Incorporating social and emotional learning strategies among ESL speakers of higher education in Malaysia

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Abstract

Public speaking is a form of oratory performance presented among a group of audience. Most second language learners often struggle with language anxiety, particularly when placed in situations where they become the center of attention. Emotions such as anxiety tend to cripple their communication. This study attempts to explore the challenges faced by second language learners in an institution of higher learning in Malaysia. The study employs the theory of Social and Emotional Learning Strategies (CASEL, 2019) to discover students' speaking anxieties. The study incorporates a qualitative approach using thematic analysis with a total of ten participants who were purposively selected to participate in this study. The findings of the study revealed that these learners are faced with incessant nervousness and fear when speaking in public. Exposure to Social and Emotional Learning Strategies has positively improved students' oral communication through the incorporation of self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making. The findings of this study are useful in assisting English language educators and curriculum designers in instilling social and emotional learning strategies among learners to alleviate negative emotions that stem from the fear of public speaking to bolster confidence among speakers of second language learners.

Keywords: Social and emotional learning strategies, language anxiety, second language, learners.

INTRODUCTION

English is the most common language used in workplace interactions to facilitate communication and performance across the world (Megat et al. 2020). Its role in coordinating tasks through the medium of communication has mandated English the as the corporate across the world (Devis-Rozental & Farquharson, 2020). English proficiency is crucial in securing job employability and to communicate effectively in work-related activities. Studies show that talents contribute only 15% towards one's success while 85% is accounted for spoken skills (Dash et al. 2020). It is because several contributing factors influence graduates' employability opportunities and having a strong command of the spoken skill serves as an edge in landing a job. A study conducted by Cheong et al. (2016), highlighted that employers in the private sector preferred hiring graduates from transnational private universities since they have a better command of English. Moreover, the lack of English proficiency and communication skills graduates attribute to unemployability among graduates deeming them incapable of using the language functionally well (Dzulkifly, 2018). Realizing the importance of oral communication, it is vital to prioritize initiatives in developing students' soft skills to make them more ready for the job market in the context of English language learning.

Studies show that having language anxiety is a major source that impacts learners' second language learning and their overall well-being including one's employability opportunities (Hamdzah, Subramaniam, Abidin, & Hassan, 2020; Kruk, 2020). Second language learners in higher education experience 'glossophobia' a term used to depict fear of public speaking and these mixed feelings are associated with language anxiety (Hancock, 2010, MacIntyre, 2017). Many varying terms are interchangeably used to denote language anxiety in oral presentations such as stage fright, communication apprehension, and speaking anxiety experienced by second language learners (Kostić-Bobanović, 2020; Bodie, 2010). Therefore, the role of social and emotional learning in second language learning has garnered interest among researchers in the past two decades (Alghorbany & Hamzah, 2020). Social-emotional competence is defined as the capacity to interact with others while controlling one's emotions for improved management (CASEL, 2019; MacIntyre, 2017). Ahmed et al. (2020) noted that the recent trend has shifted towards an 'affective turn' particularly among learners and educators in the field of second language learning when addressing language anxiety. It is because when learners are particularly trained with social and emotional learning strategies, they could better manage their anxieties, particularly in English-speaking classrooms.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

A majority of language learners experience social and emotional disturbances when using a second language. Students who undergo language anxiety have disrupted linguistic confidence which negatively affects students' communication skills. Findings show that learners with weak language proficiency suffer from anxiety that underestimates the quality of their second language mastery (Zarrinabadi et al. 2021; MacIntyre, 2017). A study conducted by Chen et al. (2021) highlighted that 60% of Chinese undergraduate English learners experience emotional disturbances when presenting using English in their classroom.

Students have far more anxiety when performing speaking tasks than when performing reading tasks (Muhammad, 2019). These students exhibit symptoms of anxiety that result in panic attacks and cold sweats in situations where they are unable to speak well in public (Nur Aqilah & Aminabibi, 2019). Furthermore, students' nervousness intensifies as a result of their fear of making mistakes and being judged in front of a wide audience (Hamdzah et al. 2020; Miskam & Saidalvi, 2019). These experiences can be frightening for speakers of second language learners as it poses risks to their 'internal fears' as well as their 'external fear' of being the center of attention (LeFebvre et al., 2018).

Therefore, social and emotional competence is a critical component that should be integrated into addressing the challenges faced by students in the context of second language learning. It is because with social and emotional learning learners' self-confidence is bolstered and their anxieties could be managed strategically. However, failing to accurately understand students' language anxiety puts educators, practitioners, and researchers at risk as they will never fully understand how to integrate social and emotional strategies learning in a second language-speaking classroom. The study will assist educators to build better speaking experience in managing language anxiety through the integration of social and emotional learning strategies, particularly among English language learners. Hence, educators of the second language could guide learners in overcoming language anxiety and its potential causes that could be overlooked previously.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

According to Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the well-known five SEL strategies also called the "CASEL wheel", are vital to a person's development and education (Restad & Mølstad, 2020). The first SEL strategy is self-awareness, it is the ability to detect a person's emotions and

one's effect on behavior, as well as the ability to find their strengths and weaknesses (CASEL, 2019). The second strategy of SEL refers to self-management, which relates to the ability to control emotions and behaviors as well as manage stress (CASEL, 2019). The third strategy refers to social awareness, it shows one's ability to empathize with others and view various perspectives from different points of view (CASEL, 2019). The fourth strategy refers to relationship skills, it requires the willingness to listen to others and ask for help from others when needed, and clearly express one's feelings (CASEL, 2019). Also, responsible decision-making is the final strategy that allows an individual to make constructive decisions as well as consider the strengths and weaknesses of one's actions (CASEL, 2019).

Therefore, promoting SEL strategies to undergraduate second language learners is regarded as a positive approach, especially when addressing self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making as three of its five components (Jin, Dewaele, & MacIntyre, 2021). Student's social and emotional competence could be trained meaningfully in their learning processes (Devis-Rozental & Farquharson, 2020). Consequently, integrating the concept of SEL strategies in the context of English as a Second language (ESL) study will not only help undergraduates to achieve better performance in the subject of English-speaking classroom but also give curricula new inspiration for integrating positive education principles in teaching and learning.

Second Language Anxiety

MacIntyre (2017) states that Second Language Anxiety (SLA) is triggered while a person is trying to learn or use a second language. The role of this current emotions research in the field of second language acquisition has been a dominant trend since the beginning of this century (Dawaele & Li, 2020; Prior, 2019). Furthermore, countries teaching English as Second Language argue that language anxiety has a negative influence on students so that they have achieved lower performance in ESL,

including Malaysia (Miskam & Saidalvi, 2019). More importantly, among the four skills of English language proficiency, speaking skills arouses a majority of language anxiety compared with listening, reading, and writing skills (Cheng, 2017). Researchers have tried to use Web-based tools and language learning websites to relieve learners' speaking anxiety, however, the result did not have a significant change in overcoming their foreign language speaking anxiety (Bashori, Van Hout, Strik & Cucchiarini, 2020). Consequently, the researcher proposed that using a qualitative method would allow students to share their anxiety openly with their peers and teachers in English-speaking classrooms. This will provide teachers with more explicit guidelines to design their courses and help students to overcome their fear of public speaking.

Social Emotional Learning Strategies

SEL ideas can be used in a variety of ways, including the ones listed by Mok (2019) which are by adopting specific SEL curricula, incorporating SEL activities into the conventional academic curricula such as literacy and history, strengthening SEL skills as part of an informal curriculum and forging a strong and meaningful partnership between school–family–community. There is evidence that the issue of adaptability and fidelity is connected to program results, therefore it must be addressed. Fidelity to program processes has been shown to lead to higher outcomes; on the other hand, poor fidelity leads to decreased efficacy (Elliott & Mihalic, 2004). As such, this present study aims to understand speaking challenges faced by second language learners and to discover effective learning strategies related to social and emotional learning among second language learners.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach to examining undergraduates' language anxieties in an English-speaking classroom. This study involves undergraduate students who are between 19-23 years old, and currently enrolled in the course 'English for Oral Speaking' at a

local higher learning institution. The participants of the study will involve students who have scored band 3 and below in their MUET examination. This study will employ a purposive sampling technique as students will be purposely selected to be part of the study.

Focus group interviews

The Focus group interview technique will be employed to conduct in-depth group interviews among the participants of the study. Focus groups aim to obtain information related to their feelings on the issues discussed between the groups of individuals. A total of twelve students will be participating in this study with six participants placed in a group (Kruger & Casey, 2000). This focus group interview aims to identify challenges faced by students when it comes to speaking in a second language. Table 1 describes the procedures involved in the focus group interview.

Table 1 The procedure of Focus Group Interviews

Steps	Preparation
1	To moderate the discussion, the facilitator will ensure that the setting online is conducive for the participants. The participants will be briefed on the purpose of the focus group interview and that their participation is voluntary. All information will be kept confidential and only used for the research.
2	Welcome the participants to their respective groups. The purpose of conducting the focus group interview was explained. In terms of ethical consideration, all information and particulars of the participants' remained confidential. Participants will be informed that the session will be recorded for transcription before the discussion.
3	Questions will be read out and participants will probe further to discuss challenges that caused them anxiety when speaking in English.
4	Students will be given a few minutes to wrap up the discussion and final words will be conveyed before closing the discussion.
5	The final phase involved analyzing and interpreting the data. Data will be transcribed based on emerging themes in this phase. The audio recordings will be transcribed for referencing and cross-checking from the recorded responses using note-taking. Results will then be interpreted from the data.

Reflective Writing

A reflective writing method will be employed where the participants will reflect on their feelings and how they have overcome speaking challenges using social and emotional strategies. The reflective notes are recording that document how these students feel after delivering their presentations when employing social and emotional learning strategies (Gilroy, et al., 2004). Before that, the instructors will incorporate direct instructions as part of their lessons using social and emotional learning strategies. Participants will be taught to incorporate strategies as tools when delivering presentations. Topics will then be assigned to the participants to deliver a presentation. Participants will be asked to reflect on the strategies that worked for them.

Questions related to reflective writing are:

1. How did you feel before, during, and after your oral presentation?

2. To what extent were the social and emotional learning strategies employed in your presentation successful?

The researchers will be adapting feedback from a study conducted by Stang and Wells (2021) who studied the effects of social-emotional learning strategies on promoting positive behavior among their learners. Students will be given a consent form to participate in this study and pseudonyms will be employed to protect their identities to maintain anonymity. To establish the trustworthiness of the data, inter-rater reliability will be taken into consideration to tackle the interpreter's biases during the process of data interpretation. The qualitative data will be triangulated merging both the data from focus group interviews and reflective writing to corroborate the findings of the study.

A thematic analysis will be analyzed using Atlas. ti as a methodological tool to identify, analyze, organize, describe, and report themes that emerge from these data (Braune & Clarke, 2006). Codes will be assigned to convey descriptive and inferential information. After the processing of data, coding categories will be created before initial themes are generated. These themes will be evaluated by the inter-raters before establishing the confirmed themes. The emerging patterns will provide an understanding of the challenges as well as the strategies employed whether successful or not from the participants of the study.

IMPLEMENTATION AND INTEGRATION OF TECHNOLOGY

The instructors taught weekly Social and Emotional Learning Strategies (SEL) from the CASEL (2019) framework to the participants of the study. A total of three lessons were allocated to address three components of CASEL's framework as an intervention for the subject of 'English for Oral Speaking'. The domains of self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness were used as guides in the SEL lessons. The instructors introduced the concept of SEL to the participants of the study using PowerPoint slides on Google Meet. Each introduction of the concept lasted about 45 minutes and students were given fifteen minutes to run a question-and-answer session for each lesson. During the three lessons that consisted of an hour each, students were introduced to the concepts of social and emotional learning strategies namely, self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision making.

Lesson 1: Self-Awareness

Students were asked to identify their strengths and weaknesses about public speaking. This lesson aims to understand feelings and the connections between feelings, thoughts, and actions. This reflection was conducted for about 40 minutes where students were encouraged to be honest and acknowledge both the negative and positive aspects of themselves.

Lesson 2: Self-Management

In this lesson, students were introduced to the concept of self-management. The domain of self-management emphasizes one's ability to regulate thoughts and emotions. As such based on last week's input, students were asked to undertake a realistic evaluation of themselves in order to provide action plans to address their weaknesses in public speaking. In other words, students reflected on the Circle of Thoughts, Acts, and Feelings that presupposes those positive actions result to positive feelings.

Lesson 3: Responsibly Decision Making

In this lesson, the students were introduced to the concept of making decisions responsibly which allows them to be accountable for their actions. The continuum of lessons 1 and 2 would probe students to make ethical and sound judgments in the planning, and speech delivery stages. Therefore, students have to understand what is required of them in completing the speaking tasks and make responsible choices for students to successfully present their assigned topics using the strategies. In this lesson, students were given three topics and they could choose any one of the following to prepare and deliver a speaking presentation virtually. They were given 10 minutes to present the topic. Students were to incorporate these strategies in their public speaking. After their respective presentations, participants were asked to write a short reflection on their experiences in using SEL strategies.

Figure 1 Example of Self-Awareness

Figure 2 Example of Responsible Decision Making
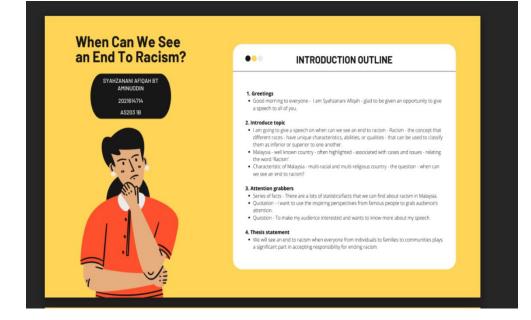
Figure 3 Example of Self-Management

FINDINGS

Demographic Characteristics

Figure 4 Demographic Characteristics: gender and state
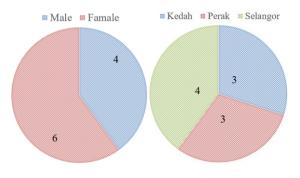
Figure 4 below shows the demographic details of the participants of the study. The total number of participants is ten students consisting of 4 males and 6 female students. These students are from Kedah (3), Perak (4), and Selangor (3) who are between the age of 19-23 years.

The findings of the study are shown using thematic analysis as shown below.
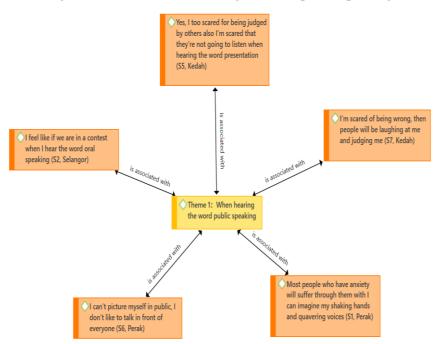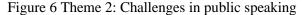
Figure 5 Theme 1: When hearing the word public speaking

The findings of the study showed that participants reported that they often felt 'anxious' when hearing the word public presentation. Anxiety is a common feeling that students experience, and these feelings become even more intense because they felt that they have to gain validation from their audience to the extent that the emotions felt are similar to going to a competition. Also, it was noted that these participants were afraid of the reactions from the audience, they were more 'scared' of being 'wrong', 'laughed', and 'judged' during their oral presentations. The word 'scared' has been repetitively used and is associated with being judged when the word presentation is being rehashed in their minds. Moreover, some even question if public speaking benefits students as they do not see the benefits and purpose of presenting in public. Therefore, feelings of being afraid and judged are the most repeated expressions to denote uneasiness and distressing emotions during presentations.

Figure 6 Theme 2: Challenges in public speaking
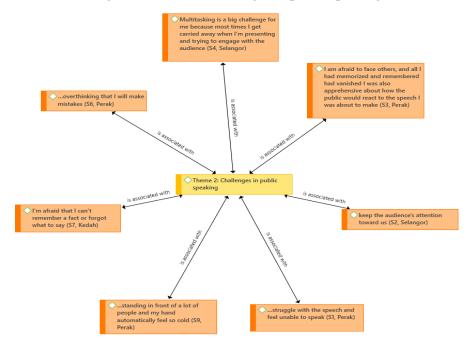
Figure 6 shows the theme of challenges showed the types of challenges faced by students in public speaking. The findings from the data showed that students struggled with using the English language which affected the ability to speak. Apart from that, students also have difficulties keeping the audience engaged throughout the presentation. Response from a student highlighted that one of the challenges encountered was 'multitasking' as in going back and forth to the slides and interacting with the audience in a presentation. Therefore, technical difficulties as well as challenges in keeping the audience engaged are also part of the difficulties faced by students. Besides that, emotions such as overthinking, afraid of standing before the public, and one's inability to recall information when delivering a presentation are some of the threats felt during a presentation.
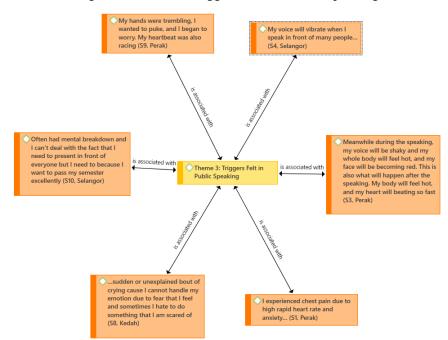
Figure 7 Theme 3: Triggers Felt in Public Speaking

Figure 7 highlights the theme of triggers emerged from the data showing that the participants were physically triggered before, during, and after their presentations. These experiences are unpleasant as one of the participants indicated that 'the memories would haunt even after their presentation was over. The physical triggers felt by these students are vibrating voices which cause choke for words coupled with racing heart palpitations. Apart from that, cold hands, sweaty palms, and trembling legs were the physical triggers and experiences felt by the participants. Due to heightened stress levels, students also undergo episodes of crying and vomiting as part of the anxieties felt by these students when it comes to public speaking. Findings also indicate that these experiences could cause mental breakdown due to the fear of speaking in public, however, students are aware that they would still have to go through the process to complete their semester well.
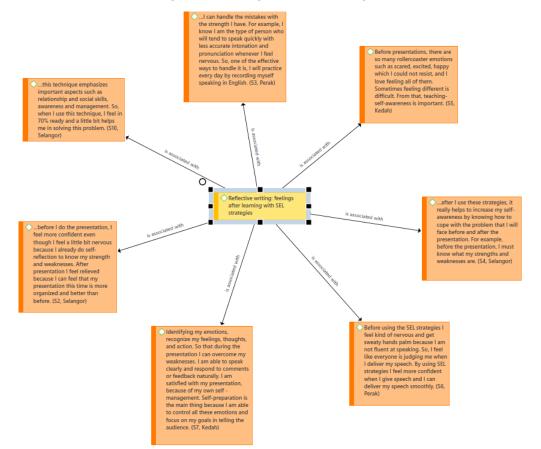
Figure 8 Learning with SEL Strategies

Figure 8 depicts the findings from reflective writing showed that the participants were able to employ these strategies in public speaking. For instance, a reflection from a participant noted that these strategies particularly self-awareness and self-management strategies enabled students to feel more relaxed and they were able to control their anxiety compared to previous presentations where this student was feeling nervous. The domain of self-awareness that allowed students to reflect on their strengths and weakness appeared to be helpful to students as they were able to better manage themselves in terms of organization and preparing themselves for the presentation. The findings also showed that students' confidence was further bolstered when they were better prepared as reflected by S10, Kedah, and S8 Selangor. In other words, the incorporation of these strategies also helped students to be calm and not worried about the outcome of the presentation. The responses from S7 Kedah, also showed that the emotional roller coasters were better managed to employ different strategies to silence the emotions that come from within oneself. Therefore, having self-awareness coupled with self-management are the most important strategies that helped these participants in the process of planning, managing, and delivering stages of public speaking.

Figure 9 Benefits of SEL Strategies

The findings of the study shown in Figure 9 show that students' oral communication skills during presentation improved through the incorporation of soc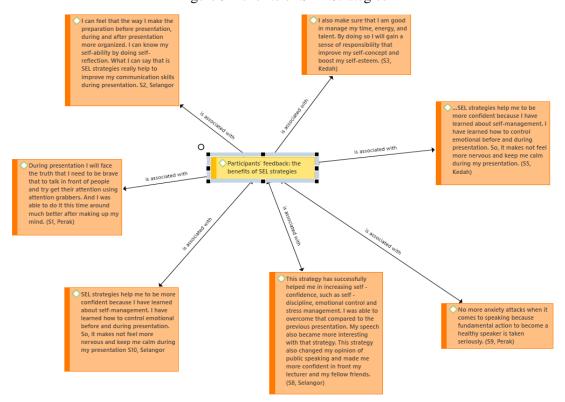ial and emotional strategies. It was reported that these students were able to take control and manage their emotions during their public speaking. For instance, responses such as I have learned how to control emotions, also helped prepare students to be mentally and physically prepared for their oral presentations. The students also noted that their motivation, confidence level, as well as self-management, skills improved upon incorporating these strategies in their presentations.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Social-emotional learning is an essential component that is useful in English language classrooms, particularly among second language learners in higher education. It is because these students usually struggle with public speaking dilemmas. The studies show that students often experience 'glossophobia' and are faced with both internal and external fears that negatively affect their oral communication. Such a conundrum should be tackled as these struggling students must be equipped with social and emotional learning strategies. The findings of the study suggest that SEL strategies are useful in empowering second language learners to be more confident and self-reliant. Past research indicated that when learners are not well supported in their language incompetency, it would impede their overall well-being and job opportunities (Zarrinabadi et al. 2021; MacIntyre, 2017). Therefore, second language learners must be taught and trained to explore the strategies related to SEL as a self-regulated learning approach.

In addressing research objective one in seeking to understand speaking challenges faced by second language learners, findings showed that students are generally afraid of public speaking. This is because these students felt scared of being judged and laughed at in public. The challenges are both physical and emotional that affect the quality of their speaking performance and ability. The findings of the study are incongruent with the findings of Nur Aqilah & Aminabibi (2019), Hamdzah et al. (2020), and Miskam & Saidalvi, (2019). LeFebvre et al.

(2018) state that such negative feelings pose serious risks to their mental well-being as their self-esteem will be affected. They also experience panic attacks, cold feet, unable to express themselves due to sweaty palms. The challenges worsen when they are mentally affected due to overthinking, feeling as though they are in for a competition. Such negative feelings defeat the purpose and understanding of the importance of public speaking. These are some of the challenges faced by the participants of this study. In addressing research objective two, the findings of the study suggest that SEL is critical in equipping students with the skills they need to succeed in public speaking. This is because the participants of the study felt empowered and supported when incorporating the strategies even before their preparation for public speaking. The incorporation of SEL strategies namely self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision making have positively influenced students' emotional regulation where they can monitor their speaking progress (CASEL, 2019). This is because language anxiety manifests in various ways as learners may experience both physical and emotional triggers in their bodies and minds. Since the associated symptoms are being felt by second language learners, many students go through such stressors unknowingly causing them to lose opportunities, self-esteem and confidence. Exposure to SEL is fundamental in today's English language classroom so that students could better manage their external pressures and manage their emotions using proven interventions. In this study, students showed engagement in their presentations which is evident in their reflection writing. Although the topics assigned to these students were new, students were able to conduct independent research and undergo the process of delivering a speech virtually and independently. This points out that, emotions could be altered when they are consciously trained and regulated.

Furthermore, the development of brain connections is another factor that necessitates the incorporation of SEL in managing anxieties. The brain only reaches its maturation at the age of 25 (CASEL,2019). Therefore, the brains of young adolescents and teenagers use the part of the brain that is 'emotional' and 'reactionary', these are the domains that are used to make decisions. Likely, most decisions that are made during this period may not utilize the rational part of the brain that is responsible for making sound judgments. As such, it becomes more incumbent to understand the connections of the brain among young adolescents who are prone to make decisions based on their emotions rather than long terms goals and adhering to sustainable practices. Therefore, it is time that students are equipped with SEL strategies that could enable them to understand their strengths and weaknesses as well as take responsible actions in executing the It gives students an understanding of who they are and why they react the way they do, as well as a path for self-improvement in becoming confident speakers and presenters using a second language as medium knowledge sharing. It is reiterated that the incorporation of SEL in public speaking has sown benefits in terms of improved organizational skills, better stress management, and improved speaking ability. However, the present study poses some limitations due to time constraints only three SEL strategies were introduced to the students who are taking the course for English for Oral speaking. Therefore, the study was unable to capture the complete essence of the model. Also, due to the smaller sampling size, the study would not be representative and generalized to a different cohort of students. For future research, it is recommended that an experimental quasi design is employed to examine the effectiveness of SEL strategies among second language learners about public speaking. English language educators could also explore and integrate this model in their lessons to create an equitable learning environment in the teaching and learning of English.

Public speaking is a transformational process as enables learners to become responsible individuals who are capable of understanding and accepting their own positive and negative sentiments as part of their developmental process. The role of social and emotional learning strategies is an important aspect that

could potentially aid second language learners' language anxiety in public speaking. This is evident through the use of social and emotional learning strategies namely self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making in molding second language learners in becoming capable public speakers presenting to larger audiences after strengthening their self-esteem and receiving training in social and emotional learning strategies. The findings of this study are useful in assisting English language educators, as well as curriculum designers in supporting second language learners in learning how to learn, building confidence through self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision making that play key skills in strengthening the foundation of the art of public speaking through the mastery of SEL. It is hoped that SEL can also be incorporated into English lessons, particularly as a means of teaching approaches and applying abilities in a variety of speaking situations such as before, during, and after stages of public speaking in tackling language anxiety among second language learners.

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