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CORRELATION BETWEEN EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN COLOMBIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

Ailyn Jariany Garnica-Rey[1] and Cristian Edgardo Navarro-Arana[2]

[1]Midwest Academy, Carmel, Indiana, USA
[2]Instituto Comunitario Minca, Santander, Colombia

Abstract

This research examined the correlation between Emotional Intelligence (EI) and English proficiency among 30 students aged 11-12 from a public school in Colombia. Participants were selected using simple random sampling, and data were collected through a non-experimental, quantitative, correlational design with a Pearson correlation analysis. EI was assessed using the Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test, while English proficiency was measured using the Cambridge A1 Movers exam. Findings showed that EI had a weak to moderate positive correlation with Overall English Proficiency (OEP), and a moderate positive correlation with Listening skills, with correlations of $r = 0.38$ and $r = 0.49$, respectively. As the results were statistically significant, through a regression analysis, it was found that EI individually contributed 14.7% and 24.3% to the mentioned variables. However, there was a weak, but statistically insignificant, correlation with the other skills. We concluded that EI may enhance OEP, particularly influencing listening skills; nonetheless, further research is needed, as other factors may have influenced the results.

***Keywords*:** Emotional Intelligence, English Language Teaching, Social and Emotional Learning

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***Correspondence:* Ailyn Jariany Garnica-Rey** holds a Bachelor's Degree in English Language Teaching, a Specialization in Social and Emotional Learning, and a Master´s Degree in Neuropsychology and Education. She works as a Language Development Teacher at Midwest Academy in Indiana, USA. Her research interests include Cognitive Neuroscience, Language Learning, Inclusive Education, and Socio-emotional Learning.

E-mail: agarnica@mymwa.org https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4218-5946

Cristian Edgardo Navarro-Arana holds a Bachelor's Degree in English Language Teaching, a Specialization in Inclusive Education, and a Master's Degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. He currently serves as an EFL State Educator at Instituto Comunitario Minca – Secretaría de Educación de Floridablanca in Santander, Colombia. His professional interests include Inclusive Education, EFL Teaching, and Socio-emotional Learning.

E-mail: cnavarro832@unab.edu.co https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1090-2839

Inadequate emotional expression and regulation may significantly undermine activities that require high Emotional Intelligence (EI), such as effective communication or problem-solving. The problem is exacerbated in children, as young ones are often not good at managing their emotions and struggle to control them during tense situations (Rojas & Quishpe, 2021). Some studies report that young children may show limited emotional regulation skills, which have been associated with increased anxiety, school avoidance, peer pressure, and behavioral challenges (MacCann et al., 2020), indicating a need for better support in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). Although developed countries have evidenced a positive influence on students' academic and behavioral outcomes through SEL programs (Wang et al., 2016), there is limited information on how EI is taught in Latin American schools. Thus, Emotional Education (EE) often depends on the teacher, whose emotional competencies may vary (Aguilar et al., 2013). Challenges such as measuring emotions, distrust in evaluations, time constraints, and a lack of reliable indicators hinder EI assessment (Sporzon & López-López, 2021). Hence, there is a need for trained educators and university programs that focus on enhancing emotional skills (Escolar et al., 2017).

Students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes exhibit diverse personalities and behaviors. Some are quick to learn as they typically don't resist making mistakes and are considerate of their classmates' feelings, while others may struggle to accept feedback, leading to frustration and emotional distress. Consequently, teachers play a crucial role, as they must understand the emotional factors impacting students to respond appropriately (Adams & Richie, 2017). Furthermore, given that acquiring English requires the development of both self and social skills, which are essential for communication, motivation, and cultural empathy (Rodríguez, 2004), it would be reasonable to integrate emotional aspects into the curriculum to promote personal and social growth, as education alone does not suffice for success in life (Rojas & Quishpe, 2021). However, few studies deal with the integration of emotional education within their curricula. Indeed, Valdiviezo-Loayza and Rivera-Muñoz (2022) found that only 36 studies were published in Latin America between 2018 and 2021, representing just 3.5% of global research on EI. None of these studies measured EI in English classrooms, and most focused on adults. This highlights a significant gap in research regarding the benefits of teaching emotional competencies in the EFL curriculum (Adams & Richie 2017). Still, existing studies indicate a stronger

relationship between EI and academic performance in the humanities compared to mathematics (McCann et al., 2020), with SEL suggested as an effective approach for fostering English learning in early childhood (Adams & Richie, 2017), with proposals for improving SEL practices existing for over 20 years (Payton et al., 2000).

Therefore, considering that SEL is concerned with activities that enable students to recognize their emotions, build peer bonds, and address genuine problems in the classroom (Coleman, 2021), it may potentially enhance their understanding, focus, and enthusiasm for language learning. However, most state educational institutions in South America appear to lack support and/or the necessary expertise for the implementation of SEL programs, without considering the possible impact SEL might have on learning. Thus, this study investigates the correlation between the Emotional Intelligence (EI) coefficient and the academic performance of 11-12-year-old students from a public institution in Colombia across the four English language skills.

Literature Review

Given that the research of SEL is more widespread in countries across Asia, Europe, and the United States, with minimal application in Latin American countries, and considering the limited exploration of SEL's role in the English learning process, this section explores the concept of EI, the neural principles involved in the learning process, the teaching and learning of English, and the existing research on the relationship between EI and English proficiency.

Emotional Intelligence

The concept of EI was popularized by Daniel Goleman, who extensively discusses both the implications of EI in multiple aspects of personal life and the importance of educating individuals to recognize and manage their own emotions (Goleman, 2012). Subsequently, several academics agree that this intelligence is a way of identifying, perceiving, expressing, and regulating one's own and others' emotions, as well as understanding how they affect the psychological state and interaction with others (Arntz & Trunce, 2019). Others view EI as intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence within Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983), where intrapersonal intelligence refers to the ability to connect with one's own emotions and thoughts, while interpersonal intelligence involves understanding and empathizing with

the emotions of others (Rebollo, 2017). Although with different names, EI is considered a crucial part of human performance, causing greater satisfaction with life because people tend to develop better skills to resolve conflicts and adapt to new situations (Aguilar et al., 2013).

EI consists of 5 competencies, such as self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills (Weissberg et al., 2013). Self-awareness enables individuals to build self-confidence by understanding their own emotions and thoughts and recognizing these in themselves. Seeing these in others refers to social awareness, which develops empathy. Self-management is related to resilience since it is the ability to control emotions. Meanwhile, responsible decision-making is reflected in the wisdom of action and the ability to relate refers to communication and socialization with others (Wirajaya, 2019). Thus, the first three competences refer to the ability to understand, manage, and handle one's own emotions, while the latter two are developed by understanding how others feel, as well as the decisions and impact generated (Alonso et al., 2021).

Consequently, several SEL programs are already being implemented in some countries, ranging from primary education to graduate programs (Rubiales et al., 2018). For example, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) promotes the integration of EI in preschool and kindergarten education in the United States. Many teachers highlight the benefits of applying SEL (CASEL, 2018), and research indicates that low-income students in SEL-focused programs experience lower levels of crime, greater social development, and improved academic success (Bridgeland et al., 2013). Thus, SEL should begin at an early age, as activities that involve both society and individual work prove beneficial for kids (García, 2019), whose innate curiosity activates the brain's reward system, linking emotions to the prefrontal cortex (Murano et al., 2020), contributing to students' well-being and academic performance (Puertas-Molero et al., 2020).

Emotional Intelligence Neuroanatomy

General intelligence encompasses both EI and logical intelligence, though they involve different brain structures. Studies on patients who lost emotional awareness after lesions in the right amygdala, or the right somatosensory cortex, have shown that EI activates distinct areas of the brain compared to IQ (Bar-On et al., 2003). Another

area of the right hemisphere associated with EI is the insular cortex, which is responsible for monitoring one's feelings and, in turn, enables understanding of others' emotions. Similarly, the anterior cingulate gyrus facilitates the management of emotions and impulses (Goleman, 2011).

On the other hand, long-lasting and meaningful learning occurs through proper emotional engagement during teaching. For this reason, neuroscience plays a crucial role as it examines how knowledge acquisition is influenced by emotion. The brain is modified through the acquisition of knowledge that is tied to emotions, facilitated by the neocortex, which processes information, and the limbic system, which governs emotional responses and memory, where the amygdala links emotions to long-term memory (Benavidez & Flores, 2019).

The emotional brain used to be known only as the set of areas that make up the limbic system, including the thalamus, hypothalamus, hippocampus, and amygdala. However, research has since revealed the crucial role of the prefrontal and frontal cortex in the neocortical processing of emotions, along with the involvement of the anterior cingulate cortex (Bisquerra et al., 2015). The most common structures in the scientific literature about the emotional brain are precisely the anterior cingulate cortex, related to the assessment of consequences when making decisions; the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, crucial for mediating between cognitive and emotional aspects; the amygdala, which processes multimodal information and is related to emotional recognition and behavior; and the insula, responsible for alerting to stimuli that may pose some kind of danger (Hogeveen et al., 2015).

English Language Teaching

English is taught to equip individuals with the communication skills necessary to participate in a globalized society. However, the evolution of teaching theories has not adequately addressed the real needs of learners (Rico, 2018) or how the brain learns. While various methodologies exist, few seem engaging to students (Ricoy & Álvarez-Pérez, 2016), as they often focus solely on intellectual aspects. Success in learning a foreign language, however, is achieved when individuals master the different communicative skills, not only individually but in various social contexts (Malla, 2016).

These methodologies have evolved throughout history, influenced by different schools of thought such as structuralism, behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism. In the 18th century, the grammar-translation method was introduced, characterized by the excessive use of the mother tongue and grammar. In response to the limitations of this approach, the direct teaching method was proposed, emphasizing the association between objects and concepts while avoiding the use of the mother tongue. Later, the audio-lingual method emerged, where students focus on a dialogue and perform repetition exercises in specific contexts. More recently, the communicative approach method has emerged, emphasizing role-playing games, body movement, and problem-solving in communication, allowing the exchange of ideas through conversations (Flores-Vélez & Cedeño-Macías, 2016). However, the latter places stronger emphasis on emotional and social skills, using language to create and exchange social interactions (Rico, 2018).

Nonetheless, even though the needs, interests, and opinions of students should guide the choice of methodology (Malla, 2016), teachers often end up teaching from textbooks designed outside the students' real contexts, without integrating knowledge through cultural exploration (Flores & Cedeño, 2016). Regarding assessment, in addition to standardized tests, it has been proposed that English should be assessed through projects, group work, and journal writing (Sarigöz & Fişne, 2018). Although these assessment tools individualize each student’s learning process and offer a more holistic measure of performance, they can be time-consuming and difficult to maintain in terms of validity. Therefore, although many theories have emerged, few incorporate didactic elements that facilitate the dynamism of communication (Ricoy & Álvarez-Pérez, 2016), omitting humanistic aspects such as the expression of feelings (Malla, 2016). Thus, teachers must employ active and engaging methodologies that cater to students’ needs to provide quality education (Navarro-Arana et al., 2024), promoting motivation, empathy, and interpersonal relationships.

Emotional Intelligence and English Language

When learning English, students tend to have low motivation, a lack of self-confidence, high anxiety levels, and fear of being ridiculed by their peers due to insufficient emotional skills. Therefore, an attempt has been made to develop an educational process that equips them with the necessary life skills, such as emotional

education (Puertas-Molero et al., 2020), helping them regulate their emotions and improve their language proficiency. A large proportion of EI-related programs show positive effect on students' emotional and academic development, especially medium-length programs applied to children (Puertas-Molero et al., 2020). Additionally, neurobiology shows that SEL activities stimulate motivation and increase the activity of neural networks and synaptic connections (Araya & Espinoza, 2020). In the context of foreign language learning, a study found that emotional factors like fear (19.64%) in social conversations and shame (14.28%) in private speech significantly affected children's English-speaking abilities (Rojas & Quishpe, 2021). Therefore, English teaching should be based on neuroeducation and neuro-didactic principles (Benavidez & Flores, 2019), using strategies that help maintain attention, motivation, and emotional management, which in turn reduces neuroendocrine activity and stress levels (Brasseur et al., 2013).

Several studies have highlighted a significant link between SEL skills and academic success in English, with self-awareness, social awareness (Bai et al., 2024), and relationship skills (Wirajaya et al., 2019) being the most influential in foreign language learning. Students who use strategies to manage their cognition, metacognition, and emotions tend to perform better in English writing, as these strategies boost interest and build confidence in learning (Teng & Zhang, 2018). Similarly, SEL programs that focus on managing positive emotions (Melani et al., 2020) help students improve their language skills, increasing vocabulary in the foreign language (Martin, 2020). Thus, activities such as poems, music, and reflective writing should be used to foster emotional development (Coleman, 2021). Likewise, meditation, positive reinforcement, and family support can promote emotional well-being in children, enhancing their language learning process (Niehaus & Adelson, 2014).

Method

This research followed a non-experimental quantitative correlational design, as it was not necessary to directly manipulate the variables, allowing for the analysis of their relationship. The primary objective of this study was to analyze the correlation between EI and the English proficiency level of thirty students aged 11 to 12 from a Colombian public school. The following research questions were developed: 1) What is the participants' level of EI? 2) What are the participants' English levels? 3) Is there any correlation between the two variables?

Participants

Participants were selected through simple random sampling, with the following inclusion criteria: a minimum of two years in the same school and no physical or cognitive disabilities. These participants were taught English using a communicative approach outlined in the Colombian national curriculum, attending classes for 4 hours a week plus 2 hours of independent study. Data were collected using standardized tests: the Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) to assess EI, and the Cambridge A1 Movers to measure English proficiency.

Procedure

To achieve the main objective of this study, the following six steps were followed. First, the literature was reviewed to understand how the topic had been addressed and to identify previous findings. Next, the research was then submitted to the school principal for approval, considering institutional ethical guidelines, to proceed with its application. Participants were then selected based on the exclusion criteria. Following this, parents/guardians provided consent for their children's participation in the study. After coordinating the place and time for testing, students completed both the EI and the English proficiency tests. All data were anonymized to safeguard confidentiality, and personal identifiers were removed to prevent any potential disclosure of sensitive information. Finally, the results were analyzed and correlated, leading to the conclusions of this research.

Data Collection

The Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) was chosen to provide a general assessment of participants' EI. Based on Salovey and Mayer's (1990) model. This test evaluates the expression, management, and application of emotions through 33 Likert-scale questions. According to Schutte et al. (1998) and Schutte et al. (2009), the SSEIT demonstrates strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90 for all items, and predictive validity as the EI score is directly correlated to the participants' performance on this test. Additionally, Schutte et al. (1998) reported that the reading ability required to complete the test aligns with students in late 5th and early 6th grade (ages 10-12), with a Flesch-Kincaid level of 5.68.

The Movers exam was the English test selected to assess students' English skills, as it meets the validity and reliability standards set by its creators (Cambridge English, 2016) and aligns with the level proposed by the Colombian English Language Curriculum for the participants' grade and age (Ministry of National Education, 2016). This test consists of 3 sections, assessing Listening, Reading and Writing, and Speaking. These sections measure learners' competencies, which are later converted into shields linked to the Cambridge English Scale (CES). A score of 1 to 3 shields corresponds to the pre-A1 level, with a CES range from below 80 to 100. A score of 4 to 5 shields reflects the A1 level, with a CES range from 100 to 200 (Cambridge Assessment English, 2021).

Findings

Emotional Intelligence vs Overall English Proficiency

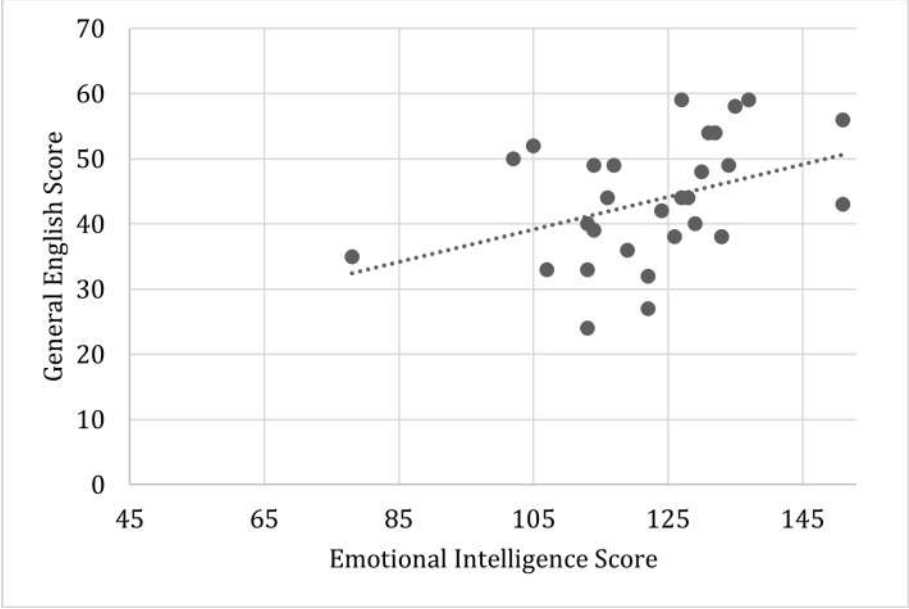
By obtaining the Pearson correlation coefficient, i.e.

$$r = \frac{n\ \sum(XY)\ -\ \sum X \sum Y}{\sqrt{[n\sum X^2 - (\sum x)^2][n\sum Y^2 - (\sum Y)^2]}},$$

we found that the correlation between EI and Overall English Proficiency (OEP) was r = 0.38, indicating a weak to moderate positive correlation between the mentioned variables considering the magnitudes: 0.00 – 0.30 = weak or insignificant correlation, 0.30 – 0.50 = weak to moderate correlation, 0.50 – 0.70 = moderate to strong correlation, and 0.70 – 1.00 = strong or powerful correlation (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Emotional Intelligence and Overall English Proficiency Correlation



After calculating the *p*-value associated with Pearson's correlation, using the formula:

$$t = \frac{r\sqrt{n-2}}{\sqrt{1-r^2}},$$

where $r = 0.38$ referred to the correlation coefficient, $n = 30$ (number of students), and t followed a student's t-distribution with $n - 2 = 28$ degrees of freedom, we also found that the statistically significant test results demonstrated a *t*-statistic = 2.20 and a *p*-value = 0.036, suggesting that, as *p*-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis that claims no correlation between the variables, can be rejected at a 95% confidence level, meaning that the observed correlation is statistically significant and is unlikely to be due to chance.

Emotional Intelligence vs. Individual English Skills

Similarly, by comparing the different English exam sections, the strongest correlation was found in listening skills, with a correlation of $r = 0.49$, indicating a moderate positive relationship. This correlation was statistically significant, with a *p*-value of approximately 0.005 (see Figure 2). In contrast, the other two sections -reading and writing combined (see Figure 3), and speaking (see Figure 4)-, both showed a correlation of $r = 0.28$ with a *p*-value = 0.134, indicating a weak positive relationship that was not statistically significant. This suggests that other factors, such as cognitive abilities, foreign language exposure, and vocabulary, may have a more substantial impact on these skills.

Figure 2

Emotional Intelligence and Listening Correlation

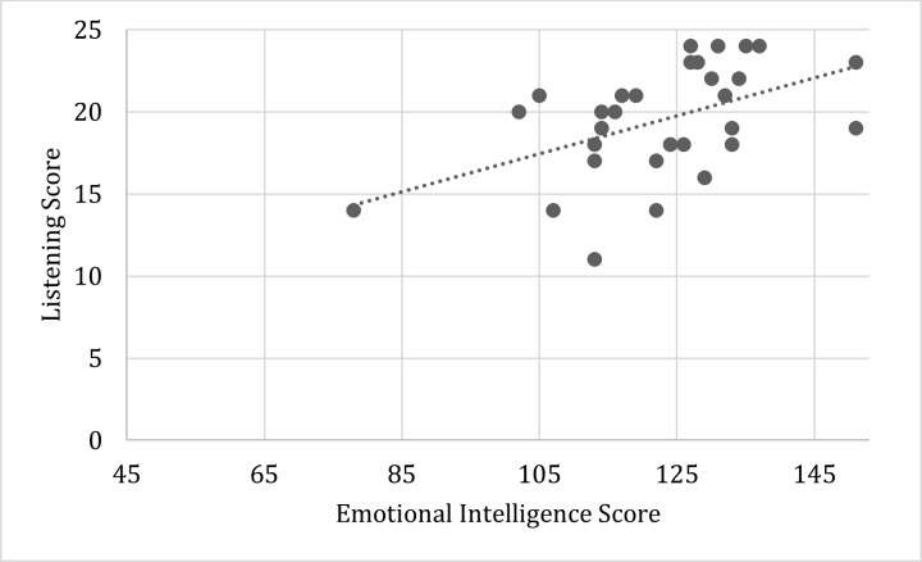


Figure 3

Emotional Intelligence and Reading - Writing Correlation

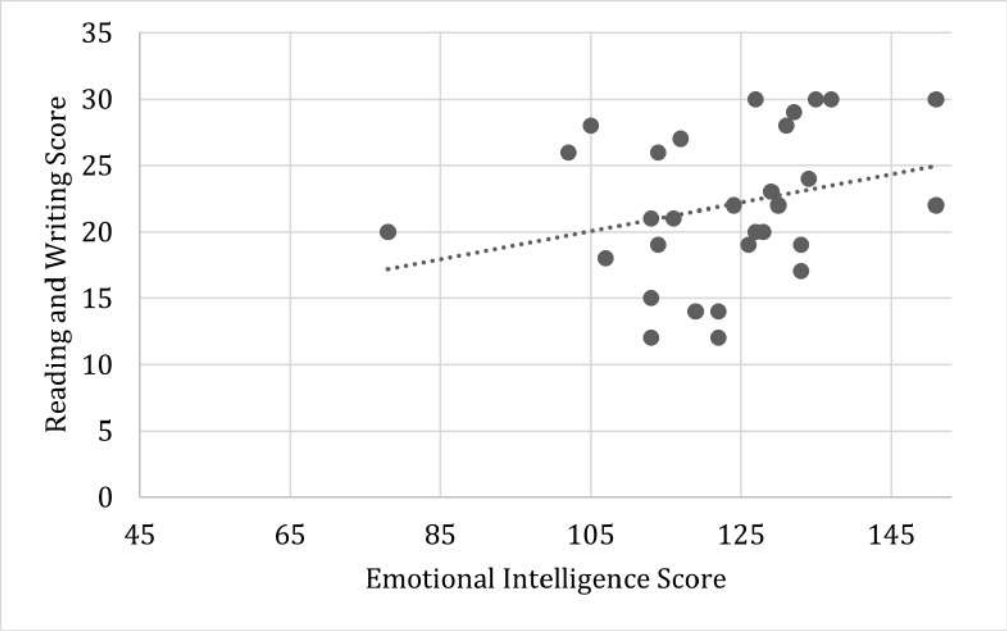
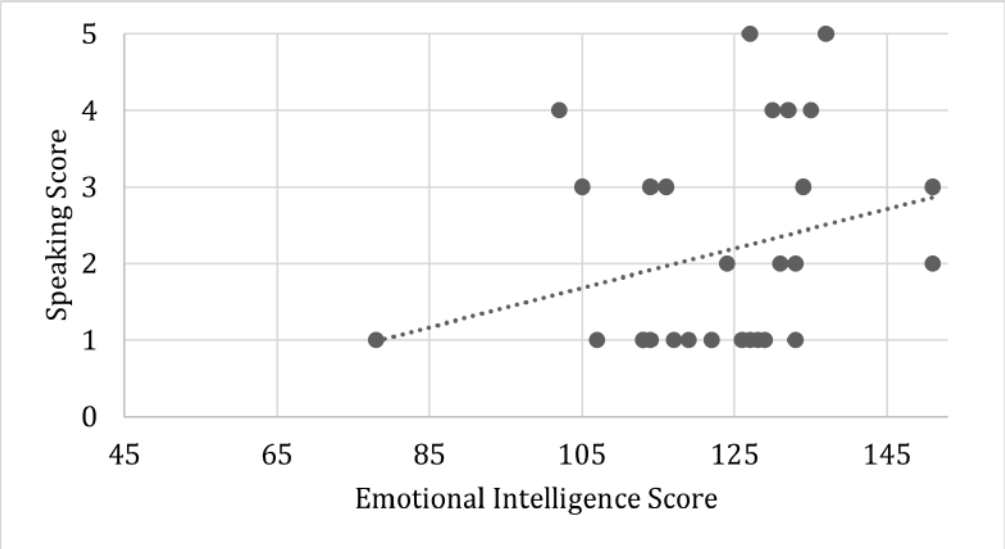


Figure 4

Emotional Intelligence and Speaking Correlation



On the other hand, given that the correlation between EI and OEP, as well as between EI and Listening, was statistically significant, a regression analysis was conducted to determine EI's contribution to these variables. The R Square value indicated that EI accounted for 14.7% of the variance in OEP. Additionally, X Variable 1 (coefficient) showed that each point increased in EI led to an increment of 0.24 in the OEP. These results were statistically significant, with a Significant *F* value of 0.03, which is below the threshold of 0.05 (see Table 1).

Table 1

Regression Analysis between EI and OEP

R Square	Standard Error	X Variable 1 (Coefficient)	Significance *F*
0.14755739	8.837476725	0.248390479	0.036104879

Moreover, in the case of EI and Listening, the contribution of the former to the latter was 24.3%. It was observed that each point that increased in EI led to an increase of 0.11 points in the Listening ones; and once again, the data was statistically significant, as the Significant *F* was 0.00 (see Table 2).

Table 2

Regression Analysis between EI and Listening

R Square	Standard Error	X Variable 1 (Coefficient)	Significance *F*
0.243788865	3.01911327	0.115804	0.005555933

Discussion and Conclusions

Although some researchers have claimed that there exists a relationship between EI and OEP (Melani et al., 2020; Puertas-Molero et al., 2020), a few have specifically examined the correlation between EI and English proficiency individually (Bai et al., 2024). This study obtained similar results to those of Wirajaya et al. (2019) as the EI had a positive weak to moderate correlation with OEP. However, this study extended the analysis by investigating not only the correlation between EI and OEP but also the correlation between EI and each of the English skills individually. The results indicated that EI had a stronger influence on listening skills compared to reading, writing, and speaking. In line with Bai et al. (2024) and Teng and Zhang (2018), the study found that despite higher EI levels, students showed no significant impact on their writing skills. Nonetheless, integrating SEL into the English curriculum could be beneficial, as it may foster a more positive classroom climate and support student engagement (Gay et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2016).

On the other hand, although the relationship was weak to moderate, there was a statistically significant tendency suggesting that students with higher EI tend to have higher OEP scores, indicating a real but modest connection between the two variables.

Therefore, it was concluded that EI influences OEP and has a substantial impact on students' listening skills, but not on reading, writing, or speaking. This suggests that EI may play a more significant role in listening skills than in other areas. However, other factors may also have influenced these outcomes. One possible reason for the positive correlation between EI and listening skills is that both involve awareness, understanding, and attentiveness. People with higher EI are generally better at recognizing the emotional context of conversations, which improves their listening effectiveness. As such, schools should consider integrating emotional development into their curricula, particularly in subjects that can be more emotionally challenging, such as English classes.

Finally, some limitations were identified in this research. First, the lack of studies conducted in Latin America made it difficult to compare the results with the national population. Also, correlating EI with each of the English skills proved challenging, as the population was immersed in a society with social and economic challenges, and participants had varying proficiency levels in the four skills, which affected the generalizability and accuracy of the results. Furthermore, the English test combined Reading and Writing into a single section, limiting the ability to draw definite conclusions about the actual correlation between EI and each of the above-mentioned skills. Further research is recommended with a larger sample, including both experimental and control groups where EI is specifically targeted, and also distinguishing results among socioeconomic levels that could have influenced the current findings.

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