

# Psychological Interaction in Vietnamese EFL Classrooms: Teachers' Perceptions of Its Role in Lower Secondary Student Learning Success

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## Abstract

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, student learning is shaped not only by instructional strategies but also by the quality of teacher-student psychological interaction. In lower secondary classrooms, where adolescents undergo rapid cognitive, emotional, and social development, publicly corrective or emotionally unsupportive teacher responses may heighten anxiety and impede language acquisition, as proposed by Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory, this study proposes that private dialogue, emotional validation, and goal-oriented encouragement may sustain learner engagement and development. A mixed-format survey will be administered to 40-50 practising lower secondary EFL teachers in Vietnam using purposive sampling. The instrument comprises demographic items, fifteen Likert-scale items across three constructs, and three open-ended questions. Quantitative data will be analysed descriptively; qualitative responses will be examined through directed content analysis. The study aims to contribute context-specific empirical evidence on psychologically supportive classroom practices in the Vietnamese EFL context.

**Keywords:** *psychological interaction, teacher perception, private dialogue, emotional validation, goal-oriented encouragement, lower secondary EFL, Vietnam*

## Literature Review

### Psychological Interaction as an Acquisition-Enabling Practice

Psychological interaction in language classrooms can be understood through the complementary insights of sociocultural, affective, and motivational theories, each of which highlights different mechanisms through which teacher-student interaction can influence language learning.

From a sociocultural perspective, Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) clarifies learning as a social interactive process in which cognitive development happens through interaction with a more cognitive subject. Although the ZPD primarily focuses on the role of cognitive scaffolding rather than emotional weight, the cognitive assistance must accompany an appealing and comfortable classroom environment in which learners feel motivated to participate and respond to guidance. Moreover, Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis provides a more direct explanation of how emotional variables may influence language acquisition. Krashen argues that emotional factors can function as an affective filter, determining learners' ability to process comprehensible input. On the other hand, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) found that negative emotional experiences, such as anxiety, can lower learner confidence and reduce classroom participation, resulting in bad performance. When learners feel confident and emotionally secure, language acquisition tends to be effective. Psychological teacher practices that support learner confidence and autonomy, such as private dialogue and emotional validation, may help create psychological conditions more favorable to language learning. Research in EFL contexts has confirmed that teachers' emotional support indirectly boosts learner engagement through the mediation of enjoyment, highlighting the importance of positive teacher–student interaction for learning outcomes (Li et al., 2020)

Similarly, Deci and Ryan's (1985) work with Self-Determination Theory (SDT) declares that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are three basic psychological needs that drive intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement. In educational contexts, when students feel personally supported, capable of success, and goal-oriented, they tend to be more persistent. Even though they have experienced a series of arduous practice days, they can be motivated to move forward due to the sense of choice, which synthesizes with goal-setting theory, suggesting that relevant, specific, and reachable goals can enhance motivation, persistence, and performance (Locke & Latham, 2002). This provides a persuasive framework for understanding goal-oriented encouragement as a psychologically supportive application for English learners.

### Teacher Perception

The comprehension of teacher cognition provides a practical framework for understanding why teacher reactions in classrooms depend not only on pedagogical competence but also on teachers' beliefs, perceptions, and interpretive judgments. Borg's (2003) influential review defines teacher perception as an interconnected system of beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, and thought processes that shape instructional decision-making before, during, and after classroom approaches. From this perspective, teachers' responses to student behaviour are not neutral; Instead, they are filtered through the teacher's interpretation of the meaning of the student's actions. Then, teachers introduce pedagogical selections that are considered appropriate by themselves. With a similar perspective, Jussim and Harber (2005), the researchers claim that teachers may interpret the same student behaviour differently, leading to different judgments and responses. In a classroom setting, student silence, defiance, or non-compliance can therefore be interpreted as non-participation, a need for correction, or a signal of emotional distress, requiring supportive intervention from the teachers.

Related research also suggests that teachers' internal psychological awareness may influence their classroom interactions. Teachers with stronger emotional intelligence are generally better able to regulate their own emotional responses, manage interpersonal relationships, and respond supportively to students' needs (Brackett et al., 2011). Similarly, Burić and Kim (2020) found that higher teacher self-efficacy was positively associated with instructional quality, including stronger classroom management, greater cognitive activation, and a more supportive classroom climate. Therefore, teachers' beliefs and emotional competencies may shape the quality of their classroom interaction and their capacity to create supportive learning environments in contributing to students' development in lower secondary EFL classrooms.

## Research Objectives

This study aims to examine the extent to which lower secondary EFL teachers in Vietnam perceive private dialogue, emotional validation, and goal-oriented encouragement as influencing student English language learning success and to identify contextual factors that teachers perceive as affecting their implementation of these practices in Vietnamese lower secondary classrooms.

## Participants

The target audience is EFL teachers at the lower secondary level (Grades 6-9) in Vietnam. The target sample size is 40-50 participants. The requirements of participants: (1) be currently teaching English for lower secondary level students (2) have a minimum of one year of teaching experience.

## Collected Result

### Quantitative Findings

Teachers generally agreed that private dialogue, emotional validation, and goal-oriented encouragement contribute positively to students' English learning success, with mean scores ranging from 4.17 to 4.30/5. Private Dialogue received the strongest endorsement (M = 4.30), particularly one-to-one conversations that help teachers understand emotional causes of disengagement. Goal-Oriented Encouragement also scored highly (M = 4.27), especially linking encouragement to specific learning goals. Emotional Validation received the lowest rating (M = 4.17), with teachers less convinced that acknowledging emotional struggles directly leads to renewed persistence. Exploratory subgroup comparisons suggest that wellbeing/behaviour-management training may strengthen teachers' use of emotional support strategies, warranting further investigation.

### Qualitative Findings

Directed content analysis revealed that teachers' strong quantitative endorsement of psychological interaction coexists with substantial structural and practical barriers to consistent implementation. For Private Dialogue, the main challenges were large class sizes, limited lesson time, lack of private space, and insufficient practical techniques. Emotional Validation was constrained by adolescent students' emotional guardedness, cultural norms around emotional expression, time pressure, and limited teacher training. For Goal-Oriented Encouragement, the key challenges were diverse student abilities, motivations, and goals, alongside tensions between externally imposed academic targets and learners' personal aspirations. Across all three constructs, teachers highlighted a recurring skills gap, suggesting that practical training and context-sensitive strategies may be essential for translating positive attitudes into classroom practice.

## Implications

The findings suggest several implications for practice. First, teacher professional development should prioritise practical, rehearsed techniques rather than further conceptual awareness, as teachers repeatedly reported lacking specific methods for psychological interaction. Second, structural barriers, including class size, lesson time, and limited private space, require school-level support alongside teacher training. Third, goal-oriented encouragement would benefit from flexible goal-setting frameworks (Locke & Latham, 2002) that balance shared academic targets with individual learner goals. Fourth, emotional validation in the Vietnamese EFL context may require greater attention to cultural attitudes toward emotional expression, including helping students develop the language to identify and communicate their emotions.

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