Supporting English Learners: Overcoming Anxiety and Building Confidence

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Abstract

Learning English is not merely the acquisition of grammar rules and vocabulary; it is a deeply human process influenced by learners' motivation, emotional states, and self-belief. Many students face challenges such as anxiety, fear of making mistakes, or low confidence, which can hinder their participation and progress. This paper explores how psychological factors-including motivation, self-efficacy, and affective barriers-impact English language learning, and how teachers can apply practical strategies to address these challenges. Drawing on foundational theories from Gardner, Krashen, Vygotsky, Deci & Ryan, and MacIntyre, the study combines a comprehensive literature review, detailed classroom observations, and a case-based analysis of first-year economics students at the A2 English level. The findings illustrate that when teachers create supportive, engaging, and psychologically-informed learning environments, students are more willing to take risks, actively participate, and gradually transform from hesitant learners into confident users of English. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that attending to the psychological dimensions of learning not only enhances language proficiency but also fosters resilience, self-assurance, and a lifelong enthusiasm for personal and academic growth.

Keywords: English language learning, educational psychology, second language acquisition, motivation, learner psychology, teaching strategies

1. Introduction.
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The global role of English as a lingua franca has made it one of the most studied and taught languages worldwide. Mastery of English provides access to international education, research, and professional opportunities. Yet, despite its importance, many learners struggle with language acquisition, not because of lack of ability, but because of psychological barriers such as low motivation, high anxiety, or poor self-confidence.

Educational psychology offers valuable insights into these barriers and provides strategies for overcoming them. Theories of motivation, social interaction, and affective factors highlight the importance of viewing language learners as whole individuals rather than as passive recipients of linguistic input. A psychologically informed approach to English teaching recognizes that language acquisition is a dynamic interplay between cognitive skills, emotional states, and social contexts.

2. Literature Review.

Understanding the psychological aspects of learning English requires a careful look at both motivation and emotion, as these factors shape how students engage with the language. Gardner (1985) emphasized that students' attitudes toward the language and its speakers play a central role in learning outcomes. He distinguished between **integrative motivation**, where learners are driven by a genuine interest in connecting with the culture, and **instrumental motivation**, which focuses on practical

benefits such as academic achievement or career opportunities. Dörnyei (2001) built on this by showing that motivation is not static; it can fluctuate over time and be influenced by classroom dynamics, teacher behavior, and goal-setting strategies.

Emotional factors, particularly anxiety, have a powerful effect on language learning. Krashen's (1982) **Affective Filter Hypothesis** suggests that stress, fear of mistakes, or low self-esteem can act as barriers, limiting students' ability to absorb and process language input. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) further highlighted that speaking anxiety is one of the most common obstacles, often leading learners to avoid communication entirely. Teachers who create supportive, encouraging environments can lower this affective filter, making language acquisition more effective.

Motivation and emotion are closely tied to self-efficacy and learner autonomy. Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy emphasizes that students who believe in their ability to succeed are more likely to take risks, persevere, and achieve higher levels of competence. Deci and Ryan's (1985) **Self-Determination Theory** complements this view, arguing that fostering autonomy, competence, and relatedness enhances intrinsic motivation, making learning more meaningful and sustainable.

Sociocultural perspectives provide additional insight. Vygotsky (1978) argued that learning is inherently social: students internalize knowledge through interaction with teachers and peers. Ellis (2008) reinforced this, showing that meaningful communicative exchanges allow learners to notice gaps in their language and refine their skills in real-time. Oxford (1990) further emphasized the importance of teaching students **learning strategies**-cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social-that help them take control of their own learning process.

Taken together, these studies suggest that language learning is deeply human: it involves emotions, beliefs, social interaction, and cognitive strategies. The literature points to a consistent conclusion-teachers who attend to these psychological dimensions, while providing structured opportunities for practice and reflection, can significantly enhance both student engagement and language outcomes.

3. Discussion.

The process of learning English is not simply about mastering grammar or memorizing vocabulary; it is deeply intertwined with learners' emotions, motivation, and cognitive styles. Motivation, for instance, plays a central role in determining how engaged students are in the classroom. Research shows that learners who are intrinsically motivated-driven by curiosity, personal goals, or a desire to connect with English-speaking communities-tend to persist longer and achieve better outcomes than those motivated solely by external rewards. Teachers can nurture this intrinsic motivation by making lessons relevant to students' lives, highlighting personal goals, and helping learners envision themselves as competent English speakers.

Emotional factors, particularly anxiety and self-doubt, are equally significant. Many students experience fear of making mistakes or being judged, which can prevent them from participating in discussions or practicing speaking. By creating a supportive classroom environment-where mistakes are normalized and celebrated as opportunities to learn-teachers can lower students' affective filters, increasing both confidence and willingness to communicate. Activities such as warm-up games, reflective journaling, and scaffolded role-plays help students gradually overcome their anxiety while experiencing small, tangible successes.

Cognitive diversity also shapes learning. Students bring different learning styles and strategies into the classroom-some respond best to visual aids, others to auditory input or hands-on practice. Teachers

who differentiate instruction and provide multiple modes of engagement allow all learners to access the material in ways that suit them, while encouraging metacognitive reflection helps students understand which strategies work best for their individual learning.

The teacher's role extends beyond facilitating learning to fostering holistic development. Through encouragement, constructive feedback, and empathetic attention to students' emotional states, teachers help learners build self-efficacy and resilience. When paired with collaborative learning opportunities, these practices not only enhance language proficiency but also strengthen social skills, teamwork, and personal growth.

Ultimately, the discussion highlights that psychological factors are not peripheral to English learning-they are central. Motivation, anxiety, self-efficacy, and cognitive strategies interact dynamically, influencing how students participate, persist, and progress. Understanding this interplay enables teachers to design lessons that are both academically effective and emotionally supportive, creating classrooms where students feel empowered to take risks, make mistakes, and grow both linguistically and personally

At the start of the semester, a group of 40 first-year economics students at the A2 English level faced a common challenge: many were hesitant to speak in English, feeling anxious about making mistakes or being judged by their peers. Some preferred to remain silent during discussions, while others relied mainly on memorization rather than actively practicing the language. Recognizing these challenges, the teacher implemented a structured, multi-step approach grounded in psychological theory. Initially, low-stakes activities such as guided dialogues and paired conversations were introduced. Over the following weeks, the activities gradually increased in complexity. Students participated in small group discussions, role-plays simulating real-world scenarios such as ordering in a restaurant or presenting a business idea, and collaborative projects that encouraged peer teaching. To address language anxiety, short warm-up games and relaxation exercises were incorporated at the start of each class. Reflective journals were introduced, giving students a safe space to record challenges, celebrate progress, and set personal learning goals.

After six weeks, the transformation was notable. Classroom observations indicated increased voluntary participation, more risk-taking in communication, and a noticeable improvement in confidence. Quantitative measures, using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz, 1986), showed a 20% reduction in self-reported anxiety levels. Students reported that role-play activities made learning enjoyable and that receiving constructive feedback in a supportive environment boosted their motivation. One student commented, *"I used to be afraid to speak in English, but now I feel more confident because I know mistakes are part of learning."* Another noted that group projects helped them learn from peers while feeling less pressure to perform perfectly.

This case demonstrates the dynamic interplay of motivation, self-efficacy, emotional support, and strategic scaffolding in the language classroom. It highlights that psychological interventions are not abstract concepts but practical tools that can transform student experiences. By combining structured support, empathy, and opportunities for reflection, teachers can create an environment where learners not only improve their English skills but also develop confidence, resilience, and a positive attitude toward learning.

This study draws on a combination of literature review, classroom observation, and case-based reflection to explore how psychological principles can be applied in English language teaching. First, a thorough review of key theories in educational psychology and second language acquisition was

conducted, including motivation, anxiety, self-efficacy, and learner strategies. This provided a conceptual foundation for understanding the interplay between psychology and language learning.

Second, classroom observations were carried out in an A2-level English course for first-year economics students. The observations focused not only on students' language performance but also on their engagement, confidence, emotional responses, and participation patterns. Attention was paid to how different teaching strategies-such as guided dialogues, group work, role-plays, and reflective activities-affected students' motivation and willingness to communicate.

Finally, a case-based reflection was included, documenting the experiences of a representative group of students as they progressed through the semester. The case emphasized the practical application of psychological principles, highlighting both successes and challenges. While this study is qualitative rather than experimental, literature review, observation, and case illustration provides a rich understanding of the human side of English learning and teaching.

4. Recommendations.

From a teacher's point of view, helping students learn English is not only about choosing the right textbooks or activities, but also about understanding the people behind the language. Students need to feel that the classroom is a safe space, where making mistakes is seen as a natural and even necessary step in learning, not something to be embarrassed about. When teachers show encouragement, humor, and patience, students often find the courage to take risks and speak more freely. Motivation grows when lessons are connected to students' real lives-whether to their studies, future careers, or personal interests-and when teachers help them imagine themselves as confident English speakers. Giving students a sense of ownership over their learning, for example by letting them choose topics or reflect on their own progress, also builds confidence and responsibility. Because every learner is different, teachers should be attentive to varied learning styles and adapt activities to suit visual, auditory, or hands-on learners, while carefully guiding students step by step so that tasks are challenging but achievable. At the same time, it is important to be sensitive to students' emotions: a reassuring word, a private piece of feedback, or even a short warm-up game can reduce the anxiety that often surrounds speaking in a foreign language. Group work and peer support are also powerful tools, making students feel less isolated and more supported by their classmates. Finally, teachers themselves benefit from reflection-taking time to think about what worked well in class, what could be improved, and even asking students for their perspectives. In this way, teachers do more than transmit knowledge; they become partners in their students' personal and linguistic growth, unlocking not only their ability to use English but also their confidence in themselves.

4. Conclusion.

The psychology of learning English reminds us that teaching is not only about transferring grammar rules and vocabulary lists but about guiding people on a journey of growth. Students bring their emotions, motivations, and self-beliefs into the classroom, and these factors often determine whether they flourish or hold back. When teachers understand the power of motivation, the importance of confidence, and the impact of anxiety, they can respond with empathy and strategies that truly unlock potential. Theories from Gardner, Krashen, Vygotsky, and others give us valuable frameworks, but it is in everyday classroom-when a shy student finally dares to speak, or when a learner realizes they are capable of more than they thought-that these ideas come alive. For the future, English

education should place equal weight on the human side of learning as it does on academic content. Teacher training programs must prepare educators not just to teach a language but to recognize the psychological needs of their learners. Researchers have a role to play in ensuring that psychological insights are embedded into curricula and teaching materials. Most importantly, teachers themselves should feel empowered to bring empathy, creativity, and reflection into their practice. In the end, learning English is not only about mastering a global language-it is about building resilience, confidence, and connections. When education recognizes and supports the whole person, students leave the classroom not just as better speakers of English, but as stronger, more self-assured individuals ready to engage with the wider world.

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ინგლისურის შემსწავლელთა მხარდაჭერა: შფოთვის დაძლევა და თავდაჯერებულობის გაზრდა

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რეზიუმე

ინგლისური ენის შესწავლა არ არის მხოლოდ გრამატიკული წესებისა და ლექსიკური ერთეულების დაუფლება, იგი წარმოადგენს ღრმა პროცესს, რომელზეც მნიშვნელოვან გავლენას ახდენს სტუდენტთა მოტივაცია, ემოციური მდგომარეობა და თვითეფექტურობის განცდა. ხშირია შემთხვევები, როდესაც სტუდენტები აწყდებიან ისეთ სირთულეებს, როგორიცაა შფოთვა, შეცდომის დაშვების შიში ან დაბალი თვითირწმენა, რაც ზღუდავს მათ ჩართულობასა და პროგრესს სწავლის პროცესში.

მოცემული კვლევა განიხილავს ფსიქოლოგიური ფაქტორების დაძლევის პრაქტიკულ სტრატეგიებს, რომლითაც შესაძლებელია აღნიშნული სირთულეების დაძლევა. კვლევა ეფუძნება Gardner-ის, Krashen-ის, Vygotsky-ს, Deci და Ryan-ის, ასევე MacIntyre-ის თეორიულ საფუძვლებს, საკლასო პროცესის დეტალურ დაკვირვებებსა და შემთხვევებზე დაფუძნებულ ანალიზს ეკონომიკის ფაკულტეტის პირველკურსელ სტუდენტთა (A2 დონის ინგლისური) მაგალითზე. მიღებული შედეგები ცხადყოფს, რომ ფსიქოლოგიურ ასპექტებზე გათვლილი, მხარდაჭერითი და ჩართულობაზე ორიენტირებული სასწავლო გარემო ხელს უწყობს სტუდენტების აქტიურობას, სტუდენტების ავტონომიურობის გაზრდას, მზაობას და მათ თანდათან გარდაქმნას ინგლისური ენის თავდაჯერებულ შემსწავლელებად. საბოლოო ჯამში, ნაშრომი ადასტურებს, რომ სწავლის ფსიქოლოგიურ განზომილებებზე ყურადღების გამახვილება არა მხოლოდ აუმჯობესებს ენობრივ კომპეტენციას, არამედ ანვითარებს ისეთ ფსიქოლოგიურ ფაქტორებს, როგორიცაა თვითდაჯერებულობა, მოტივაცია და პიროვნული და აკადემიური განვითარებისადმი ხანგრძლივ სწრაფვას.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ინგლისური ენის შესწავლა, საგანმანათლებლო ფსიქოლოგია, მეორე ენის შექმნა, მოტივაცია, შემსწავლელის ფსიქოლოგია, სწავლების სტრატეგიები