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Social-Emotional Learning in English Language Education:
Mapping the Landscape and Reflecting on the Way Forward

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Devised Drama as Social-Emotional Learning

Abstract: This qualitative case study explores social-emotional learning (SEL) in an extracurricular drama program in the US, where adult English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students collaboratively devised a play, which they performed publicly. The authors drew from CASEL's (2020) SEL framework, which consists of five core competencies, to explore drama as an SEL process. The findings indicate that devised drama engaged learners in activities that cultivated awareness of the self and others, created space for students to explore their emotions in a supportive community, and centered learner voices, indicating drama's potential as an innovative SEL pedagogy within and beyond traditional learning spaces.

Keywords: social-emotional learning, drama, TESOL, adult ESOL, theater

1. Introduction

Over twenty years ago, Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan (2004, n.p.) asserted that “tolerance, inter-cultural dialogue and respect for diversity are more essential than ever in a world where peoples are becoming more and more closely interconnected.” In the years since, it has sometimes seemed we have made little progress in meeting this call. In the US, where this study took place, divisive rhetoric surrounding immigrant and refugee communities has been on the rise. According to the Anti-Defamation League (2018, n.p.), “the mainstreaming of anti-immigrant rhetoric and the demonization of immigrants has rapidly accelerated...

due to increasing acceptance of anti-immigrant ideas and policies and the promotion of anti-immigrant sentiment in public discourse, on some news shows and on social media.” This is particularly troubling given the Pew Research Center’s projection that by 2065, 88% of the US population will comprise immigrants and their descendants (Budiman 2020). It is in this context that educators and researchers seek to identify and develop approaches to building tolerance and dialogue among an increasingly diverse population. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is gaining traction as a field of study within education broadly and language education more specifically, given its potential to help students and communities build the personal and interpersonal skills necessary to dialogue across differences (CASEL 2020; Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba 2021).

Scholars have argued for language educators, particularly those working with vulnerable and minoritized populations such as immigrants and refugees, to “embrace the adoption of more humane teaching practices emphasizing equity, restoration, social justice, inclusion, differentiation, and social-emotional support” (Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba 2021, 6). The fact that several school districts have adopted the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning’s, in short CASEL (2020), five SEL core competencies at the preK-12 level underscores this growing interest among scholars and practitioners in developing research-based practices that build SEL skills. CASEL (2020) has also demonstrated the importance of attending to SEL in adult members of school communities, with a focus on SEL interventions for educators and staff in schools. Little focus, however, has been devoted to SEL in adult learners themselves, who may similarly benefit from SEL-centered approaches, given the wealth of experiences they bring to classrooms. This paper contributes to this emerging body of literature by exploring drama-based pedagogy as an SEL approach among adult multilingual immigrant and refugee learners.

Scholars of drama in language education have demonstrated drama’s connections to several SEL domains, for example, drama’s potential to lower language learner anxiety (Galante 2018) and to promote community building and interpersonal understanding (McGovern and Yeganeh 2023). However, little empirical research has explicitly explored the connections between drama and SEL skill-building in language learning contexts, particularly with adult learners. To address this gap, our qualitative case study (Bassey 1999) explored the social-emotional dynamics in a three-month after-school drama program for adult English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students in the Northeastern US. In this program, adult multilingual students of immigrant and refugee origins collaboratively created a play through a devising process, a form of drama in which an entire company (e.g. actors, designers, directors, writers or, in this case, student-actors) create a play together through a process of improvised rehearsals as opposed to rehearsing and performing a play previously written by a playwright. The students in this program devised a play based on their own experiences, which

they performed for a public audience. Our study explored how this approach served as an SEL process for adult ESOL learners, using an interdisciplinary lens.

2. Theoretical underpinnings

This study was guided by Osher et al.'s (2016, 645) definition of SEL as the process

by which children and adults acquire and apply competencies to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle personal and interpersonal situations constructively.

This aligns with Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba's (2021, 6) conceptualization of SEL's purpose as promoting "positive, supportive, engaging, and participatory learning environments that prepare learners to succeed in school and their lives as future members of society and the world." These definitions emphasize that SEL continues across all age groups and impacts learners' lives and communities beyond the classroom.

SEL scholars, including CASEL (2020), Osher et al. (2016), and Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba (2021, 7), have proposed the five following core competencies of SEL:

self-awareness: recognizing one's own emotions and values

self-management: regulating emotions, thoughts, and behaviors

social awareness: understanding other individuals, other cultural/social norms, and recognizing resources

relationship skills: establishing positive relationships, communicating clearly, negotiating conflict, and seeking help

responsible decision-making: making realistic and ethical choices.

In this framework, SEL begins with the self and expands towards the community by promoting awareness, relationship building, and ethical action.

We understand the fifth competency, responsible decision-making, as closely related to poststructural understandings of agency. From a poststructural perspective, individuals are viewed as both constituting and constituted by social discourses as well as inextricably bound within power relations (Foucault 1972). Agency, in this conceptualization, is made possible by "shifting relations of power," in which resistance is "always possible and also closely connected to the concept of agency in that subjects may take up, refuse, or renegotiate their positioning within and through shifting networks of power/discourse" (Siffrinn and McGovern 2019, 171–172). Thus, we draw from poststructural understandings of agency to

conceptualize SEL, like all learning, as more than an individual endeavor, but rather as a phenomenon that is tied to broader networks of power, knowledge, and discourse.

We also draw from the rich tradition of theater studies to understand the connections between drama pedagogies and SEL, as well as to guide our practice. Theater scholars and practitioners have long attended to the ways in which actors engage in the conscientious development of self-awareness in relation to others (e.g. Grotowski 2002; Stanislavski 1936). Developing self-awareness is so central to the task of the actor that scholars and practitioners of vastly different theatrical traditions have written of its importance over the last century. Stanislavski (1936, 143), one of the fathers of modern theater, emphasized this in his approach to training actors, writing: “how important is the process of self-study! It should continue ceaselessly, without the actor even being aware of it, and it should test every step he takes.” Later, the Polish experimental theater artist Jerzy Grotowski (2002, 15) conceptualized an actor’s body as his primary tool and his own experimental theatrical productions as “detailed investigations of the actor-audience relationship,” with “the personal and scenic technique of the actor as the core of theatre art.” These scholars come from vastly different theatrical traditions, with Stanislavski’s actors working from a playwright’s texts and Grotowski’s actors devising performances themselves. Their work, however, emphasizes drama’s inherent focus on the exploration of the self in connection with others (the audience, society), an integral part of SEL.

In our own project, pedagogically and theoretically, we drew from the work of Polish director Grotowski (2002). In preparing his ensembles, Grotowski’s (2002, 144) approach focused explicitly on connecting the body and emotions, with explicit activities designed to hone these connections, such as this exercise: “choose an emotional impulse (such as crying) and transfer it to a particular part of the body – a foot, for example – which then has to give it expression.” Rather than asking actors to rehearse their roles in relation to the script and the director, Grotowski (2002) encouraged actors to explore how they themselves feel within the work, viewing the actor’s own body and feelings, rather than a text, as the primary tool. In a previously published interview, Vahdat Yeganeh, the primary facilitator of this project, described this Grotowskian approach as a means

for artists, producers, and spectators to have a cultural exchange in theatre, where our differences in language, music, politics, and religions are stripped away, and we practice to connect to one another in a deep psychological way—through our dreams, anxieties, fear, and love. (Waters 2020, n.p.)

In this way, the program at the center of this study sought to center students’ emotional experiences through the interconnection of body, mind, breath, imagination, and connection to others, across cultures. We see this as strongly

connected to the emerging research demonstrating the affordances of SEL-centered pedagogies discussed in the following section.

3. Literature review

An emerging body of research points to the importance of SEL in second language learning contexts, especially among immigrant and refugee learners (Pentón Herrera 2020). Adams and Richie (2017) conducted a literature review of SEL in teaching English for speakers of other languages (TESOL), concluding that increased SEL practices were tied to improvement of SEL skills in elementary-aged English Language Learners (ELLs), particularly “in classroom behavior, attendance, and overall achievement” (91). Pentón Herrera’s (2024, 8) qualitative study of SEL practices among multilingual high school students similarly found benefits associated with pedagogical practices that centered SEL, including increased self-awareness and bolstering “students’ positive emotions, such as happiness, and their sense of belonging in the classroom, which positively affected their overall well-being.” Soodmand Afshar et al. (2016) used statistical analyses to study emotional intelligence in Iranians learning English, finding that emotional intelligence was a strong predictor of academic achievement. Despite these findings that SEL-focused approaches benefit learners in myriad ways, there has been little focus on SEL in adult ESOL contexts and less on arts-based pedagogies as tools for SEL with language learners.

We have, therefore, found it useful to explore interdisciplinary understandings of SEL from the fields of psychology, arts-based pedagogies, and theater. In the field of psychology itself, the relationship between the use of the second or home language and emotion has been studied, with Homayounpour and Movahedi (2012, 129) finding that among those undergoing psychological analysis:

[w]hen words come to them in a second language, they feel they “have a choice of either paying attention to them or [putting] them away,” but... Words in the mother tongue seem to have a feeling of “thingness.” They tend to convey a sense of direct emotional and bodily transmission, a visceral reception rather than perception or interpretation.

Though Homayounpour and Movahedi’s (2012) work is in dialogue with scholarship from the field of psychology, we see possibilities for interdisciplinary dialogue with SEL and translanguaging scholarship as in Wei’s (2011, 1234) study which, though not centered on SEL, described translanguaging as “an intense social experience and emotional investment.” Homayounpour and Movahedi’s (2012) work in psychology and Wei’s (2011) scholarship on translanguaging both indicate that language and social-emotional experiences are inextricably entwined.

This points to the social-emotional domains playing a role in language learning and language classrooms, whether or not SEL is an explicit focus of the teacher or the curriculum.

In the field of arts-based pedagogies, several studies illustrate the usefulness of arts practices for explicitly promoting SEL. Simpson Steele's (2019) case study explored the experiences of high schoolers who had previously attended an arts-integrated elementary school, finding that students positively correlated their own social skills, including confidence, community building, and communication skills, with having attended an arts-integrated primary school. The study showed that the students themselves perceived SEL-related benefits from arts-based pedagogies. In another study focusing on multilingual youth, Siffrinn and McGovern (2019) explored arts-based pedagogies as Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) with multilingual/multidialectal middle schoolers. Drawing from Foucauldian theory, the authors found that learners did not always assume the roles facilitators intended, with one student even hiding under a table to avoid giving a presentation on their artwork. The authors illustrated how learners exercised agency throughout the project, even in their resistance to certain program elements, reshaping their engagement with program activities in "ways that are pedagogically and philosophically constructive" (Siffrinn and McGovern 2019, 177). Taken together, these studies illustrate that arts-based approaches can open both social and expressive opportunities for learners and that learners exercise agency in shaping their patterns of participation in alignment with their own social-emotional experiences.

There is an emerging body of research on drama-based language pedagogies that emphasizes the important role learner agency plays in performative pedagogies. Dalziel and Piazzoli (2019, 14) fronted agency and emotions in their study on drama pedagogy with asylum seekers, arguing that "[u]sing drama work to merely replicate a past situation, with no awareness of distancing strategies, is a common mistake of the novice L2 teacher interested in performative work" with refugee populations. Similarly, Piazzoli and Kir Cullen (2021) argued that asking refugee language learners to share their own stories through drama carries the potential of re-traumatizing learners. They argued that for such work to be undertaken ethically, it is necessary for facilitators to encourage student autonomy, which they equate to agency, as well as to acknowledge the vulnerability of the ensemble in performative pedagogy (Piazzoli and Kir Cullen 2021, 19).

In our own work, we have previously taken up the argument that an awareness of the ethics and emotional risks of asking immigrant and refugee learners to share their stories through performance is essential for educators facilitating performative pedagogies. Our case study of devised drama with adult immigrant and refugee learners found that devising "created space for active listening, interpersonal relationships founded in respect, and attention to socioemotional skills, and provided explicit instruction on how to enact these skills through modeling, feedback, and reflection" (McGovern and Yeganeh 2023, 13), but that allowing

space for learners to exercise agency in what and how they chose to share was a key element of ethically enacting performative language pedagogies.

Though a significant body of scholarship on drama as language pedagogy has emerged¹, little of this research has focused on devised drama's potential as an SEL practice, specifically. Further, much of the focus of this research centers on process drama, drama games, and mounting traditional theatrical productions (McGovern 2017) rather than on the process of collaboratively devising drama pieces with language learners. Similarly, though SEL is gaining traction as an area of focus in language education, much of this research focuses on SEL practices with youth, rather than adult learners (Adams and Richie 2017; Pentón Herrera 2024). Our study, then, aims to shed light on an understudied area: devised drama as an SEL practice with adult language learners.

4. Methodology

In this Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved case study (see Bassey 1999), we took on the role of practitioner-researchers (Dana and Yendol-Hoppey 2020) to address the research question: *How did devising a dramatic performance serve as an SEL process for adult ESOL learners?*

4.1. Setting

The study took place in an after-school, three-month extracurricular program held from May 1 to July 31, 2023, which was open to adult ESOL learners at a non-profit, free English school in the Northeastern United States. Students voluntarily attended three months of weekly workshops in which they participated in dramatic play, devising a theatrical performance on the theme of 'home.' This program was part of a larger project called Dialogue of Civilizations (DoC), a collaboration between the American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.) at Harvard University and community partners. DoC's mission was to engage adult immigrant and refugee ESOL students in workshops using theatrical training to explore identity, heritage, and community while learning a new language in a new home.

The workshops took place once per week over the three-month period, with additional online meetings available to students who wished to further develop monologues for the performance. Workshop attendees participated in a series of Grotowskian (2002) devising exercises, as described earlier in this paper, in which they improvised on the theme of home. Each workshop began with an introduction in which the rationale for the project and logistical concerns (e.g. the performance schedule) were discussed, and concluded with a period of time dedicated to open reflection and questions. As the primary facilitator, Vahdat oversaw the devising process and curated the performance piece. Kathleen and an

ESOL teacher from the partner institution assisted in facilitating the workshops and monologue writing sessions.

4.2. Participants

The participants included thirteen adult ESOL student-actors, two teachers who also served as musicians/actors, and three facilitators, all of whom also participated in drama activities. The student participants were all adults designated by their language school to be at an intermediate level of English based primarily on their speaking skills. Though we analyzed data from all participants, this article presents data from three participants who contributed monologues for the final performance: Noor, Lev, and Sophia.

Noor had immigrated to the US from Egypt with her husband five years prior to the study, having left her family, including two children and her father, in Egypt for political reasons. Lev and Sophia were a married couple who had emigrated from Russia in their seventies to join their daughters and grandchildren already living in the US. These participants, along with our rationale for selecting them as focal participants, are described more fully in later sections of this paper. All participants were recruited in an IRB-approved process involving informed consent, and workshop attendees were given the option to participate in the workshops without consenting to participate in the study, making study participation voluntary.

4.3. Positionality statement

As co-authors and collaborators, Kathleen and Vahdat each took leadership in different aspects of the project. Though Kathleen led the research and Vahdat the devising process, each played a role in both aspects of the project, meaning that this study was conducted from an emic, or insider's, perspective. During this project, Kathleen met with students to help them write monologues for the play, participated in rehearsal sessions, and provided feedback to the ensemble. Her background includes both facilitating and studying drama with multilingual adult learners (see McGovern and Yeganeh 2023), and she values the importance of centering student voices in research and pedagogy. Accordingly, she designed the data collection phase of the project to minimize demands on student participants' time outside of the workshops. In line with poststructural onto-epistemological research traditions, Kathleen believes in the importance of exploring the relation of the self, and one's research, to broader societal discourses, and acknowledges the importance of unpacking her own role as a white American researcher and educator working with multilingual immigrant and refugee learners. In doing this, she found it valuable to engage in dialogue with Vahdat as they worked together to analyze the data, construct themes, and articulate findings.

Vahdat, a learning lead at the American Repertory Theater, led the ensemble of students and teachers in devising, presenting, and performing an original production for a public audience at the A.R.T. Vahdat's pedagogical approach was informed by the theatrical traditions of Grotowski (2002) and by Iranian scholar Shayegan's (1990) philosophy of the importance of dialogue among cultures in effecting positive change in the world. This pedagogical process is described more fully in McGovern and Yeganeh (2023). Originally from Iran, Vahdat identifies as a member of the refugee community himself. As such, he believed home was an important subject for the project as it provided students with a space in which they could share with the ensemble their feelings around home, including those of loss. Drawing from his own positionality, Vahdat hoped that students might gain a new feeling of home through participation in this theatrical community, believing that the feeling of being understood by others can foster agency in shaping our communities.

4.4. Data collection and analysis

To arrive at our findings, we collected data, including fieldnotes, audio recordings of workshops and interviews, and artifacts such as students' writings from the duration of the three-month workshop. Informal interviews were conducted directly before and after workshop meetings and monologue writing sessions in order to be respectful of participants' time commitments. Participants were interviewed at the start of the workshop series and again before the performance. Though not all participants had time to participate in interviews, all focal participants participated in two or more interview sessions. All audio data was later transcribed for analysis.

We analyzed the data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis, which allows for flexibility in constructing both in-vivo and theoretical codes. Our coding was also influenced by MacLure's (2013) notion of the importance of attending to "hotspots" in our data set. MacLure (2013, 164) encourages researchers to "look for ways in which coding offends" in order to accept the unsettling, pay close attention to affect, and complicate facile interpretations. In dialogue with one another, we identified these "hotspots" in the data set (MacLure 2013) that spoke to the research question. We then used the five core SEL competencies put forward by Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba (2021) and CASEL (2020) as conceptual codes, attending to data that spoke strongly to each code, either in terms of aligning with or challenging each category.

The three focal participants of our study, Noor, Lev, and Sophia, increasingly drew our attention during this data analysis process as we discussed how data from all students both spoke to and challenged themes across the data set. Data from Noor and Sophia were largely representative of two themes that appeared across all participant data: 1) drama as promoting self-awareness and self-regulation, and 2) drama as creating space for students to explore their interior worlds in a

supportive community. Data from Lev's participation addressed a third theme: 3) the importance of centering learner voice and agency in devised drama and storytelling pedagogy. We found Lev's case particularly important to include as occasionally his pushback on the devising process created 'hotspots' (MacLure 2013) that challenged some of the previously constructed themes. We present these themes through data from our three focal participants in the following section.

5. Findings

We found that devised drama engaged the multilingual adult immigrant and refugee learners in this program in activities that cultivated awareness of the self and others, created space for students to explore their emotions in a supportive community, and centered learners' voices.

5.1. Devised drama promoted self-awareness and self-regulation

From the beginning of the program, the primary facilitator (Vahdat) worked to scaffold self-awareness, asking student-actors to attend to their bodies, emotions, and impulses in a deliberate manner. Early workshops focused almost entirely on exercises promoting the awareness of the self in relation to the others present through activities such as the one below, which required the ensemble to stand in a circle, making eye contact while breathing mindfully:

- Vahdat: So, make eye contact and breathe in, beautiful, and breathe out. No. Eye contact.
- Ensemble: (*laughter*)
- Vahdat: (*jokingly*) I'm not your partner. With your partner. It's a little bit strange, right? Making eye contact with other people in the room? But that's what you're doing now. So, breathing in...² breathe out... beautiful. Breathe in... And now we're gonna play this game. It's a game of imaginary. There's no science behind it, but actually it's very, very helpful. I'm going to imagine the breath I take in, I'm going to imagine the breath that I take in goes all the way into my body and I'm going to see it, I'm going to imagine, goes all the way into my legs, all the way into my body, and goes all the way down to the floor, as if my fingers are touching the floor. But I'm not going to touch, I'm just going to imagine. (transcription of workshop 2023)

Although the activity may at first glance appear simple, in practice, it required the ensemble to practice self-awareness by making the normally unconscious act of breathing conscious. It also required the ensemble to make small, intentional changes

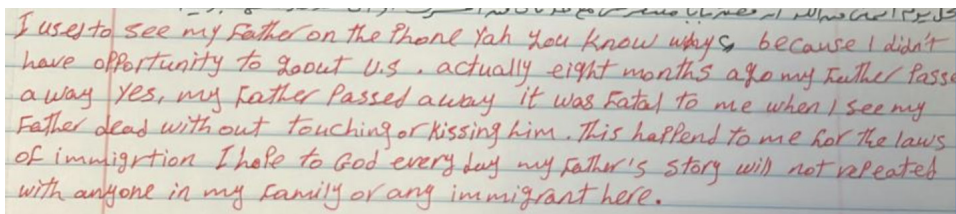
to their breath and eye contact, to overcome their nerves and giggles that accompanied the task of holding the gaze of new acquaintances with calm and intention, all of which help practice the SEL skill of self-regulation. Activities such as this established a foundation for the workshops that prioritized and provided guidance in building self-awareness and self-regulation skills, in connection with others present.

This practice of attending to one's own physical and emotional state is at the core of the first two competencies of SEL: self-awareness and self-regulation (Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba 2021). Drawing from a Grotowskian (2002) approach that views the body as the primary instrument of expression, the workshops' devised drama approach both necessitated and provided tools for engaging in self-study. The fact that acting techniques across varied traditions (e.g. Grotowski 2002; Stanislavski 1936) not only call for, but also facilitate the study of the self in connection with an ensemble, indicates the potential of drama-based pedagogies as a means of honing SEL skills. As Adams and Richie (2017, 91) argued, "The more SEL is integrated into the natural, normal ways of being together in the classroom, the more students' social and emotional skills will improve." Beginning each workshop with these drama exercises, designed to promote self-awareness and self-regulation, served as a means of integrating SEL into the workshops' routine and establishing a classroom discourse in which SEL was centered.

5.2. Devised drama created space for students to explore their interior worlds in a supportive community

In addition to scaffolding self-awareness and self-regulation, data from Noor and Sophia indicate that students valued the devised drama workshops for providing them with a space in which they could explore their interior worlds in a supportive community.

Noor, a woman in her thirties, had immigrated to the US from Egypt with her husband five years prior to the study for political reasons. Noor used the workshops as a space to share her experience of leaving her father and two of her children in her country of origin while seeking a new home in the US (fieldnote). She wrote about the emotional impact of immigration and family separation in a monologue, which she titled "I Hate Lost," seen (in part) in Figure 1 below.



I use to see my father on the phone yah you know why, because I didn't have opportunity to goout U.S. actually eight months ago my father passed away yes, my father passed away it was fatal to me when I see my father dead with out touching or kissing him. This happen to me for the laws of immigration I hope to God every day my father's story will not repeated with anyone in my family or any immigrant here.

Fig. 1. Excerpt from Noor's monologue

In this monologue, she wrote in Arabic and English about how US immigration laws prevented her from visiting her father as he was dying. She described the impact of his passing without her being able to touch or kiss him as “fatal to me.” In her writing, she shared this deeply emotional experience with the ensemble and, later, the public audience both in Arabic and in English.

In a midpoint interview, Noor discussed the value of finding a space to explore these emotions through the drama workshop:

Noor: When I’m starting theater last semester, I think about only my English, to improve my English to meet people. I think only about that for theater. But when I start with my teacher, with my friend in the theater class, I love that. Because I feel very comfortable. I feel like I have time with the doctor for, uh, I don’t know what’s the name for the doctor...

Kathleen: Like a psychologist?

Noor: A psychologist, yes, you know? (*laughs*) I feel after that, you know, very interesting for me to keep it with theater class because make me happy and make me... feel more comfortable to meet people, to talk to people. Before, um, when I talk with people I feel a bit shy, oh, maybe I do some wrong, I speak some wrong. Now (*laughs*) I know I speak a lot of word wrong, but I didn’t be shy. I’m try to speak. You know?

Kathleen: Interesting.

Noor: I think the theater class make me strong. Yeah. (interview 2023)

Here, Noor likened this space to a visit with the psychologist, framing her fellow students as her friends. Noor uses the term “comfortable” twice in describing her experience of the drama workshops, saying: “I feel very comfortable. I feel like I have time with the doctor,” and “feel more comfortable to meet people, to talk to people.” Contrasting this with her monologue in which she addresses strong feelings of loss, it is clear that this “comfort” she refers to does not mean “easy.” Noor frames the community as a comfort, and the drama workshops as a space in which challenging emotions could be brought to the forefront in a supportive and productive environment. “The theater class make me strong,” Noor asserted, describing how she felt she had overcome some feelings of shyness through theater, framing the workshops as a space in which she could explore and share her loss and find the strength to address the grief she had carried since her father’s passing. With the final line of her monologue, “I hope to God everyday my father’s story will not [be] repeated with anyone in my family or any immigrant here,” Noor also positioned the act of sharing her story as impactful to her community by connecting her story to the broader immigrant experience. With that line, she positioned her grief not as an individual trauma to bear, but as connected to a broader community and worthy of note for a public audience, potentially as a moment of advocacy. Noor’s monologue directly addressed US immigration policy and its negative impact on her family.

Sophia's case pointed to students' finding value of a different sort in the workshops' SEL-centered approach. She and her husband, Lev, were septuagenarians who had recently immigrated to the US from Russia, partly to join their daughters and grandchildren and partly to leave a political system of which they disapproved (interview 2023). Both Sophia and Lev were retired from the engineering field and had no prior experience as theater artists. In an interview midway through the program, Sophia shared her impressions of the devised drama process in terms of what the workshops offered adult learners:

- Kathleen: Now that you're in the theater class, what do you think about it now?
 Sophia: It's special. It's special experience... but I think for people who came in this center to find... uh... education and work, this experience is very, very good.
- Kathleen: Really? Why?
 Sophia: Because here can say their story, they can hear the story in other people... And I think when they begin to work and to study, they will have no time to, to think about this. And it, it was the point. Later, when he take analysis, comparing something, it maybe give them something. Energy, and the wishing to help another people, maybe. Maybe... I think this, this one of the part of the program that help people and (*laughs*) which part is very, is very help. I think this workshop help people to relax, to relax because, the, the word that (*laughs, searching for word*) not relax, when you...
- Kathleen: Oh, tense or stress?
 Sophia: Because when you in stress, it's very terrible feeling. (interview 2023)

Like Noor, Sophia framed the theater workshop as a unique space in which students have the time to reflect on their experiences. Sophia described the theatre workshop as a place that “help[s] people to relax,” and, like Noor, she saw the workshops as having a higher function than creating a safe, comfortable, or relaxing space. Sophia asserted that having the time to tell and to hear each other's stories is not something adults who also have to work and study often have time for. She identified this as one of the most important parts of the workshop and framed its importance in terms of participants being able to carry their workshop experiences with them later in life, saying “later, when he take analysis, comparing something, it maybe give them something. Energy, and the wishing to help another people, maybe.” Like Noor, Sophia also framed sharing experiences through drama as a way of making a positive impact on those around them. Sophia's case underscores the importance of SEL-centered approaches in adult classrooms, given the demands on adults' time and resources beyond the classroom, and highlights her view of drama as self-work and as an experience that participants may carry with them as a tool for the future.

Both Noor and Sophia saw the theater workshops as a space in which they could engage in self-discovery and communication through drama, which was new to them. They both valued the devising process and the community for welcoming the exploration of the self in an ensemble-focused group. For Noor, the workshops were a way to explore her inner emotional landscape and come to terms with her father's death and her geographical separation from her family. For Sophia, they served as a means of learning about herself and about others, of reducing stress, and of making a positive impact. Both saw devised drama as offering students something special to carry forward, in Noor's case, strength, and in Sophia's case, a lingering sense of energy and a desire to help others. These cases, coupled with the fact that busy adults made the time to attend these voluntary workshops, align with Pentón Herrera's (2024, 8) finding that centering SEL practices both promote self-awareness and positively affect students' emotional well-being. Our data also supports Simpson Steel's (2019) finding that students perceive arts-based practices and attention to SEL as beneficial in increasing their confidence, decreasing stress, and building community. Noor and Sophia's experiences further emphasize the importance of centering SEL in classrooms of adult learners, specifically.

5.3. Agency and learners' voices were centered throughout the process

Finally, we found that agency and learners' voices were centered throughout the process, which was important in that it created space for the student-ensemble to share their experiences in performance on their own terms. The primary facilitator, Vahdat, used the word "agency" directly in his facilitation:

We're gonna do a lot of exercises that create a dynamic between us, between the actors. And last week we talked about it, that I'm not in the circle, everyone on the stage takes the agency, becomes the collaborators. That's for all of us, right? (transcription of workshop 2023)

With directions such as this, the facilitators worked to emphasize that the ensemble had control over what, when, and how they participated in the devising process. This included to what extent and in what languages they shared their emotional landscapes with the ensemble and audience. Vahdat also designed and facilitated the workshops in a way that centered on learners' ideas. Rather than the ensemble simply following Vahdat's instruction to complete predetermined exercises, Vahdat asked the students to play a key role in shaping the workshops' activities. In the following excerpt, the ensemble negotiated the rules of an exercise; Vahdat had asked them to pass sounds, along with an imaginary ball, to one another while standing in a circle. Below, the facilitators (Kathleen and Vahdat) and students (Noor, Charan, and Lev) collectively negotiate how the activity should proceed:

- Kathleen: In this activity, when we pass it (the ball), then do we not have it any more? We are waiting to receive it from another person?
- Vahdat: That's a very good question.
- Kathleen: Or it doesn't /³ we don't-⁴
- Vahdat: Do we know what she asked?
- Noor: Yeah.
- Vahdat: What do you feel?
- Noor: I feel we have another one.
- Vahdat: Based on your own experiences, not that she's making a statement what your answer is... She's saying how she feels, so as soon as you send it, you feel like you have another one.
- Noor: Yeah
- Vahdat: What else, do we, do we know her question? After we pass the ball, how do we feel? Are we out of the ball? (*long pause*)
- Charan: We can feel differently, someone feels no more ball and waiting for / someone
- Lev: Yeah. We have different exercises, the last exercises we don't have a ball. Yeah?
- Noor: But, I want to add something. If you have an idea in your mind and you think about something important for you, I think you need to let out for everybody, you know, if I give it to you, I need to give it to another person too, because I want to share my idea for everyone.
- Vahdat: Ok, so do we know what she's saying? If I'm passing it to you, I want to do the same thing to her and I also want to pass it to you, I don't want it to be individual, so it's sort of this ball keeps reproducing...that's a very interesting question because the question is really more important than really what the answer is, there is no "should be." The idea is putting us in experience and seeing how it feels to us. (transcription of workshop 2023)

Here, the ensemble shaped the activity rather than simply following clearly delineated, predetermined rules and procedures. Kathleen, who first asked the question, was a co-facilitator and project researcher, so we also see a decentering of the authoritarian voice of the director/teacher, and a centering of student voices in this exchange. Each person present comprised the ensemble, which negotiated meaning both as a unit and as individuals with differing opinions. While Noor proposed that a new ball be generated each time one was passed, Charan, another student, said that he preferred to wait for someone to pass him a new ball. In the end, Vahdat honored all these interpretations, stating, "there is no 'should be.' The idea is putting us in experience and seeing how it feels to us." Through this approach to facilitation, each ensemble member was encouraged to view their own interpretation and their own way of participating as valuable and valid. In this

way, students were encouraged to exercise agency in determining when, how, and whether to participate in each activity from the beginning of the project.

This also created a space for students to share feelings of dissent around the work being collaboratively devised, to advocate for their own emotional well-being, and to shape their own participation in the performative elements of the program. This is shown in the case of Lev, Sophia's husband, who offered pushback after an activity in which students had been asked to improvise on the theme of missing home by completing the sentence, "Where is my ____". Some improvisations that students had offered included: "Where is my city who I lived 75 years?" "Where is my mother?" "Where is my guitar?" "Where is my food my mother do?" (transcription of workshop 2023). After the activity concluded, Lev offered this feedback:

- Lev: But we say the same words many times, it's.../ I understand
 Sophia: It's meditation / it's meditation
 Lev: It's big problem / very big problem
 Sophia: (*overlapping, inaudible or possibly Russian*)
 Lev: People is crazy.
 Noor: Hmm? Why?
 Lev: When you go a long time and say the same words / and
 Sophia: This is (*overlapping, inaudible*) normal
 Lev: And don't find the answers, it's crazy people.
 Noor: But this emotion, it's inside you, it's ok, you share it.
 Lev: Uh, by night, it, in my home, not on the stage. You understand me?
 Vahdat: Yeah.
 Noor: Mmm. (transcription of workshop 2023)

In this excerpt, Lev asserted that asking the same question, "Where is my ____," many times was "a very big problem," and "crazy." Sophia, Lev's wife, attempted to de-escalate what she may have perceived as a challenge to Vahdat's authority by countering that it is not crazy, rather it "is meditation." Noor, asked for clarification from Lev, who explained that asking the same questions again and again is crazy, echoing the truism, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." Sophia interrupted him to directly contradict that "it is normal." At the end of this exchange, however, Lev offered the explanation, "by night, it, in my home, not on the stage. You understand me?," implying that he carried the emotions from the theater activities with him when he left the workshop. At this point, no one challenged Lev's expression of discomfort or unwillingness to participate. Rather, Noor and Vahdat expressed understanding.

However, as the dialogue continued, Lev's wife, Sofia, again challenged Lev's right to make this critique:

- Lev: It's not normal...it's um
- Sophia: Lev, you / not
- Lev: Ok, ok,
- Vahdat: No, I love to hear it -
- Noor: You did very well -
- Vahdat: No, if there is a thought I'd love to hear it...I'd love to hear it if there is more.
- Sophia: (*speaking to Lev*) You're not producer.
- Lev: For me, it's very interesting and good say, uh, our friend from Haiti, very beautiful, but it's different words. It's, um, big emotion. I think only he can (*inaudible*). The other people can repeat the same one word, one, two, three, it's, um (*inaudible*). We can make a short monologues with creatives, uh, for example I find, uh, short poems in this, the same...
- Sophia: About home
- Lev: The same, for example, my city (*recites several lines of a poem by Pushkin*) Yeah? Etcetera. I can?
- Vahdat: Sure. Would you want to do that at the beginning? (transcription of workshop 2023)

Even while Sophia reinforced traditional director/actor or teacher/student roles of doing what one is told by telling Lev he was “not the producer,” Vahdat invited Lev to share his own experience and critique of the exercise. Sophia’s admonition was an example of the pervasiveness of authoritarian, teacher/director-centered classroom discourse. Despite the facilitators’ work to center the students’ own ideas, voices, and feelings and to de-center the authoritarian voice of the teacher/director, students did not always take up this discourse or the reframing of these roles.

Yet, Lev did succeed at renegotiating the activity. Despite Sophia’s admonitions, Lev provided his rationale for not wanting to participate in the activity as it evoked “big emotion.” He proposed reciting a poem by Pushkin about his home city, St. Petersburg, instead of contributing his own thoughts and feelings about his home city. Lev renegotiated the activity to engage in aesthetic distancing even though it was not initially presented as an option by the facilitators. Through this innovativeness, Lev exhibited agency in ways similar to those demonstrated by the youth in Siffrinn and McGovern’s (2019) study, with a key difference being that at the age of 75, it is possible to assume that Lev had already developed many SEL core competencies, including the ability to negotiate relationships, make ethical decisions, and engage in self-advocacy.

Though prior research has shown that asking students to share stories of loss and trauma runs the risk of re-traumatizing students, aesthetic distancing has been demonstrated as a means of mitigating that risk and ethically engaging multilingual immigrant and refugee learners in performative language pedagogies

(Dalziel and Piazzoli 2019; Piazzoli and Kir Cullen 2021). Lev's willingness to challenge Vahdat's prompt and his innovativeness in adopting aesthetic distancing as a participation strategy underlines learners' abilities to exercise self-care as much as it illustrates the importance of establishing an environment in which students perceive their voices as valued. Prior scholarship has demonstrated how learners of all ages can exhibit creative agency in situations that cause discomfort (Jones et al. 2016; Siffrinn and McGovern 2019). Our study echoes this finding, with Lev's case demonstrating that some learners, at least, possess the relationship skills to negotiate conflict, make responsible decisions, and exercise self-care in determining how much of themselves to share with their community.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Our study found that devised drama served as an SEL-centered practice with adult multilingual immigrant and refugee learners. Like Pentón Herrera's (2024, 8) study, which demonstrated how SEL practices increased "students' positive emotions, such as happiness, and their sense of belonging in the classroom, which positively affected their overall well-being," data from our students show how devised drama served as an SEL strategy by engaging students in activities that cultivated awareness of the self and others, created space for students to explore their emotions in a supportive community, and centered learner voices throughout the process. The adult learners in this study valued the workshops as a space in which they could explore and share with others who they are and how they feel. In this way, data from our study aligns with prior research showing not only that arts-based pedagogies can serve to promote SEL, but also that students' themselves perceive SEL benefits associated with arts-based practices (e.g. Simpson Steele 2019).

At the same time, however, creating a space in which learners share their feelings may evoke sadness or discomfort. Engaging students, particularly vulnerable populations such as immigrants and refugees, in sharing deeply emotional experiences carries risks, such as the potential to re-traumatize or essentialize learners, as several scholars have noted (Dalziel and Piazzoli 2019; Piazzoli and Kir Cullen 2021; McGovern and Yeganeh 2023). Dalziel and Piazzoli (2019) proposed valuing learner agency and facilitators' sensitivity to learner vulnerability as a key part of engaging learners in performative language pedagogy in an ethical manner. Our own study upholds this finding.

The devising process used in this project established these values early in the process. To mitigate this risk associated with performative storytelling, Vahdat worked to establish a space in which his own voice guided the project, but was not the final authority from the beginning of the process. Through activities as simple as guided breathing and making eye contact in a circle, Vahdat aimed to create a discourse in which students were asked to take stock of their own emotional

experiences and encouraged to challenge, question, and alter activities to align with their impulses. In this space, exhibiting agency was a core expectation, and students were encouraged to share to the extent they felt comfortable in the moment, attending to their own bodies and needs. This created space for students to explore their own emotional worlds on their own terms. Some, like Noor, who shared the loss of her father, exhibited agency in using the workshops as a therapeutic outlet; others, like Lev, exhibited agency through the use of aesthetic distancing, sharing a poem rather than his own thoughts of what he missed in St. Petersburg, recognizing that the latter would cause him distress.

6.1. Limitations

As in all research, this study has limitations. Firstly, focusing on a particular cohort at a particular time and place meant that we were able to capture a rich and nuanced glimpse of the experiences of our participants, but it also means that other individuals in other contexts will likely experience the vast range of drama-based and SEL approaches differently. This speaks to the importance of centering the needs and experiences of the individuals with whom we interact in our research and practice going forward. Another limitation of the study was our inability to collect data from audience members due to logistical constraints. We see this as a promising avenue for future research: that is, to explore the SEL experiences of audiences put in dialogue with students through performative pedagogies. Similarly, prioritizing our adult learners' needs and schedules by conducting interviews during workshops meant we were unable to interview participants retrospectively after the final performance concluded. Continuing to collect data after the workshops' conclusion could provide additional insight into the program's impact on participants in the long term.

6.2. Research implications and directions forward

As we consider pathways for future research, we join the group of scholars calling for additional research on SEL in language education contexts (e.g. Adams and Richie 2017; Osher et al. 2016; Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba 2021). There is currently a move towards centering SEL in PreK-12 settings (CASEL 2020) and we believe that additional scholarship on SEL processes with adult learners would be beneficial to the fields of language education and education more broadly. Additionally, because the devising approach discussed in this paper centers learners' stories, we see it as affording opportunities for future research that addresses the multiple and varied intersectional positionalities of our participants, including questions relating to race, gender, and sexuality (e.g. Trinh 2020). Similarly, future research might further focus on the multimodal, embodied nature of performative pedagogies and the connections between the body, emotion, language, and community.

6.3. Pedagogical implications and directions forward

Using SEL-focused pedagogies with language learners may feel daunting for educators, especially those working with vulnerable populations, such as immigrants and refugees. Teachers may fear that centering SEL would also mean centering trauma or other negative emotions in the classroom. At the same time, students, particularly adult learners, come to our classrooms with a range of lived experiences and a lifetime of emotions; in many cases, they also enter our classrooms with an array of SEL tools and skills honed across their lifetimes. Like Gkonou et al. (2020), we would argue that there are no classrooms in which social-emotional domains play no role, only spaces in which the social-emotional aspects of learning are pushed to the margins or ignored. By normalizing SEL-focused practices through drama-based language pedagogy, we hope not only to increase the SEL skills of our class-ensemble, but to build a supportive environment in which our students' voices, experiences, and feelings are centered. We see drama-based pedagogies as a promising means of centering SEL with language learners, provided that facilitators remain mindful of their ensemble's vulnerability and voices.

Moving forward, we advocate for educators to continue to explore ways to welcome students' experiences and emotions into the classroom, holistically. We have found that not only children, but also adults see the value in participating in supportive educational communities that SEL-centered practices have the potential to create. We have also found the Dialogue of Civilizations approach described in this paper and in McGovern and Yeganeh (2023) to be a promising avenue in working against anti-immigrant discourses and towards fostering tolerance, dialogue, and respect within communities. Dialogue of Civilizations brings people from diverse backgrounds together to actively explore and express who they are. It is our hope that when people who participate in the project feel heard and understood, they also feel more a part of the new community in which they live. We see incorporating devised drama as an SEL-approach as going beyond learning rules and policy to explore how communities can further cultivate these feelings of belonging.

Notes

- 1 We encourage readers to see the *Scenario* journal and these three literature reviews for additional information on the field more broadly: Belliveau and Kim 2013; McGovern 2017; Schewe 2013.
- 2 "...” denotes a transcribed pause in this data excerpt and across all the transcribed data.
- 3 / denotes overlapping speech (the point at which the next interlocutor begins speaking)
- 4 - denotes interrupted speech

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