

A Systematic Literature Review of Emotional Scaffolding in EFL Pedagogy

Yao Yao^{1,2}, Hanita Hanim Ismail¹, Melor Md Yunus¹

¹ Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi 43600, Malaysia

² Tongling Polytechnic, Tongling, Anhui Province, China

Correspondence: Hanita Hanim Ismail, Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi 43600, Malaysia. E-mail:hanitahanim@ukm.edu.my

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Abstract

While emotional scaffolding has received encouraging research interest due to increase students’ engagement, academic performance, and well-being, there is scant synthesis and review study in the field of higher education and EFL teaching. Based on PRISMA (2021) principle, the present literature review has selected 33 peer-reviewed journal articles from 4 popular databases (which are Scopus, WOS, Eric, and ProQuest Education database). Through a thematic analysis of them, the review indicated 5 main categories (integrating emotional themes, emotional climate design, use of humour/storytelling, verbal affirmations/positive reinforcement, and technology mediated support) in EFL pedagogy using Emotional Scaffolding, which have received outcomes in enhancing student engagement, well-being, and language proficiency. It also addresses 3 emotional factors correlated with teaching. This study synthesizes current evidence for understanding Emotional Scaffolding in higher education EFL teaching. This review provides some implications for teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders and calls for more practical studies on higher education as well as higher vocational education level with more insights on teacher training and curriculum development.

Keywords: affective pedagogy, emotional scaffolding, EFL, higher education, teacher emotional support

1. Introduction

The emotional dimension of teaching has increasingly attracted scholarly attention, with teachers' emotional support recognized as a key factor influencing students' engagement, well-being, and academic success in EFL classrooms. Learners are shaped not only by cognitive factors, but also by emotional states, motivation, and self-efficacy. This need for emotional support has become especially prominent during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, prompting researchers to focus on the teacher’s role in fostering a supportive classroom environment(Panpistharwee P. & Suwanarak K., 2024).

Existing literature offers various conceptualizations of students’ emotional needs in education, including “emotional scaffolding” (Meyer & Turner, 2007), "teacher emotional support"(Pianta et al., 2003), and "affective scaffolding"(Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021) Although these terms have been applied overlapping, they are not fully interchangeable. In the present work, we would adopt the term “Emotional Scaffolding”, ES in short, as the umbrella concept to synthesize insights across the studies. Table 1 summarizes these overlapping concepts along with their definitions which clarify they difference by definition and notes.

Table 1. Terminology terms

Term	Definition	Representative Source	Notes
Emotional Scaffolding	Instructional strategies that intentionally support students’ emotional states to facilitate learning.	Meyer (2007)	Emphasizes teachers’ responses to student frustration and anxiety during classroom tasks.
Teacher Emotional Support	Teachers’ provision of warmth, respect, and positive relationships to support students’ emotional needs.	Pianta et al. (2003)	Concept widely adopted in the class observational framework, primarily within early childhood and primary and secondary school educational settings
Affective Scaffolding	Supportive strategies that regulate learners’ emotional states during cognitive engagement, often through embodied interaction.	Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021	Concept derived from cognitive neuroscience and phenomenological research perspectives
ES / AS (Abbreviations)	Short forms used in empirical studies referring to emotional support or affective scaffolding, often in questionnaires.	Rosiek & Beghetto (2009), Park (2017)	Frequently employed in quantitative studies, particularly within survey-based emotional support measurements

Although some studies have explored ES through qualitative methods—primarily semi-structured interviews—they often lack a coherent theoretical or methodological framework (Aljabr F.S. & Al-Ahdal A.A.M.H., 2024; Mudawy A.M.A., 2024; Muengnakin K. & Narathakoon A., 2025; Panpistharwee P. & Suwanarak K., 2024). Prior research has predominantly focused on primary or secondary education (Borisova A.S. et al., 2025; Wu H., 2024) or adjacent fields such as psychology, nursing, engineering, and computer science (Korkealehto K. et al., 2021; Li C., 2021; Mendoza L. et al., 2022), leaving ES in the context of EFL higher education largely underexamined. Moreover, current literature lacks systematic synthesis of ES definitions, classifications of teacher behavior, and exploration of how emotional factors affect student outcomes from the teachers' perspective the field still lacks systematic analyses that synthesize definitions of emotional scaffolding, categorize teacher behaviors, and explore factors influencing students' emotional changes from teachers' perspective.

Given these gaps, this study conducts a systematic literature review (SLR) to consolidate existing knowledge of emotional scaffolding in EFL higher education. Specifically, the review addresses three research questions:

- (a) What are the definitions and categories of emotional scaffolding?
- (b) What types of teaching methods can be applied as emotional scaffolding strategies by teachers?
- (c) What emotional outcomes and emotional factors affect students during EFL learning?

By mapping how emotional scaffolding is conceptualized and applied in the literature, this review aims to inform EFL teaching practices, contribute to teacher training frameworks, and promote emotionally responsive pedagogy in tertiary language education.

2. Methodology

2.1 Review Design and Protocol

This systematic review aims to serve as a guide for advancing knowledge in the field of emotional scaffolding in EFL higher education. Systematic reviews play a critical role in supporting evidence-based decision-making by providing comprehensive and high-quality syntheses of available research (Page et al., 2021). In line with recent methodological advancements, this review was conducted with a strong emphasis on transparency and rigor, ensuring that both conceptual and empirical insights are faithfully represented (Brauer et al., 2024). The review specifically focuses on language education, teacher development, and emotional pedagogy. Referring to the PRISMA review process (2020), it involves a systematic sequence of four key phases: (a) selecting relevant databases and developing a search strategy; (b) establishing clear inclusion and exclusion criteria; (c) screening studies based on these criteria; and (d) conducting a comprehensive analysis of the eligible articles (see Figure 1).

2.2 Database Selection and Search Strategy

Conducting searches across multiple databases allows systematic reviewers to identify a wide range of studies, minimizing the risk of selection bias and enhancing the comprehensiveness of the review (Page et al., 2021). Accordingly, the present review retrieved peer-reviewed journal articles and dissertations from four major academic databases: Web of Science (WOS), Scopus, ERIC, and the ProQuest Education Database.

The search strategy combined Boolean operators and specific keyword strings to maximize the relevance of identified studies. The keywords employed in the four databases were: "emotional scaffolding" OR "ES" OR "affective scaffolding" OR "AS" OR "teacher emotional support" AND "higher education" AND "EFL". 8495 searches were limited to English-language publications to ensure consistency and international accessibility.

Only studies published between 2020 and 2025 were included to capture the most recent developments in emotional scaffolding research, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has significantly reshaped educational practices and emotional needs within learning environments.

In the first step of PRISMA, Duplication Removal, given that the initial dataset combined records from Web of Science (WOS), Scopus, ERIC, and ProQuest Education, all collected entries were merged into a single Excel file. Duplicate entries were identified and removed using Excel's duplication-checking function. The initial dataset consisted of 8,495 records, with 9 duplicate articles eliminated, resulting in 8,486 unique records for further screening.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria are essential in systematic reviews to ensure the relevance, quality, and focus of the selected studies (Page et al., 2021). The following criteria were applied:

Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Published between 2020–2025	Published before 2020
Peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, review articles	Early access papers, grant announcements, clinical trials, editorials, meeting abstracts, retracted publications, case reports, letters, unspecified document types
Topics in education, educational research, linguistics, psychology, social sciences, arts, and humanities	Topics outside of these areas
Language: English	Other languages
Contexts in higher education, colleges, or higher vocational education	Contexts in primary, secondary, or middle schools
EFL or ESL teaching settings	Other educational contexts

Based on the PRISMA procedure, the inclusion and exclusion criteria ensure the quality of the final paper and the integrity of data processing. Here, these criteria are designed to meet the needs of successful selection, focusing on key aspects of paper topics, scope, types, and language.

2.4 Screening Process

The screening process in this review followed the PRISMA guidelines framework (2021), which includes 3 sequential steps: (1) title and abstract screening, (2) full-text retrieval, and (3) eligibility assessment. Figure 1 presents a visual summary of the PRISMA screening flowchart.

In the Title and Abstract Screening stage, predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria were administered upon. Articles deemed irrelevant to the study objectives were excluded at this stage. A total of 2,781 records were excluded, leaving 2,765 articles for the next phase. Upon finishing the first step, the following step is to obtain full-text of the identified studies. Any articles without access to its full text were excluded. As a result, 16 articles could not be retrieved, leaving 2,659 full-text articles available for eligibility assessment. In the third step, full-text articles were then evaluated against the inclusion criteria and study objectives. Based on this assessment, 2,626 articles were excluded due to misalignment with the inclusion criteria, resulting in 33 articles that met all eligibility requirements. These 33 studies were subjected to further qualitative and quantitative analysis. To ensure rigor and transparency, the eligibility assessment process adhered strictly to PRISMA quality standards.

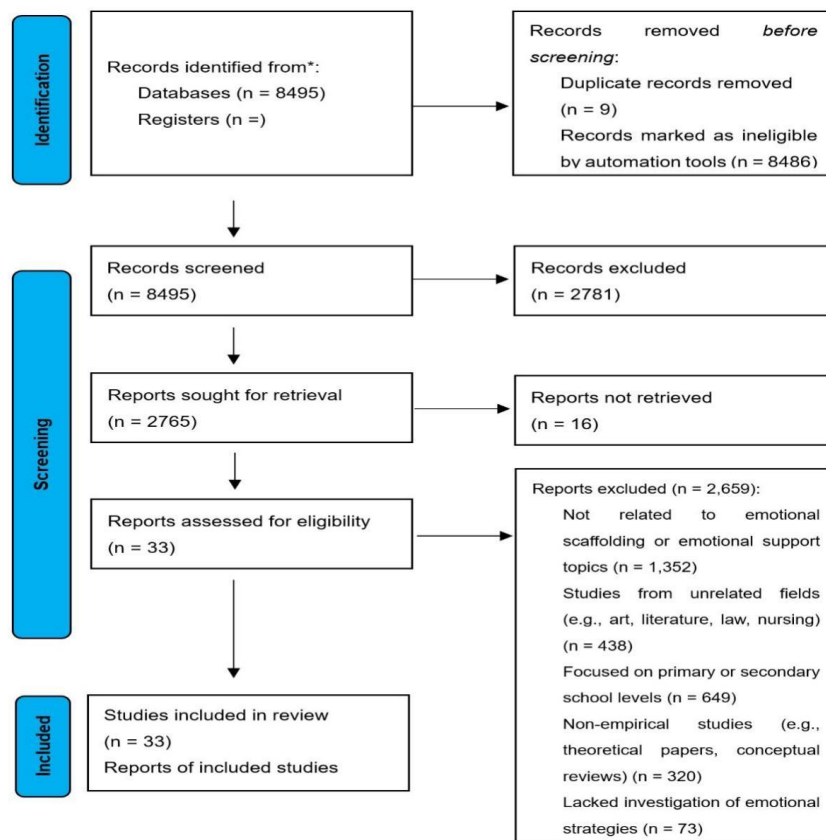


Figure 1. PRISMA Flowchart adapted from Page et al. (2021)

2.5 Data Extraction and Analysis

Following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis was selected as the method for synthesizing findings due to its flexibility in accommodating both inductive and deductive coding approaches for thoughtful data interpretation. In the preliminary phase, basic bibliographic information – including author names, publication year, article title, journal source, abstract, and DOI – was systematically recorded for all 33 articles using Microsoft Excel. Data extraction was primarily conducted by the first author.

The analysis was divided into two parts - descriptive analysis and thematic analysis. A descriptive analysis was conducted on the 33 included studies, covering publication characteristics, disciplinary fields, geographical distribution, theoretical frameworks, teacher practices, and measured student outcomes, teaching strategies, and socio-emotional learning was also represented. The studies were conducted across diverse geographical regions, including China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Turkey, South Korea, Finland, and other contexts where English is taught as a foreign language. The majority of research targeted university students, although a few studies involved higher secondary students or specialized EFL learner groups.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Definitions and Categories of Emotional Scaffolding

The conceptualization of emotional scaffolding (ES) varies across the literature, reflecting different theoretical perspectives and disciplinary emphases. According to Meyer (2007), ES refers to teaching strategies that require teachers to respond appropriately to students’ emotional needs arising during the teaching and learning process, particularly in moments of frustration or anxiety. In contrast, Rosiek (2009) conceptualizes teacher emotional support as an integral part of the meaning-making elements of pedagogy, emphasizing the emotional benefits embedded within instructional interactions.

While Meyer focuses on teachers’ responsive actions, Rosiek foregrounds the phenomenological role of emotions in instructional dynamics. Despite these differences, both scholars agree on the pivotal role of teachers in addressing students’ emotional needs and acknowledge the essential value of emotions in the learning environment. Furthermore, Rosiek highlights the pedagogical use of metaphors and narratives as tools to enhance emotional engagement, thereby expanding the applications of emotional scaffolding within teaching practices.

Table 3. Results of term ES searching among 33 articles

Term	Frequency in Reviewed Studies	Notes
Emotional Scaffolding	0	Term not explicitly used; related constructs identified
Teacher Emotional Support	0	Term not explicitly used; broader teacher support concepts prevalent
Affective Scaffolding	0	Term not explicitly used; affective engagement concepts observed

Interestingly, when analyzing the search results using the terms “emotional scaffolding,” “teacher emotional support,” or “affective scaffolding,” none of these phrases appeared explicitly in the titles or abstracts of the 33 selected articles (Table 3). Instead, the studies predominantly referenced broader constructs, such as teacher support, emotional climate, affective engagement, and teacher – student relationships. This absence highlights a conceptual gap and underscores the fragmented and indirect treatment of emotional scaffolding within current research discourse.

This finding points to the urgent need for consolidating diverse conceptualizations under a cohesive framework of emotional scaffolding. Thus, this review proposes a synthesized definition and categorization of emotional scaffolding by integrating perspectives from related constructs, offering a more structured understanding applicable to the EFL higher education context.

Additionally, while the explicit terms were absent, an analysis of keyword frequencies across the 33 studies reveals frequent attention to emotional and relational aspects, as shown below.

Table 4. Keyword Frequencies Across the 33 Articles

Keyword	Frequency
engagement	29
anxiety	49
students	78
teacher	33
emotional	54

The keyword frequency analysis suggests that although the term emotional scaffolding was not explicitly employed, the concepts underpinning emotional scaffolding—such as engagement, anxiety regulation, teacher support, and emotional well-being—were recurrent themes in the reviewed literature. This implicit presence indicates a latent but significant concern with emotional scaffolding practices among EFL educators.

Emotional scaffolding practices in EFL higher education contexts can be synthesized into three primary dimensions:

3.1.1 Emotional attunement

Teachers’ sensitivity to learners’ emotional and affective states, including recognizing and responding to emotions such as anxiety, frustration, and disengagement during the EFL learning process. The frequent occurrence of terms like anxiety (49 mentions) and emotional (54 mentions) underscores the critical role of teachers’ emotional attunement. Research evidence suggests that learner anxiety negatively impacts willingness to communicate(Xu J. et al., 2025) and that learners’ emotional states dynamically correlate with educational achievement (Wu H., 2024).

3.1.2 Relational bonding

Relational bonding emphasizes the development of positive, trustful, and respectful teacher – student relationships as foundational elements of emotional scaffolding. The frequent appearance of the keywords "teacher" (33 mentions) and "students" (78 mentions) suggests that relational dynamics are a recurrent concern in the reviewed studies.

Meyer (2007) argued that positive teacher – student emotional interactions serve as integral co-constructive elements of meaningful learning relationships. For example, Borisova et al. (Borisova A.S. et al., 2025) reported that Chinese EFL learners exhibited higher levels of anxiety compared to their Russian counterparts, underlining the significance of relational sensitivity in multicultural settings. Long et al. (Long et al., 2024) suggested that when both teachers and students hold positive attitudes towards classroom emotional climate, significant improvements in language learning performance can be achieved.

3.1.3 Affective regulation strategies

Affective regulation strategies refer to structured pedagogical interventions aimed at supporting students' emotional states during EFL learning, such as creating a positive classroom atmosphere or explicitly incorporating affective objectives into lesson design.

The keyword analysis revealed that the term "engagement" appeared 29 times across the reviewed studies, highlighting the crucial role of pedagogical practices in maintaining learners’ emotional involvement and motivation throughout the learning process. Effective affective regulation strategies often require teachers to flexibly adapt their instructional plans to respond to students’ emotional needs as they arise in real time.

For instance, Xu et al.(Xu J. et al., 2025)found that students’ enjoyment acted as a positive predictor of their ideal L2 selves and willingness to communicate (WTC). Similarly, Wang et al. (Wang et al., 2024) demonstrated that a mastery-oriented classroom goal structure directly and indirectly influenced male students' engagement through self-efficacy, whereas for female students, the effect was mediated only through self-efficacy. These findings emphasize that emotion-focused instructional strategies can significantly shape students' engagement trajectories in EFL learning contexts.

Building on the theoretical foundations of Meyer (2007) and Rosiek (2009), and supported by the thematic analysis, the present review try to combine these 3 dimensions within the definition of ES.

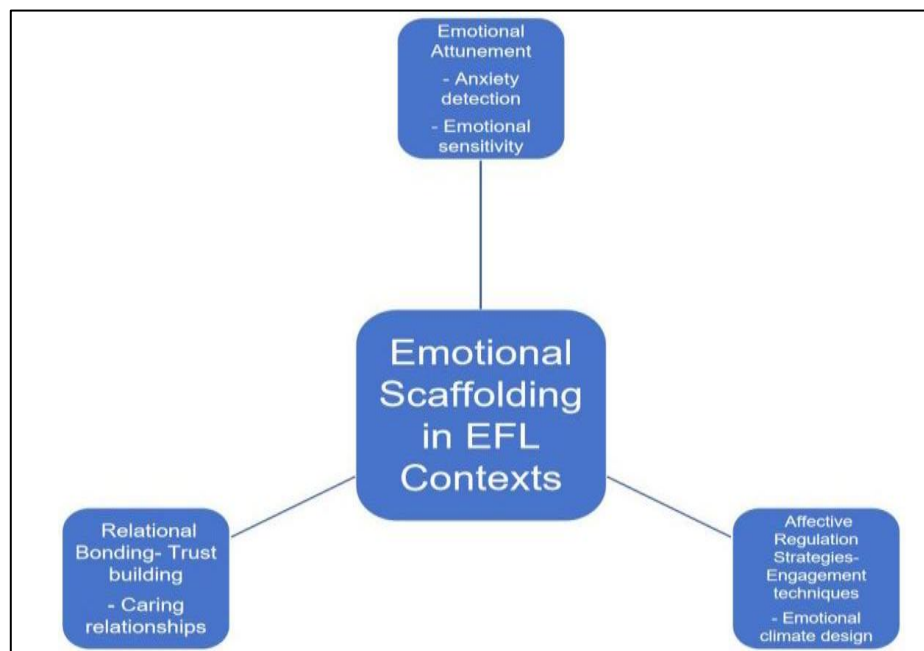


Figure 2. Preliminary Conceptual Framework of Emotional Scaffolding (ES) Dimensions

Figure 2 summarizes the core dimensions of Emotional Scaffolding (ES) identified through the thematic synthesis of reviewed literature: Emotional Attunement, Relational Bonding, and Affective Regulation Strategies. This preliminary integrative structure serves as a foundation, outlining the basic interactions and practices repeatedly highlighted across studies.

3.2 Teacher Behaviours and Pedagogical Strategies

The review revealed a diverse range of teaching methods and practices that align with emotional scaffolding principles. These approaches function not only as instructional strategies within EFL/ESL contexts but also resonate with the broader theme of supporting students' emotional development in learning environments.

Five major categories of teacher behaviours and pedagogical strategies have been identified (see Appendix 1). These categories illustrate how teachers' immediate emotional interactions with students are coordinated with systematically designed pedagogical strategies to cultivate positive emotional experiences and enhance engagement in language learning.

3.2.1 Integrating Emotional Themes

Several studies have explored the integration of emotional themes into instructional materials, demonstrating positive effects on language performance (Li C., 2021; Kim & Kweon, 2023; Liu Q. & Zhou W., 2024). For instance, Xu et al. (2025) embedded emotional literacy into English Medium Instruction (EMI) materials to help students process learning-related anxiety and improve self-expression. This approach echoes broader calls for recognizing the pivotal role of teacher emotional support in EFL teaching (Li Z. et al., 2024).

Accordingly, teachers are encouraged to design curricula and instructional approaches that empower second language (L2) learners by fostering a sense of agency through group discussions, collaborative projects, reflective questioning, and alternative assessment formats (Haile et al., 2024; Solhi M., 2024).

3.2.2 Emotional Climate Design

Several studies incorporated a focusing on emotional climate design as a supportive environment for EFL teaching (Dai K. & Wang Y., 2024; Wang et al., 2024). A positive classroom atmosphere fosters students' sense of belonging, self-confidence, and willingness to express themselves in the target language (Wu H., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2025).

When encountering students' negative emotional states, teachers are advised to respond proactively by offering repeated explanations, encouraging peer collaboration, and designing tasks suited for both online and offline contexts (Korkealehto K. et al., 2021; Li Z. et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2025). Without appropriate intervention, negative emotions may lead to dissatisfaction and anxiety, ultimately affecting academic performance (Muengnakin K. & Narathakoon A., 2025).

In particular, addressing the needs of lower proficiency learners requires that teachers with advanced professional training adopt strategies such as allowing longer wait times and offering scaffolded tasks to create a more relaxed learning environment (Haile et al., 2024; Kim & Kweon, 2023).

3.2.3 Use of Humour/Storytelling

The integration of humour and storytelling into pedagogical practice has been recognized as effective in reducing learners' anxiety and tension. Urbanski and Becker (2024) emphasized that humor facilitates peer emotional support and contributes to a positive classroom atmosphere.

Teachers can foster a meaningful and enjoyable learning environment by integrating humor, passion, and enthusiasm into their instructional activities (Liu Q. & Zhou W., 2024; Wu et al., 2024). Additionally, storytelling and emotionally themed role-plays can serve as effective tools to overcome language learning anxiety (Kalra R. & Siribud S., 2020; Yuan R. et al., 2023).

3.2.4 Verbal Affirmations/Positive Reinforcement

Verbal affirmations and positive reinforcement emerged as essential strategies to enhance students' motivation and emotional engagement. Immediate verbal and nonverbal feedback from teachers plays a critical role in encouraging students and mitigating their fear of making mistakes (Kim & Kweon, 2023; Li Z. et al., 2024; Panpistharwee P. & Suwanarak K., 2024; Wang et al., 2024; Muengnakin K. & Narathakoon A., 2025; Yang et al., 2025).

Peer encouragement, achieved through collaborative activities and group problem-solving tasks, further strengthens students' self-confidence and affiliation (Solhi M., 2024; Urbanski K.B. & Becker M.L., 2024).

Educators are thus advised to promote collaboration among students while supporting the expression of positive emotions and deploying strategies to mitigate negative emotional experiences (Saračević J. et al., 2021; Yüce E., 2023; Dai K. & Wang Y., 2024). Personalized emotional support should also be provided to learners coping with anxiety (Saračević J. et al., 2021; Yuan R. et al., 2023), and critical thinking activities can help counteract boredom and foster deeper learning engagement (Li C. 2021a; Haile et al. 2024).

3.2.5 Technology Medicated Support

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the integration of digital technologies into EFL instruction, fundamentally reshaping emotional support practice (Panpistharwee P. & Suwanarak K., 2024). Technology-mediated interventions, such as collaborative projects and online peer interactions, have been shown to enhance students' motivation and positive emotional experiences (Dai K. & Wang Y., 2024; Solhi M., 2024).

Instructors feedback and peer collaboration facilitated through online platforms, including videoconferencing, have contributed to emotional scaffolding efforts (Korkealehto K. et al., 2021; Alzubi A.A.F. et al., 2022; Kim & Kweon, 2023). However, the effective application of technology requires teachers to adopt a variety of approaches that minimize negative emotions and maximize enjoyment of

online learning, with institutional support playing a crucial role (Li Z. et al., 2024; Liu Q. & Zhou W., 2024).

3.2.6 Other Teaching Approaches

Several studies examined additional teaching approaches from an emotional perspective, including self-regulation training, reflective journaling, and affect-sensitive peer review practices (Xu J. et al., 2025; Kim & Kweon, 2023). While less frequently studied, these approaches offer promising avenues for enhancing emotional scaffolding in EFL contexts. Teachers are encouraged to undertake professional development in emotional intelligence and student emotional regulation to better manage classroom stress and anxiety (Kalra R. & Siribud S., 2020; Yang et al., 2025). Supporting students' reflective practices can enhance their autonomy, growth mindset, and academic integrity (Korkealehto K. et al., 2021; Alzubi A.A.F. et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2024). Furthermore, external environmental factors influencing teacher emotional support, such as institutional policies and administrative backing, should not be overlooked (Mendoza L. et al., 2022; Liu Q. & Zhou W., 2024; Muengnakin K. & Narathakoon A., 2025).

3.3 Student Outcomes and Emotional Variables

The 33 studies selected through the PRISMA process have documented a wide range of affective, behavioral, and cognitive outcomes associated with effective teacher emotional scaffolding practices in EFL teaching and learning contexts. Despite employing varied research methods and measurement tools, it is possible to identify common dimensions across studies, allowing for a synthesis of major student outcomes.

3.3.1 Student Outcomes

(a) Affective Outcomes

Several studies explored changes in students' emotional states by comparing conditions before and after teacher interventions. Teachers' emotional support, grounded in an understanding of students' needs, successfully reduced learners' anxiety levels (Yuan R. et al., 2023). Peer collaboration also emerged as an effective strategy for alleviating student anxiety (Hayasaki A. & Ryan S., 2022; del Carmen Garrido-Hornos M., 2023; Lee S. & Lee H., 2024). Moreover, the use of technological tools in learning environments has been linked to increased student comfort and emotional safety (Dai K. & Wang Y., 2024), helping create spaces where learners feel supported and able to enjoy the learning process (Urbanski K.B. & Becker M.L., 2024).

(b) Behavioural Engagement

Many studies reported positive behavioral outcomes linked to emotional scaffolding, particularly in terms of enhanced student engagement and willingness to participate (Muengnakin K. & Narathakoon A., 2025). Following emotional support interventions, students demonstrated increased active participation with teachers and peers in class (Panpistharwee P. & Suwanarak K., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024).

Teacher ES was found to positively influence not only classroom engagement but also students' persistence in tackling difficult tasks (Hayasaki A. & Ryan S., 2022; Kim & Kweon, 2023; Yang et al., 2025). Encouragement from teachers was associated with improved language performance outcomes through sustained student effort (Korkealehto K. et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2024; Muengnakin K. & Narathakoon A., 2025). In a study of 2021, the teachers are encouraged to increase students' engagement on students' persistence on difficult tasks accordingly.

(c) Cognitive-Emotional Self-Perception

A number of studies emphasized internal shifts in students' self-perception as learners (Kim & Kweon, 2023; Y ıce E., 2023). Positive teacher feedback was associated with increased confidence in English writing (Yang et al., 2025). Similarly, students reported enhanced feelings of belonging and engagement when teachers employed humor, passion, and enthusiasm in their instructional practices (Li C., 2021; del Carmen Garrido-Hornos M., 2023; Liu Q. & Zhou W., 2024).

3.3.2 Emotional Variables Influencing Student Outcomes

(a) Teacher and classroom factors

A large body of research highlights the critical role of teacher emotional support and classroom environment in shaping students' emotional experiences. Students who perceive teachers as caring, understanding, and encouraging tend to display lower levels of anxiety and boredom (Liu Q. & Zhou W., 2024; Urbanski K.B. & Becker M.L., 2024; Wang et al., 2024; Muengnakin K. & Narathakoon A., 2025).

Teaching styles also have significant emotional implications. Clear, enthusiastic instructional styles reduce boredom and anxiety (Y ıce E., 2023; Urbanski K.B. & Becker M.L., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024), while punitive or indifferent styles exacerbate negative emotions. Building a positive emotional climate characterized by collaboration and low pressure is essential for fostering emotional security and engagement (Korkealehto K. et al., 2021; Jim nez Mu noz A.J. & Lahuerta Mart nez A.C., 2022; Yang et al., 2025).

Moreover, learning context (e.g., online vs. face-to-face, EMI vs. non-EMI) mediates emotional experiences. Research indicates that online and EMI learning environments are often associated with heightened anxiety and lower engagement, which can be mitigated through emotional scaffolding interventions (Kim & Kweon, 2023; Tang & Ma, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024).

(b) Student Characteristics and Emotional Factors

Students' pre-existing emotional dispositions—such as trait emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and general anxiety tendencies—significantly influence their emotional responses. Students with higher emotional intelligence are more resilient to boredom and burnout and achieve better academic outcomes (Korkealehto K. et al., 2021; Solhi M., 2024; Zhuang T. & Xu X., 2024). Additionally, students with high self-efficacy and strong ideal L2 selves experience greater learning enjoyment and willingness to communicate (WTC), while students with low self-efficacy and high anxiety exhibit withdrawal and reduced motivation (Kim & Kweon, 2023; Lee S. & Lee H., 2024). Furthermore, the interplay between motivation and emotion is also obvious. Higher levels of motivation students usually experience more positive emotion when acquire success, while constant failure leads to negative emotion with continuous weaken on motivation (del Carmen Garrido-Hornos M., 2023; Kim & Kweon, 2023; Solhi M., 2024; Yang et al., 2025).

(c) Contextual and Sociocultural Factors

Student emotional trajectories are further influenced by broader contextual and sociocultural factors. Cross-cultural comparisons reveal significant differences in emotional tendencies; for example, Chinese EFL college students report higher anxiety levels compared to their Russian counterparts (Borisova A.S. et al., 2025). Age, gender, and previous learning experiences also mediate emotional responses. Younger students and beginners often experience higher levels of anxiety (Kalra R. & Siribud S., 2020; Alzaanin E., 2024; Yan et al., 2024). Gender-based differences have also been observed, with female students sometimes reporting different emotional patterns compared to male students (Wang et al., 2024). The transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic introduced additional emotional challenges, requiring new emotional scaffolding strategies to maintain students' engagement and motivation (Li Z. et al., 2024; Liu Q. & Zhou W., 2024; Panpistharwee P. & Suwanarak K., 2024; Yang et al., 2025). For coping boredom and loneliness during on-line learning, instructors are encouraged to utilize new emotional scaffolding teaching strategies such as frequent inquire and inspection, informal collaborative discussion with peers in order to maintain students engagement and motivation (Korkealehto K. et al., 2021; Dai K. & Wang Y., 2024; Kim & Kweon, 2023; Liu Q. & Zhou W., 2024; Wu et al., 2024).

All in all, the students emotional changing sources are multiple such as teacher practice, student trait, and social context factors. It is summarized in the table 10 with description of categories and frequency.

3.3.3 Research Gaps and Proposition of an Emotional Scaffolding Framework

Despite the increasing number of studies on emotional scaffolding (ES) in the context of EFL education in recent years, the present systematic review reveals several critical limitations and blind spots that hinder the establishment of a cohesive research agenda and actionable instructional frameworks.

Three major research gaps can be identified, which are conceptual gap, methodological gap and contextual gap. There remains a lack of a cohesive definition and theoretical framework for ES in the context of higher education EFL teaching in the conceptual gap. Many existing studies treat emotional support as incidental or peripheral rather than integrating it as a structured pedagogical strategy within curriculum design and instructional practices (Muengnakin K. & Narathakoon A., 2025b; Xu J. et al., 2025).

As for the methodological gap, the generalizability of findings is often undermined by the widespread reliance on non-validated measurement tools, heavy dependence on self-report instruments, and the scarcity of longitudinal studies examining the effects of emotional interventions over time. This limits our understanding of the enduring impacts of emotional scaffolding on student outcomes.

Under the contextual gap, few studies have focused on vocational education contexts or addressed the specific emotional needs of EFL learners outside traditional university settings. There remains an urgent need to explore emotional scaffolding in diverse educational environments, especially in higher vocational education, to reflect the full spectrum of learner experiences

3.4 Technology-Enhanced Tools for Emotional Scaffolding

Although existing literature primarily emphasizes traditional face-to-face emotional scaffolding approaches, several emerging studies indicate substantial potential in digital technologies to enhance teachers' emotional responsiveness (Panpistharwee P. & Suwanarak K., 2024; Muengnakin K. & Narathakoon A., 2025). For example, real-time digital surveys and instant feedback platforms can provide immediate insights into students' emotional states, allowing teachers to dynamically adjust classroom activities and emotional interventions. Additionally, virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies have demonstrated effectiveness in creating emotionally immersive environments, thereby improving teacher-student emotional connections and learner engagement.

Integrating these technological tools into the ES framework aligns with recent pedagogical shifts towards blended learning, providing novel ways for educators to foster supportive and responsive emotional climates (Korkealehto K. et al., 2021; del Carmen Garrido-Hornos M., 2023). This integration not only enriches traditional ES strategies but also paves the way for more personalized and interactive emotional support in language classrooms.

4. Theoretical Contributions and Limitation

4.1 Theoretical Contributions

The present SLR work has made contribution on understanding of ES from a multi perspectives, as following: First, this study proposes the definition of Emotional Scaffolding in EFL Teaching that systematically integrates teacher emotional support factors into language instruction. Second, the study emphasizes the mediating roles of teaching strategies, emotional outcomes, and learning contexts in shaping

learners' emotional experiences. Third, this review addresses a notable gap in the existing literature: while previous studies have predominantly focused on negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, boredom) in EFL learning (Liu Q. & Zhou W., 2024), the present work highlights the importance of cultivating positive emotions and offering holistic emotional support to promote student engagement and success. These findings collectively advance both theoretical conceptualizations and practical applications of emotional scaffolding in second language education.

The present study further categorizes instructional approaches employed during ES into five major types (see Appendix 1). Nearly half of the reviewed studies reported the use of verbal affirmations and positive reinforcement, with teachers commonly boosting students' confidence through positive feedback and contextualizing learning materials based on students' real-life experiences to enhance emotional engagement. In contrast, the use of humor and storytelling as emotional scaffolding strategies was relatively rare, despite some studies highlighting the pedagogical value of narratives and metaphors for emotional support. This disparity suggests a theoretical – practical gap in the integration of narrative-based emotional scaffolding technique. Overall, the prevailing ES strategies observed in the literature predominantly focused on fostering positive emotional experiences and emotionalizing learning content to enhance student motivation and engagement.

The findings also corroborate the positive correlation between teacher emotional support and students' emotional and academic outcome. Continuous and empathetic emotional scaffolding from teachers led to increased positive emotions and decreased negative emotions among students. Multiple studies demonstrated that in emotionally supportive learning environments, students exhibited higher willingness to communicate (WTC), greater engagement, and a greater likelihood of using English actively for communication and self-challenging tasks (Panpistharwee P. & Suwanarak K., 2024; Solhi M., 2024). These results align with findings from educational psychology, which indicate that positive emotions enhance student engagement and academic performance, while negative emotions hinder learning processes (Tingyu Z. et al., 2024; Yüce E., 2023).

Importantly, the present review reveals that the process and effects of applying ES are mediated by multiple factors, including cultural background, teacher and student traits, and learning environments. Cultural and systemic factors significantly influence teaching and learning practices. Studies confirm that teachers' decisions regarding pedagogical strategies are shaped by socio-cultural contexts (Saračević J. et al., 2021; Hayasaki A. & Ryan S., 2022). For instance, in some educational settings, teachers may openly express emotional support, while in others, a more subtle approach may be preferred to maintain formality. Another factor is the teacher background and training. Teachers with training in emotional intelligence demonstrate stronger abilities to implement effective emotional scaffolding strategies, supporting the positive relationship between professional development and pedagogical decision-making. Additionally, student traits—such as pre-existing emotional dispositions, motivation levels, and personality characteristics—influence the efficacy of emotional scaffolding interventions. In EFL teaching contexts, instructors must thoughtfully consider and integrate these variables when designing emotional support strategies. The teaching model and instructional context (e.g., EMI, bilingual education) further moderate the implementation of ES, highlighting the necessity for flexible and context-sensitive pedagogical adaptations.

Finally, the theoretical underpinnings of ES identified in the reviewed literature align closely with several established frameworks. The most commonly referenced theoretical foundation is Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, particularly the concept of scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Many studies explain teachers' temporary emotional support actions by drawing from both cognitive and emotional scaffolding perspectives (Saračević J. et al., 2021; Lee S. & Lee H., 2024; Urbanski K.B. & Becker M.L., 2024; Yang et al., 2025). Other studies explicitly cite Meyer and Turner (2007) as foundational sources, particularly their definition of teacher-initiated interactions aimed at supporting positive emotional experiences to achieve learning goals (Haile et al., 2024; Liu Q. & Zhou W., 2024).

4.2 Limitation

The present study still contains some challenges and limitations. First of all, the literature search was conducted and restricted to four major academic databases (WOS, Scopus, Proquest, and ERIC). The overall representativeness and sample size might be constrained. The future study shall expand the search scope to embrace wider and additional databases. Additionally, the work only synthesise academic publications of English language limited in the year rang from 2020 to 2025. This kind of decision may affect the inclusion of other languages or earlier findings.

5. Conclusion

This systematic literature review has underscored the central role of emotional scaffolding (ES) in EFL higher education and proposed a conceptual framework to support its integration into instructional practice. By synthesizing current research, the review highlights the importance of teacher-initiated emotional support in promoting learner engagement, well-being, and language performance. It responds to the need for holistic and practical approaches that equip teachers with strategies to address students' emotional needs in linguistically and emotionally demanding environments.

Looking ahead, this review identifies several key directions for future research. Longitudinal studies are needed to track how sustained emotional support influences student outcomes over time. Similarly, intervention-based research focusing on teacher training programs can provide empirical evidence of ES effectiveness in authentic classroom settings. The use of mixed-method approaches is also encouraged to capture the perspectives of both students and teachers—examining not only student experiences but also the emotional labor of instructors. In addition, technology-enhanced emotional scaffolding—through AI, VR, or game-based learning platforms—

emerges as a promising frontier for supporting student emotion regulation and engagement.

Together, these insights offer a foundation for developing emotionally responsive pedagogical models and evidence-based teacher education programs in EFL contexts. By advancing both theoretical understanding and instructional practice, emotional scaffolding holds significant potential for fostering more engaging, supportive, and humane language learning environments in higher education.

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Authors' contributions

Yao Yao was responsible for study design, data collection, data analysis, and manuscript.

Dr. Hanita was responsible for research design and revising.

Prof. Melor was responsible for manuscript revising.

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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We declare that we have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix 1

Appendix 1. Categorization of Emotional Interventions in Reviewed Studies

Authors & date	Aim	Location	Integrating emotional themes	Emotional climate design	Use of humor / Storytelling	Verbal affirmations / Positive reinforcement	Technology-mediated support	others
Xu J.; Zhou S.; Chen C.; Perrin S.; Gan H. (2025)	To disentangle how two heavily researched emotions (i.e., enjoyment and anxiety) affect students' learning motivation and willingness to communicate (WTC) inside and outside of EMI classrooms.	China	familiarity with the subject topic can mitigate students' apprehensive emotions in EMI courses	to create an emotionally supportive EMI environment to help students				EMI teacher training programs should also include an element of building emotional intelligence to help teachers empathize with and more effectively alleviate their students' stress and anxiety while learning through an L2. this suggests that students might view their future identity to work in the disciplinary field as unrelated to their English practice at an EMI university.
Muengnakin K.; Narathakoon A. (2025)	explored speaking anxiety and attitudes towards speaking English in the classroom setting	Thailand		speaking performance and scores after participating in English activities in the classroom		self-practice that made them more relaxed and helped them make fewer mistakes		Managing Emotions; Building Confidence; Keeping Concentration; Friend Support
Yang, TT; Wang, YC; Yang, CL (2025)	to investigating the effectiveness of self-regulated language learning intervention (devised using Zimmerman's cyclical phase model of SRL) on Chinese EFL learners	China	Helping students recognize and express their emotions through courses or activities improves their emotional intelligence, enabling them to better cope with challenges in learning.	Creating a Supportive Environment increasing their sense of belonging and self-confidence.		Timely Feedback: Providing timely and constructive feedback helps students understand their learning progress, enhancing their intrinsic motivation.		Self-Regulation: Teachers can teach students self-regulation techniques to help them manage and regulate their emotions during the learning process, enhancing motivation and effectiveness. Group Activities: Encouraging students to participate in cooperative learning enhances emotional exchange and support, fostering a sense of teamwork. Encouraging students to reflect on their emotions and learning processes helps them identify the impact of emotions on their learning.
Lee S.; Lee H. (2024)	To explores the relationship between interactional factors (social presence, L2 anxiety, perceived benefits of digital tools) and their predictive roles in L2 WTC and interaction in online English as a medium of instruction (EMI) classes.					mutual support between community members	technical training before online class	
Alzaanin E (2024)	To investigate the emotional experiences	Saudi Arabia	design vocabulary learning tasks and environments	design vocabulary learning tasks and environments				
Kimberly Buescher Urbanski & Mariana Lima Becker (2024)	To leverage Concept-Based Language Instruction (C-BLI) and a Division-of-Labor Pedagogy (DOLP) to investigate the second language (L2) literacy development of university	USA		the researcher-teachers' highly attuned mediation	through laughter and encouragement	peer encouragement and support to take risks		
Li Z.; Guan P.; Li J.; Wang J. (2024)	To investigate these two variables in online and offline English-speaking classes	China	focus on the role of emotions and provide timely emotional support			get immediate feedback and support from the teacher and peers	administrative support and technical training; using e-learning platforms	
Wu H.; Zeng Y.; Fan Z. (2024)	To assess the levels of burnout and engagement among 1234 Chinese EFL students.	China	apply the homework, organization, and planning skills (HOPS) intervention		teachers should use humor	foster collaboration among students	expose to authentic and diverse texts and media	

Solhi M.(2024)	To explore how negative emotional orientations may contribute to English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) in in-person and online classes.	Turkey	curricula and instructional approaches could be designed to empower L2 learners with a sense of control over learner emotions			instructional approaches that emphasize collaborative peer/group activities and interactions	implementation of collaborative online projects	
Dai K.; Wang Y. (2024)	To explore the intricate connections between Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' classroom emotions (anxiety, boredom and enjoyment) and their engagement within the context of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in technology-based learning environments	China	Design interactive activities	create a supportive and inclusive environment		encourage students to express positive emotions	Utilize technological tools to enhance the learning experience	Acknowledge that each student's emotional responses may differ, and teachers should adjust their teaching strategies based on individual characteristics. Incorporate education on emotion management and regulation into the classroom, helping students recognize and manage their own emotions.
Tingyu Z.; Ruohan Z.; Ping P.(2024)	To examine the mediating roles of boredom and burnout in the connection between TEI and ELP among Chinese university students engaged in EFL endeavor	China		fostering a positive and collaborative classroom environment		to prevent and mitigate these negative emotional factors		Encouraging student autonomy, promoting a growth mindset, and incorporating elements of gamification and real-world relevance can also help combat boredom and burnout to maintain student motivation. it is crucial to provide students with the tools and resources to recognize and manage the signs of burnout and boredom.
Wu H. (2024)	to investigate the change of FLE and FLCFA over time and their interplay with independent variables (learner-internal and teacher-centered variables) in a higher education context.	China	incorporate the cultural treasures of the target language in the teaching process	build a positive atmosphere in the classroom				
Panpisthar wee P.; Suwanarak K. (2024)	To explore the teachers' views and their implementation of the CLT approach in online education in consideration of the fact that the approach was claimed to be the preferred approach in classroom-based instruction.	Thailand				the usages of verbal and nonverbal interaction during the lessons evidently promoted the educational process and influenced the student's mood in learning.	emphasize the implementation of technologies	Another teacher-related challenge emerging from the study was the teacher's inadequate preparation to teach the communicative approach for the online instruction. the findings revealed that Thai EFL teachers had limited knowledge of the CLT implementation in the online instruction.
Liu Q.; Zhou W.(2024)	to investigate the effect of teachers' emotional support on online learning engagement for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners and the mediating roles of academic emotions, specifically enjoyment and boredom	China	teachers' emotional support and online English learning engagement by incorporating the person environment interaction model and the broaden-build theory	focusing on promoting teachers' emotional support by creating a harmonious classroom atmosphere	design activities enhancing students enjoyment		maximize the impact of enjoyment on online learning engagement	reveals the underlying mechanism of how the learner-external environmental factor of teachers' emotional support affects EFL learners' online learning engagement through the learner-internal factors (enjoyment and boredom), which contributes to the generalizability of these theories to the online EFL setting. fostering students' sense of enjoyment is a crucial internal factor in alleviating their boredom, which, in turn, boosts online learning engagement
Haile, KW; Olamo, TG; Yemiru, MA (2024)	to examine the questioning behaviours and strategies used by EFL instructors to enhance reflective learning in the communicative English language skills course	Ethiopia	stakeholders such as course material writers can use these insights to structure content more effectively, while testers and curriculum developers can integrate reflective question types and strategies into assessments and	continuous professional development programmes should prioritise equipping instructors with effective planning skills, including allocating sufficient waiting time, to boost student engagement and learning.		selecting questions that stimulate critical thinking and reflection across different topics to enhance student engagement and deepen learning experiences		

			curricula, promoting essential skills for contemporary educational and professional settings						
Yan, CM; He, CJ; Sheng, H(2024)	sets out to uncover EFL student teachers' perceptions of the current teacher feedback on their course essays and desirable teacher written feedback	China		build a trust relationship between teacher and students			offer personal and positive feedback by language		
Wang, H; Patterson, MM; Long, HY (2024)	examined the effects of classroom goal structure, self-efficacy, and gender on student engagement among college students (N = 606) learning English as a foreign language in China	China		mastery classroom goal structure in facilitating student English language learning engagement			Strategies such as the use of meaningful learning tasks and assessments, allowing for autonomy and choice, providing supportive feedback, and allowing for social interaction in the classroom can help instructors to create a mastery-oriented classroom environment		
Y ıce E.(2023)	to explore the role of learning climate on self-efficacy beliefs and self-perceived communication competences of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in higher education	Turkey		creating a positive foreign language learning environment may help learners promote their efficacy beliefs and communication competences.			Lecturers can design and plan foreign language learning activities by keeping in mind the positive effects of these constructs on learners		
Yuan R.; Zhang T.; Li M. (2023)	The analysis reveals three core themes, which were perceived to be integral to an ideal EMI classroom: 1) an integration between content, language, and learning strategies, 2) a process-oriented course design permeated with a translanguaging approach, and 3) moving beyond specific EMI classrooms with a future and community orientation.	China		Teachers should create a supportive and inclusive environment to enhance students' sense of belonging and self-confidence.	Employing emotionally guided teaching strategies, such as storytelling or situational simulations, to stimulate students' emotional resonance and engagement		Teachers can provide personalized support by listening to and understanding students' emotional needs, helping them cope with stress and anxiety related to learning. Teachers should provide timely and positive feedback to boost students' self-efficacy and interest in learning.	By promoting interaction and communication among students, teachers can help establish deeper emotional connections, enhancing their motivation to learn.	
Kim, J; Kweon, SO (2023)	investigates how differently tertiary level English as a foreign language (EFL) learners exert autonomy and regulate motivation by proficiency levels to acquire speaking skills in the target language via a videoconference platform	South Korea	instructors need to explicitly define and communicate their instructional goals with their students as well as calibrate their feedback to better fit the needs from the students. localized context on the lower proficiency learners	Amplify prepared to participate in peer interaction, students will develop a sense of community in the virtual space, which is crucial to communication and interaction			The student participants of this study gained emotional support from 'the professor's words of encouragement' with presentation skills as well as constructive feedback on their English production.	instructor feedback and motivational self-talk in videoconference-based class	Its findings highlight the web of relationships between student motivational regulation, proficiency levels, and the emerging context in the fully video-synchronous EFL speaking class. EFL speaking instructors also need to be trained on EFL motivational regulation, which is intricately webbed and highly context specific
Alzubi A.A.F.; Al-Mwzaiji K.N.A.; Nazim M.(2022)	To identify English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' perceptions of online versus offline assessment methods in higher education. Furthermore, it targets the best skill-wise assessment methods and constraints that teachers can use when applying EFL assessment methods in both online and offline learning	Saudi Arabia		Enrich classroom atmosphere through various extrinsic and intrinsic techniques			the assessment methods most commonly used by the teachers in online classrooms were	·Raise awareness of ethics and academic honesty among learners to combat cheating and impersonation ·Train teachers to detect and prevent cheating in online and offline assessment contexts	

	modes						quizzes for listening and reading skills	
Mendoza L.; Lehtonen T.; Lindblom-Ylänne S.; Hyytinen H.(2022)	This qualitative study analyzes first-year university students' conceptions of their second language (L2) self-concept and self-efficacy for academic writing in English.	China	however, this study suggests that teachers should explore and consider the role of L2 self-concept and self-efficacy for L2 academic writing when designing university writing courses for L2 writers, especially for those undergoing educational transitions			referring to a relatively stable sensation of feeling positive and good about themselves as English learners from primary school onwards		Descriptions of change towards more positive The fifth category consisted of L2 self-concept descriptions and experiences that were mostly negative
Li C.(2021)	research on the ubiquitous emotional experience of boredom	China	L2 teachers could also focus on increasing the perceived intrinsic value of L2 learning activities, for example, by choosing interesting learning materials to kindle students' interest, enhancing their awareness of appreciating and enjoying the exploration of L2 language and language itself rather than being achievement or outcome oriented.		I would speculate that reduction in boredom and increase in enjoyment would lead to improved L2 achievement for students	They highlight the critical role of appraisals of control, intrinsic value, and extrinsic value in instigating boredom as its proximal determinants.		it would be important for language teachers to design tasks at an appropriate level of difficulty (neither overnor underchallenging) that matches individual competencies.
Saračević J.; Dubravac V.; Brdarević-čeljo A.; Bećirović S.(2021)	examined anxiety, neuroticism and extraversion amongst Bosnian high school and university students who were studying English as a foreign language (EFL)	Bosnia and Herzegovina	In addition to formal language learning, regular informal exposure should be encouraged because it might decrease anxiety and neuroticism and increase extraversion			In general, teachers should promote individualisation to assist all students to achieve their maximum potential.		
Korkealehto K.; Lakkala M.; Toom A.(2021)	investigates how student engagement and oral language skills rehearsal are perceived in a blended learning language course	Finland	students' own activities enhanced their willingness to conduct oral assignments and their security to talk in the target language increased according to the students	Carefully crafted learning environment sparks interaction and enhances engagement; it is evident that collaboration and pair work are paramount in online language learning, not only for learning but also for community building.		the face-to-face sessions were regarded as important for social engagement and they promoted academic engagement as well when the teaching methods	Collaboration enhanced engagement as the weekly video calls formed a platform for practicing interaction in English.	students' academic and social engagement was perceived to increase when the students felt themselves autonomous learners and noticed that their own commitment had an impact on their learning which is in line with previous research. Students' shortage of invested time and weaknesses in previous competences had a negative impact on both academic and social engagement, even though the students were self-critical regarding their own activity and language competence. According to the results, collaboration and video calls were the most significant methods to increase oral interaction.
Kalra R.; Siribud S. (2020)	investigated public speaking anxiety problems faced by Thai EFL students from their own and the researchers' perspectives	Thailand	conduct needs analysis of the learners before implementing the public speaking course		encouraged to use different, interesting speaking activities such as role plays in class	students should be encouraged to join English language speaking clubs		language teachers may consult with their anxious learners to find out the reasons for their anxiety