

Chapter 2. Literature review

This chapter provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the affective challenges experienced by low-achieving EFL university students and the coping strategies they employ to manage these challenges. The discussion focuses on two main aspects: affective challenges in EFL learning and students' coping strategies. In addition, the characteristics of low-achieving students and relevant previous studies are reviewed to contextualize the present study.

2.1 Affective Challenges

Affective challenges in EFL refer to emotional and psychological factors that influence learners' engagement and participation in language learning, such as anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, emotional response and low self-confidence, which often result in reduced classroom involvement and hinder language development (Attia & Algazo, 2025). Horwitz et al. (1986) established language anxiety as a specific learning barrier which hinders students from acquiring and using their second language effectively. The research shows that students develop anxiety when they need to use an unfamiliar language which makes them avoid speaking and reduce their classroom involvement. The fear of negative evaluation which MacIntyre and Gardner (1991); Papi and Hiver (2020) studied causes students to stay away from speaking activities because they worry about their mistakes and how others will judge them which intensifies their anxiety and prevents language growth. In addition, emotional responses are negative feelings such as stress, frustration, and insecurity experienced by learners when learning

English, which can interfere with motivation and classroom participation (Krashen, 1982; Wang et al., 2024). Moreover, low self-confidence in EFL contexts refers to learners' lack of belief in their ability to communicate effectively in English, especially during speaking and interactive tasks, which often results in avoidance and reduced participation (Dewaele et al., 2023).

These affective factors are often triggered by language barriers such as comprehension difficulties and communication problems, which are common among learners in foreign language contexts. Learners may become frustrated, loose, or demotivated (Büyükkarcı & Özsarı, 2022; Saito et al., 1999). Thus, comprehension difficulties may come from limited vocabulary knowledge, unfamiliar syntax, or rapid speech delivery, all of which can hinder learners' ability to extract meaning and respond appropriately. Besides, communication problems, including mispronunciation, lack of fluency, and grammatical errors, often lead to misunderstandings and disruptions in interaction (Aubrey, 2022; Yashima, 2002). These challenges can strengthen feelings of incompetence and learners' affective barriers, creating a cycle of anxiety and communicative difficulty.

2.2 Coping Strategies

Coping strategies are commonly defined as individuals' behavioral and psychological efforts to manage stress and challenging situations (Lazarus, 1984). In the context of EFL learning, coping strategies help students regulate anxiety, maintain motivation, and continue engaging in language learning despite affective challenges. Therefore, Amirkhan (1990); Carver et al. (1989) in studies on coping strategies, assessment, measurement, and theoretically based approaches stated that

problem solving, seeking social support, and avoidance, as well as planning, positive acceptance, and denial, were indicative of the coping strategies factor identified. A supportive learning environment plays a crucial role in helping students cope with affective challenges. Botes et al. (2020); Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014); Moskowitz and Dewaele (2020) emphasize the importance of learning environments that reduce stress and encourage risk-taking, allowing learners to participate without fear of embarrassment. Similarly, Gregersen and Horwitz (2002); Muroya (2023) suggest that positive feedback from teachers, peer support, and anxiety-reducing classroom practices can help learners manage fear of negative evaluation and build self-confidence.

Research in EFL contexts shows that learners use a range of self-directed coping strategies such as preparation, practice, self-motivation, and goal setting to manage emotional difficulties and maintain engagement. For example, self-regulation strategies have been shown to enhance EFL learners' motivation, willingness to communicate, and self-efficacy, indicating that learners can take control of their learning processes to overcome emotional challenges (Zhang, 2024). In addition, preparation and rehearsal have been specifically identified as effective strategies for managing speaking anxiety among EFL learners, helping students build confidence and reduce negative emotional responses during oral tasks (Lestari et al., 2025).

In language learning research, coping strategies that focus on managing emotions are often called affective strategies. Kousalová (2023); Oxford (1990) explains that affective strategies help learners regulate feelings such as anxiety, frustration, and lack of confidence to support sustainable learning. In the context of this research,

affective strategies are understood as students' efforts to manage emotional difficulties such as anxiety or low self-confidence when learning English.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This study is wanted to know and describe “What affective challenges do low-achieving EFL students experience in their learning process?” also “How do low-achieving EFL students cope with these challenges?” This qualitative question aims to identify the types of affective challenges experienced by low-achieving students. Furthermore, describe students’ coping strategies to overcome the challenges. According to Krashen (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, emotional variables such as anxiety, low self-confidence, and fear of making mistakes can hinder language acquisition when learners experience high emotional stress. These affective challenges are often triggered by language barriers, especially in EFL learning contexts where learners struggle to understand or express themselves in English. As a result, learners may experience reduced intrinsic motivation and eventually disengage from academic tasks. Dweck (2006) Mindset Theory also explains how repeated negative experiences, such as failure or embarrassment, can lead to fixed mindsets and low self-efficacy. Based on this theoretical foundation, this study explores affective challenges do low-achieving students experience in their learning process and how students cope with these challenges.

2.4 Previous Studies

Previous empirical studies have investigated affective challenges and coping strategies in EFL learning using various research designs and participant groups.

Pysarchyk and Yamshynska (2015) conducted a qualitative study using interviews and classroom observations to explore psychological challenges among EFL learners and found that anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence significantly reduced students' classroom participation. Öz and Polat (2022) employed a mixed-methods design involving university EFL students and revealed that language anxiety and fear of negative evaluation negatively affected learners' willingness to communicate. In the Indonesian context, Purnama et al. (2019) used a quantitative survey to examine affective factors influencing English achievement and reported that anxiety and low self-confidence were strongly associated with low academic performance, although learners' lived experiences were not deeply explored. Regarding coping strategies, Ali et al. (2020) applied a qualitative interview-based approach with international university students in Indonesia and found that learners coped with emotional difficulties through self-motivation, and persistence despite anxiety. Similarly, Uslu and Durak (2024), using a correlational design, demonstrated that self-regulation strategies were positively related to emotional control and academic engagement, though their study was not EFL-specific. While these studies provide valuable insights, most relied on quantitative or mixed methods, focused on general or international learners, and examined affective challenges and coping strategies separately. Therefore, there remains a gap in understanding how low-achieving Indonesian EFL university students experience affective challenges and employ coping strategies from a phenomenological perspective, which the present study seeks to address.