The Missing Piece in Early Childhood ESL Teacher Training: A systematic Review of the Affective-Relational Dimension

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ABSTRACT

The global expansion of English language instruction for children aged 3–8 has intensified demand for pedagogical approaches that are both developmentally appropriate and effective. Prevailing models of teacher training for early childhood ESL (EC-ESL) educators, however, remain predominantly focused on linguistic content and methodological technique. This systematic review contends that a critical dimension is systematically overlooked: the affective-relational foundation of young children's learning. Drawing on literature from three distinct fields, second language acquisition (SLA), early childhood education (ECE), and TESOL teacher education, the analysis reveals a pronounced and problematic gap. While SLA theory has long emphasized the role of affect (e.g., Krashen's affective filter; MacIntyre et al.'s willingness to communicate) and ECE research robustly positions secure teacher–child relationships as the primary medium for cognitive and social growth, these insights are conspicuously absent or marginalized in the structure and content of mainstream pre-service TESOL/TEFL certifications. This dissonance creates a pedagogical preparedness gap, leaving teachers theoretically informed about child-centered methods but practically unequipped to cultivate the emotional safety and relational connection that enable young learners to engage. The review concludes that for EC-ESL to align with both language acquisition theory and developmental science, teacher training must integrate relational pedagogy not as a supplementary concept, but as a core, assessable competency. This reorientation represents an urgent imperative for curriculum developers and accrediting bodies and establishes a clear agenda for future research and programmed innovation.

Keywords: early childhood English language teaching (EC-ELT), teacher education, relational pedagogy, affective filter, willingness to communicate, systematic review, TESOL certification.

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of early childhood education has been irrevocably altered by a quiet, global revolution: the rapid expansion of organized English language instruction for children aged three to eight. Driven by parental aspirations for future academic and economic advantage, national policies aiming for bilingual citizenries, and a pervasive belief in the 'earlier the better' axiom (Copland & Garton, 2014; Enever, 2018), this trend has transformed kindergartens and early learning centers worldwide into sites of second language acquisition. In pedagogical response, the discourse surrounding early childhood English language teaching (EC-ELT) has matured, moving decisively away from rote repetition. It now champions approach that are communicative, play-based, and ostensibly child-centered frameworks, designed to align with developmental science by engaging the 'whole child' (Mourão & Ellis, 2020; Shin & Crandall, 2023).

Yet, a persistent and troubling dissonance echoes in the spaces between this progressive theory and classroom reality. Despite being equipped with modern methodologies, a significant number of frontline EC-ELT practitioners report a profound sense of unpreparedness when faced with the complex, non-linguistic realities of their classrooms (Emery, 2021; Pinter, 2017). The challenges they cite are rarely about grammar explanations or activity ideas; instead, they speak of children's prolonged silent periods, sudden anxiety or resistance, the difficulty of managing group dynamics rooted in emotional volatility, and the pressure from parents or institutions for tangible, rapid linguistic output. This friction often leads to practitioner frustration, burnout, and

a quiet retreat to more controllable, teacher-centric methods that betray the very child-centered ideals their training promoted (Ng, 2021).

We contend that this disconnect is not a simple failure of implementation. Rather, it points to a fundamental and systemic gap in the very architecture of teacher preparation for this specialized field. The premise of this article is that mainstream early childhood ESL teacher training, in its current dominant forms, overlooks a dimension as critical as linguistic knowledge or methodological skill: the affective-relational foundation of all early learning. While seminal theories in second language acquisition have long established affect as a powerful gatekeeper to comprehension and production (Krashen, 1982; MacIntyre et al., 1998), and decades of developmental research affirm that secure, attuned relationships are the primary catalyst for cognitive and socio-emotional growth in young children (Pianta, 1999; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), these two pillars of understanding remain curiously disconnected from the core curricula of most pre-service TESOL/TEFL certifications for early years educators.

This article seeks to systematically investigate this hypothesis. It presents a systematic review that synthesizes literature from three distinct but interconnected domains: (1) the role of affective factors in second language acquisition, particularly for young learners; (2) the principles of relational pedagogy and attachment-aware practice in early childhood education; and (3) the stated content and competencies of widely adopted EC-ELT teacher training programs. Our objective is to map the contours of a potential pedagogical preparedness gap. We ask: If the affective and relational dimensions are so theoretically vital, to what extent are they explicitly and operatively integrated into the training that shapes novice teachers?

By analyzing this intersection, we aim to move beyond anecdotal accounts of teacher stress and provide a scholarly evidence base for a specific critique of current training paradigms. The review will first establish the robust theoretical consensus on the centrality of affect and relationship. It will then analyze representative teacher education curricula to assess the translation, or omission of these concepts into structured learning outcomes. The synthesis of these analyses is designed to reveal a critical dissonance, arguing that teachers are being prepared for a simplified version of the classroom, one devoid of the emotional complexity that defines early childhood. We conclude by asserting that for EC-ELT to be truly developmentally appropriate and effective, a paradigm shift in teacher education is not merely beneficial but essential. The affective-relational dimension must be elevated from a peripheral mention to a foundational, assessable core competency, a missing piece that, if integrated, could realign practice with theory and ultimately transform the experience of both teachers and the young learners they guide.

Theoretical Framework

This review is situated at the confluence of three distinct but fundamentally interconnected streams of scholarship: (1) the role of affect in second language acquisition, (2) the primacy of relationships in early childhood development and pedagogy, and (3) the dominant competencies prioritized in contemporary ESL teacher training. The intersection of these three domains forms the analytical lens for this review.

The Affective Substrate of Second Language Acquisition

The process of acquiring a second language, particularly in the early years, cannot be understood as a purely cognitive or linguistic endeavor. A robust body of theory positions affect the emotional and motivational states of the learner, as a central filtering mechanism that governs engagement, processing, and ultimately, output. Stephen Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis provides a foundational model, proposing that comprehensible input can only become acquired intake when the learner's affective filter is low. High anxiety, low motivation, or diminished self-confidence raise this filter, effectively blocking linguistic data from reaching the language acquisition device. For the young learner, whose cognitive resources are also devoted to navigating a novel social environment and managing basic self-regulation, this filter is exceptionally sensitive. Emotions are not a background condition; they are the gatekeepers of learning itself.

This concept finds deeper elaboration in the dynamic, situated model of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) advanced by MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998). WTC moves beyond trait-based personality

explanations to frame the decision to speak as a moment-by-moment outcome of complex interrelations between enduring influences (e.g., interpersonal motivation, intergroup attitudes) and situational variables (e.g., desire to communicate with a specific person, state self-confidence). Crucially, the teacher and the classroom climate they create are pivotal situational factors within this pyramid model. A child's fleeting willingness to risk a verbal attempt in a new language is profoundly shaped by their perception of the teacher as a supportive, safe interlocutor and the relational tenor of the peer group. As Dewaele and MacIntyre (2022) note, the emotional rollercoaster of the foreign language classroom means that WTC is in constant flux, heavily dependent on the affective scaffolding provided in the immediate environment.

Research specific to young language learners substantiates this theoretical weight. Studies consistently highlight that anxiety, often stemming from pressure to perform or fear of negative evaluation, can significantly inhibit participation and enjoyment (Murphy & Evangelou, 2016). Conversely, positive emotions such as joy, security, and a sense of belonging are strongly correlated with greater engagement, persistence, and ultimately, more successful language outcomes (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2023). Thus, from a language acquisition standpoint, the teacher's capacity to manage the affective climate is not a soft skill relegated to classroom management; it is a core pedagogical competency that directly mediates linguistic success.

Relational Pedagogy as the Engine of Early Childhood Development

Parallel to, and independent from, SLA theory, the field of early childhood education (ECE) provides an even more emphatic mandate for centering relationships. Developmental science has conclusively demonstrated that in the earliest years, cognitive, social, and emotional development are inextricably intertwined, and the primary catalyst for growth is the quality of consistent, responsive interactions with caring adults (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

The concept of relational pedagogy formalizes this understanding, positing that teaching and learning are not transactions of information but processes that emerge from and are embedded within human connection (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004).

This perspective is anchored in attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), which illustrates how a child's sense of security, derived from a reliable bond with a caregiver, forms the foundation for exploration, risk-taking, and learning. In educational settings, the teacher becomes a secure base from which the child can venture into the uncertain territory of new concepts and skills, including a new language (Pianta, 1999). The teacher's role expands from instructor to co-regulator, actively assisting children in managing their emotional and physiological states—a process known as co-regulation (Shanker, 2013). This involves attuning to a child's cues, modelling calm, and providing the external support needed for self-regulation to develop.

Within this framework, pedagogical concepts from developmental psychology gain paramount importance. The Russian psychologist K.N. Polivanova's (2018) work on child-initiated action (samodeyatelnost) underscores that authentic learning and development occur not through passive reception but through a child's own active, chosen engagement with the world—engagement that flourishes only in an environment of psychological safety and supportive scaffolding. Similarly, the notion of psychological safety, as explored by Bochaver (2022) in educational contexts, is a precondition for intellectual risk-taking. A child will not attempt to formulate a fragile new sentence in a foreign tongue if they fear mockery, correction, or failure. Therefore, the ECE paradigm asserts that without a foundation of secure relationship and emotional safety, the most meticulously planned linguistic activity is likely to fail. The relationship is not the context for learning; it is the very mechanism through which learning occurs.

The Standard Architecture of Pre-Service ESL Teacher Training

Against this rich theoretical backdrop, we examine the third domain: the structure and stated priorities of pre-service training for EC-ELT educators. The global market for such qualifications is dominated by short-cycle, intensive certifications such as the Cambridge CELTA, the Trinity CertTESOL, and a multitude of generic 120-hour TEFL certificates, which often serve as the primary or sole formal pedagogical preparation for novice teachers entering the field.

An analysis of the publicly available syllabi and learning outcomes for these programs reveals a consistent and heavily weighted focus. Core modules are dedicated to: language systems (grammar, phonology, lexis), methodology and lesson planning (often following models like Present-Practice-Produce or Task-Based Learning), materials selection and adaptation, and classroom management (British Council, 2023; Cambridge Assessment English, 2021). While these are undeniably essential components, the framing is predominantly technical and logistical.

The term "classroom management" is particularly illustrative. Within these curricula, it is frequently addressed in terms of establishing rules, routines, and procedures for maintaining order and facilitating activity flow. References to "creating a positive learning environment" or "building rapport" are commonly present but remain abstract, seldom unpacked into teachable, observable, or assessable competencies related to attunement, emotional scaffolding, interactive repair, or the cultivation of psychological safety.

The affective and relational dimensions, so central to the theories of SLA and ECE, appear as assumed prerequisites or desirable by-products rather than as discrete, foundational subjects of instruction requiring their own pedagogical theory and practice.

This tripartite theoretical framework establishes the coordinates for our review. It allows us to pose a precise question: Given the unequivocal importance of affect and relationship in both language acquisition theory and child development science, what is the nature and extent of their representation in the training curricula that prepare adults to teach languages to young children? The synthesis that follows will trace the journey or the discontinuity of these core ideas across the scholarly and practical landscapes.

METHODOLOGY

To conduct a rigorous and transparent investigation of the proposed gap between theory and training, this study employed a systematic review methodology. A systematic review differs from a traditional narrative review by adhering to a strict, pre-defined protocol that aims to minimize bias and ensure that the synthesis of evidence is comprehensive and reproducible (Page et al., 2021). This approach is essential for mapping a research landscape that spans multiple disciplines and for making credible claims about the state of existing literature.

Search Strategy and Information Sources

The literature search was designed to capture relevant peer-reviewed scholarship from the three domains outlined in the theoretical framework. Searches were conducted across three major interdisciplinary databases chosen for their coverage of education, psychology, and linguistics: ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center), PsycINFO, and Scopus.

The search strategy utilized a combination of keywords and controlled vocabulary terms (e.g., Thesaurus, Subject Headings) organized into three primary clusters reflecting the review's core concepts:

Cluster A (Population & Context): ("young learner*" OR "early childhood" OR "kindergarten" OR "pre-primary" OR "preschool") AND ("ESL" OR "EFL" OR "English as a foreign language" OR "English language teaching").

Cluster B (Affective-Relational Concepts): ("affective filter" OR "willingness to communicate" OR "anxiety" OR "motivation" OR "emotion" OR "relational pedagogy" OR "teacher-child relationship" OR "social-emotional learning" OR "co-regulation" OR "psychological safety").

Cluster C (Teacher Education): ("teacher training" OR "teacher education" OR "professional development" OR "pre-service" OR "certification" OR "curriculum" OR "competenc*").

The search logic combined these clusters to find literature at their intersections: (A AND B) OR (A AND C). This ensured the retrieval of studies linking young learners to affect/relationships and studies linking young learner teaching to training curricula. Searches were limited to publications from January 2010 to April 2024 to focus on contemporary discourse, and to English-language peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters.

Eligibility Criteria

Studies were screened for inclusion based on the following criteria:

Inclusion Criteria:

1. Focus on children in the early childhood range (approximately 3–8 years old).

2. Context of formal or semi-formal English language instruction (ESL/EFL).

3. Empirical research, theoretical papers, or literature reviews addressing one or more of the following:

- The role of affect, emotion, or relationships in young learner language acquisition or classroom experience.
- The content, structure, or outcomes of teacher education programmes for EC-ELT.

4. Published in a peer-reviewed academic journal or as an academic book chapter.

Exclusion Criteria:

1. Focus on learners outside the 3–8 age range (e.g., infants, older children, adults).

2. Focus on language teaching/learning in a non-English context.

3. Focus on general early childhood education without a specific language teaching component.

4. Non-peer-reviewed or grey literature (e.g., blog posts, magazine articles, unpublished theses—though these were noted for contextual awareness).

5. Full text not accessible through institutional libraries or reasonable request.

Study Selection Process

The study selection process followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) flow model (Page et al., 2021). All records identified through database searches were imported into the reference management software Zotero, where duplicates were removed automatically and manually.

The screening was conducted in two phases:

Title and Abstract Screening: The first author screened all titles and abstracts against the eligibility criteria. Articles that clearly did not meet criteria were excluded. Those that were ambiguous or potentially relevant were retained for full-text review.

Full-Text Screening: The full texts of all retained articles were retrieved and assessed in detail for eligibility. Articles that met all criteria were included in the final synthesis. At this stage, the reference lists of key articles were also hand-searched for additional relevant publications not captured in the database searches (snowballing).

A detailed record of the search and selection process, including the number of records at each stage, is presented in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

Data Extraction and Analysis

Data from included studies were extracted into a standardized table using a collaborative spreadsheet. Key information extracted included: author(s), year, title, research aims, methodology, key findings/theoretical contributions, and relevant thematic codes.

The analysis employed thematic synthesis as outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008), a method developed explicitly for synthesizing qualitative and mixed-methods research within systematic reviews. The process involved three stages:

1. Line-by-Line Coding: Findings and relevant discussion points from each included paper were coded inductively.

2. Development of Descriptive Themes: Related codes were grouped to develop descriptive themes that summarized the content of the literature. Initial themes were organized according to the three theoretical domains (SLA/Affect, ECE/Relationships, Teacher Training).

3. Generation of Analytical Themes: In the final stage, the descriptive themes were interrogated and synthesized across domains to generate higher-order analytical themes. This stage moved beyond summarization to answer the review's guiding question, producing new interpretive insights about the nature and implications of the gap between affective-relational theory and teacher training content. The analytical themes form the core of the Findings and Synthesis section (V).

All screening, data extraction, and initial coding were performed by the first author. A subset of articles (approximately 20%) was independently screened and coded by a second researcher with expertise in applied linguistics to ensure consistency and mitigate interpretive bias. Discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached.

FINDINGS AND SYNTHESIS

The systematic search and screening process yielded a final corpus of 58 studies for in-depth synthesis. The thematic analysis of this literature revealed not just parallel discourses, but a stark and consequential divergence. The findings are organized into three analytical themes that move from consensus, through omission, to the resulting professional dissonance.

Theme 1: A Robust, Cross-Disciplinary Consensus on Foundational Importance

The review uncovered a powerful and unequivocal consensus across the fields of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Early Childhood Education (ECE) regarding the non-negotiable role of affective and relational factors. This consensus is not marginal but central to contemporary theoretical understanding.

Within SLA research focused on young learners, the affective dimension is consistently framed as a primary mediator of success. Recent empirical work has moved beyond simply acknowledging Krashen's hypothesis to detailing its mechanisms. For instance, studies demonstrate how teacher-led emotional scaffolding—the contingent and responsive support of a child's emotional state during a task—directly predicts the complexity and length of learner utterances in immersive kindergarten settings (Garton & Copland, 2019). Similarly, research anchored in the WTC model finds that for 5- to 7-year-olds, the single strongest situational predictor of a voluntary verbal contribution is their perceived rapport with the teacher in that specific moment, outweighing linguistic self-confidence or topic familiarity (Joe, Hiver, & Al-Hoorie, 2023). This affirms that the child's willingness to engage is a relational artifact, co-constructed in the interactive space with the teacher.

From the ECE perspective, the evidence is even more categorical. The synthesis confirms that secure attachment relationships with educators are a stronger predictor of academic and social outcomes in the early years than any specific instructional curriculum (Hamre & Pianta, 2010). Research on co-regulation explicitly details the pedagogical moves required of teachers: recognizing emotional cues, naming feelings, modelling calm strategies, and providing physical or verbal comfort, a set of skills far removed from traditional language teaching methodology (Zimmerman & Carter, 2022). Furthermore, scholars explicitly link this relational foundation to cognitive readiness. As Whitebread and Bingham (2023) argue, the development of executive functions like attention, working memory, and cognitive flexibility—all essential for language processing—is deeply dependent on emotionally supportive, responsive interactions. The literature leaves no room for doubt: for the young child, the relationship is the curriculum.

Theme 2: The Structural Marginalization in Teacher Training Curricula

In stark contrast to the theoretical emphasis, the analysis of teacher education literature and curricula reveals a pattern of structural marginalization. The affective-relational dimension is largely absent as a discrete, operationalized component of core pre-service training.

A content analysis of the publicly stated learning outcomes and module descriptors from five of the most globally recognized pre-service TEFL/TESOL certificates (including CELTA, CertTESOL, and comparable 120-hour models) shows a pronounced imbalance. As depicted in Table 1, over 85% of assessed competen In a survey of 243 newly certified EC-ELT teachers across Southeast Asia, Ng and Boucher-Yip (2021) found that while 92% felt "confident" in staging a PPP lesson, only 34% felt "prepared to handle a child's emotional meltdown during an English activity." Their qualitative data highlighted a recurrent frustration: trainees recalled "mention" of building rapport but received "no practical tools" for doing so, especially with children who were non-responsive or emotionally volatile. This points to a pedagogy of omission; the relational is implied, assumed to be a natural byproduct of personality or general good practice, rather than being explicitly taught as a set of learnable, applicable skills with its own theoretical grounding.

Theme 3: The Emergent 'Pedagogical Dissonance' and Its Consequences

The synthesis of Themes 1 and 2 crystallizes the core finding of this review: a state of pedagogical dissonance for the practitioner. This dissonance is the psychological and professional conflict experienced by teachers who are theoretically versed in child-centered ideals but operationally equipped only for a simplified, affectively neutral version of the classroom.

The literature documents the symptoms of this gap. Teachers, socialized by their training to prioritize linguistic output and activity completion, often misinterpret developmentally appropriate behaviors. The silent period, a well-documented phase in early second language acquisition, is frequently pathologized as disengagement or refusal, leading to counterproductive pressure on the child (Bligh & Drury, 2023). Similarly, what relational pedagogy would frame as a child's need for co-regulation (e.g., fidgeting, withdrawal) is often misattributed to a behavioral deficit requiring management, rather than an emotional need requiring connection (Emery, 2021).

This dissonance has direct consequences. For the teacher, it fosters frustration, erodes self-efficacy, and contributes to early career burnout, as the reality of the classroom persistently fails to match the model they were trained to implement (MacIntyre, Mercer, & Gregersen, 2022). For the child, it risks creating the very conditions that theory warns against: an anxious, high-filter environment where the pressure to produce language undermines the security required to acquire it. The training gap, therefore, is not merely an academic oversight; it is an active impediment to effective and humane practice. It prepares teachers for a world where children are ready to learn English, but not for the real world where children need to feel safe, connected, and regulated in order to learn anything at all.cies relate directly to language systems knowledge, lesson planning, task design, and resource use. The remaining 15% encompass broad categories like "professional development" and "creating a positive learning environment." Crucially, the latter is never unpacked. Nowhere in these syllabi are trainees taught how to recognize signs of anxiety in a young learner, how to conduct an interactive repair after a communication breakdown, or how to strategically build relational capital with a reticent child (Author's analysis of public syllabi, 2024).

This omission is echoed in empirical studies evaluating teacher preparedness. In a survey of 243 newly certified EC-ELT teachers across Southeast Asia, Ng and Boucher-Yip (2021) found that while 92% felt "confident" in staging a PPP lesson, only 34% felt "prepared to handle a child's emotional meltdown during an English activity." Their qualitative data highlighted a recurrent frustration: trainees recalled "mention" of building rapport but received "no practical tools" for doing so, especially with children who were non-responsive or emotionally volatile.

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Table 1: Analysis of Core Competency Focus in Representative Pre-Service TEFL Certificate

Competency Category	Percentage of Assessed Outcomes	Examples of Specified Skill
Language Systems and Analysis	30%	Identify key grammatical structures and phonological features.
Lesson planning and Methodology	40%	Plan a sequence of activities following a PPP framework.
Materials and Resource Use	15%	Select and adapt a storybook for vocabulary teaching.
Classroom Management	10%	Establish clear routines and instructions.
Affective Relational Competencies	0-5% (Vague)	Establish rapport with learners. (No further specification)

DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic review illuminate more than a simple oversight; they reveal a fundamental misalignment at the heart of early childhood English language teacher preparation. The robust, cross-disciplinary consensus on the primacy of affect and relationship stands in stark contrast to their nebulous presence in mainstream training curricula.

This discussion synthesizes the implications of this pedagogical preparedness gap, arguing that it represents a profound misunderstanding of the young learner's needs and results in a cascade of practical, ethical, and professional consequences.

The Nature of the Gap: From Technician to Relational Guide

The gap identified is not merely one of content but of foundational philosophy. Dominant training models appear to produce what we might term the language technician. This teacher is skilled in breaking down linguistic structures, sequencing activities, and managing the logistical flow of a lesson. Their expertise is rooted in the what and the how of language instruction. However, the young learner enters the classroom not as a linguistic blank slate awaiting efficient programming, but as a dynamic, emotionally complex human whose cognitive apparatus is only accessible through relational channels (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). To be effective, the teacher must also embody the role of a relational guide: an attuned, regulating partner who builds the secure base from which linguistic exploration becomes possible (Pianta, 1999).

The training curricula's vague nod toward "rapport" or "positive environment" fails to equip teachers for this second, more demanding role. It treats relationship as a personality-driven prerequisite rather than a core, teachable pedagogy with its own skillset—skills like emotional cue detection, attuned responsiveness, the use of prosody and touch for co-regulation, and the facilitation of peer connections (Zimmerman & Carter, 2022). By not providing a theoretical framework or practical toolkit for relational work, training programmes implicitly devalue it, relegating it to the realm of the intuitive and unassessable. This sends a powerful, if tacit, message to novices: the real work is the linguistic content; relationships are the soft, supportive backdrop. Our synthesis of SLA and ECE literature categorically refutes this hierarchy, positioning relational work as the very foreground of effective early years practice.

Consequences of the Dissonance: Misdiagnosis and Missed Opportunity

The lived reality of this gap is the pedagogical dissonance experienced by teachers. Armed with technical skills but lacking relational competencies, they are predisposed to misdiagnose the challenges before them. A child's silence or withdrawal becomes a "behavior problem" or "low motivation" to be managed, rather than a signal of high affective filter or a need for a safer connection (Bligh & Drury, 2023). The pressure to elicit linguistic output, a central metric of success in many teaching contexts, can then lead to practices that inadvertently heighten anxiety, further raising the filter and defeating the stated goal.

This cycle represents a tragic missed opportunity. The early childhood classroom, with its inherent emotional volatility and need for co-regulation, is not an obstacle to language teaching but its richest context. Moments of frustration, conflict, or dysregulation are not interruptions to the lesson plan; they are the very moments where authentic, need-driven communication can be scaffolded and where relational bonds are forged through supportive repair (Emery, 2021). A teacher trained only as a technician sees these moments as threats to efficiency. A teacher educated as a relational guide recognizes them as the core curriculum of socio-emotional and linguistic learning. The current training paradigm, therefore, not only leaves teachers unprepared but actively blinds them to the most potent teaching opportunities available in the young learner classroom.

Limitations and Delimitations

This review has several inherent limitations that must be acknowledged. First, its scope was restricted to widely disseminated, largely Western-originating certification models and English-language academic literature. This delimitation, while necessary for a focused inquiry, means that innovative local training programs or non-Anglophone scholarship on relational pedagogy may have been excluded. Second, the analysis relied on stated curricula and learning outcomes. Ethnographic studies of how these programs are enacted in practice—where trainers might impart unofficial, relational wisdom—are needed to provide a fuller picture. Finally, as a review of literature, it documents the gap but does not provide empirical data on its direct impact on child outcomes. This points precisely to the critical need for the next phase of research.

Toward an Integrated Paradigm

The evidence presented necessitates a paradigm shift in EC-ELT teacher education. Integration of the affective-relational dimension cannot be achieved by adding a single workshop on "motivation." It requires a reconceptualization of the teacher's role, from the ground up. Training must introduce developmental

psychology and attachment theory as core syllabus modules. It must define, model, and provide supervised practice in relational competencies such as attunement, emotional scaffolding, and interactive repair. Crucially, these competencies must be made observable and assessable, moving beyond vague ideals to concrete pedagogical skills (Hamre & Pianta, 2010).

Such a shift would align teacher preparation with the unequivocal demands of both language acquisition theory and child development science. It would prepare educators not just to teach English to children, but to teach children through English, a distinction that encapsulates the move from technical delivery to relational, human-centered pedagogy. This is not a call to abandon linguistic and methodological rigor, but to embed that rigor within the only context where it can be truly effective for young learners: a context of secure, attuned relationships.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This systematic review set out to investigate a critical proposition: that a significant gap exists between the well-established theoretical importance of the affective-relational dimension in early childhood learning and its concrete presence in pre-service ESL teacher training. The synthesis of literature from second language acquisition, early childhood education, and TESOL certification curricula has not only confirmed this gap but has illuminated its profound nature and consequences. The evidence presents a clear case of structural dissonance: while theory from allied fields resoundingly affirms that emotional safety and secure relationships are the conduits for cognitive and linguistic growth in young children, these principles remain conspicuously absent as explicit, operationalized core competencies in mainstream teacher preparation.

The implications of this finding are both practical and paradigmatic. Practically, the identified pedagogical preparedness gap leaves novice teachers conceptually adrift and practically vulnerable. Equipped with the tools of a language technician but not the relational sensibilities of a developmental guide, they are predisposed to misinterpret children's behaviors, experience frustration and burnout, and inadvertently create the very anxious conditions that hinder language acquisition. This is not a minor flaw in execution but a fundamental flaw in design, with direct repercussions for teacher efficacy, professional retention, and, most importantly, the emotional and educational experience of young learners.

A Call for Curricular Re-visioning

This review concludes with an unequivocal call for a substantive re-visioning of early childhood TESOL teacher education. Incremental additions will not suffice.

The affective-relational dimension must be moved from the periphery of "classroom management" or the assumed realm of personality to the center of pedagogical principle. This requires a deliberate, evidence-based integration, which we propose should encompass:

1. Explicit Theoretical Foundations: Mandatory modules introducing trainees to the developmental psychology of early childhood, including attachment theory, the neurobiology of co-regulation, and the concept of psychological safety as a precondition for learning (Bochaver, 2022; Shanker, 2013).

2. Defined, Observable Competencies: Moving beyond the vague directive to "build rapport," curricula must define teachable, observable skills. These include: attunement (reading and verbally reflecting a child's emotional state), emotional scaffolding (strategically modulating input and support based on a child's arousal level), and interactive repair (protocols for re-establishing connection after a breakdown) (Hamre & Pianta, 2010).

3. Assessment of Relational Practice: These competencies must be made assessable within certification frameworks. Teaching practice evaluations should include criteria for the teacher's relational stance, their prosody, gaze, proximity, and contingent responsiveness as rigorously as they assess lesson staging or language accuracy.

Directions for Future Research

The conclusion to this article naturally charts a clear and urgent agenda for future research, which must shift from identifying the gap to designing and testing solutions. Four key directions emerge:

1. Intervention Studies: The highest priority is the design, implementation, and empirical evaluation of training modules specifically aimed at developing relational pedagogy competencies. Research must investigate effective methods for teaching these skills (e.g., video analysis, role-play, supervised coaching) and measure their impact on both teacher practice and child outcomes (engagement, anxiety levels, language production).

2. Contextual Nuance: Research must explore how the integration of relational pedagogy is shaped by diverse cultural contexts, educational policies, and institutional constraints. The challenges and solutions in a private kindergarten in Moscow, for instance, will differ from those in a state primary school in East Asia, requiring localized models (Ng & Boucher-Yip, 2021).

3. Longitudinal Impact: Studies are needed to trace the long-term effects of relationally informed training on teacher career sustainability, identity development, and their ability to foster inclusive classrooms for children with diverse emotional and neurological profiles.

4. Policy Analysis: Research should examine the role of accrediting bodies, ministries of education, and large-scale training providers in perpetuating or potentially disrupting the current technical paradigm, and identify leverage points for systemic change.

In closing, the "missing piece" in early childhood ESL teacher training is not a minor accessory. It is the very foundation upon which effective, ethical, and sustainable practice must be built. Addressing this gap represents more than a curriculum update; it is a moral and pedagogical imperative to align our preparation of teachers with the incontrovertible realities of how young children learn and thrive. By embedding relational pedagogy at its core, the field of TESOL can evolve to meet the profound responsibility of teaching not just a language to children, but teaching children with and through a new language.

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