

Original Article

Emotional and Cognitive Landscapes of EFL Learners Living in the Philippines: A Phenomenological Study

Charmaine Penalba

Author Information:

University of Perpetual Help System Dalta,
Philippines

Correspondence:
phencham28@gmail.com

Article History:

Date received: November 14, 2025
Date revised: January 27, 2026
Date accepted: February 10, 2026

Recommended citation:

Penalba, C. (2026). Emotional and cognitive landscapes of EFL learners living in the Philippines: A phenomenological study. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 4(3), 79-89. <https://doi.org/10.69569/jip.2025.754>

Abstract. This study examined the emotional and cognitive experiences of Southeast Asian EFL learners in the Philippines as they navigated language-learning challenges. Grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, the analysis examined the roles of social interaction, scaffolding, and emotional readiness in language development. Using a phenomenological design, in-depth interviews were conducted with learners from Vietnam, Myanmar, and Indonesia to capture their lived academic and social experiences. Findings indicated pronounced speaking anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, intensified by cultural adjustment challenges. Despite these barriers, supportive interactions with peers, teachers, and institutions fostered emotional resilience and sustained motivation. Learners employed cognitive strategies such as planning, self-monitoring, resource-based learning, and adaptive practice to manage academic demands and improve proficiency. Peer collaboration, teacher responsiveness, and culturally sensitive institutional support further enhanced learner confidence and engagement. The study underscores the interdependence of emotional and cognitive processes in second language acquisition and highlights the importance of social scaffolding and affective support. It recommends holistic pedagogical approaches that address both cognitive development and emotional well-being to promote academic, social, and emotional success among Southeast Asian EFL learners.

Keywords: Southeast Asian EFL learners; Emotional landscapes; Cognitive strategies; Speaking anxiety; Cultural adjustment.

English language learning in the Philippines has evolved into a dynamic field shaped by its colonial history and contemporary global demand for English proficiency. The country's strong educational infrastructure and English-speaking environment have made it a hub for both local and international learners (Study English Direct, 2025). Despite these advantages, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in the Philippines face complex emotional and cognitive challenges that affect their engagement, motivation, and proficiency. Understanding these dynamics is crucial, as emotional states often influence learners' willingness to communicate and employ strategies effectively (Almesaar, 2022; Labicane, 2021).

The emergence of major ESL centers in cities such as Baguio and Cebu has fostered culturally diverse learning environments that promote interaction and authentic language use. These settings, however, also heighten affective pressures like fear of speaking, comparison anxiety, and self-doubt, particularly among learners adapting to new cultural contexts (Ye & Caiga, 2024). Such emotions shape cognitive engagement, determining how

learners approach tasks, process input, and participate in class. Investigating the interplay between these emotional and cognitive processes provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of EFL learners navigating Philippine ESL programs.

Emotions are at the heart of language learning. Studies consistently show that anxiety and fear of negative evaluation hinder active participation and oral performance (Bagalay et al., 2021). Filipino students, in particular, report high anxiety during speaking tasks, leading to avoidance of communicative activities (Labicane, 2021). Nevertheless, learners are not passive recipients of these experiences. Pabro-Maquidato (2021) found that EFL students cope through self-encouragement, peer support, and rehearsal, demonstrating emotional resilience. These underscore the importance of recognizing learners' affective realities as integral to language acquisition, not as peripheral challenges.

Zhang (2021) theorized that learners' emotional exposure to linguistic inputs enhances motivation and academic performance, showing that emotion and cognition are inseparable in learning. Learners who connect emotionally with learning materials show higher engagement and use of strategies. Applying this framework to the Philippine ESL context allows a more nuanced view of how emotion-driven experiences influence cognitive regulation, particularly in immersive, interaction-rich environments where learners' emotions are constantly negotiated.

Equally vital are the cognitive strategies learners use to manage tasks and process language. James and Bulusan (2020) emphasized that metacognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring, and self-evaluation improve comprehension and task performance. Similarly, Dayag-Tungpalan (2023) found that reflective practices and self-monitoring enhanced speaking performance and reduced anxiety. These suggest that cognitive strategies are not only tools for linguistic improvement but also mechanisms for emotional regulation, illustrating how strategic learning can mitigate affective barriers.

Recent studies further highlight how social contexts enhance cognitive engagement. Hardiyanto et al (2024) revealed that peer collaboration and structured practice boost learners' strategic use of language, while Bouknify and Anasse (2024) reported that rehearsal and mnemonic techniques improve both confidence and fluency. Such findings point to the interconnectedness of emotion, cognition, and environment. Learners benefit most when instruction integrates strategy training with supportive interaction. Thus, language learning in Philippine ESL settings must be viewed as a socially mediated, emotionally infused, and cognitively active process.

Teacher and institutional support also play a crucial mediating role. Theriana (2023) emphasized that constructive feedback and encouragement from teachers help learners overcome anxiety and improve engagement. Similarly, Ojanola (2023) observed that institutional structures offering smaller class sizes and personalized instruction foster confidence and participation. In the Philippines, where immersion-based instruction is standard, such support systems are vital in balancing emotional and cognitive demands, ensuring learners feel both challenged and secure in their learning environments.

Despite the growing body of literature, a clear research gap persists regarding EFL learners' lived experiences in the Philippine context. Most studies have focused on learners in foreign settings such as Saudi Arabia, China, or Indonesia, leaving a limited understanding of how emotional and cognitive factors intersect among EFL learners in local ESL environments. Existing research tends to isolate affective or cognitive dimensions rather than examining their convergence. This gap underscores the need for qualitative studies that explore how learners personally experience and negotiate these interconnected processes.

Addressing this gap, the present study explores the emotional and cognitive landscapes of EFL learners in the Philippines. It investigates how emotional experiences shape cognitive strategies and how learners perceive institutional and peer support in managing these challenges. This inquiry is significant as it offers practical and theoretical contributions to language education by providing insights that can guide teachers, schools, and policymakers in fostering emotionally supportive and cognitively enriching environments. Ultimately, the study aims to deepen understanding of how emotion and cognition collectively influence EFL learning success in the Philippine context. Specifically, it aimed to address the following questions: What emotional experiences do EFL learners commonly encounter during their language learning journey? How do EFL learners describe cognitive strategies they use to improve their English proficiency? How do learners perceive the support they receive (lack) from teachers, peers, and institutions in managing their emotional and cognitive challenges?

Methodology

This chapter outlines the research design and methods used for exploring the emotional and cognitive landscapes of Southeast Asian EFL learners living in the Philippines. It provides a clear framework for how the study was conducted, detailing the research approach, participant selection, data generation strategies, and thematic reflection process. By adopting Van Manen's phenomenological approach, this study ensures that the research process remains transparent, systematic, and aligned with its objectives, while highlighting participants' authentic voices and the meanings embedded in their lived experiences.

Research Design:

The study employed a phenomenological approach, drawing on Van Manen's framework to explore and interpret individuals' lived experiences. This approach was chosen because it sought to uncover the essence of how Southeast Asian EFL learners in the Philippines made sense of their emotional and cognitive landscapes. Unlike descriptive phenomenology, Van Manen's hermeneutic stance allowed not only description but also interpretation of experiences to reveal deeper meanings. Through this lens, the study examined how learners articulated their struggles, adjustments, and triumphs as they navigated language learning and cultural immersion. Van Manen's four lifeworld existential- lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality), and lived relation (relationality)- served as a guide for both data generation and interpretation. These existentials ensured that the inquiry remained grounded in the concrete realities of participants' experiences while remaining open to broader meanings that transcended individual accounts.

Selection of Co-participants

The study used purposive sampling to recruit 8-15 Southeast Asian EFL learners who were studying or residing in the Philippines. This number was considered sufficient for phenomenological inquiry, which prioritized depth of insight over breadth of coverage (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were chosen based on the following criteria: They were nationals of Southeast Asian countries (Indonesia, Myanmar, and Vietnam), they had at least six months of experience living in the Philippines as EFL learners, and they were willing to share and reflect on their emotional and cognitive experiences related to language learning and cultural adjustment. Recruitment was facilitated through academic institutions, language centers, and personal networks. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any stage.

Data Generation

The primary data were generated through in-depth phenomenological interviews, guided by Van Manen's approach to conversational questioning. These interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to share their experiences freely while remaining aligned with the study's core research questions. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and focused on eliciting detailed accounts of emotional challenges, coping mechanisms, cognitive strategies, and perceptions of the Philippine cultural and academic environment.

Questions were open-ended and exploratory, such as: Can you describe a time when you felt strong emotions, such as anxiety, embarrassment, or confidence, while learning or using English in the Philippines? What made you feel that way? What techniques or personal strategies do you usually use to help yourself understand or speak English better? How did you discover or develop these strategies? How have your teachers, classmates, or school helped you deal with your struggles in learning English both emotionally and mentally?

All interviews were recorded with participants' permission and transcribed verbatim. Field notes and reflective memos were also maintained to capture contextual details and the researcher's interpretive insights.

Thematic Reflections

This study followed Van Manen's phenomenological reflection process, which involved moving back and forth between the parts and the whole of the text to uncover essential themes. The steps included:

Holistic Reading - considering each transcript as a whole and identifying an overall meaning.

Selective Reading - isolating statements or phrases that appeared particularly essential to the experience.

Detailed Reading - scrutinizing each sentence or phrase to see what it revealed about the phenomenon.

From these readings, emergent themes were clustered into broader categories representing the emotional and cognitive landscapes of learners. The use of Van Manen's lifeworld existential ensured that interpretations remained grounded in the human experience of space, body, time, and relation.

Literature Comparison

The methodological stance of this study distinguished it from much of the existing research on EFL learners, which often employed quantitative surveys or experimental designs. While such studies provided measurable outcomes, they frequently overlooked the subjective dimension of language learning—the emotions, meanings, and lived struggles behind learner performance. By contrast, Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology allowed for a deeply human-centered inquiry, highlighting learners' voices as central sources of knowledge. Furthermore, this approach enabled the study to bridge emotional and cognitive dimensions, which were often studied separately in applied linguistics. By situating learners' reflections within their lived contexts, the study provided nuanced insights into how language acquisition is shaped not only by instructional methods but also by the intertwined realities of identity, culture, and human experience.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed thematically. The researcher identified significant statements, formulated meanings, and clustered or organized them into themes that reflect the core elements of participants' emotional and cognitive experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were upheld throughout the research process. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants, and informed consent was obtained. Their voluntary participation and their right to withdraw at any time were acknowledged. Their confidentiality and anonymity were also observed. All forms of deceptive data and biased representations of primary data results were avoided.

Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the narratives of Southeast Asian EFL learners living in the Philippines, analyzed through Van Manen's phenomenological lens. The study sought to uncover the emotional and cognitive landscapes shaping learners' second language acquisition. Data gathered from in-depth interviews were coded and organized into emergent themes, which are presented here in alignment with the research questions. Co-participants' voices are foregrounded through direct quotations, while themes are corroborated with existing studies to provide a comprehensive interpretation.

The narratives revealed three key emotional themes shaping the experiences of Southeast Asian EFL learners in the Philippines: (1) Speaking Anxiety and Fear of Negative Evaluation, (2) Cultural Adjustment and Emotional Strain, and (3) Emotional Growth Through Supportive Interactions.

Participant Response	Code	Theme
(P3) "I was laughed at when I said it wrong."	Speaking Anxiety	Fear of Negative Evaluation
(P4) "I got nervous when the teacher asked me to repeat."	Public Speaking Anxiety	Self-Consciousness
(P7) "Even our broken English is accepted out of consideration."	Accent Concern	Sociocultural Sensitivity
(P9) "I cried in the dorm. I felt I was not learning."	Emotional Strain	Cultural Adjustment Stress
(P4) "They said it is okay to make mistakes. That made me happy to try."	Encouragement	Emotional Support
(P8) "When my teacher said 'good job,' I felt like I could do it more."	Teacher Praise	Confidence Boost
(P2) "We support each other to grow and develop our English."	Peer Encouragement	Collaborative Learning

Theme 1: Speaking Anxiety and Fear of Negative Evaluation

Speaking anxiety and fear of negative evaluation surfaced as one of the most dominant emotional experiences among the participants. Many learners expressed apprehension when required to speak in front of others, particularly when they were unsure of their grammar or pronunciation. Their responses reveal that emotional tension during oral communication often stems from self-consciousness and social comparison. This finding aligns with Horwitz's (2016) assertion that anxiety in foreign language classrooms is a pervasive emotional barrier that constrains participation and diminishes learners' willingness to communicate.

Participants frequently reported feeling embarrassed and nervous during speaking tasks. For instance, one participant shared, "I was laughed at when I said it wrong," (P3), while another stated, "I got nervous when the teacher

asked me to repeat," (P4). These statements reflect a recurring concern about public mistakes and perceived peer judgment. The fear of ridicule fosters avoidance behavior, where learners refrain from volunteering answers or engaging in conversation. As Bagalay et al. (2021) found, such anxiety can lead to cognitive overload, limiting the capacity to process linguistic input effectively. Thus, emotional insecurity in speaking environments can impede learners' confidence and learning outcomes.

From Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective, language acquisition occurs within social interaction, where learners co-construct meaning through dialogue and feedback. However, when learners perceive communicative exchanges as threatening, their entry into the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is obstructed. Speaking anxiety, therefore, disrupts the social mediation essential for cognitive and linguistic growth. The absence of supportive scaffolding deprives learners of guided participation, keeping them within the boundaries of what they can do independently rather than extending their linguistic competence.

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis complements this view by asserting that high anxiety raises the affective filter, preventing linguistic input from being effectively processed. When learners fear negative evaluation, their affective filter heightens, blocking access to comprehensible input necessary for acquisition (Alharbi, 2021). In contrast, a low-anxiety environment enables smoother intake and natural language development. Thus, speaking anxiety not only represents an emotional barrier but also a cognitive blockade to language processing and retention.

Theme 2: Cultural Adjustment and Emotional Strain

Cultural adjustment emerged as another significant emotional challenge faced by EFL learners. Participants shared that living and studying in a new environment led to homesickness, self-doubt, and emotional fatigue. These experiences reveal that linguistic learning cannot be separated from cultural adaptation; rather, the two processes are intertwined. The transition to an unfamiliar sociocultural context often provokes feelings of isolation and inadequacy, especially when learners encounter communication barriers or social misunderstandings.

Several participants described struggling emotionally as they adjusted to the cultural and linguistic demands of studying in the Philippines. One participant admitted, *"I cried in the dorm. I felt I was not learning"* (P9), reflecting the emotional exhaustion associated with perceived underachievement. Such feelings are consistent with Almesaar's (2022) findings, which noted that emotional instability and fluctuations in motivation are prevalent among EFL learners in cross-cultural settings. Fitrawati et al. (2023) likewise found that emotional strain, including anxiety and low confidence, is often heightened by the pressure to adapt academically and socially in a foreign environment. These emotional difficulties can manifest in decreased motivation and self-efficacy, negatively influencing learners' progress.

According to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, learners' psychological development is shaped by social interaction and mediation. Emotional strain during cultural adaptation signals a lack of sufficient social scaffolding from teachers, peers, or institutions. Without these mediating relationships, learners struggle to navigate their ZPD effectively. Cultural support structures such as peer mentoring, orientation programs, and classroom inclusivity can serve as mediational tools that reduce alienation and encourage integration into the learning community.

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis also explains why difficulties with cultural adjustment inhibit language acquisition. Emotional strain, homesickness, or cultural dissonance increase stress and lower motivation, thereby raising the affective filter (Pabro-Maquidato, 2021). When learners feel alienated, they become less receptive to input and less inclined to take communicative risks. On the other hand, positive emotional climates-where learners feel understood and accepted-can lower the affective filter and enhance comprehension and participation.

Theme 3: Emotional Growth Through Supportive Interactions

While learners initially faced anxiety and cultural strain, many eventually experienced emotional growth and empowerment through supportive relationships. The data revealed that positive feedback, encouragement, and empathetic communication from teachers and peers nurtured learners' confidence. This theme emphasizes that emotional growth is not spontaneous but socially constructed through interpersonal affirmation and collaboration. Statements such as *"They said it is okay to make mistakes. That made me happy to try"* (P4) and *"When my teacher said 'good job,' I felt like I could do it more"* (P8) illustrate how emotional validation transformed learners' self-perception. These expressions reveal the psychological impact of encouragement on risk-taking and perseverance.

Similar findings were reported by Zhang et al. (2024), who identified emotional support as a mediator of engagement and academic success. Likewise, Su and Guo (2024) found that collaborative emotional environments help regulate anxiety and promote sustained effort in EFL learning.

From Vygotsky's lens, emotional growth reflects the internalization of social experiences into personal development. Through positive social mediation, learners acquire not only linguistic competence but also emotional resilience. Teacher praise, peer collaboration, and group activities serve as scaffolding mechanisms that expand learners' ZPD and foster motivation. As learners interact with supportive figures, they gradually transform external affirmation into internal self-efficacy. In Krashen's framework, emotional support lowers the affective filter, allowing greater access to language input and encouraging authentic communication. Positive reinforcement increases learners' willingness to communicate and enhances retention by associating language learning with pleasure rather than fear. When teachers and peers validate learners' efforts, emotional tension decreases, and the language learning process becomes more spontaneous and enjoyable (Zhang, 2021).

The narratives revealed that learners used diverse cognitive strategies to overcome difficulties and enhance their English proficiency. Their approaches demonstrate a balance between independent initiative and socially mediated learning. Three overarching themes emerged: (1) Planning and Self-Monitoring, (2) Resource-Based Learning, and (3) Cognitive Adaptation Through Practice. These strategies illustrate that language learning is both self-regulated and socially influenced, aligning with Vygotsky's *Sociocultural Theory* and Krashen's *Affective Filter Hypothesis*.

Table 2. *Cognitive Strategies*

Participant Response	Code	Themes
(P1) "I make a schedule for practicing English daily."	Planning	Planning & Self-Monitoring
(P3) "I note the words I often mispronounce and practice them at night."	Self-Monitoring	Planning & Self-Monitoring
(P5) "We plan group sessions to discuss grammar together."	Peer Coordination	Planning & Self-Monitoring
(P2) "I use online dictionaries and YouTube videos."	Digital Resources	Resource-Based Learning
(P3) "We exchange notes and videos to help each other."	Peer Sharing	Resource-Based Learning
(P6) "Listening to podcasts helps me understand accents."	Digital Practice	Resource-Based Learning
(P1) "I practice speaking the same phrases until I feel confident."	Repetitive Practice	Cognitive Adaptation Through Practice
(P6) "I pretend I am in a real-life situation to practice English."	Simulation	Cognitive Adaptation Through Practice
(P9) "Daily practice makes it easier to remember and use new words."	Consistent Practice	Cognitive Adaptation Through Practice

Theme 1: Planning and Self-Monitoring

Planning and self-monitoring emerged as essential strategies for learners striving to manage their time, focus their effort, and evaluate their progress. This theme illustrates that EFL learners are not passive recipients of instruction but active agents in structuring their learning process. By setting goals and systematically tracking their achievements, learners cultivate autonomy and awareness of their strengths and weaknesses. Hasani and Pahamzah (2022) emphasized that such metacognitive strategies, particularly planning and monitoring, play a vital role in improving reading comprehension and overall proficiency among EFL learners.

Participants demonstrated an awareness of the importance of organizing and assessing their learning routines. For example, one participant noted, "I make a schedule for practicing English daily" (P1), while another shared, "I note the words I often mispronounce and practice them at night" (P3). These statements reflect a deliberate effort to set personal goals, monitor errors, and evaluate performance over time. As Albashtawi and Mahfoodh (2023) found, students who engage in structured planning and evaluation are more likely to achieve higher academic outcomes, suggesting that metacognitive engagement enhances both cognitive and affective readiness to learn.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory provides a framework for understanding how learners develop planning and monitoring skills through social mediation. Initially guided by teachers or peers, these strategies become internalized as self-regulatory tools. Planning, in this sense, is a product of the learner's interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)-where external scaffolding eventually transforms into internal self-direction. The learners' ability to set routines and assess progress thus reflects the gradual internalization of socially acquired learning practices.

From Krashen's perspective, planning and self-monitoring help lower the affective filter by fostering a sense of

control and competence. When learners feel organized and purposeful, anxiety decreases and motivation increases, creating optimal conditions for processing language input. As Alharbi (2021) observed, students who develop confidence in structured learning environments exhibit lower stress and higher participation. Therefore, self-regulation not only enhances cognition but also mitigates affective barriers.

Theme 2: Resource-Based Learning

The second cognitive strategy theme, resource-based learning, centers on the learners' creative use of technological, textual, and social tools to facilitate language acquisition. EFL learners increasingly rely on accessible online resources and peer-generated materials to supplement formal instruction. As digital technology becomes integrated into education, these resources serve as mediational aids that extend learning beyond the classroom. Ahmed (2020) observed that learners who actively utilize such aids demonstrate greater metacognitive awareness and adaptability.

Several participants expressed a need for both digital and human resources to enhance their learning. Statements such as *"I use online dictionaries and YouTube videos"* (P2) and *"We exchange notes and videos to help each other"* (P3) indicate that learners diversify their sources of input and feedback. Another participant noted, *"Listening to podcasts helps me understand accents"* (P6), underscoring the importance of authentic audio materials for improving comprehension. These experiences reflect a flexible and learner-driven approach to language learning, consistent with Riiwandono's (2024) observation that EFL learners adapt digital resources to address learning challenges across varied contexts.

Within Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, resource-based learning exemplifies the use of cultural tools, artifacts, and technologies that mediate cognitive development. Digital platforms, peer-shared materials, and collaborative study sessions serve as mediators that help learners internalize knowledge through interaction. The use of such tools expands the learners' ZPD by enabling them to engage in learning tasks that might otherwise be beyond their independent capability. Thus, the use of digital and collaborative resources is not merely practical but also socially developmental.

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis explains why learners gravitate toward these external resources. Online platforms and peer collaboration often provide low-pressure environments where learners can explore and practice without fear of judgment. This freedom reduces anxiety and fosters motivation, creating a more supportive learning environment (Su & Guo, 2024). Engaging with diverse and enjoyable materials, such as podcasts or videos, stimulates curiosity and encourages consistent exposure, which enhances natural language acquisition.

The findings suggest that integrating resource-based learning into EFL pedagogy can significantly enhance learner autonomy and engagement. Teachers can encourage the use of multimedia materials, language learning apps, and peer-sharing networks as legitimate extensions of classroom instruction. Doing so not only empowers learners cognitively but also supports emotional confidence and social connectedness. This theme reinforces that effective learning strategies must address both the cognitive and affective dimensions of language development, consistent with Vygotsky's and Krashen's principles.

Theme 3: Cognitive Adaptation Through Practice

Cognitive adaptation through practice emerged as a pivotal strategy employed by learners to reinforce linguistic competence. Participants repeatedly emphasized the role of repetition, contextual practice, and self-simulation in consolidating learning. This theme underscores that language learning requires not only comprehension but also consistent and purposeful application. Bouknify and Anasse (2024) identified repetitive oral practice as an effective method for strengthening cognitive fluency and deepening understanding of speaking skills.

Participants described engaging in various forms of repetitive and contextual practice. One shared, *"I practice speaking the same phrases until I feel confident"* (P1), while another said, *"I pretend I am in a real-life situation to practice English"* (P6). Others noted that *"Daily practice makes it easier to remember and use new words"* (P9). These reflections highlight learners' attempts to internalize linguistic patterns through simulation and self-rehearsal. Mulyani (2020) similarly found that consistent practice differentiates successful EFL learners from less proficient ones, as repetition builds automaticity and strengthens neural language pathways.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory views practice as the process by which learners internalize language through mediated, socially situated activities. When learners simulate conversations or participate in group exercises, they recreate the social conditions that promote cognitive growth. Through such practice, learners move from other-regulated participation (relying on teachers or peers) to self-regulated mastery. The repetition of tasks thus represents not mere rote learning but an iterative process of internalizing socially modeled linguistic behaviors.

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis complements this interpretation by emphasizing that frequent, low-stress practice reduces anxiety and enhances acquisition. As learners engage in repetitive and contextualized exercises, their familiarity with the language increases, and their affective filter naturally lowers. This allows them to process linguistic input more effectively and communicate with greater ease. Encouraging practice in relaxed environments, such as peer dialogue or language clubs, promotes fluency by merging affective comfort with cognitive repetition (Theriana, 2023).

Cognitive adaptation through practice reveals that persistence and consistency are key to language mastery. Teachers can design learning tasks that simulate authentic communication, such as role plays, group discussions, and task-based learning, to reinforce contextual fluency. Regular exposure to meaningful use of English can bridge the gap between theoretical understanding and spontaneous communication. Integrating such practice into daily learning lowers anxiety, nurtures confidence, and aligns with both Vygotsky's emphasis on mediated practice and Krashen's focus on affective readiness.

The findings clearly demonstrate the vital role of supportive networks in the emotional and cognitive development of Southeast Asian EFL learners. Participants' experiences illustrate that their relationships with peers, along with institutional support, significantly enhance their motivation, confidence, and commitment to learning English. Three key themes emerged from their narratives: (1) Peer Collaboration and Encouragement, (2) Teacher Sensitivity and Classroom Atmosphere, and (3) Institutional and Cultural Support Structures.

Table 3: *Perceived Support Systems that Help Learners Manage Emotional and Cognitive Challenges*

Participants' Response	Code	Theme
(P2) "Having classmates at the same level can help us improve English together."	Peer Collaboration	Peer Collaboration & Encouragement
(P5) "Classmates comforted each other when stressed."	Peer Support	Peer Collaboration & Encouragement
(P7) "In teamwork, foreigners were paired with local students."	Peer Scaffolding	Peer Collaboration & Encouragement
(P3) "Our teachers were nice and understood our strengths and weaknesses."	Teacher Sensitivity	Teacher Sensitivity & Classroom Atmosphere
(P5) "Each teacher had strengths in grammar, speaking, or listening."	Differentiated Instruction	Teacher Sensitivity & Classroom Atmosphere
(P4) "They said it is okay to make mistakes."	Positive Feedback	Teacher Sensitivity & Classroom Atmosphere
(P7) "The school and classmates accepted us as who we are."	Institutional Support	Institutional & Cultural Support Structures
(P6) "Holistic formation combining academic and spiritual guidance helped me manage mental pressures."	Holistic Support	Institutional & Cultural Support Structures
(P2) "School groupings encouraged foreigners to work with locals."	Social Integration	Institutional & Cultural Support Structures

Theme 1: Peer Collaboration and Encouragement

Peer collaboration and encouragement were essential to developing both emotional stability and academic improvement among EFL learners. Participants consistently shared that interaction with classmates provided not only cognitive support but also emotional reassurance. The findings suggest that learning English becomes less intimidating and more meaningful when learners collaborate with peers who share similar challenges. This reflects the social nature of language learning, as peers provide a sense of belonging that motivates consistent engagement and participation.

Several participants described how working with classmates helped them cope with anxiety and enhance comprehension. One stated, "Having classmates at the same level can help us improve English together" (P2), while another mentioned, "Classmates comforted each other when stressed" (P5). These statements demonstrate how peer dynamics foster a nonjudgmental environment where learners can express themselves freely. Such findings align with Hardiyanto et al. (2024), who emphasized that cooperative learning enhances understanding and performance in English subjects, and Su and Guo (2024), who reported that peer collaboration helps regulate

emotions and improve academic engagement.

According to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, learning occurs first on the social plane before it becomes internalized. Peer collaboration provides the scaffolding learners need to perform tasks within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Through guided interaction and peer feedback, learners internalize both linguistic structures and social communication skills. Collaborative tasks-such as group discussions or peer review -enable learners to co-construct meaning and develop linguistic competence that they may not achieve independently. Thus, peer collaboration embodies Vygotsky's view that social interaction is the foundation of cognitive development.

From Krashen's perspective, peer collaboration helps maintain a low affective filter by providing a relaxed and supportive atmosphere. Interacting with classmates at similar proficiency levels reduces fear of negative evaluation and encourages risk-taking in communication. As Ye and Caiga (2024) found, learners who experience positive peer interactions are more willing to communicate in English and display greater language fluency. Emotional reassurance from peers thus directly contributes to effective language acquisition by minimizing stress and enhancing input processing.

Theme 2: Teacher Sensitivity and Classroom Atmosphere

Teacher sensitivity and the overall classroom atmosphere emerged as decisive factors in shaping learners' emotions and attitudes toward English learning. Participants expressed that empathetic teachers who recognized their individual struggles created safer, more motivating classrooms. Emotional attunement from teachers not only reduced anxiety but also encouraged learners to participate actively. These findings reaffirm the teacher's dual role as both an instructional guide and an affective mediator in the learning process. Participants frequently cited teacher empathy and understanding as crucial to their motivation. One learner stated, *"Our teachers were nice and understood our strengths and weaknesses"* (P3), while another participant added, *"They said it is okay to make mistakes"* (P4). These expressions highlight the impact of teacher kindness and constructive feedback in building confidence. Zhang et al. (2024) found that teacher emotional support mediates engagement and motivation among EFL learners, while Dayag-Tungpalan (2023) observed that teacher sensitivity enhances students' ability to apply metacognitive strategies effectively. When teachers create an atmosphere of psychological safety, learners feel more inclined to experiment with language use without fear of criticism.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory views teachers as more knowledgeable others who guide learners through scaffolding. This scaffolding is not limited to cognitive guidance; it also extends to emotional mediation. By showing sensitivity and patience, teachers help students regulate their emotions and stay within their optimal learning zone. Classroom activities that encourage discussion, reflection, and collaboration exemplify Vygotsky's idea of co-constructed learning, in which the teacher's affective presence plays a central role. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis similarly posits that teacher behavior significantly influences learners' emotional states. Positive teacher-student interactions lower anxiety, increase motivation, and facilitate the intake of comprehensible input (Labicane, 2021). On the other hand, critical or unsympathetic teaching raises the affective filter, reducing learning efficiency. When teachers provide encouragement and affirm learners' efforts, they help maintain the emotional openness required for language acquisition.

The evidence highlights the need for emotionally responsive pedagogy in EFL classrooms. Teachers may balance academic rigor with empathy by providing personalized feedback, encouraging student expression, and celebrating progress. Professional development programs can also train educators in affective communication and cross-cultural sensitivity. In line with Vygotsky's and Krashen's frameworks, creating supportive classroom atmospheres not only enhances linguistic outcomes but also nurtures learners' emotional resilience and confidence.

Theme 3: Institutional and Cultural Support Structures

The final theme emphasizes the significant influence of institutional and cultural support systems in sustaining learners' emotional health and academic persistence. Beyond peer and teacher relationships, participants acknowledged the importance of an inclusive institutional environment that values cultural diversity. Supportive programs, counseling, and community integration were considered vital for mitigating homesickness and academic pressure. This indicates that effective EFL education extends beyond classroom instruction to encompass institutional care and cultural acceptance.

Learners expressed gratitude for the institutional and cultural support they received. One participant shared, *"The school and classmates accepted us as who we are"* (P7), while another reflected, *"Holistic formation combining academic and spiritual guidance helped me manage mental pressures"* (P6). These testimonies suggest that inclusive practices foster a sense of belonging and reduce emotional isolation. Consistent with Ye and Caiga (2024), students who experience social integration and institutional inclusivity are more willing to communicate and adapt to new learning environments. The Philippines' reputation as a welcoming study destination (Saavedra, 2019; Study English Direct, 2025) further validates the impact of cultural openness on learners' emotional adjustment.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory interprets institutional and cultural support as macro-level mediational systems that shape learners' psychological development. The educational environment, comprising norms, relationships, and institutional practices, serves as a social structure that mediates learning. Through supportive cultural engagement, learners internalize values of inclusivity, cooperation, and resilience. Institutional structures thus function as extended scaffolding mechanisms that guide learners' adaptation and learning within their broader social context.

In Krashen's framework, inclusive institutional practices and cultural support directly lower the affective filter by promoting emotional security and reducing stress. Environments that affirm cultural identity and provide holistic care enable learners to focus their cognitive resources on language acquisition rather than on emotional defense mechanisms (Zhang, 2021). When learners feel valued and accepted, their motivation to communicate increases, and their affective barriers diminish.

The findings emphasize that institutional and cultural support is indispensable for the success of EFL learners. Schools may institutionalize programs that promote intercultural dialogue, provide emotional counseling, and build social bridges between local and international students. Cultural inclusivity must be embedded in academic policies and daily interactions to sustain emotional well-being and cognitive engagement. These initiatives resonate with both Vygotsky's emphasis on sociocultural mediation and Krashen's advocacy for emotionally conducive learning conditions.

Conclusion

Based on the summary of findings, the following conclusions were drawn:

The findings reveal that Southeast Asian EFL learners in the Philippines commonly experience substantial emotional challenges, yet they also demonstrate resilience through supportive interactions. These emotions directly affect learners' confidence and willingness to communicate, validating both Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) and Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (AFH), which emphasize the interdependence of social scaffolding and affective readiness in language learning. Eventually, the learners' narratives underscore that the supportive environments, whether from teachers, peers, or culturally sensitive practices, play a decisive role in transforming negative emotions into opportunities for emotional growth and meaningful engagement.

Learners employ diverse cognitive strategies that not only enhance their English proficiency but also help regulate emotional challenges. These strategies reflect a conscious effort to balance cognitive development with affective readiness, supporting SCT's emphasis on mediated learning and AFH's principle of reducing anxiety to facilitate effective input absorption. The findings highlight that cognitive strategies are not merely academic tools but also mechanisms of self-regulation, resilience, and motivation, allowing learners to take greater ownership of their progress in a cross-cultural environment.

Support from peers, teachers, and institutions emerged as central in shaping learners' emotional stability and cognitive development, enabling cultural integration. These support systems illustrate how SCT's scaffolding and AFH's affective considerations converge to create learning spaces that are both socially and emotionally sustaining. However, the data also suggest that institutional support remains uneven, pointing to the need for more intentional programs tailored to international learners. Overall, the learners' experiences affirm that adequate support must holistically integrate emotional reassurance and cognitive scaffolding to maximize language acquisition outcomes.

Contributions of Authors

Author: conceptualization, data gathering, proposal writing, data analysis

Funding

No funding agency.

Conflict of Interests

No conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

The Almighty God, for granting me strength, wisdom, and perseverance throughout the conduct of this study. My Research Adviser, for the invaluable guidance, support, and constructive advice that significantly improved this work. The Panel Members, for their recommendations, insights, and encouragement that helped refine and strengthen this research. My Loved Ones, for their unwavering love, understanding, and support, motivated me to complete this study.

References

- Admin. (2025). The rise of English schools in the Philippines: A 2025 market report. Study English Direct. <https://tinyurl.com/mv34r3je>
- Ahmed, R.M. (2020). Investigating EFL learners' awareness of cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies of students in different disciplines. *Arab World English Journal*, 11(3), 294–304. <https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol11no3.18>
- Albashtawi, A., & Mahfoodh, O.H.A. (2023). EFL students' use of cognitive strategies and their class level and grade point averages. *International Journal of Instruction*, 16(3), 1055–1074. <https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2023.16356a>
- Alharbi, S. (2021). The struggling English language learners: Case studies of English language learning difficulties in EFL context. *English Language Teaching*, 14(11), 108–118. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v14n11p108>
- Almesaar, O. (2022). The emotional experience of learning English as a foreign language: A qualitative study in the context of Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 18(2), 845–859. <https://tinyurl.com/5cmbkzbc>
- Anj. (2024). A comprehensive guide to studying English in Baguio City. A&J e-Edu Academy. <https://tinyurl.com/eyz26hym>
- Bagalay, B., Bayan, R., Caliboso, J., & Batang, B. (2021). Anxiety in classroom oral participation among ESL college students. *TESOL International Journal*, 16(1), 4–13. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.26794.90568>
- Bouknify, M., & Anasse, K. (2024). Effective learning strategies for enhancing cognitive development in EFL speaking skills. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 9(11). <https://tinyurl.com/5xyaypp7>
- Dayag-Tungpalan, M. (2023). Metacognitive strategies and perceived factors affecting the speaking performance of ESL learners. *Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers*, 14(2), 547–556. <https://doi.org/10.47750/jett.2023.14.02.049>
- Daguay-James, H., & Bulusan, F. (2020). Metacognitive strategies on reading English texts of ESL freshmen: A sequential explanatory mixed design. *TESOL International Journal*, 15(1). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1257215.pdf>
- DELED.Institute. (2025). Vygotsky's social perspective on language acquisition. *Language & Early Literacy*. <https://tinyurl.com/kazpsmc2>
- Djiwandono, P. (2024). EFL learners' strategies of coping with online language learning difficulties during COVID-19. *MEXTESOL Journal*, 48(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.61871/mj.v48n1-2>
- Fitrawati, F., Kamil, I., & Perrodin, D. (2023). Foreign language reading anxiety: Exploring the experiences of EFL students at a state university in Padang, Indonesia. *English Language Teaching Educational Journal*, 6(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.12928/elt.v6i1.7716>
- Gökgez-Kurt, B., & Durukan, D. (2023). Examining tertiary-level distance EFL learners' perceived value of learning English and foreign language anxiety in compulsory English classes. *The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning*, 13(1), pp.1–18. <https://hal.science/hal-04183746/document>
- Hardiyanto, A., Nastika, O.M.N., Eslabon, M.N.A., & Suprpto, I. (2024). Learning strategies used by ESL students in learning English at Capiz National High School, Philippines. *JEELS (Journal of English Education and Linguistics Studies)*, 11(1), 453–474.
- Hasani, A., & Pahamzah, J. (2022). Relationship approach to cognitive and metacognitive strategies on EFL students' reading comprehension. *Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 8(2), 16–23. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1373894.pdf>
- Horwitz, E. (2016). Factor structure of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale: Comment on Park (2014). *Psychological Reports*, 119(1), 71–76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033294116653368>
- International TEFL and TESOL Training. (n.d.). Cebu ESL institutes overview. <https://www.teflcourse.net/ia/cebu-esl-institutes-overview>
- Labicane, G.E. (2021). Foreign language anxiety experiences of Filipino students across the four macro skills. *Language Literacy: Journal of Linguistics, Literature, and Language Teaching*, 5(1), 254–264. <https://doi.org/10.30743/ll.v5i1.3761>
- Mulyani, S. (2020). Language learning strategies of successful EFL learners. *International Journal in Applied Linguistics of Parahikma*, 2(1), 31–39. <https://tinyurl.com/4upckvp8>
- Ojanola, R. (2023). Language anxiety of Filipino learners in speaking English: A case study. Department of Education. <https://tinyurl.com/2xpdactz>
- Pabro-Maquidato, I.M. (2021). The experience of English speaking anxiety and coping strategies: A transcendental phenomenological study. *International Journal of TESOL & Education*, 1(2), 45–64. <http://i-jte.org/index.php/journal/article/view/32>
- Saavedra, J.R. (2019). PH emerging as world's 'Study English' powerhouse: DOT exec. Philippine News Agency. <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/10763497>
- Su, Y., & Guo, H. (2024). Unpacking EFL learners' emotions and emotion-regulation strategies in digital collaborative academic reading projects: An integrated approach of vignette methodology and interview analysis. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 71, 101404. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2024.101404>
- Theriana, A. (2023). Understanding the strategies employed by EFL learners to overcome speaking anxiety in the classroom. *NextGen Education Review Journal*, 1(2), 33–44. <https://tinyurl.com/nmmbvj9z>
- Theyab, F.M. (2024). Identifying language learning strategies used by EFL students at university level. *The Middle East International Journal for Social Sciences*, 6(1), 9–16. <https://tinyurl.com/5hfmwrmm>
- Ye, Q., & Caiga, B.T. (2024). English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom anxiety, risk-taking behavior, and willingness to communicate among Chinese college students. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management and Sustainable Development*, 12(2, Part 1), 47–61. <https://doi.org/10.70979/QVLW9593>
- Zhang, Y.C., Hu, Y., & Yu, M. (2024). Exploring emotional support and engagement in adolescent EFL learning: The mediating role of emotion regulation strategies. *Language Teaching Research. Advance Online Publication*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688241266184>
- Zhang, X. (2021). The impact of EFL students' emotion level on their motivation and academic achievement: A theoretical conceptual analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, Article 798564. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.798564>