

A Conceptual Analysis of Affective Learning in TESL Teacher Education: Perceptions, Challenges, And Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Affective learning is a crucial yet often overlooked component of TESL teacher education, playing a significant role in shaping student-teachers' emotional intelligence, ethical reasoning, and engagement strategies. This conceptual paper examines the importance of affective learning within teacher training programmes and identifies the challenges TESL student-teachers face in integrating affective domain strategies into their teaching practices. Drawing on Bloom's Affective Taxonomy, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Theory, and Emotional Intelligence (EI) Theory, this paper highlights the gaps in training, assessment, and institutional support for affective learning within TESL curricula. Despite growing recognition of holistic education approaches, affective learning remains secondary to cognitive and psychomotor domains in many TESL programmes. Student-teachers often lack sufficient training in applying emotional and value-driven teaching strategies, leading to difficulties in engaging students meaningfully. Additionally, assessing affective learning outcomes remains complex due to the absence of standardised evaluation frameworks. Institutional constraints, such as rigid curricula and an overemphasis on academic performance, further hinder the effective implementation of affective teaching methodologies. This paper proposes strategies for improving affective learning integration, including curriculum reforms, enhanced professional development for student-teachers, and policy recommendations to institutionalise affective domain strategies in TESL education. By addressing these gaps, the study aims to contribute to the enhancement of TESL teacher education, ensuring that future educators are equipped with the emotional intelligence and pedagogical skills necessary to foster holistic student development.

Keywords: affective, TESL, student-teacher, emotional intelligence (EI), social-emotional learning (SEL), pedagogy,

INTRODUCTION

Affective learning, which includes values, emotions, and interpersonal relationships, is an essential yet often overlooked aspect of TESL teacher education in Malaysia. Teacher preparation programmes tend to emphasise cognitive knowledge and technical skills, while emotional growth and interpersonal competence are given less attention. This imbalance is reinforced by systemic pressures such as examination performance, institutional rankings, and the difficulty of assessing affective outcomes. Many teacher educators themselves have limited training in affective pedagogy, making it challenging to guide student teachers in this area.

Research suggests that pre-service teachers struggle to connect what they learn in theory with the realities of classroom practice. When mentor teachers are not equipped with affective or student-centred approaches, the gap becomes wider. This weakens the holistic development of future teachers, who must work in classrooms shaped by linguistic diversity, cultural sensitivities, and complex emotional dynamics.

While international studies highlight the benefits of affective learning in teacher education, research in the Malaysian context remains limited. Existing work continues to privilege the cognitive and technical aspects of

language teaching, leaving emotional and values-based dimensions underexplored. This gap is particularly significant in Malaysia, where the cultural and linguistic diversity of classrooms demands teachers who are both academically competent and emotionally responsive.

This paper, therefore, has two main aims. The first is to analyse the role and importance of affective learning in Malaysian TESL teacher education, while identifying the challenges that hinder its integration into curricula. The second is to propose strategies, grounded in evidence from recent scholarship, for strengthening affective learning in TESL programmes. By drawing on a conceptual analysis of studies published between 2015 and 2024, the paper highlights key themes, challenges, and strategies for advancing the affective dimension of teacher preparation.

The importance of affective learning in TESL programmes

In Malaysian classrooms, TESL educators frequently engage with learners from diverse ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds. These students often experience a range of emotional, cultural, and psychological challenges that impact their learning experiences and outcomes (Salleh, 2020). Affective learning enables teachers to respond more effectively to such challenges by fostering emotional awareness, cultural empathy, and value-driven engagement.

Research indicates that emotional intelligence contributes significantly to classroom management, student engagement, and teacher-student relationships. For instance, a study by Ismail and Hassan (2019) on Malaysian pre-service ESL teachers found a positive correlation between emotional intelligence and perceived teaching efficacy. Teachers who were better at managing their emotions and demonstrating empathy were more successful at motivating students and handling behavioural issues.

Similarly, Norazman and Yaakob (2022) emphasise that TESL teachers who use social-emotional learning strategies such as peer mentoring, conflict resolution and empathetic communication tend to observe higher levels of student engagement and lower levels of anxiety in the classroom. In line with this, Razawi and Mohamad (2024) demonstrated that lecturers who employed socio-affective strategies were able to significantly enhance ESL students' speaking motivation and fluency. Their findings reinforce the point that attention to the affective domain not only reduces classroom anxiety but also translates into measurable linguistic outcomes, particularly in oral communication which is a key challenge in TESL contexts.

Comparative evidence from other multilingual settings further strengthens this argument. In Canada, affective strategies integrated into ESL classrooms have been shown to reduce language anxiety and significantly improve oral proficiency (Derakhshan & Fathi, 2021). Likewise, Vandeyar (2017) found that in South African multilingual schools, teacher sensitivity to students' emotional and cultural needs enhanced motivation and improved retention rates. Together, these findings highlight that affective learning not only benefits teacher well-being but also yields measurable student outcomes, including increased participation, reduced attrition, and improved language achievement across diverse contexts. Specifically, within language learning contexts, affective learning helps address the language anxiety commonly experienced by ESL learners, particularly in oral communication skills. Contexts marked by linguistic and cultural diversity consistently demonstrate that affective pedagogy is not merely desirable but necessary for equitable language education, reinforcing the urgency of addressing gaps in Malaysian TESL programmes. Teachers trained in affective strategies are better equipped to identify early signs of anxiety and provide appropriate emotional support to enhance learners' confidence.

Moreover, affective learning encourages teachers to consider the moral and ethical implications of their pedagogical choices. In multicultural societies like Malaysia, ethical reasoning helps TESL educators navigate sensitive topics such as race, identity, and gender, fostering inclusive and respectful classroom dialogue (Rajendran, 2021). Additionally, affective learning helps prevent teacher burnout by enhancing self-awareness and emotional regulation skills. Teachers with higher emotional intelligence are better equipped to manage work-related stress, maintain motivation for teaching, and build healthy professional relationships with colleagues and school administration.

From a classroom management perspective, teachers who integrate affective learning report improved disciplinary outcomes and higher levels of student engagement. Skills such as empathy and effective communication enable teachers to build strong rapport with students, thereby reducing behavioural issues and enhancing overall learning quality. Consequently, teachers are better prepared to address students' emotional and social needs alongside their academic growth. This approach supports a more inclusive and humanistic model of language education, in line with national goals to prepare educators who are reflective, compassionate, and responsive to the multicultural fabric of Malaysian society.

Theoretical framework that underpinnings affective domains

This paper is grounded in three interrelated frameworks that provide a comprehensive understanding of the affective domain in TESL teacher education. Together, these perspectives form the theoretical foundation for analysing how emotional, ethical and relational competencies can be fostered in student teachers.

Bloom's Affective Taxonomy and linking it to Perceptions, Challenges, and Strategies in TESL Education

Bloom's affective taxonomy with its five hierarchical levels - perceiving, responding, valuing, organising and characterising - provides a useful tool for examining affective learning in TESL teacher education (Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1964). In terms of cognition or perception, the taxonomy explains how student teachers initially become aware of and respond to the emotional and values-based dimensions of teaching. This reflects their initial engagement with affective learning in the receiving and responding stages (Bloom et al., 1964).

However, applying Bloom's affective taxonomy in teacher education presents significant conceptual and practical challenges. Unlike cognitive outcomes, affective progression from receiving to characterising involves internal processes that resist objective measurement. The challenges become clearer when student teachers attempt to move beyond mere perception to evaluation and organisation. Here, they are expected to internalise and integrate ethical principles, empathy and intercultural sensitivity into their pedagogy. Many struggles at this stage because they have limited training, have difficulty demonstrating consistent empathy, and face institutional pressures that prioritise cognitive outcomes over affective growth (Azman & Mahmud, 2020; Kaur & Lee, 2021; Nasir & Farid, 2019). Furthermore, the hierarchical structure assumes linear progression, yet affective development is often cyclical and context-dependent. A student-teacher may demonstrate ethical reasoning during reflective coursework but revert to surface-level responses under practicum pressures. Finally, the taxonomy also points to strategies to strengthen affective learning in the characterisation phase, where values are internalised as consistent professional behaviour. Here, curriculum reforms, professional development opportunities, and assessment tools that focus on affective competencies are crucial in supporting TESL teachers to embody empathy, ethical reasoning, and emotional intelligence as part of their pedagogical identity (Jamaluddin & Aziz, 2022; Tan & Marimuthu, 2022). In this way, Bloom's taxonomy directly underpins this article's focus on perceptions, challenges and strategies in affective learning in TESL education.

Social-Emotional Learning as a Framework for Affective Competence in TESL Teacher Education

Social-emotional learning (SEL) theory provides a powerful framework for examining affective learning in TESL teacher education because it emphasises competencies that directly influence teachers' perceptions, challenges, and strategies in classroom practice. The five competencies identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020) are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making, which reflect the affective demands on TESL teachers. In terms of perception, SEL helps student teachers recognise their own emotions, biases and pedagogical identities, which shape their view of the affective domain in pedagogy (Elias, 2019). The challenges arise when student teachers attempt to apply SEL principles in real classrooms, particularly in interacting with diverse learners, fostering empathy across cultures, and balancing emotional responsiveness with academic expectations (Norazman & Yaakob, 2022; Weissberg, 2020). At the strategy level, SEL theory offers evidence-based practices for cultivating inclusive and supportive classrooms, such as empathy-based feedback, peer mentoring, and intercultural dialogue (Schonert-Reichl, 2019; Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams, 2019). Embedding SEL in TESL teacher education, therefore, strengthens the affective domain by equipping future educators with relational and emotional competence that are essential for holistic student development.

Emotional intelligence (EI) and affective learning in TESL

Emotional intelligence (EI) theory explains how teachers' abilities to recognise, understand and manage emotions - and empathise with learners - shape the affective core of TESL teacher education (Goleman, 1995; Brackett & Rivers, 2014). At the perceptual level, emotional intelligence influences teachers' perceptions of their own identity as a teacher, their interpretation of emotions in the classroom, and their assessment of learners' needs. Higher emotional intelligence is associated with greater teacher effectiveness and better rapport in the ESL context (Ismail & Hassan, 2019; MacCann et al., 2020). The challenges arise when these dispositions must be implemented under real-world pressures - varying levels of performance, disciplinary demands, and workload - where limited EI training, emotion regulation, and the risk of burnout can hinder consistent, empathic practice (Che Ahmad & Idris, 2021; Mérida-López & Extremera, 2017). At a strategic level, well-designed EI/SEC (social-emotional competence) interventions have been shown to improve teacher emotion regulation, classroom climate and student engagement - suggesting a pathway to institutionalise EI in TESL through curriculum design, practicum mentoring for placements and assessment rubrics (Hodzic et al., 2018; Jennings et al., 2017; Schonert-Reichl, 2019). The presentation of EI as a teachable and assessable competency is therefore consistent with the aim of your work: to embed affective learning so that TESL graduates are emotionally attuned, ethically grounded and pedagogically responsive.

Theoretical framework of affective learning in TESL Teacher Education

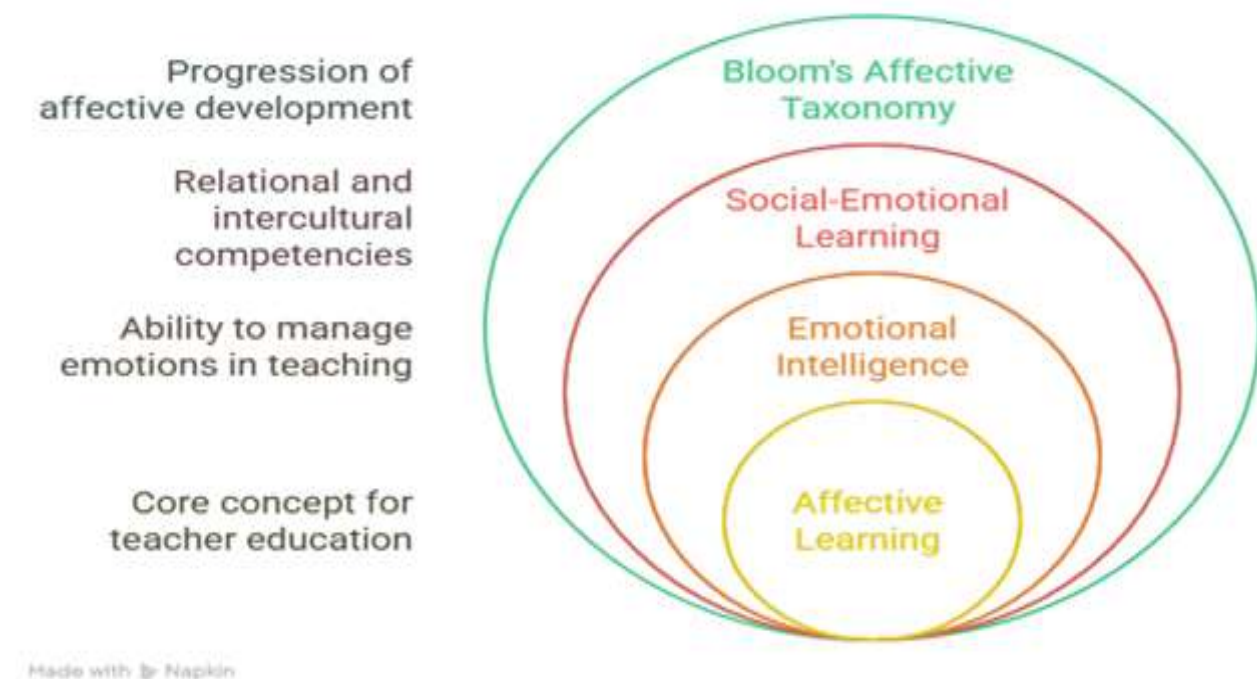


Figure 1: Theoretical framework of affective learning in TESL Teacher Education

This study draws on three complementary frameworks, as shown in Figure 1 - Bloom's affective taxonomy, social-emotional learning (SEL) and emotional intelligence (EI) which together explain the role of affective learning in TESL teacher education. Bloom's taxonomy (Krathwohl, Bloom & Masia, 1964) describes the progression from perceiving and responding to evaluating, organising and characterising, and makes a direct link to how student teachers form perceptions, manage challenges and apply strategies for affective competence. SEL theory (CASEL, 2020) adds five core competencies which are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relational skills and responsible decision-making, that characterise the relational and intercultural dimension of teaching. EI theory (Goleman, 1995; Brackett & Rivers, 2014) emphasises teachers' ability to recognise, regulate and apply emotions in the classroom, which influences their identity, classroom climate and resilience. Taken together, these frameworks reveal how perceptions of affective learning emerge, what challenges limit its integration, and what strategies can strengthen teacher preparation. This integrated model

forms the conceptual basis for analysing affective learning in TESL. The framework illuminates the multidimensional nature of affective learning and provides the conceptual framework for exploring its current status and future potential in Malaysian TESL teacher education.

Curriculum and Assessment Gaps in Malaysia

A review of TESL programmes across public and private universities in Malaysia reveals a significant underrepresentation of affective domain objectives in both curriculum content and assessment practices. While student-teachers often engage in microteaching and peer feedback, these activities seldom emphasise emotional awareness or ethical reflection (MOHE, 2020).

Research by Latiff and Karim (2020) showed that TESL courses that integrated elements of reflective teaching rarely went beyond surface-level reflection. Student-teachers reported difficulty connecting pedagogical decisions to values or emotional impacts due to the absence of structured guidance or exemplars. This gap is particularly evident in practicum courses, where assessments focus primarily on mastery of teaching techniques and achievement of learning objectives, while teacher-student relationship building and cultural sensitivity are rarely formally evaluated.

Assessment mechanisms continue to emphasise academic performance, with little attention paid to the affective dimensions of teaching. The Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) benchmarks for education programmes provide detailed guidance for cognitive and psychomotor competencies, but contain minimal criteria for assessing emotional or values-based learning (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2025). Consequently, student teachers are rarely assessed on their ability to build trust, demonstrate cultural sensitivity or facilitate respectful dialogue, despite these skills being so important in multilingual and diverse TESL classrooms. The lack of specific assessment rubrics for affective competencies makes it difficult for lecturers to provide meaningful feedback to student teachers on their progress in developing emotional intelligence and professional ethics.

While previous programme standards under the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) placed limited emphasis on affective outcomes, recent policy directions indicate a shift towards values-based education and sustainability competencies (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2025). This development provides a valuable policy window for embedding affective learning in TESL education, as both values-based pedagogy and sustainability education rely on empathy, ethical reasoning, and intercultural awareness, all of which are central components of the affective domain.

Challenges in Integrating Affective Learning

Despite the recognised importance of affective learning, its integration into TESL teacher education in Malaysia faces substantial challenges:

Limited training: Many teacher education institutions in Malaysia place greater emphasis on cognitive competencies, such as grammar instruction and exam techniques, rather than emotional and interpersonal skills. Research by Azman and Mahmud (2020) found that pre-service TESL teachers reported minimal exposure to emotional intelligence or SEL-related training during their coursework or practicum. This lack of preparation leaves them unprepared to manage emotional dynamics in real classrooms.

Assessment complexity: Assessing affective learning poses inherent difficulties due to its qualitative and introspective nature. Most Malaysian universities still rely on standard written tests and performance-based evaluations, which inadequately capture students' affective development. Tan and Marimuthu (2022) argue that without structured frameworks and validated rubrics, teacher educators struggle to consistently measure affective outcomes such as empathy, ethical reasoning, or value internalisation.

Institutional constraints: The rigidity of institutional curricula combined with the predominant emphasis on academic performance indicators, such as CEFR-aligned examinations, often limits the integration of affective learning objectives. Kaur and Lee (2021), in their study on Malaysian higher education policy, found that the pursuit of institutional rankings emphasises measurable academic output. As a result, essential components of

holistic education, including the development of affective competencies, are often disregarded in programme design and evaluation.

Lack of role models: Many teacher educators themselves lack formal training in affective pedagogy, making it difficult for student-teachers to observe or learn affective teaching behaviors. According to Nasir and Farid (2019), a gap exists between the pedagogical ideals promoted in theory and the emotionally disengaged classroom practices observed during teaching practicums.

Strategies for Strengthening Affective Integration

To address these issues, several evidence-based strategies are proposed to embed affective learning more meaningfully in TESL teacher education:

6.1 *Curriculum reform:* Embedding affective learning objectives into core TESL modules can help reframe teacher training beyond technical proficiency. For example, incorporating emotionally rich literature, ethical case studies, and guided storytelling can foster reflection and empathy (Rahman & Chong, 2021). Courses like 'Professional Ethics' or 'Intercultural Communication' should be compulsory in TESL programmes.

6.2 *Professional development:* Continuous professional development (CPD) for TESL lecturers and mentors should include training in SEL practices and emotional intelligence. A pilot initiative by Jamaluddin and Aziz (2022) demonstrated that TESL lecturers trained in affective strategies were more capable of scaffolding student reflections and addressing emotional challenges during practicum supervision.

6.3 *Innovative assessment:* Reflective journals, emotion mapping, peer dialogue transcripts, and scenario-based interviews can serve as alternative tools for assessing affective growth. Developing rubrics aligned with Bloom's affective taxonomy can support more structured and valid evaluation (Tan & Marimuthu, 2022).

6.4 *Institutional and policy recommendations:* Addressing the systemic marginalisation of affective learning requires coordinated policy intervention at multiple levels. At the national level, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) and the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) must revise the Programme Standards for Education (TESL) to include explicit affective competencies alongside cognitive and psychomotor domains. Current MQA benchmarks provide detailed criteria for technical skills but lack specific indicators for emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, or ethical reasoning (MOHE, 2020). Revised standards should require evidence of how affective outcomes are taught, practised, and assessed, in alignment with the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 and the Framework for Education 4.0's emphasis on holistic development (KPM, 2021).

At the institutional level, universities must reform curricula that prioritise examination performance over holistic development by introducing compulsory modules such as "Professional Ethics in TESL" and revising practicum frameworks to formally assess relationship-building and cultural sensitivity (Kaur & Lee, 2021; Latiff & Karim, 2020). Sustainability requires establishing funding for Continuous Professional Development (CPD) to train lecturers in SEL strategies and reflective mentoring, with incentive schemes recognizing institutions that demonstrate effective affective integration. Only through such multi-level, evidence-based policy action can affective learning move from aspirational rhetoric to embedded practice.

Implications for Malaysian TESL Education

The integration of affective learning into TESL teacher education in Malaysia has significant implications for both pedagogical practice and educational policy. This approach prepares future educators to go beyond language teaching by fostering students' character development, emotional resilience and intercultural competence. These objectives are closely aligned with the core objectives of Malaysia's National Philosophy of Education, which emphasises the education of well-balanced, intellectually, emotionally and socially competent individuals (KPM, 2021).

First, TESL educators with strong affective competencies are more likely to build emotionally supportive and inclusive learning environments. This is particularly important in Malaysian classrooms where learners may feel linguistically inadequate or emotionally disengaged. A study by Samad and Yusof (2020) highlighted how

emotionally responsive ESL teachers significantly improved student participation, particularly among low-achieving students in rural areas.

Second, affective learning enhances teacher well-being and professional satisfaction. Teachers equipped with emotional intelligence are better able to manage classroom stress, establish healthier work-life boundaries, and avoid burnout. This is supported by Che Ahmad and Idris (2021), who found that emotional self-regulation among Malaysian English teachers was strongly linked to resilience and long-term career commitment.

Third, implementing affective strategies fosters stronger teacher-student relationships, which in turn promote language acquisition and classroom discipline. According to Musa and Nor (2019), TESL student-teachers who applied empathy-based feedback techniques reported reduced behavioural disruptions and higher learner confidence in speaking tasks.

Lastly, from a policy standpoint, institutionalizing affective learning contributes to the broader goal of humanising higher education, as outlined in Malaysia's Framework for Education 4.0 (MOHE, 2020). Preparing emotionally intelligent educators is critical to producing graduates who are not just competent workers but also responsible and ethical citizens in a multicultural society.

CONCLUSION

This paper emphasises the importance of affective learning in TESL teacher education, an area that is often marginalised in favour of the cognitive and psychomotor domains. Using Bloom's taxonomy of affect, social-emotional learning, and emotional intelligence, the paper will highlight how cognition shapes teacher identity, what challenges limit integration, and what strategies can more effectively incorporate affective competencies. Strengthening curriculum, professional development, and assessment will better enable TESL teachers to foster empathy, ethical reasoning, and intercultural awareness. Ultimately, institutionalizing affective learning will ensure that future teachers are emotionally intelligent, resilient and prepared for holistic teaching practice.

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Declaration Of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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