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

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I Felt “Safe and Heard”: Nurturing English Majors’ Social-Emotional Skills through the Discussion of Controversial Issues in the Hungarian University Context

Abstract: Amidst contemporary challenges (e.g. pandemics, wars), integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes is crucial for fostering students’ growth and emotional well-being. This study aimed to reveal how a language seminar can contribute to nurturing university students’ SEL skills while also developing their language skills by engaging in discussions about controversial issues (CIs). Two groups of students, taught by the two authors, participated in the study. The results reveal that the students appreciated the discussions about CIs, found them challenging but enjoyable, and conducive to developing SEL skills. The results imply that creating an SEL-based syllabus focusing on CI could be both feasible and worthwhile.

Keywords: social-emotional learning (SEL), controversial issues (CIs), skills development, classroom study, tertiary education, Hungarian university context

1. Introduction

It has never been more important to learn how to handle conflicts, manage our emotions, and connect with people than today. The severe hardships we face (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic, war, and inflation) necessitate teachers to

address these issues in the classroom and become active supporters of their students' mental and emotional well-being (Pentón Herrera 2020). One possible way to support students amid these challenges that has begun to gain traction in English language teaching (ELT) is to implement social-emotional learning (SEL) in education. SEL enables teachers to teach content while supporting their students' well-being and equipping them with the skills needed to flourish in various contexts (Elias 2006; Zins and Elias 2007; Mahoney and Weissberg 2019; Pentón Herrera 2024). By definition, social and emotional learning is "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (CASEL 2024). Thus, SEL promotes well-being, contributes to school safety, develops students' civic learning, and prepares them to enter the job market and build their careers (CASEL 2024).

The topicality of SEL is undoubtedly more than timely in the Hungarian educational context. According to Bíró-Nagy and Szabó (2021), dissatisfaction, conformity, passivity, and polarization describe the attitudes and worldviews of the Hungarian youth. Moreover, a study exploring the well-being of Hungarian university students (Karner et al. 2021) revealed that a large proportion of this population struggles with mental health issues (i.e. depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts), and uses harmful coping strategies to deal with problems. These tendencies are rather worrisome and clearly show that urgent steps are needed in society and education. In our view, integrating SEL into classes – especially English as a foreign language (EFL) classes – could serve as part of the remedy to the situation.

In this mixed-methods classroom research, we present two Budapest-based teacher educators' endeavors to design a skills-based language practice course based on the principles of SEL, focusing on controversial issues (CI). For clarity, in this article, the term 'controversial issues' denotes issues "that have a political, social and personal impact and arouse feeling and/or deal with questions of value or belief" (Oxfam 2018, 2). The reason for choosing to focus on dealing with CIs for SEL lies in the fact that CIs provide excellent opportunities for both language and personal development (Starkey 2005). Apart from language skills, dealing with controversial issues improves one's critical thinking-, argumentation-, interpersonal-, as well as intrapersonal skills, which are indispensable to becoming healthy and responsible citizens in today's society (Divéki 2023; Divéki and Pereszlényi 2021; Starkey 2005). Moreover, students generally like discussing hot-button or sensitive topics (Oxfam 2018), and more importantly, they appreciate being asked about their opinions (Divéki and Pereszlényi 2021). Thus, the authors designed a one semester-long course and, through end-of-the-lesson feedback sheets, end-of-the-course feedback sheets, and their research journals, aimed to gain insight into how a course

focusing on CIs can contribute to nurturing students' social-emotional skills while also developing their language skills. More specifically, the study aimed to explore the two authors' students' views on controversial discussions and their perceptions of the skills developed during these discussions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social-emotional learning (SEL)

Undoubtedly, SEL has become one of the educational buzzwords in recent times. Even though there has been “an explosion of interest in social and emotional learning” (Weissberg et al. 2015, 3), it is challenging to define it. SEL is certainly a broad concept that involves knowledge, skills, and attitudes to enable individuals to become committed to personal development, lifelong learning, and the development of supportive relationships (CASEL 2012). Thus, SEL becomes indispensable for achieving personal, academic, and career goals (Jones and Doolittle 2017).

One of the most widely used SEL frameworks is provided by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning or CASEL (CASEL 2024). The framework identifies five key domains that are also interrelated: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. *Self-awareness* indicates the capacity to be aware of and understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values, such as being able to address one's strengths and limitations (Weissberg et al. 2015; CASEL 2024). *Self-management* means that one can control their emotions, thoughts, and actions in various situations; for example, managing control impulses (Weissberg et al. 2015; CASEL 2024). *Social awareness* covers the abilities that enable one to relate to people's emotions, and to feel empathy and compassion for people regardless of their (cultural) backgrounds (CASEL 2024). *Relationship skills* refers to providing individuals with all the skills that are needed to find and maintain healthy, supportive relationships (e.g. communication skills, and active listening skills) (Weissberg et al. 2015; CASEL 2024). The last domain, *responsible decision-making*, includes knowledge, and skills that enable one to make constructive decisions in various situations, such as evaluating the consequences of one's actions (CASEL 2024). These five domains are cultivated within different contexts: in classrooms, schools, families, and other communities (CASEL 2024).

The importance of SEL is underpinned by its short- and long-term outcomes, as summarized by Weissberg et al. (2015). The short-term outcomes include: social-emotional skills (e.g. self-understanding), positive attitudes towards others (e.g. empathy), or results, such as improved test grades. The long-term outcomes involve academic and career success as well as positive relationships.

2.2. SEL in the EFL classroom

The need for integrating SEL in education, as well as its relevance to students, is indubitable. People today have to face more complex challenges than previous generations (Zins and Elias 2007; Mesibov and Drmacich 2022), which warrants changes in education. Current events necessitate educators to care for and support their students' well-being more than before (Pentón Herrera 2020). Although global events may not affect students directly, their repercussions take a toll on people's mental health and emotional well-being. This may result in poor academic performance; as pointed out by Pentón Herrera (2020, 5), "students cannot learn successfully when they are afraid, hungry, scared, excluded, discriminated, invisible, unsupported, depressed, homeless, fearing family separation or deportation."

Apart from its relevance, it is important to mention the benefits of SEL integration. First and foremost, SEL has an essential role in triggering positive emotions and decreasing negative emotions, thus impacting students' well-being (Pentón Herrera 2024). Upon examining 82 school-based interventions, Taylor et al. (2017) found that SEL interventions develop students' SEL skills and their attitudes. Moreover, the integration of SEL leads to better academic performance and lowers emotional distress and drug use (Taylor et al. 2017). A more detailed conclusion is drawn by Zins and Elias (2007). The benefits are grouped into three main categories: attitudes, behaviors, and performance. SEL integration results in improved ethical attitudes and sense of belonging (i.e. attitudes); leads to active participation and involvement in activities, better conflict-solving skills (i.e. behaviors); improves mathematics, language, and social studies skills; and increases achievement over time (i.e. performance).

Narrowing down the scope to EFL classrooms, the focus of the present study, several arguments supporting the introduction of SEL can be found. First and foremost, the connection between language and feelings must be highlighted. Having the necessary language to express feelings enables one to understand and cope with them (Pentón Herrera 2020); thus, the combination of language teaching and SEL has a positive impact on students' language skills and stamina. Another argument lies in the various topics that are covered in English lessons. These topics provide an excellent opportunity for improving certain skills, which are also vital in the SEL framework. For instance, issues like climate change can evoke strong feelings and spark debate. Because they are relevant to students' lives, these topics can be a springboard for learning valuable skills like communication, goal-setting, problem-solving, and emotional regulation. As the example shows, SEL is the link between knowledge taught in schools and skills needed in life (Elias 2006).

Despite the solid theoretical framework and long history of SEL in general education, there is a dearth of empirical studies focusing on SEL in ELT. One exception is a study conducted in the Hong Kong secondary school context (Bai and Wang 2021). The results of the questionnaire study revealed that the students had a

high level of awareness skills, while having a lower level of management skills. It was also found that self-awareness serves as a foundation for managing emotions, which results in better performance in the EFL classroom. Another empirical study, which focused on SEL activities and their effects in the English classroom, involved Latin American high school students studying in the USA (Pentón Herrera 2024). The findings indicate the substantial impact SEL may have in the classroom, such as creating a safe space, strengthening interpersonal relationships, and teaching students how to cope with their emotions. Pentón Herrera's (2024) study also shows that SEL activities can be used to develop real-life skills, thus preparing students for real-life situations.

2.3. Dealing with controversial issues in the EFL classroom

“It is in the interest of the language teacher to promote controversy in the classroom,” argues Starkey (2005, 35). Indeed, there has been growing interest in integrating critical controversial issues into the EFL curriculum. Controversial issues are, by the definition of the Council of Europe (2020, 7), “issues which arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in communities and society.” As the definition by Oxfam (2018, 2) details, these issues “have a political, social and personal impact and arouse feeling and/or deal with questions of value or belief,” which means that they are inherently complex and multi-layered. These issues may range from local matters, such as building battery factories close to settlements, to global ones, like taxing multinational companies to reduce greenhouse emissions. Some issues may be considered more controversial in some places than others (e.g. in 2024, building battery factories is a widely debated issue in Hungary, while it may be rather uncontentious in other parts of Europe). Some issues (e.g. the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, gun control, abortion) have been simmering for a long time, while other issues are relatively new (e.g. transgender rights, AI and intellectual property) (Council of Europe 2020).

Since controversial topics are rather complex and may cause division and conflict, it is understandable that they are often avoided in classes. Coursebook writers also often refrain from including CI because they can be sensitive and may be considered inappropriate in some cultures (Gray 2000). As empirical studies (Haynes 2009; Yoshihara 2013; Evripidou and Çavuşoğlu 2014; Divéki 2018; Divéki 2024) reveal, EFL teachers have mixed feelings about addressing CI in their lessons for fear of not knowing enough about the issues, or causing conflict in the classroom they would not be able to deal with. For instance, in the Japanese context, both Yoshihara (2013), who examined teachers' willingness to treat issues such as domestic violence, global warming, homosexuality, children's rights and corporate social responsibility in university classes, and Haynes (2009), who revealed university teachers' perspectives on dealing with sexuality and AIDS-related issues, reported on teachers' concerns about incorporating these CI due to their fear of unforeseen consequences and lack of knowledge. Evripidou and

Çavuşoglu (2014, 70) explored Cypriot secondary EFL teachers' views on "gay and lesbian-related topics," who, even though reported having mostly positive attitudes towards their incorporation, expressed concerns about feeling "unequipped" to discuss such issues and respond to potential homophobic comments. In her book, Divéki (2024) mapped both secondary school teachers' and university tutors' attitudes towards the incorporation of global content in the Hungarian context and found that the participants prefer dealing with intercultural and global issues significantly more than with issues of local significance or issues they deem controversial. In her studies, it was the younger generation of teachers that was found to be more likely to integrate controversial topics (e.g. sexual identities, negative stereotypes, and discrimination) into their EFL lessons. Nevertheless, students, on their part, seem to enjoy dealing with controversial matters in language classes (e.g. discrimination, stereotypes, racism, human rights, globalisation, the impact of the media, poverty, and sustainability, see Gimenez and Metliss 2011; homosexuality and adultery, see Tekin 2011; LGBTQ+ issues, see Nelson 2015; Zare and Othman 2015; fake news, see Divéki and Pereszlényi 2021; climate change, fake news, immigration, feminism, see Divéki 2024). This is especially true when students approach CI through up-to-date and relevant (preferably pop-cultural) materials, feel that the lesson expanded their knowledge about the world, or are offered a new take on the topics they discussed many times before (Divéki 2024).

The pedagogical benefits of dealing with CIs are numerous, and they align with nurturing social-emotional skills; thus, incorporating them into EFL classes is justified. First, CIs are highly relevant to students' lives, and by avoiding CIs in classes, teachers "leave young people unprepared for the complexities of the modern world" (Oxfam 2018, 2). Second, when CIs are incorporated into communicative language classes, students can improve their social competence and skills, such as cooperation, communication, and conflict-resolution (Martínez-Alba and Pentón Herrera 2023). By creating a space where students encounter meaningful real-world issues, teachers can ensure that students engage with multiple perspectives, while they also improve their overall language skills. Third, as Hess (2004, 257) notes, the "discussions of controversial issues in schools can enhance democratic thinking." To become democratic citizens, students need to deal with complex CIs under the guidance of their teachers to learn how to discuss CIs politely and constructively (i.e. relationship skills), by considering others' perspectives (i.e. social awareness), ensuring that these discussions go smoothly (i.e. self-awareness, self-management), so that one day they can make responsible decisions about public affairs (i.e. responsible decision-making). Even though publications warn about the controversies in addressing CIs in class (e.g. teacher stance and roles, conflict resolution, the danger of indoctrination), there is agreement that it is possible to effectively treat CIs in a pedagogically constructive manner by creating the optimal environment, being prepared and even-handed, and not championing any views (Council of Europe 2020; Tony Blair Institute for Global Change 2017; Karam 2021).

2.4. The rationale for the study

Although SEL has been researched and integrated into various educational programs, there is a dearth of research in the Hungarian context. That said, a few studies highlight the importance of SEL and reflect on its practical realization in the Hungarian context (Winkler and Zsolnai 2022; Zsolnai et al. 2015). In their article, Zsolnai et al. (2015) provide an overview of SEL implementation practices in various countries, including Hungary. The authors claim there have been some experiments and short programs that can be incorporated into existing curricula; however, the Hungarian educational system puts a premium on the development of cognitive skills and not on SEL skills. It has to be noted that even though SEL programs exist in Hungary, they primarily focus on social-emotional competence, and they are not based on the CASEL framework.

Regarding empirical research, no study has been found that addresses the implementation of CASEL in the Hungarian educational context. Despite this void, it must be noted that some studies investigated the development of certain SEL skills in the EFL classroom (Divéki and Pereszlényi 2021; Pereszlényi 2022; Huszákné Vendég 2023; Schüsler 2023; Divéki 2024). The present study intends to fill this gap by reflecting on a one-semester-long experiment carried out at a Hungarian university to explore students' opinions on the practical realization of SEL. Also, the study aims to explore how these discussions can contribute to the development of SEL. Finally, it intends to present an example of how SEL can be integrated into EFL lessons.

3. Research design and methods

3.1. Research design

The study is an exploratory empirical investigation and can be classified as mixed-methods classroom research (Dörnyei 2007). This means that it involves both qualitative and quantitative research at the data analysis level (Dörnyei 2007). The scope of our research included two main points: 1) how SEL can be taught in the EFL classroom, and 2) how SEL-related skills can be developed from the student's perspective. The research combined both quantitative (i.e. feedback forms with items based on Likert-scale) and qualitative (i.e. reflective journals) data collection methodologies.

3.2. Research questions

Our study aimed to reveal how a language skills development seminar can contribute to nurturing university students' SEL skills while also developing their language skills. To guide our investigations, the following questions were formulated:

1. What are the perspectives of second-year English majors on controversial discussions in their language development seminars?
2. What do second-year English majors think about the development of their SEL skills while engaging with controversial topics in their language development seminars?

3.3. The participants and the setting

The participants of the study were students in two Skills Development groups at a prestigious university located in Budapest, Hungary. Advertised exclusively for second-year students enrolled in the English Studies BA program or the English teacher training program, Skills Development is a general English language course intended to develop students' overall language proficiency. The course structure is flexible, empowering the instructors to select the course's focus and content.

The research project was conducted in the Autumn 2023/24 semester, and the students who took the researcher-instructors' seminars became the participants of the study. During the first lesson, the students were informed about the study, completed a consent form, and had the opportunity to opt out of the study (which would have meant not filling in the feedback sheets). As every student consented to be studied, we had altogether 31 participants (16 English majors and 15 teacher trainees). The authors conducted the research in their own courses, resulting in two groups of students participating in the study. As the study intends to explore how SEL can be integrated into the EFL classroom, involving two groups was deemed to present more possibilities.

Group A (the second author's group) comprised 16 (12 female, 3 male, and 1 nonbinary) students. Even though they had already passed their first-year proficiency exam (CEFR B2+/C1), their language proficiency level exhibited a wide range. The course, titled *Skills Development – Embracing Controversy*, was designed by the researcher-instructor to revolve entirely around controversial topics, which some students initially found challenging. At the onset of the semester, many students seemed shy and reluctant to participate in the group discussions despite the respectful and safe environment fostered within the group. As the semester progressed, they formed close bonds with each other, actively engaged in group activities, and seemed to have eased up in front of the group.

Group B (the first author's group) consisted of 15 students (11 female, 4 male). Their language profile was similar to Group A. The course, *Skills Development Through TED Talks*, was built on TED talks addressing topics related to SEL. Although there were some timid students in the group, they were engaged in small group discussions. Some of the topics were less popular or relatable, which resulted in short discussions; however, the students were engaged in the group discussions overall.

3.4. The course design

Table 1. The topics discussed in the seminars

Group A (Taught by Divéki)		Group B (Taught by Pereszlényi)	
Topics selected by the instructor	Topics selected by the students	Topics selected by the instructor	Topics selected by the students
<i>Environment:</i> Animal rights CSR or personal responsibility <i>Sports:</i> Transgender athletes Activism in sports <i>Technology:</i> Data privacy <i>Technology:</i> Data privacy Controlling children's screen time <i>Food:</i> Giving up eating meat <i>Education:</i> Segregation in schools Free education <i>Society:</i> Gender equality LGBTQ families <i>Media:</i> Beauty culture Social media and democracy <i>Body:</i> Plastic surgeries Abortion <i>Family:</i> Monogamy vs. polygamy	<i>Environment:</i> Responsibilities <i>Sports:</i> Doping + Should sports be compulsory in schools <i>Technology:</i> Robots in healthcare Responsibilities Should sports be compulsory in schools <i>Technology:</i> Robots in healthcare Will AI take our jobs? <i>Education:</i> Should homework be compulsory? <i>Society:</i> Gendered bathrooms Should we talk about LGBTQ topics in school? <i>Media:</i> What effect does social media have on children? <i>Body:</i> Does diet culture hurt us? <i>Family:</i> The effect of divorce on children	<i>Environment:</i> Sustainable solutions <i>Education:</i> Problems in education Languages <i>Society:</i> The language should use with queer people The ways we differ from each other Being a conformist or a non-conformist +SEL topics: <i>Mental health:</i> Depression How to have fun <i>Time (and self-) management:</i> Procrastination	<i>Environment:</i> Keeping animals in zoos Recycling in Hungary <i>Sports:</i> Gender pay gap in sports <i>Technology:</i> Technology in education (AI) <i>Food:</i> Vegan vs. non-vegan diets <i>Body:</i> Gender differences in developing eating disorders <i>Family:</i> Moving out from home

Even though it resulted in two different learning experiences, the researcher-instructors designed their courses based on the same principles: their main pedagogical aims involved enhancing their students' overall language skills (approximating CEFR C1+) and their socio-emotional skills by engaging them in

discussions about contentious topics. The two courses shared many similarities: (a) each session revolved around one or two main discussion topics, (b) these discussion topics related to the main themes selected by the instructors at the beginning of the semester (i.e. *environment, sports, technology, education, society, media, body, family*) or to SEL, (c) the instructors prepared the in-class discussions by setting authentic materials for the students to read or watch in advance (flipped classroom principle), (d) the students were involved in selecting the topics they wanted to discuss in class, (e) the students could choose on which CI they wanted to lead a discussion in pairs, and (f) the students were asked to create a podcast episode on a controversial topic as part of their assessment. The main difference between the courses was in the focus: while Divéki's course focused entirely on CI, Pereszlényi's group mainly dealt with CI in the student-led discussions, similar to Haynes' (2009) Teach-Ins.

When starting the semester, the researcher-instructors only had a half-made syllabus so that the students could propose topics they wanted to discuss. Both instructors started the course by displaying some main themes and asking the students to brainstorm controversial sub-topics. After the brainstorming session, these ideas were collected (see Table 1), and the students could choose the topic they wanted to facilitate a discussion on and another one they wanted to make a podcast episode on. Figure 1 shows the topic selection process in Group A, taught by Divéki, and an example of a brainstorming process in Group B, taught by Pereszlényi.



Fig. 1. The selection of the discussion topics and brainstorming in Group A and B, respectively

In Course A, a typical session started with reviewing the vocabulary from the previous session with a game-like activity (e.g. taboo, bingo, hot seat). Then, the main topic was introduced with short discussions (in pairs or small groups) on the video/reading assigned for the lesson, and by reviewing the vocabulary from the handout accompanying the text. Then, two students led a discussion on a CI (relating to the main theme of the lesson) for 15 minutes. Each session concluded with a debate, where various debate formats were used. Figure 2 illustrates the multiple formats used to this end. During the debates, the instructor strove to position herself either as an objective chairperson or the devil's advocate (Council of Europe, 2020) to encourage her students to consider different viewpoints.



Fig. 2. Group A discussing controversial issues around the media

At the start of the semester, Group B students collected some controversial subtopics based on the main topics used in Group A. A typical lesson started with a short warm-up followed by the main topic of the lesson through a TED Talk. The TED Talk was always accompanied by some tasks (e.g. vocabulary and comprehension activities, discussions), and in some cases, the students did project work, too (e.g. designing an advertisement for a sustainable product). During the lessons, the students also led a discussion on a controversial subtopic of their choice. First, the pairs did a short presentation providing some background information on the topic, followed by some questions that their peers discussed in small groups. Although the aim was to have a debate, the students avoided asking questions that may have led to opposing views. Their questions were either too general or based solely on personal experience, so it was not possible to conduct a debate. Since the instructor aimed to provide as much freedom to the students as possible as well as to create a safe space, the students were not interrupted, and they were not asked to conduct debates.

As shown in Figure 2, both courses intended to give students the space to nurture their social and emotional skills. The reflections (either as homework or in

the feedback) enabled them to work on their self-awareness, the freedom to choose the topics for in-class discussion and in the podcast assignment served to develop their responsible decision-making skills, and hopefully, the discussions on controversial issues helped them develop all the components of the CASEL framework: self-awareness (examining bias, identifying emotions and their views), self-management (emotional regulation, taking initiative), responsible decision-making (curiosity, open-mindedness, taking sides), relationships skills (communication, conflict resolution) and social awareness (empathy, perspective-taking).

3.5. Data collection and analysis

To explore our students' perception of the discussions and the skills developed through them, data was primarily collected through (1) discussion feedback sheets, (2) an end-of-the-course feedback sheet, and (3) the researcher-instructors' reflective journals. The students' products (homework, reflections, podcast) supplemented these instruments and served as tools for triangulation (Dörnyei 2007).

On the feedback sheets, through both open-ended and Likert-scale questions, the students were asked about the extent to which they enjoyed the discussions of the day, what they liked or disliked about them, what they learned from them, how they made them feel, and they had to decide whether each discussion helped them develop their SEL skills (the meaning of each component of the CASEL framework was discussed at the beginning of the semester). The printed feedback sheets were completed anonymously after each discussion (in Group A, in the last five minutes; in Group B's class, right after each student-led discussion).

The end-of-the-course feedback sheet was similar in design to the discussion feedback sheets, but it enabled the students to reflect on their experience during the semester: first, it inquired about (1) their reflections about the discussions (i.e. *Which discussion did the students like the most?; Which discussion did they deem the most important?; and How did the discussions make them feel?*), (2) the skills they improved during the discussions, (3) their reflections about the podcast assignment, and finally, (4) the effort they put into the course. The end-of-the-course feedback was anonymous, and it took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

To include another angle and have a deeper understanding of the data and experiences, the researcher-instructors also kept research journals to track their students' engagement with the topics and any emerging issues in the lessons. After receiving permission from the Research Ethical Board of the university, the data collection started in September 2023 and finished in December 2023.

After the data collection, the feedback sheet data were transferred to Excel and analyzed with the help of SPSS 22. Data from the feedback sheets were analyzed by calculating means and standard deviations, and the socio-emotional skills scales were analyzed by selection frequencies. The qualitative data was analyzed using the method of thematic content analysis, which resulted in a table of themes and

quotes supporting the themes. In the results section, after each quote, there is an identifier showing which group the student belonged to (e.g. #A16 went to Group A, and #B1 went to Group B).

Given the nature of this study which only focused on two seminar groups, its findings should not be construed as generalizable. While the involvement of both researcher-instructors provided a deep understanding of the courses, the fact that each group was only instructed by one researcher may have introduced some limitations. The main topics were the same in the two groups, but the subtopics were chosen by the students, which naturally resulted in differing sets of subtopics. The different subtopics may have impacted the students' opinions and perceptions. Another limitation lies in the different course structures. While Group A students were able to provide detailed information regarding SEL in the feedback, Group B students provided less information on SEL as the topics explored in detail in Course A were used mostly as supplementary topics in Group B. A final limitation may stem from the fact that the two instructors' teaching style, rapport with the group, and presence were naturally different (even though they attended the same teacher education program and have been teaching together for many years), which could have also altered the students' perceptions. Given that the study was not experimental but exploratory in nature, even though these limitations were considered, they do not necessarily delimit the findings.

4. Findings

4.1. RQ1: What are the perspectives of second-year English majors on controversial discussions in their language development seminars?

To tap into our students' perspectives on the controversial discussions, in the feedback sheets, the students were asked about the extent to which they enjoyed each discussion on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). As can be seen from Table 2, overall, the students awarded high means (i.e. over 4.00) to the discussions. There were only two discussions in Group B with means below 4. The most highly rated discussion in both groups was on family matters, which is also corroborated by the end-of-the-course feedback about the students' favorite discussion (8 out of 24 students marked those discussions as favorites).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for students' enjoyment of each discussion

theme	Group 1			Group 2		
	discussion topic	M	SD	discussion topic	M	SD
<i>environment</i>	1) Whose responsibility is it to take care of the environment?	4.20	.66	Recycling in Hungary	4.46	.52
	2) Animal rights			Zoos	3.88	.99
<i>sports</i>	1) Transgender athletes 2) Doping + Should schools be compulsory in school? 3) Activism in sports	4.50	.51	The gender pay gap in sports	4.61	.51
<i>technology</i>	1) Data privacy 2) Controlling children's screen time 3) Robots in healthcare 4) Will AI take our jobs?	4.67	.51	Technology in education (AI)	4.70	.48
<i>education</i>	1) Segregation in schools 2) Free education 3) Should homework be compulsory?	4.06	.51			
<i>society</i>	1) Gender equality 2) LGBTQ families 3) Gendered bathrooms 4) Should we talk about LGBTQ topics in school?	4.25	1.04			
<i>media</i>	1) Beauty culture 2) Social media and democracy 3) What effect does social media have on children?	4.70	.67			
<i>body</i>	1) Plastic surgeries 2) Abortion 3) Does diet culture hurt us?	4.36	.81	Gender differences in developing eating disorders	3.57	.85
<i>family</i>	1) Monogamy vs. polygamy 2) The effect of divorce on children	4.93	.27	Moving out from home	4.92	.66
<i>food</i>				Vegan vs. non-vegan diets	4.22	.66
overall means		4.44	.75		4.18	1.13

This result may sound surprising because family is both a highly sensitive and frequent topic, which appears in almost every coursebook in some form. One explanation is that in both groups, the chosen controversial topics either offered a new take on the theme (monogamy vs. polygamy) or were highly relevant for the age group (moving out from home), so the students deemed the discussions meaningful and informative (Divéki 2024; Nelson 2015; Tekin 2011).

In Group A, apart from environmental issues, all other topics were mentioned as someone's favorite (family (N=6), education (N=2), trans athletes (N=2), abortion (N=2), beauty culture (N=2) and gender issues (N=1)), while in Group B, all the topics were marked as a favorite by at least one student (technology in education (N=2), veganism (N=1), eating disorders (N=1); moving out from home (N=1), recycling (N=1), zoos (N=1) and gender pay gap (N=1)). Thus, we can confidently state that the selected topics catered to students' interests, which is rather fortunate, as the students were involved in the selection process.

The students were asked both in the feedback sheets and in the end-of-the-course feedback what they liked and disliked about the discussions. In many cases, just as already highlighted above, they felt that the "topic was close to [their] hearts" (#A12), or relevant to their lives in some way.

- (1) I liked that it was something that everyone experienced one way or another, so we all had opinions (even if we didn't express them). (#A4 on education)
- (2) It was really my topic, I was in my element today. Last week, I was very excited about this class. I loved both the feminism and the LGBTQ+ debate part of the class. (#A8 on society)
- (3) I was excited to discuss topics that were relevant for me and my peers. (#B4)
- (4) I liked that we could choose the topic, and this way, everyone talked about something they found interesting. (#B5)

This finding about the quality of the topic is in line with the empirical findings of Divéki (2024), Nelson (2015), and Tekin (2011) and with the CI literature, which suggests that dealing with meaningful content that caters to their interests both mentally and emotionally engages the students, motivates them to contribute to the discussions and use the language if they perceive the topic caters to their interests (Oxfam 2018; Starkey 2005). The students also seemed to appreciate that they learned new information from others and that, through the discussions, they could engage with new perspectives. The students commented that engaging in CI discussions allowed them to broaden their horizons, think about angles of the topics they would have never thought of, and sometimes even "think outside the box" (#A15), which is also in concert with the findings of Divéki (2024), Nelson (2015) and Tekin (2011).

- (5) I was happily surprised by how many great ideas were presented during the discussions. (#A4)

- (6) It was sad to hear about some facts, but it was nice to hear about this topic as I wouldn't often educate myself on this. (#B8)
- (7) I liked that the others came up with arguments about university [education]. I was so focused on smaller children that I completely forgot about higher education. (#A8 on free education)

Interestingly, some students enjoyed discussions more where there were disagreements (“I liked the debate at the end, maybe it would be better if we had opposing opinions” (#A7), “I liked that we have different views about the topic, so we could have very interesting discussions” (#A13)), while others enjoyed being on the same page with their peers (“I liked that most of us agreed, but also we were able to raise different opinions under the umbrella of agreement” (#A2), “I felt good discussing my viewpoints because it has met very similar ones on a controversial topic” (#B7).

Another recurrent theme in the answers about why they liked a discussion concerned its format. Many of the students in Group A disclosed reservations about expressing their views “in front of 15 other people” (#A13) and wrote that they were less anxious when they could work in smaller groups. Thus, some of them preferred debate formats that involved small group work (e.g. a speed dating debate format, where they had to have a short debate in three minutes, and then have another short debate with another person, or the role-play activity on abortion, where they had to act out a discussion between pro-choice and pro-life supporters in fours); however, many of them preferred the “big debates,” such as the fishbowl debate on corporate vs. individual responsibility or the Jubilee-style discussion on relationships (inspired by the Jubilee – Middle Ground series on YouTube). This is an inherent language teaching issue, which could be explained by both individual differences and classroom dynamics, and it only seems natural that there will be differences in students' work mode preferences (Scrivener 2015). Nevertheless, for teachers, this implies that it is crucial to vary the activity formats and work modes so that each student can work in their preferred way as frequently as possible.

In Group A, students also mentioned the atmosphere and the group in their answers. They were grateful for the “safe space” (#A11), the fact that “everyone was respectful” (#A16), and the ways they were “encouraged to speak” (#A12). From their answers, it seems evident that it was important for them how they managed to discuss these matters as a group: “I really liked how we were thinking critically together. It was so encouraging to see. I love to discuss issues like this with our class” (#A7). This attitude is understandable for two reasons. First, as has been shown in the literature (Council of Europe 2020; Tony Blair Institute for Global Change 2017), creating the optimal environment for dealing with CIs is of utmost importance, and the students reflected on that. Second, as the semester progressed, the students bonded, and interpersonal relationships became more important for them.

The students also shared some factors that contributed to them not enjoying the discussions that much. It became apparent that discussions about irrelevant, very unfamiliar, or even too-talked-about, cliché topics left them uninterested; they preferred the ones that taught them new information or delved into new angles on familiar issues (Tekin 2011; Nelson 2015; Divéki 2024). In one student's words: "I'm not very familiar with the topic of technology, so sometimes I felt like I can't contribute as much to the discussions as I would want to" (#A16). Another student asserted: "It's a very controversial topic, but I think we're talking about it too much, so it wasn't interesting for me" (#B6 on veganism).

In some cases, however, the students found the topics too challenging and sensitive to talk about with their peers. Interestingly, in both groups, these comments were put forward in connection with the topic of the body. As a Group A student put it after the discussion on eating disorders and abortion, "these were heavy topics, I did not like the weight of the questions" (#A6). In group B, a student also commented on the sensitivity of issues around the body: "As it is such a sensitive topic, it might have been good if some trigger warnings were used" (#B3). Naturally, it is important to know one's group before dealing with a sensitive issue, but even then, it is difficult to predict whether such topics will push a button or not. As Karam (2021) notes, "some topics remain a source of discomfort and ambivalence" (p. 14), but even if they do, it does not mean they have no place in the classroom. This is why it would be useful to normalize controversy in the classroom and improve students' self-awareness, self-management, and conflict-resolution strategies to be able to handle their triggers better.

The participants also expressed frustration about having to express their views in front of other people, and having to do so in English. Nevertheless, these instances show that the students were self-aware, and managed to reflect on the fact that they still needed to work on their language skills and their stage fright.

- (8) It also created stress in me when I couldn't express myself properly, so I have to work on my speaking skills (#A16)
- (9) Talking in front of the whole group put me out of my comfort zone (#A7)
- (10) I didn't dare to speak up because I know that I couldn't have transferred my points clearly so that the others could see them the way I do. (#A3)

Finally, to reveal their attitudes, the students were asked about their feelings in connection with CI discussions. In both groups, the participants confessed and showed a wide range of feelings during the lessons. In the beginning, Group A students seemed rather timid and nervous when they had to speak up, which also figured in their written responses in the feedback. Nevertheless, they used words like uncomfortable, nervous, stressed, and overwhelmed more often in the first lessons than on later occasions. Student A16 framed this change as follows: "The discussions at first made me very uncomfortable; it was hard to speak up and share

my thoughts. Then, it became a bit better, and I started to feel less intimidated by the topics. However, my discomfort in this situation did not disappear, but these discussions helped me to step out of my comfort zone and practice.” This gradual change was more easily noticeable in Group A’s answers, as all the occasions were dedicated to discussions on CI. Table 3 shows the number of times each feeling was expressed in the participants’ feedback.

Table 3. The students’ feelings about the CI discussions

Feeling	Number of occurrences
good	34
comfortable	13
excited	12
included	12
uncomfortable	11
confident	9
interested	8
nervous	7
open-minded	5
relaxed	4
informed	3
motivated	3
brave	2
anxious	2
sad	2
curious	2
enlightened	2
thoughtful	2
neutral	2
awkward	2

As can be seen from Table 3, the most used adjectives in both the lesson feedback and the end-of-the-course feedback were “good,” “comfortable,” and “excited,” which all reflect positive feelings. There were also some instances when the students felt uncomfortable, nervous, or even sad at times, but these experiences were likely balanced out by the many positive feelings. Finally, below are listed a few quotes from the students to illustrate in more detail how they felt about the discussions:

(11) I had a great and respectful discussion with my partner and the group I was in; the conversation was really interesting and made me feel safe and heard. (#A6)

- (12) Neutral because I promised myself long ago not to care about this topic to prevent myself from unwanted anger, sadness, and, most importantly, helplessness. (#B11)
- (13) In the beginning, I was nervous to share my opinion, but as we progressed, and got to know each other, I felt more and more confident to talk. I even surprised myself, I never would've thought I would be able to discuss so many different topics. (#A4)

Overall, the students reacted to the discussions on CIs positively: they mostly liked the discussions, and they displayed a wide variety of feelings during them, mostly dominated by positive emotions. From an SEL perspective, it seems useful for students to have the opportunity to reflect on CI discussions so that they become aware of these feelings and learn strategies to contribute efficiently to future discussions without turning them into shouting matches.

4.2. RQ2: What do second-year English majors think about the development of their SEL skills while engaging with controversial topics in their language development seminars?

In answering RQ2, students were asked to decide whether each discussion developed any of the five domains of SEL as defined by CASEL. The results show that the students found all the topics and discussions useful in terms of SEL. Table 4 presents each SEL domain and those topics that were deemed to develop each component the most. The majority of Group A thought that numerous topics improved all five domains: technology, body, family, society, and media. Interestingly, the students thought that every topic they had had throughout the semester developed four components of SEL (i.e. self-awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness). Based on the students' responses, self-management was still addressed throughout the semester, but only by five out of the eight topics. Group B's responses are strikingly different from those of Group A. There was only one topic that developed the majority of SEL domains: food (vegan vs. non-vegan diets). The most improved domain was deemed to be social awareness; on the other hand, relationship skills was the most neglected area, according to the students.

As can be seen in Table 4, SEL skills were more in the focus of Course A than B, according to the students. This stark contrast may be explained by the fact that while Course A was dedicated to controversial issues, and each lesson (i.e. the discussion as well as the lesson materials) was built on an issue, Course B included both controversial and non-controversial (i.e. less emotionally-charged) issues. Moreover, the discussions served as supplementary tasks, and they were not strictly connected to the main focus of the lessons. Therefore, while the students in Group A provided feedback on the whole lesson, the students in Group B reflected solely on the discussions, led by their peers.

Table 4. The students' opinions on SEL throughout the semester

	Group A	Group B
self-awareness	technology (yes: 8; no: 1) body (yes: 10; no: 1) family (yes: 14; no: 0) society (yes: 7; no: 1) environment (yes: 14; no: 2) society (yes: 7; no: 1)	body (yes: 12; no: 2) environment (yes: 8; no: 3) food (yes: 8; no: 1)
	environment (yes: 14; no: 2) sports (yes: 15; no: 1) education (yes: 14; no: 1) media (yes: 10; no: 0)	
self-management	technology (yes: 7; no: 2) body (yes: 10; no: 1) family (yes: 11; no: 3) society (yes: 6; no: 2) media (yes: 7; no: 3)	food (yes: 7; no: 2)
responsible decision-making	technology (yes: 8; no: 1) body (yes: 11; no: 0) family (yes: 12; no: 2) society (yes: 7; no: 1) environment (yes: 14; no: 2) sports (yes: 15; no: 1) education (yes: 13; no: 2) media (yes: 9; no: 1)	technology (yes: 9; no: 1) family (yes: 11; no: 1) environment (yes: 11; no: 0) food (yes: 8; no: 1)
relationship skills	technology (yes: 8; no: 1) body (yes: 9; no: 2) family (yes: 14; no: 0) society (yes: 8; no: 0) environment (yes: 14; no: 2) sports (yes: 16; no: 0) education (yes: 12; no: 3) media (yes: 10; no: 0)	
social awareness	technology (yes: 9; no: 0) body (yes: 10; no: 1) family (yes: 14; no: 0) society (yes: 8; no: 0) environment (yes: 14; no: 2) sports (yes: 16; no: 0) education (yes: 12; no: 3) media (yes: 9; no: 1)	body (yes: 12; no: 2) environment – recycling (yes: 8; no: 3) food (yes: 8; no: 1) environment – zoos (yes: 8; no: 1) sports (yes: 12; no: 1)

Regarding the end-of-the-semester feedback, the results show that most students thought that their SEL skills had been developed during the courses, especially those pertaining to self-awareness, responsible decision-making and

social awareness (Table 5). In the case of these three domains, the two groups unanimously agreed. The high scores of self-awareness and social awareness align with the results of previous research (Bai and Wang 2021).

Table 5. The students' opinions on SEL skills development at the end of the semester

	Group A (N=15)	Group B (N=9)
self-awareness	yes: 15	yes: 9
self-management	yes: 14 no: 1	yes: 6 no: 3
responsible decision-making	yes: 15	yes: 9
relationship skills	yes: 14 no: 1	yes: 6 no: 3
social awareness	yes: 15	yes: 9

Interestingly, while the students' responses in Group A were consistent, some inconsistencies can be pointed out in Group B. While the students did not think that their relationship skills improved throughout the semester (Table 4), some changed their opinions about it at the end of the semester (Table 5). Also, the students referred to the development of their relationship skills in the open-ended section of the feedback. Thus, it may be implied that the students did not understand completely the skills that belong to this SEL domain.

Concerning the students' responses to the open-ended questions, it can be seen that awareness was a pivotal area in both courses, albeit in different ways. In Group A, some students reflected on self-awareness. They perceived and addressed their own feelings, and they were critical of themselves, as shown in the following example: "... there are topics that trigger me in a very personal level, and it is hard for me to talk about them" (#A3). In Group B, self-awareness was also addressed in the feedback, but only when the topic was highly relevant and relatable to the group (i.e. family or moving out of home). One student commented: "I felt like I am finally being heard about problems I never spoke about before" (#B4).

Social awareness was also addressed in the students' comments, which, in some cases, resulted in recognizing the importance of taking action, as shown in the following two comments. The first example shows that some students had an epiphany after discussing a topic and realized they needed to educate themselves more on certain issues: "I learned that I don't know a lot about privacy laws and things that are in connection with my data, so I would really like to look more deeply into it" (#A5). The second comment is an example of becoming aware of severe issues, which was mentioned by many students in both groups. Moreover, it shows that some students also realized the importance of paying attention to each

other as well as acting when needed: "... [M]any people can suffer from some kind of eating disorder without even realizing it, so it is important to take action when we notice even the smallest signs" (#B4).

The students in both groups mentioned that they have acquired new information, which also enables them to make responsible decisions. For instance, by learning about artificial intelligence (AI), they realized that although they should be aware of its dangers, they should not avoid it completely (Group B). Apart from factual information, the students also practiced critical thinking skills that will help them make decisions. For example, as a student put it: "... before believing anything, we should question it first, whether it's true or not" (#A11).

Relationship skills were addressed more in Group A. Numerous students mentioned certain communication and debating skills they practiced throughout the course. They also reflected on the importance of listening to each other and respecting others' opinions, as shown in this comment: "... other people see things very differently than me, but we can stay respectful throughout the whole discussion" (#A12). Skills connected to another domain, namely self-management, were also mentioned in the debates in Course A. For example, a student emphasized the importance of not getting offended in a debate; instead, one should focus on the intent behind the thoughts (#A15). Since there were debates in Group A, the frequent comments on debating skills as well as attitude are not surprising. Although relationship skills were not mentioned in the feedback provided after each discussion in Group B (see Table 4 above), this domain was addressed in the final feedback forms. The students did not reflect on particular skills, but they referred to the fact that they had talked and worked on projects with each other.

The students' responses show that Course A focused more on SEL domains than Course B. The participants were able to reflect more on the relation between the course content and SEL; they could also provide more details as the whole lesson (i.e. the teacher input and the discussion) was built on one topic. Meanwhile, in the case of Course B, the different structure resulted in fewer details and more general responses relating to SEL than in Course A. Nevertheless, social awareness was a dominant domain in both cases: the students thought that most topics improved their skills related to social awareness, followed by those of responsible decision-making and self-awareness.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In our study, we endeavored to explore how SEL can be incorporated into an English language course in the Hungarian university context. More specifically, we intended to explore how discussions on CIs can develop students' skills connected to the five domains of SEL. Course A focused entirely on CI; in Course B, the students presented a CI and led a discussion based on their presentation. Therefore,

the present study explored two ways of integrating SEL: as the main component of a course (Course A) and as a supplementary component (Course B).

Concerning research question 1 (*What are the perspectives of second-year English majors on controversial discussions in their language development seminars?*), it became apparent from the data that students enjoyed the topics discussed during the semester. The findings of our study are consistent with previous research done by Gimenez and Metliss (2011), Divéki (2024), Divéki and Pereszlényi (2021), Nelson (2015), and Tekin (2011), who also observed that students tend to mostly enjoy dealing with controversy. The participants revealed that two main factors influenced the extent to which they liked a controversial topic: its relevance and novelty (i.e. whether they learned new information). These two factors were also emphasized in the students' responses regarding the factors they did not like, as they highlighted feeling uninterested when the topic was irrelevant or clichéd. These results match those observed by Divéki (2024) and also have important pedagogical implications for both in-service and pre-service teacher training.

We propose that EFL teachers should learn how to select relevant topics for in-class discussions and approach them in novel ways so that their students find the learning value in each lesson and become fully engaged. One technique that may prove useful is asking the students themselves: if we involve students in the co-creation of the course (Karam 2021) by letting them select some of the topics, we can map and cater to their interests and we create a learning atmosphere where they feel ownership of the course content, thereby developing their responsible decision-making skills. In our study, it was also revealed that the atmosphere, the group, and the activity formats contribute to students' enjoyment of discussions on these topics. Creating a safe space for such discussions seems to be a prerequisite, and the participants underscored the importance of feeling safe and heard to be able to formulate opinions on heavy issues.

Finally, the participants reported feeling a wide range of emotions during these classes. Observably, the positive ones were more numerous, as the students were able to phrase their emotions and respond to their peers' feelings carefully, which is an essential attribute of SEL-informed classrooms (Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba 2021). Therefore, we deemed the course successful in developing SEL skills and hopefully conducive to improving student well-being (Pentón Herrera 2024). Nevertheless, it must be noted that when it comes to dealing with CIs, some discomfort is indeed unavoidable (Karam 2021); thus, part of the preparation for complex discussions lies in preparing students to deal with conflicting emotions, i.e. nurturing their self-management skills. The most important implication for teacher education is thereby systematically including contentious issues in the syllabi, preparing the terrain for complex discussions by creating safe spaces, enabling trainees to face their own biases and emotional responses, and finally, empowering them with techniques to successfully deal with complex topics in the classroom and to create SEL-informed classes.

In response to research question two (*What do second-year English majors think about the development of their SEL skills while engaging with controversial topics in their language development seminars?*), we concluded that SEL competencies were improved to some extent during the study. The students perceived that their self-awareness and social awareness skills were developed the most, similar to Bai and Wang's study (2021). When it comes to dealing with controversy, these skills are of utmost importance, as they allow students to: (1) be able to formulate opinions, (2) be able to identify where they stand on issues, (3) inspect and critically examine their values (Pentón Herrera 2019; Karam, 2021), (4) recognize their social and cultural identity, (5) examine their biases, and express their views, (6) take others' perspectives, and (7) show empathy and compassion and state their opinion in a way which conforms to social norms.

The courses were purposefully designed to give space to participants to practice the aforementioned skills, so it is quite fortunate that the students felt that these skills were effectively developed. Self-management and relationship skills were the two domains that were not the focus of the course, according to the students; nevertheless, these domains were mentioned in the end-of-the-course feedback. As these two skills are also vital when it comes to dealing with controversy, further research directions could include examining in detail how to develop these skills so that students recognize their development. Other research directions could involve experimental classroom studies to enable researchers to compare the development of these skills between different student groups. Our final suggestion is to examine other factors impacting SEL skills development in such designs, more specifically, the teacher's and the group's roles.

The present article explored the possibilities of including SEL in the EFL classroom by dealing with CIs and their effects on students' skills. The main implication is that designing university language courses with dual aims is possible, and creating a syllabus centering on controversial issues with SEL aims is worthwhile. Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly necessary. Teachers need to equip their students with skills and strategies that make them responsible and successful individuals in their communities as well as in their future (Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba 2021; Martínez-Alba and Pentón Herrera 2023). With this aim in mind, the combination of SEL and controversial issues is one option that teachers can choose: as shown in the present article. It is hoped that the results presented in this article contribute to the discussion of SEL practices and provide further support for the need for SEL in education. Despite the topicality of SEL, there is a dearth of research in Hungary, especially in terms of empirical investigations. Therefore, it is hoped that the present article will inspire fellow researchers to explore the possibilities SEL entails in the Hungarian educational context.

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