



An SEL Toolbox for the English Language Classroom

by [Yevgeniya Pukalo](#) and [Kelsey DeCamillis](#)

In the 2020–2021 school year, teachers across the world found themselves working mostly remotely from their kitchens, bedrooms, and basements; we were trying our best to keep our students engaged and focused. We faced many issues because of the trauma that impacted the emotional maturity and health of our students that bled into the 2021–2022 school year as well. At Yevgeniya’s school in Southeastern Michigan, we found there were some specific trauma-related issues that we identified as being the most prevalent in our students:

- Disconnect and lack of community
- Confusion and overwhelm
- Low motivation and focus
- Struggle with academics
- Loss of peer relationships

In addition to these general issues across the board with all students, there were many new challenges brought on in the English language classroom during the pandemic-response online learning year. Language learning was hindered in many ways in the shift to online learning, with issues ranging from access to the internet, a lack of technology, and decreased family support and motivation to practice a new language to classroom-specific problems like isolation from peers. At the same time as these obstacles presented themselves, a window of opportunity opened that allowed us to discover creative solutions to these issues and to focus on social-emotional learning (SEL) needs of students in the English language classroom. In light of the collective trauma that we were all going through, it became imminently important to focus on the emotional welfare of students and to build their SEL capacity.

After collaborating with her colleagues, Yevgeniya began to build a toolbox with various SEL strategies, using it to store favorite activities that worked for her students virtually or in-person and adding or creating new ones when old activities and strategies no longer worked. Over the course of the past 2 years in building this toolbox, she found that there were a few key categories of SEL tools:

- Tools to build rapport
- Digital tools

- Tools to assess student SEL

Following, Yevgeniya will share some of the key activities that helped promote SEL in her classroom, including a link to our 2022 TESOL International Convention & English Language Expo presentation, which contains much more of the “SEL toolbox,” complete with links and examples.

Tools to Build Rapport

Emotion Check-Ins

These tools are typically used at the beginning of a class session to provide an opportunity for connection and relationship building. They were especially helpful in trying to connect with students remotely but are easily adapted to work in-person as well.

1. Lemons and Strawberries (Ups and Downs)

Ask students to specifically share whether they had any ups (strawberries) or downs (lemons). This is a great way to start a lesson after a break or a weekend. It allows students to share and be respectful listeners. For students with emerging English proficiency, teachers can have a couple of sentence starters on the board (see Figure 1).

Note: In different cultures, different fruits hold varying cultural values. Consider opening this activity the first time with a class discussion of what fruits or other symbols might represent highs and lows for each student’s home culture.

How was your weekend? Any strawberries? Any lemons?	
	
Last weekend, I was/had/did... It was amazing/great because....	Last weekend, I was/had/did... I felt sad/upset/unhappy because....

Figure 1. Lemons and Strawberries activity and sentence frames.

2. What Squirrel Are You Today?

Have students rate their daily feelings using real-life images (see Figure 2). This is one of my favorite activities to see how everyone is doing. It doesn't require any serious preparation, but it reveals a lot about how your students are feeling. It can help you learn about your students' emotional state and, by providing more emotion options (than, e.g., just a smiley face or frowning face), you get a sense of how they are more honestly feeling.

On this squirrel scale, how do you feel today?



Recognizing Healthy Social-Emotional Behavior

Providing positive reinforcement is an important element of teaching healthy social-emotional skills. These tools encourage students to put their social-emotional skills to work by providing recognition.

Figure 2. Squirrel emotion scale chart.

3. Pineapple Award (Student of the Month)

If you “catch” students doing good deeds, they are candidates to get the Pineapple Award. This encourages students to practice their SEL skills actively, hoping to be noticed and have the chance to be recognized as the student of the month. You can give out a little gift (I have pineapple pens I found online), and student winners get their picture on the wall in recognition (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Pineapple Award recognition wall.

4. “I hope...” Notes

At the beginning of the year, have students write about their hopes to encourage a positive outlook and provide a chance for goal setting. Post them in the classroom as a reminder to students of their hopes throughout the year (see Figure 4). At the end of the school year, students revisit their hopes and then write a reflection about whether their hopes were fulfilled; this way, they recognize their past perspective and how they have grown or shifted perspective over the year. Here are some student examples; they are unedited:

- I hope to get good grades.
- I hope that i make more friends.
- I hope that I can smile every day.
- I hope to increase my English level.

It can be a good practice to have students write one academic hope and one social hope.

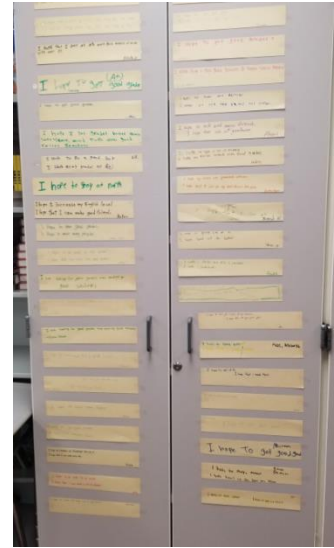


Figure 4. “I hope” notes posted in the classroom.

Tools to Build Empathy and Community

5. Scavenger Hunt

This was a popular activity with beginning English learners during virtual learning. Ask students to find an object at home, with specific characteristics, to show everybody (see Figure 5). For example, ask them to find something green or something square. It’s fast and fun. It allows English learners to practice English (vocabulary review, following directions, speaking and listening skills) while connecting with their classmates in a way that shows a glimpse into their life. This could easily be shifted to in-person by making it an assignment to bring something into school, like a show-and-tell.

A virtual learning home scavenger hunt slide. The title is 'Scavenger Hunt at Home' in a purple box. The task is 'Find something round.' in white text. Below the task, there are four images: a pizza, a wristwatch, a baseball, and the moon. To the right of these images is a digital clock showing 3:00. Below the images, the text 'Students' Responses:' is followed by three bullet points: 'This is my ball. It's round.', 'This is my brother's watch. It is round.', and 'This is a photograph of the Moon. The Moon is round.'

Figure 5. Virtual learning home scavenger hunt.

6. We Share Something in Common (Hexagon Activity)

Students fill out six triangles based on prompts/categories you give them (e.g., favorite color, languages they speak, countries they come from). Then, they work together to see any similarities. Where there are similarities, they match the edges of their hexagons up and tape them together on the back: They match and build connections with their classmates (see Figure 6). It's a crafty way for students to build empathy and see connections between one another they might not have seen before.

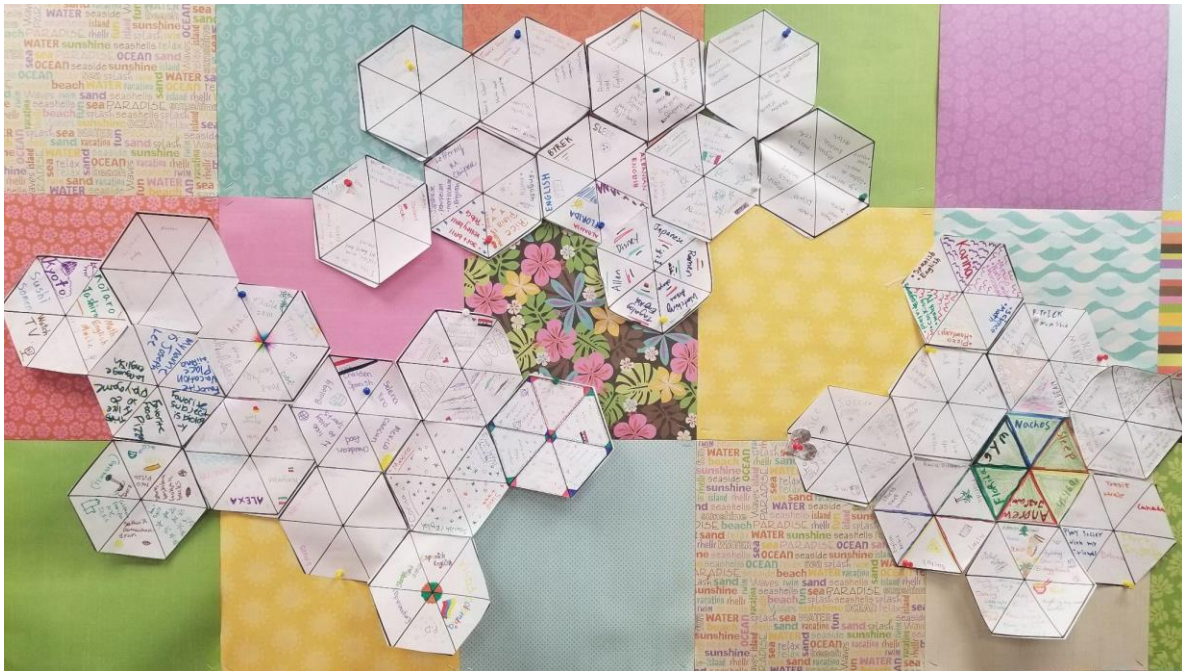


Figure 6. Hexagon activity displayed on wall.

Digital Tools for SEL

Another way to support student SEL is by using the variety of digital tools that exist. During virtual teaching and learning, everybody was overwhelmed with the amount of technology we used, and we ran into plenty of tech issues and complications—too many tabs, too many learning platforms, eventually even too many screens! After the deluge, the following tools proved to continue helping support students, building some SEL skills, and providing language practice as well.

7. Jamboard

[Jamboard](#) is a great Google whiteboard tool that keeps students engaged and allows real-time communication. Jamboard quickly became one of my favorite tools to teach content, have discussions on various topics, and do quick SEL checks. Specifically, because it can be made anonymous to the other students, learners' sense of safety in sharing on the Jamboard is increased.

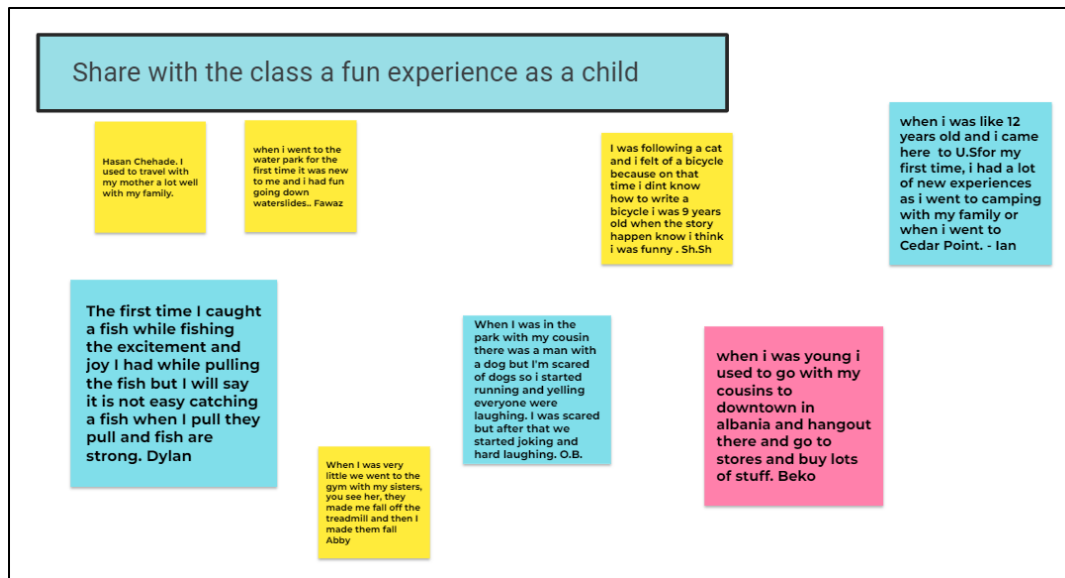


Figure 7. Jamboard showing students sharing stories in anticipation of writing a memoir.

You can give students prompts that will encourage positive reflection on themselves and their lives, and that can prepare them for future assignments, such as “Share with the class a fun experience as a child” in anticipation of writing a memoir (see Figure 7). Questions like “What are five words I would use to describe myself?” are affirmation activities and also offer practice reviewing parts of speech (adjectives).

8. Poetry and Journaling

Another way you can engage students in social-emotional work is through journaling. In online teaching, provide them with a virtual journal and have them respond to prompts such as “I am” poems. Jason Reynolds’s [“Write, Right, Rite”](#) project is an excellent video resource for these activities. Reynolds, the U.S. National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature, gives fun, brain-break worthy challenges to the students, like [“Take an Imaginary Road Trip.”](#)

Tools for Assessing Social-Emotional Learning

From lesson planning to teaching, I have been using the following tools to assess the SEL needs of my students in real time, even when we were in a virtual classroom. These assessment tools allow you to monitor your students’ learning, language development, and their SEL needs. Some of these overlap as great digital tools, as well.

9. SEL Reflection Prompts

These [SEL Reflection Prompts](#) are a great way to assess specific areas of SEL, and they also offer great writing practice. They are provided by Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the leading organization on implementing SEL in classes across the nation. I used them often as entrance slips to class. Here are a few of the prompts, from the category “prompts that support social awareness and relationship skills” and questions that help to “recognize the feelings and perspectives of

others”:

- Write about a time you disagreed with a friend. How did you handle it?
 - What are some things you can do to be an active listener?
 - Why is it valuable to learn about the perspectives of others?
 - Write about a time that your opinion changed. What caused it to change?
 - Write about a current event and analyze the perspectives of different people involved, including how their life experiences/ identity may impact their perspectives.
 - Analyze the factors that have influenced your perspective on an issue.
- (CASEL, 2020)

10. Exit Slips

Similarly to the CASEL prompts, these [Friendzy Exit Ticket Slides](#) are an extremely helpful tool in measuring specific SEL skills while also providing a chance for students to work on their writing skills. In the notes section of each slide, it is indicated which SEL skill is being assessed by the prompt.

Conclusion

Through trial and error, collaboration with colleagues, observation of engagement, and assessment of the SEL skills of my students, I have found that these SEL tools work, and I will continue to work on adding to this toolbox over time. There are many more amazing tools in my SEL toolbox that I didn't touch on in this article; you can explore them in [my presentation](#) from the 2022 TESOL International Association & English Language Expo. I definitely recommend checking out the rest of the tools that are provided in the slides, especially Slides 26 and 27, which contain a fantastic SEL activities list that Farmington Public Schools allowed me to share for this presentation.

The shift to emergency online teaching during the pandemic taught us valuable lessons about the social-emotional welfare of our students, and I hope these tools help you build those SEL skills in your own English language classroom. For more research on SEL, we recommend looking into [CASEL](#), trauma-informed practices (Crosby et al., 2018), and mindfulness (Bishop et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2013; McCown et al., 2010) as starting points.

References

Bishop, S. R., Lau, M., Shapiro, S., Carlson, L., Anderson, N. D., Carmody, J., Segal, Z. V., Abbey, S., Speca, M., Velting, D., & Devins, G. (2004). Mindfulness: A proposed operational definition. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 11(3), 230–241.

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2020). *SEL reflection prompts*. <https://casel.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/SEL-Reflection-Prompts.pdf>

Crosby, S. D., Howell, P., & Thomas, S. (2018). Social justice education through trauma-informed teaching. *Middle School Journal*, 49(4), 15–23.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). *Full catastrophe living, revised edition: How to cope with stress, pain and illness using mindfulness meditation*. Hachette.

McCown, D., Reibel, D., & Micozzi, M. S. (2010). Defining mindfulness for the moment. In *Teaching mindfulness: A practical guide for clinicians and educators* (pp. 59-87). Springer.

Yevgeniya Pukalo is currently an ESL/ELA teacher at North Farmington High School (Farmington Public Schools, Michigan, USA). Yevgeniya has experience teaching K–12 English learners as well as adult learners. She has a BA in English and an MA in TESOL.

Kelsey DeCamillis (MA, TESOL) currently works as a literacy interventionist and has had many teaching experiences in the realm of TESOL, teaching English from elementary up through university and adult learners and in many contexts (EFL abroad in South Korea and Montenegro; EAL, ELA, and CBI as well as instructional coaching in Southeastern Michigan, USA).