving in the workplace.

Although the importance of integrating soft skills into higher education curricula has been widely established in the literature (Kniaz & Chukhno, 2021; Lavrysh, 2016; Saienko, Semyda & Akhmad, 2020; Tevdovska, 2016) there have been comparatively few attempts to incorporate Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies into English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction.

The purpose of the article: to investigate and substantiate effective SEL (Social Emotional Learning) strategies for developing soft skills at the ESP classes in higher education.

The research is guided by the following question: How can Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies be effectively integrated into English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction to foster the development of soft skills in higher education?

2 METHODS

The present study employed literature analysis as the main research method regarding incorporating Social Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies for developing soft skills in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses at the tertiary level. Instructional materials were designed around authentic ESP contexts – business negotiations, project management, workplace communication, and intercultural interaction. Each lesson integrated one or more SEL-based strategies aligned with the five core competencies defined by CASEL (CASEL, 2020): self-awareness (emotional check-ins, reflective journaling, self-assessment tasks); self-management (goal-setting activities, stress-management exercises, resilience narratives); social awareness (perspective-taking discussions, empathy role-plays, intercultural communication tasks); relationship skills (collaborative projects, peer mentoring, feedback exchanges); responsible decision-making (ethical dilemma case studies, problem-solving simulations). Digital tools such as Padlet, Mentimeter, and Google Workspace were used to support collaborative learning and enhance technological literacy. The integration of these tools reflected the emphasis on 21st-century workplace competencies highlighted in The Future of Jobs Report (World Economic Forum, 2025).

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

English language classes that integrate Social Emotional Learning (SEL) provide valuable opportunities for the systematic development of soft skills. In addition to fostering linguistic competence, carefully selected instructional materials can promote leadership, teamwork, effective communication, and negotiation skills. Through SEL-informed activities, learners are able to enhance both their language proficiency and the interpersonal competencies essential for academic and professional success.

Emotional intelligence is a foundational element of soft skills (Mohammed & Ozdamli, 2024). Its key components, such as self-awareness and self-management, support effective leadership and problem-solving. Emotional intelligence helps employees communicate clearly, handle challenges, and think creatively, which is why it is essential for leadership and teamwork. Emotional soft skills also enhance stress management, adaptability and communication in complex environments. Social-emotional skills are central to cooperation, task performance, emotional regulation, and open-mindedness, and include sub-skills like tolerance and sociability. Research further shows that these skills contribute to academic success, career decision-making confidence, and positive workplace relationships (Brassey et al., 2020; Oliveira, de Castro, Silva, & Taveira, 2023).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) places students' life competencies on an equal level with domain-specific academic knowledge and skills. It encompasses abilities that are essential for individuals' academic achievement, employability, and success in everyday life. Integrating SEL into English language instruction not only enhances language acquisition but also contributes to the creation of a supportive and safe learning environment, fosters collaboration, and strengthens meaningful dialogue between teachers and learners.

SEL comprises several interrelated domains. Self-awareness refers to an individual's capacity to recognize and accurately interpret one's own emotions, thoughts, and values. Self-management involves effectively regulating emotions, thoughts, and behaviors across various contexts, including managing stress, persevering through challenges, and setting and achieving personal goals. Social awareness denotes the ability to adopt the perspectives of individuals from diverse backgrounds, understand social and cultural norms, and identify available resources and supports. Relationship skills encompass the competence to build and maintain healthy and collaborative relationships, communicate clearly, listen actively, cooperate with others, resist negative peer pressure, negotiate conflicts, and seek help when needed. Finally, responsible decision-making involves making choices based on realistic evaluations of consequences, safety considerations, ethical principles, and broader social norms (CASEL, 2020; Osher et al., 2016).

Analytical thinking is identified as one of the most critical skills for the modern workforce, with 69% of global employers rating it as essential (World Economic Forum, 2025). In ESP university classrooms, analytical thinking can be cultivated through structured case study analysis, where students read business or social scenarios in English, identify challenges and propose solutions in small groups. Additional strategies include data interpretation exercises, in which learners analyze graphs, tables, or survey results and summarize findings; problem-solving workshops, where students collaboratively tackle real-world tasks and justify their decisions; and compare-and-contrast discussions, in which learners evaluate conflicting viewpoints and defend their conclusions. These activities foster critical reasoning, decision-making and evidence-based communication while reinforcing language proficiency.

Resilience is increasingly important for navigating workplace uncertainty and adapting to challenges. ESP learners can develop resilience through reflective challenge narratives, writing or sharing experiences of overcoming personal or academic obstacles. Additional strategies include failure reflection essays, in which students analyze unsuccessful outcomes and lessons learned; simulated challenge tasks with unexpected obstacles requiring adaptive responses; and peer mentoring programs, where learners support classmates in overcoming language-related difficulties. These activities promote persistence, emotional regulation, self-awareness, and collaborative problem-solving, while also enhancing expressive and reflective language skills.

Flexibility and cognitive agility are essential skills in dynamic work environments. Role-swap debates provide ESP learners with opportunities to argue positions contrary to personal beliefs, requiring rapid adaptation of thought and spontaneous spoken communication. Complementary activities include improvisational role-plays, in which students respond to unplanned social or professional scenarios; rotating team roles, where learners switch responsibilities during group tasks to build versatility; and scenario-based writing exercises, requiring students to reinterpret stories from multiple perspectives. These methods foster adaptive thinking, perspective-taking, and oral fluency in English, preparing students for complex professional situations.

Leadership and social influence remain fundamental interpersonal competencies for future workforces. ESP students can develop these skills through structured group projects with rotating leadership roles, enabling them to coordinate, delegate, and present collective outcomes. Additional strategies include peer-led workshops, where students design and lead mini-lessons; debate moderation, allowing learners to guide discussions and ensure balanced participation; and mentorship coordination, where advanced students guide beginners through collaborative projects. These approaches cultivate leadership, collaboration, persuasion, and confidence in professional English communication.

Creative thinking is essential for problem-solving and innovation in modern workplaces. ESP learners can engage in innovation challenges, brainstorming novel products, services, or social initiatives and presenting them using visual aids or dramatization. Other activities to foster creativity include storytelling, where students create alternative endings or plot twists; design thinking projects, in which learners prototype innovative solutions to everyday problems; and language games with constraints, encouraging students to write or speak creatively within specific rules. Collectively, these activities enhance divergent thinking, collaboration, and expressive competence in English.

Self-awareness is foundational to emotional intelligence and professional effectiveness. ESP learners can cultivate self-awareness through emotional journaling and peer reflection, documenting feelings and performance during language tasks and exchanging feedback.

Incorporating check-ins at the beginning of the class may have a lot of benefits both for the teacher and the students. Check-ins allow students to pause, reflect, and assess their feelings, create a safe space, give space to process the changes, help reduce stress and anxiety, enable students to relax and focus on learning, help to stay connected with your students and build strong rapport. They are also a way to measure the 'temperature' of the group and adjust the lesson plan.

For the teacher, a check-in is a valuable tool to gauge the 'temperature' of the group and adjust the lesson plan accordingly. If students seem tired, you can introduce a brain energizer. If they appear worried or sad, you can incorporate meditation or breathing techniques to help them relax. This adaptability ensures that your teaching meets the students' immediate needs and fosters a supportive learning environment.

Complementary strategies to enhance self-awareness include strengths and weaknesses mapping, where students identify personal competencies and areas for improvement; emotional vocabulary expansion, labeling emotions in real or fictional scenarios; and mindfulness reflection sessions, combining brief guided mindfulness exercises with written reflection. These practices enhance introspection, emotional literacy, and reflective language use, supporting both intrapersonal and interpersonal development.

Technological literacy is increasingly indispensable in modern professional contexts. ESP students can develop these skills by using collaborative platforms such as Google Slides, Canva, or Padlet to complete group projects. Additional strategies include online collaboration challenges, which require real-time interaction and task completion using digital tools; digital research tasks, emphasizing evaluation and summarization of credible online sources; and podcast or video creation, in which learners produce short multimedia content in English. These activities strengthen digital competency, project management, collaboration, and communicative proficiency.

Empathy and active listening are crucial for effective interpersonal interaction and collaboration. Story circle activities, in which students share personal experiences while peers listen, paraphrase and ask clarifying questions, support these skills. Additional strategies include

perspective-taking interviews, in which learners retell classmates' experiences from their partner's viewpoint; conflict resolution role-plays, simulating disagreements with empathic negotiation; and listening quizzes, which test comprehension of nuances and intent in spoken English. These activities promote perspective-taking, social awareness, and conversational competence in the target language.

Curiosity and lifelong learning are essential for adapting to rapidly evolving professional environments. ESP learners can practice research and teach-back activities, exploring unfamiliar topics and presenting findings to peers. Additional strategies include exploratory presentations, investigating topics outside the learner's field; "What If" scenarios, posing hypothetical questions and discussing outcomes; and interdisciplinary research projects, connecting language learning with other academic domains. These approaches foster inquiry, integrative thinking, autonomous learning, and oral communication in English.

Service orientation and social responsibility are increasingly valued workplace competencies. ESP students can develop these skills through community problem-solving simulations, collaboratively proposing solutions to real-world issues and presenting their rationale in English. Additional strategies include role-playing customer service scenarios, emphasizing empathy and solution-focused communication; charity campaign planning, in which students design and organize volunteer or fundraising activities; and community engagement proposals, where learners create initiatives addressing local issues. These activities strengthen social responsibility, teamwork, persuasive communication, and practical language use.

Thus, the materials used for teaching ESP provide a great number of tasks which can be successfully applied for developing students' soft skills.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The present study contributes to the growing body of research on soft skills development in higher education by substantiating the pedagogical potential of integrating SEL strategies into ESP instruction. The novelty of the research lies in the systematic alignment of SEL competencies, as defined by the CASEL framework, with ESP learning objectives and authentic professional contexts. Unlike previous studies that primarily address soft skills development in general education settings, this study demonstrates how SEL can be purposefully embedded into ESP tasks to simultaneously enhance linguistic proficiency and essential professional competencies. Furthermore, the research offers a structured approach to incorporating SEL through task-based, communicative, and digitally supported activities tailored to the needs of future specialists.

The findings confirm that SEL-informed ESP instruction creates a dual impact: it not only facilitates language acquisition but also promotes the development of key soft skills such as analytical thinking, resilience, communication, leadership, empathy, and adaptability. Importantly, the integration of SEL strategies contributes to the creation of a supportive, learner-centred, and psychologically safe educational environment, which is particularly relevant in contexts characterized by uncertainty and stress.

From a practical perspective, several recommendations can be proposed for the effective implementation of SEL strategies in ESP classrooms. First, educators are encouraged to systematically integrate SEL components into lesson design by aligning language tasks with specific socio-emotional competencies. Second, the use of interactive methodologies – such as role plays, case studies, collaborative projects, and reflective practices – should be prioritized to foster both communication skills and emotional engagement. Third, regular incorporation of brief SEL routines, including emotional check-ins, mindfulness activities, and feedback sessions, can enhance students' self-awareness and readiness for learning. Fourth, the use of digital tools (e.g., collaborative platforms and interactive applications) should be expanded to support engagement, cooperation, and the development of technological literacy. Finally, teacher training and professional development programs should include components on SEL integration to ensure the effective and conscious application of these strategies in ESP contexts.

Despite its contributions, the study is limited by its primarily theoretical and descriptive nature. Therefore, further research should focus on empirical validation of the proposed approach. Future studies may involve the design and implementation of pedagogical experiments aimed at measuring the impact of SEL-based instruction on specific soft skills development in ESP learners. Additionally, comparative studies across different disciplines and educational contexts could provide deeper insights into the adaptability and scalability of SEL strategies.

In conclusion, the integration of SEL strategies into ESP instruction represents a promising and innovative direction in higher education pedagogy, contributing to the preparation of well-rounded, resilient, and competitive professionals capable of meeting the complex demands of the modern labour market.

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Людмила Герасименко, Світлана Муравська. Розвиток м'яких навичок у ESP за допомогою стратегій соціально-емоційного навчання. У статті досліджено потенціал стратегій соціально-емоційного навчання (Social Emotional Learning, SEL) для розвитку soft skills у процесі викладання англійської мови за професійним спрямуванням (ESP) у закладах вищої освіти. З огляду на актуальні вимоги світового ринку праці, саме такі навички, як аналітичне мислення, стійкість, комунікативність, лідерство, гнучкість та емоційний інтелект, стають ключовими для професійної успішності. Спираючись на міжнародні дослідження, зокрема The Future of Jobs Report 2025, у статті

обґрунтовується, що ESP, завдяки своїй комунікативній та діяльній сутності, має значний потенціал для цілеспрямованого формування цих компетентностей. Методологічною основою роботи є аналіз наукових джерел та розроблення навчальних матеріалів на основі автентичних професійних ситуацій. SEL-стратегії, узгоджені з п'ятьма компетентностями CASEL, інтегруються в ESP-заняття для розвитку самоусвідомлення, саморегуляції, соціальної обізнаності, навичок міжособистісної взаємодії та відповідального прийняття рішень. Застосування рольових ігор, кейс-методу, колаборативних проєктів, рефлексивних завдань, вправ на розвиток емпатії та використання цифрових інструментів демонструє можливість системного формування критичного й аналітичного мислення, креативності, навичок переговорів, емпатії, технологічної грамотності та лідерства. Показано, що інтеграція SEL у навчання ESP не лише підвищує рівень мовної підготовки, а й формує підтримувальне та взаємодійне освітнє середовище. У висновках підкреслено, що впровадження SEL-підходів сприяє підготовці конкурентоспроможних фахівців, а подальші дослідження передбачають проведення педагогічного експерименту з оцінювання ефективності цих стратегій у розвитку soft skills.

Ключові слова: м'які навички; соціально-емоційне навчання; ESP; вища освіта; емоційний інтелект; аналітичне мислення; комунікативні навички; стійкість; лідерство; професійна компетентність.

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