

EXPLORING OTHERNESS THROUGH SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL): AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS AND CHOICE OF TOPIC

Gal MANOR, Lect. PhD.,
Levinsky-Wingate Academic College
galmanormail@gmail.com

Abstract: *This article will explore students' choice of topics and their reflections in a course on Otherness taught to a class of pre-service teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Tenets of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) were used in teaching a seminar in English (the students' L2), focusing on self-awareness, self-management and social awareness. Several theories of Otherness coupled with literary and media examples were presented, and the students then had a free choice of topics for research from eight categories of Otherness: age, gender, disability, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, economic status, religion, and supernatural Otherness. The students' (N=90) choice of topics between 2020-2023 revealed that most students avoided culturally sensitive topics such as religion and sexual orientation, and mostly opted for professionally motivated research subjects in the field of education such as mental and physical disability. A qualitative analysis of their reasons for choosing the topics revealed three categories: personal, professional and ethical. In addition, students' responses to the course revealed that choosing their own topic led to both motivation and enjoyment of the course. Finally, the importance of allowing students to choose a topic in Higher Education will be discussed, as well as the implications for SEL in the EFL classroom.*

Keywords: *social emotional learning (SEL), otherness, teacher education, student writing, English as a foreign language (EFL).*

Introduction

Understanding students' reasons for choosing a topic is an important step towards curriculum design and course planning and can offer insights into the motivational advantages of Social Emotional Learning

(SEL) in education. A recent white paper published by leading scientists has pointed to the multiple advantages of SEL in the literacy classroom (Pearson et al., 2024). Research has also shown that choice increases motivation among students (Patall et al., 2010; Reeve, 2002) and that student who cared about their chosen topic fared better in terms of confidence and motivation (Andolina & Conklin, 2020). It is therefore important to understand why students choose their topics in order to design courses and assignments that increase motivation and promote personal and academic success in accordance with the goals of SEL.

This paper explores choice of topic and the reasons behind the choice in a course on Otherness in English literature and media delivered from 2020 to 2023 to pre-service English teachers enrolled in a college of Education. SEL pedagogy focusing on self-awareness and social awareness was implemented in the hope of creating a safe environment in which students can think more deeply about issues of Otherness and explore representations of fictional and real-world others (Linder, 2021; Schrijvers et al., 2019). The results present the choice of topics made by the 90 students who took the course, their reasons for choosing these topics and their reflections on the course.

Finally, I will present the implications of the findings for teaching about Otherness in Higher Education through tenets of SEL. Hopefully, this article will help others by showing how SEL pedagogy focusing on allowing students to choose their own topic can enhance students' understanding of Otherness in different college environments.

Literature Review

Advantages of SEL

The importance of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in education has been gaining recognition and empirical support in the last three decades, gradually becoming an essential component of pedagogy today (Cohen, 2006; Mahoney et al, 2018; Oberle et al, 2016; Weissberg, R. P. et al., 2015). SEL is a student-centered approach defined as “the development of information, mindsets, and skills that allow individuals to identify and manage their emotions, enhance their awareness of and empathy for others, and establish and work towards personal goals” (Gallagher & Stocker, 2018, p.7). The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was established in 1994 by educators and researchers hoping to promote social and emotional skills along with academic achievement in order to support personal development within an ethical framework of a just, caring and productive democratic society. In 2015, Weissberg et al. present an updated framework that focusses on five domains of Social

Emotional Learning, and on the strategies and policies that derive from the most updated research. The five domains delineated by Weissberg et al, include:

- A. Self-awareness: Being able to discern and understand one's abilities, goals, values, and emotions in order to function well in academic and social environments.
- B. Self-management: the ability to regulate emotions and behaviour in order to achieve academic and personal goals.
- C. Social awareness: the ability to acknowledge and empathise with different points of view, including those from different cultures.
- D. Relationship skills: the ability to form and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships that include cooperation and communication.
- E. Decision-making skills: the ability to make healthy and constructive choices for oneself and for others based on realistic evaluations of diverse settings.

To achieve their full effect, these five SEL skills should be promoted through strategies applied from the classroom and school environments to family and community levels (CASEL, 2023). A growing body of research, using rigorous research methods and published in top tier journals, has shown the multiple benefits of SEL to students' academic and personal achievements (Pearson et al., 2024). For example, in 2018, a meta-analysis of school based SEL programs based on 459 studies/interventions revealed "positive benefits for the participating students on a range of behavioral, attitudinal, emotional, and academic outcomes that are evident both immediately after the intervention and during various follow-up periods, depending on the specific outcome in question" (Mahoney et al., 2018, p.22). The most prominent short-term outcome addressed "positive attitudes towards self and others", which is relevant to this course and the current research (p.19). In addition, a CASEL white paper concludes that "Current research in the fields of human development, learning sciences, and neurosciences builds upon each other and demonstrates that learning environments and instruction must support students' social and emotional development and well-being to drive student literacy development" (Pearson et al., 2024, p.3).

In the last few years SEL has infiltrated institutions of Higher Education (HE) after having been embedded and researched in school settings (Wilson et al, 2024). Since literacy is highly relevant to SEL (Tussey & Haas, 2021), SEL strategies are well suited for the literacy classroom in HE, and especially beneficial for students of education

who can carry the torch forward and implement SEL with their own students.

This paper will focus on the implementation of the first three components of the CASEL model (self-awareness, self-management and social awareness), to a group of preservice teachers at a college of education in Israel. The aim of this course was to facilitate an understanding of Otherness and its representations in literature and media while encouraging a social emotional process in the classroom. The following paragraphs will delineate some of the SEL strategies used in this course and their advantages.

A. Promoting self-awareness and social awareness

Research has shown that SEL pedagogy in the literacy classroom can enhance self and social awareness (Aerila, 2021; Garling et al., 2021; Linder, 2021). Self-awareness is enhanced when students encounter texts and activities that draw attention to their own feelings and thoughts, or to characters that are similar to the students in one or more elements of their identities. Social awareness can be promoted by engaging with texts or utterances from other points of view, dissimilar to those of the students. As Martha Nussbaum (2010) has claimed, by teaching the humanities students develop the capacity to perceive the world from other points of view, a capacity which is essential for democratic societies that strive for fairness and decency. Similarly, Bishop's (1990) metaphors of the "Mirror" and the "Window" for the use of literature in the classroom are highly appropriate for the promotion of self-awareness and social awareness in the literacy classroom today. The text can act as a mirror, reflecting our own existence, and allowing us to better understand ourselves. It can also, as Nussbaum would have it, serve as a window, allowing us to view the world from the different points of view created by the author (Bishop, 1990).

B. Promoting Self-management: student autonomy and agency

Student autonomy has been shown to improve motivation and academic success (Reeve, 2002). When students choose their own topics, with the right encouragement from the teacher, they choose topics that they care deeply about (Andolina & Conklin, 2020; Weissberg, 2015). However, some studies have shown that students' autonomous choice of topic is not always welcome in higher education (Harmer and Stokes, 2016). Thus, the literature on the subject seems to suggest that a mixed approach should be implemented with regard to choosing a topic: allowing for student autonomy and agency in education but also providing some limitations and a structure for the students' academic work.

Agency is a concept closely connected to student autonomy, and is an important component of self-management, the second aspect of SEL (CASEL, 2023; Jagers, 2019). Agency is the feeling of control over our actions and their consequences (Moore, 2016). According to Firth (2013), this perception can be interpreted as an illusion or a conscious action of free will and is defined according to two elements. The first is an “intentional binding which creates a perception of agency, linking an intentional action to its outcome”. The second element derives “from the counterfactual reasoning that we could have chosen some other action” (Frith, 2013, 1). Students’ agency should be acknowledged by allowing students to choose their own topics and addressing emotional engagement to the topic and diverse points of view (Canziani et al, 2021).

Bandura (2001) delineates four core elements of human agency which were applied to the teaching of this course. The first is intentionality, which pertains to the “representation of a future course of action to be performed” (p. 6). Within the context of this article, this means that students are actively committed to the course with the anticipation of writing a seminar paper in order to gain a degree in Education. In the first four weeks of the semester, students are asked to commit to a topic of their choice, which related to Otherness and to literature and/or media in English. The second core elements of agency according to Bandura (2001) is “Forethought”, which refers to the planning ahead and adapting a course of action (p.7). This element is reflected in the syllabus via an outline and set of dates which is structured by the teacher and filled in by the student. The student makes specific and detailed plans on how to complete the writing of the paper, and what to focus on in each section. The third element is “Self-reactiveness” which is “the ability to give shape to appropriate courses of action and to motivate and regulate their execution” (p.8). This element was embodied in the students’ work on the assignments they were given throughout the course. The fourth element is “Self-Reflectiveness”, namely the capability to reflect and self-examine your previous plans, as well as your functioning and efficacy, and to choose one course of action over an other in order to achieve your goal or to alter it according to the outcomes you have achieved or not (p.10). This element was implemented through drafting, writing, receiving feedback, and then rewriting several times throughout the course.

Having discussed the SEL categories promoted in this course, the next section will explain how literary texts on the theme of Otherness can facilitate the ability to understand other people’s points of view, including those of view of individuals from other cultures and

backgrounds (Aerila, 2021; Garling et al., 2021; Linder, 2021; Schrijvers et al., 2019).

Grasping Otherness through Literature and media in the College Classroom

Otherness, a concept derived from nineteenth century philosophy and later adapted by the social sciences and the humanities, has been defined by numerous philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists. Staszak (2020) offers the following overall definition of the Other which may apply to both the social sciences and humanities:

Other: a member of a dominated out-group whose identity is considered lacking and who may be subject to discrimination by the in-group...Otherness is due less to the difference of the Other than to the point of view and the discourse of the person who perceives the Other as such. Opposing Us, the Self, and Them, the Other, is to choose a criterion that allows humanity to be divided into two groups: one that embodies the norm and whose identity is valued and another that is defined by its faults, devalued and susceptible to discrimination (p.25).

Within the context of the college classroom, Otherness is defined as any individual and/or group which deviates from the dominant norms of a certain society. The Other is perceived as opposed to the Self and the constructed group identity. Thus, identity is a socially constructed term, as Beverley Tatum (2000) explains, where one can be part of one group associated with the self, and simultaneously the Other as far as a different group is concerned:

While there may be countless ways one might be defined as exceptional, there are at least seven categories of "otherness" commonly experienced in U.S. society. People are commonly defined as other on the basis of race or ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, and physical or mental ability (p.10).

Otherness is also interpreted from a psychoanalytical point of view. Carl Gustav Jung (1968) discusses the archetype of the Shadow, which is defined as all that we do not wish to identify or associate with ourselves (Jung, 1959; Perry & Tower, 2023). Jung continues to claim that it is only once we acknowledge and accept our own shadow, as an individual or as a culture, that we stop demonizing the Other. Julia Kristeva (1993) continues this idea by stating that "the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity flounder. By recognising him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself" (p. 1).

Whereas Otherness as a term usually refers to real life individuals or groups, with a difference real or imagined, another category of

Otherness has been added to this course and presented to the students: imaginary and fictional Otherness. Richard Kearney (2003) delineates more “figures of Otherness”, namely, “strangers, gods and monsters” (p.3). This category of Otherness includes aliens, ghosts, dragons and vampires, to name but a few. Kearney’s (2003) psychoanalytical approach perceives these Others as projections of what we recoil from and resides within our unconscious.

Otherness is a perennial theme in literature and media. Exploring themes of Otherness in the language arts/literacy classroom encourages the crossing of boundaries, both personal and collective, and lends itself to multicultural literacy. Research has shown that nearly all students who engaged with literature in the classroom reported that they gained insight into themselves and others in the process (Schrijvers et al., 2016). Reading about characters who are both similar and different to the reader’s perceived identity can allow for more understanding of other points of view. These skills promote the goals of the SEL categories of self and social awareness (Linder, 2021). Research has also shown that literature must be taught through multi-modal texts in order to be taught efficiently in the language classroom (Pieper, 2023). Thus, the teaching of Otherness through SEL is enhanced when involving multi-modal texts such as songs, videos, comics and films, rather than focusing solely on canonical texts and traditional reading materials (Garlin et al, 2021; Visko et al, 2021).

Research questions:

1. Which topics were chosen by the students, and what can be learnt from their preferences?
2. What reasons emerge from students’ reflections on their choice of topic?
3. What can be learned from student feedback on this course?

Methodology

Research context

The students

The students who participated in this research are third- and fourth-year students going through a four-year training course for a B.Ed. degree in order to teach in Israeli schools. English is one of the three formal languages in Israel, and Israeli students and parents perceive it as one of the most important subjects in the curriculum. Most pre-service English teachers studying for a B.Ed. are non-native speakers of English. Thus, the teaching of pre-service English teachers takes place in an English as a foreign Language (EFL) classroom, with

students whose L1 is in most part Hebrew and Arabic, with some immigrants who are native speakers of European languages.

All in all, 90 students completed the course successfully (F:81, M:9). Most of the students were Jewish (84), out of whom 10 were immigrants (9 from countries of the former Soviet Union and 1 from France), and there were 6 Arab students (6.66%). All the participants were 3rd and 4th year student teachers, studying to gain a B. Ed. and a teaching certificate for teaching English in Israel.

2020/2021: 39 students (33F, 6M)

2021/2022: 28 students (26F, 2M)

2022/2023: 23 students (22F, 1M)

Prior requirements: The students had taken a course in literary analysis in their first or second year of study and were therefore acquainted with basic literary terms needed for analysis such as setting, plot, characterization, point of view, and theme.

The course: “The Other”

The findings in this research derive from the responses of 90 students enrolled in the course “The Other” from October 2020 to August 2023 at the Levinsky-Wingate Academic Center in Tel Aviv, Israel. The course was taught using student centered SEL pedagogy, focusing on three main domains: Self-awareness, Self-management and Social awareness. Students were offered a choice of topics, from eight categories of Otherness: age, gender, disability, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, economic status, religion, and imaginary Otherness. The course was an annual one, comprising of two semesters, each one 14 weeks long. The course was taught in hybrid format, with two thirds of sessions taught frontally on campus, and the rest synchronously on-line. The syllabus, lesson plans and assignments were identical for the three academic years referred to in this article.

Course content: The first semester focused on understanding definitions of Otherness and exemplifying them through literary and media texts. The second semester was devoted to the writing process of a research paper of approximately 5000 words on the student’s chosen topic.

Activities in the first semester: The first semester began with a discussion of Otherness based on sharing one’s emotions and listening to different points of view, thus hoping to promote self-awareness and social awareness. In this initial activity, students were asked to think about a situation in which they were the Other - the one who was different, outside of the norm - within a dominant group. Students were asked to ruminate about the experience for a few minutes, and then to share it with their classmates in an accepting and non-judgmental environment. This activity was meant to elicit an emotional response

from the students which is associated with the theme of Otherness. The different perspectives which emerged during the class discussion promoted an awareness of other people's feelings of Otherness, and hopefully also prompted social awareness. In the final sessions of this annual course, students shared their research paper by presenting it to the entire class. Students were encouraged to be supportive and empathetic towards the presenters and their research topics.

This initial activity was followed by some academic reading about Otherness. We began by reading a definition of Otherness by Staszak (2020), followed by excerpts from Julia Kristeva, Carl Gustav Jung, James Kearney, Beverley Tatum and Martha Nussbaum. Several sources on literature and Otherness were presented as well. Next, eight categories of Otherness, based on Tatum's (2000) delineation, were introduced to the students, and examples from literature and media were given in each category:

1. Age: Otherness related to age refers to constructions of different age groups, such as childhood, adolescence and old age, and the values and attitudes associated with them in diverse social settings
2. Gender/Sex: gender discrimination and constructions of femininity and masculinity from diverse sources were presented to the students, and expectations from men and women in the students' worlds were explored.
3. Physical and mental ability: Definitions of physical and mental disabilities were presented, including a perspective of disability as defined by society rather than physical and/or mental attributes.
4. Race and ethnicity: Definitions of racial and ethnic identities were discussed, as well as discrimination against racial and ethnic minorities.
5. Sexual orientation: Representations of Gay and Lesbian characters in literature and the media were discussed, focusing on social discrimination.
6. Economic status / class: Representations of poverty and homelessness in literature and the media were discussed, presenting differing attitudes towards these issues.
7. Religion / spiritual beliefs: Judaism, Islam, Christianity and other religious beliefs were presented in terms of their representations in the literature and the media.
8. Supernatural others: Fantastical and imaginary characters, who embody a supernatural element, were presented and explored. For example: superheroes, vampires, trolls.

Activities in the second semester: By the beginning of the second semester, students would have received feedback on their chosen topic and related research articles. The second semester is devoted to the writing process, which takes place at home and in the computer lab on campus. The writing process is structured by the teacher and based on short lectures, group discussions and personal mentorship. Short lectures were given on the following topics: the different parts of a research paper, writing a literature review / thesis statement / results / discussion, and different aspects of academic writing (paragraph structure, academic vocabulary, references, plagiarism, etc).

Methods Used

Towards the end of the course, along with their submission of the final paper, students were asked to provide their reflections. The prompt for reflections was:

Explain why you chose this topic and describe the process you went through while writing this paper.

A qualitative analysis was conducted on the reflections produced by the students, using coding and categories in search of themes (Chi, 1997; Terry et al, 2017).

In addition, students were sent an anonymous questionnaire on the course through Google forms. Unfortunately, only 27 students responded out of the 90 who took the course (30%).

The prompt for student questionnaire on the course was:

What is the most memorable element from the course on the Other?

Findings

Chosen topics

The results show that the most popular topic, chosen by 37 students (41%) was Otherness in terms of physical and mental ability, with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Learning Disability (LD) leading the choice of topics. This choice aligns with the fact that these students are studying education and are acquainted with these topics in advance.

The second most popular choice was racial Otherness, chosen by 24 students (27%). The most popular topic within this category was representations of African Americans as Others in literature and media. Topics related to gender were chosen by 23 students (25.55%) with most papers focusing on gender roles, body image and issues of representation of women.

Age related topics were chosen by 11 students (12.22%), whereas those related to class and social status were chosen by 8 students (8.88%).

Religion and supernatural topics take the last place in students' choices. As far as religion is concerned, only 6 students (6.66%) in the past 3 years chose to focus on Jews or Muslims as the Other. The least

chosen topic is sexual orientation. Only 2 students out of 90 (2.22%) chose this topic, probably because it remains a volatile topic in Israeli society.

Some of the papers refer to two topics, so the number of cases (94) exceeds the number of students (90). For example: a paper entitled “Feminism in Mulan” belongs to two categories- gender and ethnicity- whereas a paper on African American Women belongs to the categories gender and race.

| | age | gender | disability | Race ethnicity | Sexual orientation | class | religion | supernatural |
|--------|-----|--------|------------|----------------|--------------------|-------|----------|--------------|
| 2020-1 | 5 | 13 | 14 | 14 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 5 |
| 2021-2 | 5 | 7 | 11 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 0 |
| 2022-3 | 1 | 3 | 12 | 6 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 4 |

Qualitative analysis

This analysis provides a categorization of the reasons students chose their specific topics. The responses were given as a reply to the question: *Why did you choose this topic and what did you learn in the process of writing the paper?* Keep in mind that some students may fall into multiple categories, as their motivations can be multifaceted. Three broad categories emerged from the reflections: A personal connection to the topic chosen by 36 students (40%), a professional/educational interest in the topic chosen by 32 students (35.55%), and an ethical consideration regarding the topic was chosen by 75 students (83.33%). All in all, 143 reasons were found in the reflections. 28 students (31.11%) chose only one reason in their reflections, 43 students (47.77%) chose two reasons, and in some reflections all three reasons were mentioned (6 students; 6.66%).

Examples of personal reasons: As mentioned previously, 36 students (40%) mentioned personal reasons in relation to their topic of choice. The personal connection is to the students' identity and/or experience. For example, D., chose to explore the representations of women with a Hijab in the media from a critical point of view:

“As a Muslim woman that wearing the hijab¹ I have seen few clips from the show". This show has triggered and inspired me to explore on the representation women on the media and I have seen that most of

¹ The grammatical errors appear in the students' reflections. English is the students' L2 or L3, and I have chosen not to correct their writing for the purpose of authenticity.

the shows present taking off the hijab as a way of "freedom", and few of the shows present Muslim women as empowered women, they have limited vision on the Islam and Muslim women In general" (D., 2022). Another student chose to write about a novel revolving around an orphan due to her own experience of orphanhood:

Writing this research paper was a very interesting experience; I encountered Wolter Tevis's novel *The Queen's Gambit* during the first lockdown due to Covid-19 in 2020....As an orphan myself, the process of researching about parental loss has shed a great light on my personal experience trying to cope with the loss of my father (A., 2022).

A mature student who experienced difficulties in college due to her age, chose to analyse representations of older students in the American media:

As an older adult student who went to learn in college at the age of fifty years old to get a new career, doing this seminar paper was sort of approval to what I felt during all the years of learning. I had doubts if I will be able to keep up with the demands or do my peers will accept me into their groups. From the first day in college, my younger classmates had difficulties accepting me as a freshman, and every year and from every new peer in class, I received the same question over and over – are you a teacher? And every time I answered – no, I am an undergraduate just like you (H., 2022).

Feelings of low self-esteem about her appearance led another student to choose the topic of narrow representations of beauty in the media:

I chose this topic because as a child I often suffered from insecurity about my external look. As a child, I looked on TV and movies for women or girls who represented a different look from what I've seen at the time. I believe our world should be less racist and more egalitarian for all types of people. In today's world, where models and TV stars of all kinds are constantly seen on social media, there should be diversity and equality, to show all types of people that there are others like them (O., 2021).

Examples of professional reasons: 32 students (35.55%) chose professional reasons for their choice of topic. These students presented themselves as educators interested in a certain phenomenon in the professional setting. For example, one student chose to write about Otherness in terms of physical disability and gave the following reasons:

As an English teacher and an educator, I assume that we should teach this story in our classes. Sometimes our pupils don't want to talk or play with children that are different from them. The Hunchback of Notredam can show and teach the student that people that different from us can be our friends even they are different. In addition, this film

can show children with low self-esteem that they can introduce themselves and getting know new friends (A., 2020).

Another student focused on her experience with ASD students and emphasized the significance of the topic in the professional setting:

I decided to research this novel because of my interest in ASD, and my education in this area. As an English teacher, I sometimes meet and teach students with ASD, so I believe that researching this disorder and learning more about it is very important. I have gained a better understanding of ASD through Christopher's point of view and suggest all educators should read this book. My suggestion for further research is to rely on the novel in order to gather a guide for parents who have a child or a teenager with ASD, in order to help families and their children to go through this journey together (S., 2021).

The topic of ASD in the classroom arose in this student's reflection as well:

This paper and its findings can assist me as a teacher in the future. The seminar paper has presented the characteristics of autism. It can help me identify characteristics of autism in students, and understand their needs. The paper has also presented attitudes toward people with ASD, and showed that people with autism have few friends and their social life is usually poor. As a teacher, I have to notice the social life of students with ASD and help them develop their social skills (S., 2022).

The following students presented the importance of preventing prejudice and bullying in their classrooms:

As a teacher I would recommend this series for my students since the development during it would teach them to accept people who are different from them, also it would teach them to never judge others based on their look or beliefs (V., 2023).

It is of great importance for me as an educator to research this topic. Thanks to the research I did, I discovered amazing and creative ways to deal with bullying in my class (T., 2022).

The following student also mentioned classroom pedagogy and the professional role:

Moreover, if we, as teachers, want to give our students the confidence to share their thoughts and opinions, we should give positive feedback as an integrative part of our conversation with them. So, it's important to encourage our students to be confidence and believe in themselves (E., 2021).

A student writing about gender roles made the following remark about the educational merit of the movie she analysed:

I think this movie can be taught in schools in order to question traditional gender roles and open a conversation between the students

to see their different thoughts and points of view about this topic (M., 2021).

Examples of Ethical reasons: The most popular reason for choosing a topic was ethical (N=75, 83.33%). These students referred to social awareness and advocacy, aspiring to make a change by addressing preconceptions about disadvantaged individuals and groups and promoting equality and diversity within society. This reason for choosing a topic often accompanied another reason, either personal (N=23) or professional (N=24). Here are several examples:

I was hoping to read and discover many ways in which dogs can also help people with mental or physical issues and indeed I have found a wide range of unbelievable actions dogs can do for those "other" people. I found that this amazing animal is not only cute and lovely, but it also makes others' lives easier and full of peace and happiness although all the difficulties (E., 2021).

My personal impression from writing this paper is that we, as a society have to learn from past mistakes. We now need to concentrate on "right" and "fair" education, rights, and correction of the ways the Native Americans had suffered from by now... I think the history of native American should be more exposed and learned (S., 2021).

Prior to writing this paper, I had a vague idea and bits of information on the topic...Part of growing and being exposed to otherness gave me the tools and allowed me to spot the media's dishonest representation. With the newly gained information, I was also able to apply the knowledge into real life experience, and educating my close circle on their internalized misogyny, racism, and homophobia. The topic of otherness and this particular paper contributed greatly to my understanding of how minorities are affected in terms of education, welfare, and community (A., 2021).

The movie serves as a reminder that everybody deserves to be seen, heard, and cherished despite differences or difficulties. We can create an environment where everyone can feel accepted and a sense of belonging by promoting an inclusive and compassionate society (L., 2023).

Student feedback on the course

The following responses were received from students as a response to a questionnaire I had sent to the students registered on this course. Unfortunately, the response rate was quite low; only 27 students responded to my online questions out of the 90 who completed the course between the years 2020-2023. However, the responses deserve mentioning as they are anonymous, unlike the reflections about the choice of topic which appeared as part of the process of writing the seminar paper.

The question posed to the students was the following: what is your most significant memory (positive or negative) from the course on Otherness? (27 responses). The two most popular categories that emerged from the responses were “the freedom to choose your own topic” and “the enjoyment in the course”. 8 responses out of 27 (29.63%) mentioned the ability to choose one’s own topic as the most memorable element in the course. For example, one student wrote:

I loved the fact that we had the freedom to choose a topic close to our hearts. The Other could refer to many groups and issues, but I believe that each student chose a topic that is personally significant for them, and this increased motivation and improved the outcomes.

Another student commented:

The most significant memory is the freedom to choose our own topic and to be able to explore any group of Others. The ability to let our imagination and passion lead us was unique in the realm of academic studies.

Another dominant category which emerged from the responses of 9 (33.33%) students was “enjoyment” in the course’s topics. For example, one student wrote:

This was the most meaningful and enjoyable course that I had throughout my degree.

Another student remarked:

I really enjoyed the course and the way in which we explored the subject of Otherness through films, stories and characters was really cool and interesting.

Discussion

Understanding students’ reasons for choosing a topic is an important step towards curriculum design and course planning and can offer insights into the motivational advantages of SEL in Higher Education. Accordingly, this study has attempted to explore the significance of choosing a topic in a course on Otherness in literature and media taught using elements of SEL to 90 pre-service English teachers in Israel. Based on their reflections and feedback, giving the students a free choice of topic within the boundaries of this course was a significant factor that revealed three underlying reasons for undergraduate research: personal, professional and ethical. Even though these three clear categories emerge, many students have chosen to mention two reasons which are interconnected, such as personal and ethical reasons, or professional and ethical ones. As a result, the reasons for choosing a topic mentioned by these students seem to merge two categories and bind them together.

Although the teaching method allowed for diverse explorations of Otherness, including some culturally volatile topics, the results have

shown that the most popular topic among students was physical and mental disability, which is an accepted and familiar subject taught at the college. Topics relating to ethnicity, race and gender were also very popular. Only a handful of students (6) wrote about Otherness in the local Israeli-Palestinian context or about Jewish and Muslim Otherness. This is true for both Arab and Jewish students which suggests that the subject is avoided by both parties and not just by the Arab minority group. Students prefer to discuss Otherness in the African American context which is detached from the overwhelming and often alarming local environment.

Finally, students feedback questionnaires have shown that students found the subject of Otherness interesting and have benefitted from the class discussions and their personal research as far as the understanding of Otherness in different contexts is concerned. Being able to choose one's own topic emerged as the most memorable favorable element in the course according to 8 out of 27 anonymous responses.

A few points for further discussion

1. Allowing for agency in the students' choice of topic

Second, student agency in the choice of topics is beneficial to course outcomes and student satisfaction. Student feedback supports the free choice of topics and shows it to be a memorable element in the process of learning. Since students seem to have avoided controversial topics, more emphasis should be placed on providing a safe environment for all students to explore topics that they find meaningful. Teachers should note that students mention three main reasons for choosing a topic: personal, professional and ethical, and should therefore address these reasons when assigning a general subject for research. However, it is recommended that some guidelines and boundaries should be provided so as not to overwhelm the students and to set a common theoretical background for their research.

2. Teaching literacy in the "broad sense".

The teaching of literacy is enhanced by SEL pedagogy combined with multi modal texts rather than strictly traditional and canonical texts. For example, students moved from films such as Disney's *The Little Mermaid* and *Tangled* to the original literary texts that inspired them, comparing and contrasting them in terms of characterization, plot, setting and theme. This supports the idea of teaching literature in the "broad sense" (Pieper, 2023) and using popular media (Visco et al, 2021) in an attempt to improve motivation and academic success in the literacy classroom. Further research should explore the effect of using popular culture in HE literacy and EFL courses as part of SEL.

3. Exploring other factors

Further research should explore the role of factors such as gender, race and cultural background on student agency in relation to choice of topic, motivation, and academic success. Furthermore, it would be interesting to gauge social awareness, self-management and self-awareness before and after the teaching of a course on Otherness in literature and the media based on SEL pedagogy.

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