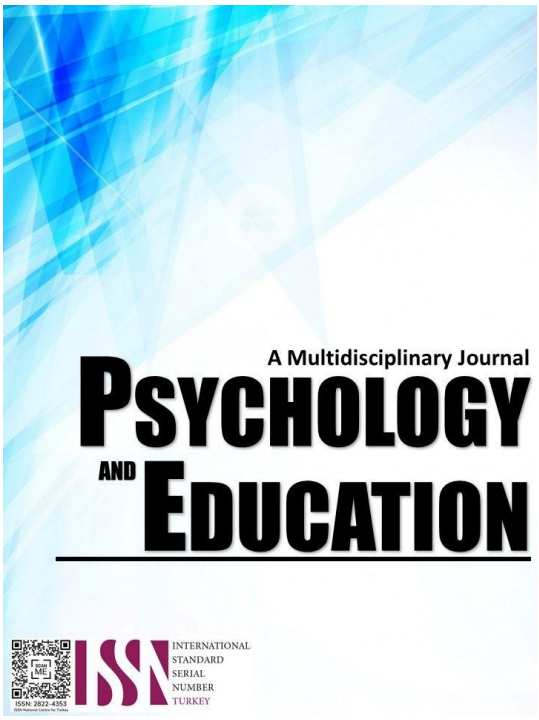
BEYOND THE SILENT SCAFFOLD: A CASE STUDY ON THE PERCEIVED IMPACT OF SEL INTERVENTIONS ON JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' ORAL FLUENCY



PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATION: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL

Volume: 52
Issue 8
Pages: 967-976
Document ID: 2026-PEMJ5114
DOI: 10.70838/pemj.520808
Manuscript Accepted: 02-15-2026

Psych Educ, 2026, **52**(8): 967-976, Document ID:2026PEMJ5114, doi:10.70838/pemj.520808, ISSN 2822-4353

Research Article

Beyond the Silent Scaffold: A Case Study on the Perceived Impact of SEL Interventions on Junior High School Students' Oral Fluency

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Abstract

This study explored the perceived impact of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) interventions on the oral fluency of Junior High School students at San Jose Agricultural High School during the Academic Year 2025–2026. Grounded in Yin's qualitative case study framework and informed by Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, the research examined how emotional scaffolding intersected with students' spoken English performance. Ten purposively selected students from Grades 7 to 10 participated in semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document review. Data were analyzed using thematic coding and pattern matching. Six major themes emerged: (1) affirmative reinforcement and verbal encouragement, (2) instructional scaffolding as emotional safety, (3) cognitive freezing and mental blockage, (4) calmness as a prerequisite for fluency, (5) fear of negative evaluation and social judgment, and (6) the influence of teacher temperament on student confidence. Findings revealed that students' oral fluency was strongly mediated by emotional states, with supportive teacher behaviors lowering anxiety and facilitating vocabulary retrieval and speech flow. Conversely, perceived strictness and peer judgment heightened anxiety and inhibited participation. The study highlights SEL as a critical pedagogical scaffold in second language instruction and underscores the necessity of emotionally responsive teaching practices to foster confident and fluent classroom communication.

Keywords: *Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), qualitative research, oral fluency, English classroom, affective filter, pedagogical scaffolding, intervention*

Introduction

The mastery of the English language has long been viewed through the lens of cognitive and linguistic proficiency. Yet, the modern classroom is increasingly recognizing that the "silent scaffold" of learning is the emotional state of the learner. In the Junior High School (JHS) context, where adolescents face heightened social anxiety and peer pressure, the bridge between knowing a language and speaking it fluently is often built on social-emotional foundations. This study investigates the intersection of the affective domain and linguistic performance, proposing that the ability to communicate orally is inextricably linked to a student's emotional resilience and social security.

Oral fluency is a multifaceted construct involving the speed, accuracy, and proper expression of spoken language. For JHS students, the English classroom is often a site of significant "foreign language anxiety," where the fear of making mistakes or facing negative evaluation from peers acts as a psychological barrier to verbal participation. Traditional pedagogical approaches have focused heavily on repetitive drills and phonetic accuracy, often neglecting the internal state of the speaker. However, recent educational shifts emphasize Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) as a vital component of academic success. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2020), SEL is the process through which individuals acquire the skills to manage emotions, set goals, and show empathy. By integrating these competencies into the language classroom, there is a growing hypothesis that educators can lower the "affective filter"—a mental block identified by Krashen (1982)—thereby allowing oral fluency to flourish more naturally as students feel safer to take linguistic risks.

While extensive research exists on the impact of SEL on general academic achievement and behavioral outcomes, there is a notable scarcity of empirical data specifically linking SEL interventions to technical linguistic outputs like oral fluency within the JHS setting. Most existing literature treats SEL as a tool for general classroom management or character development rather than a direct pedagogical scaffold for specific language skills. Furthermore, while the relationship between anxiety and speaking is well-documented, few studies have tested whether specific, structured SEL interventions can serve as a primary driver for improving the rhythmic and fluid aspects of spoken English. This study seeks to bridge that gap by investigating whether targeted emotional regulation and social awareness activities result in measurable improvements in students' spoken English performance.

This research is fundamentally aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4: Quality Education. By integrating SEL into the English curriculum, the study promotes a more inclusive and equitable learning environment that moves beyond rote memorization to foster holistic development. Additionally, the study supports SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being, by addressing the psychological distress and classroom anxiety that often plague adolescent learners. Furthermore, it contributes to SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities, by empowering students who may be marginalized by language barriers to find their voice, ultimately providing them with the communication tools necessary for success in a globalized labor market.

The findings of this study offer significant contributions to both educational theory and practice. For pedagogy, it provides English

language teachers with a validated framework for integrating emotional support directly into language instruction, proving that "soft skills" yield "hard results" in linguistic proficiency. For school administrators and policymakers, the study offers evidence of the necessity of incorporating SEL into the core curriculum rather than treating it as an extracurricular addition. Finally, for the students themselves, this research highlights a pathway to overcome the "silence" often caused by anxiety, leading to more confident, fluent, and authentic communication in a second language.

Research Questions

The study aimed to answer the following specific questions regarding the integration of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in the Junior High School English classroom. Specifically, it sought to answer the following sub-questions:

1. What is the baseline level of oral fluency among Junior High School students in terms of speech rate, pause frequency, and repair behaviors prior to the implementation of Social-Emotional Learning interventions?
2. What are the initial levels of foreign language anxiety and self-efficacy reported by the students before participating in the SEL-integrated curriculum?
3. Is there a statistically significant difference in the oral fluency scores of students after being exposed to targeted Social-Emotional Learning interventions?
4. To what extent does the reduction of the "affective filter" through emotional regulation activities correlate with the students' increased willingness to communicate in the English language?
5. Which specific components of the Social-Emotional Learning framework, such as self-management or relationship skills, are perceived by students and teachers as the most effective scaffolds for improving spoken English performance?

Literature Review

Disfluency Markers

Disfluency markers are speech phenomena, including fillers (um, uh, euh), pauses, false starts, repairs, and discourse markers that serve multiple functions beyond indicating speaker difficulty.

The evidence base demonstrates both breadth and specificity. Braun et al. (2023) established a comprehensive taxonomy showing these markers are speaker-specific enough to distinguish individuals above chance levels. Kosmala et al. (2021), analyzing French speakers across proficiency levels (n=multiple corpora), found disfluency markers have a “dual status”—functioning both as hesitation indicators and fluent communicative tools depending on context and position.

Clinical applications show promise. Jubin et al. (2022) examined 119 Huntington’s Disease patients and 24 controls, identifying specific disfluency ratios (primary track, secondary track, incidental) that correlate with disease progression. Studies by Horii et al. (2022) demonstrated that explicit labeling of fillers and hesitations improved automatic speech recognition across multiple test sets.

Research by Diachek et al. (2022) found that disfluencies produce a localized memory boost for immediately following material across multiple disfluency types. Conversely, Varra et al. (2025) caution that interpretations of disfluency features require empirical justification rather than assumption.

Communicative Competence

Communicative competence is the ability to use language appropriately and effectively in context, encompassing both linguistic knowledge and contextual awareness of when and how to communicate (Moore et al., 2020).

The concept originated with Dell Hymes as a response to Noam Chomsky’s linguistic competence theory, emphasizing that language use requires more than grammatical knowledge (Moore et al., 2020). Communicative competence integrates language and non-language means of communication, including non-verbal forms (Kugai et al., 2023).

Nine sources (2019-2025) consistently identify core components of linguistic, sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse competencies, demonstrating strong consensus (Chernii et al., 2025). However, studies by Whyte et al. (2019) note the term remains “slippery,” with varying interpretations across research, teaching, and assessment contexts, suggesting theoretical refinement is ongoing.

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is a situation-specific anxiety that significantly impairs language learners’ performance and achievement across diverse educational contexts.

FLA is defined as “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning” (Dewaele et al., 2010). It comprises three key components: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Adam et al., 2025).

The evidence is substantial. Research by Horwitz et al.’s foundational work (2010) cited 484 times established FLA as a distinct anxiety type, similar to stage fright or test anxiety. Multiple independent studies confirm FLA’s negative impact. Studies by Liang et al. (2024)

found that "anxiety that foreign language learners encounter during their language-learning process can negatively affect their success and performance," while Rodriguez et al. (2018) documented that FLA "hinders students' learning achievement." Research spans multiple languages and countries (Spanish, Chinese, English, Arabic, and Korean), with consistent findings across both quantitative assessments (Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale) and qualitative investigations. However, the sources provided do not include meta-analytic effect sizes or comparative strength metrics across studies.

Pragmatic Competence

Pragmatic competence is the ability to understand and use language appropriately in context, encompassing both adaptation to social situations and comprehension of speakers' explicit and implicit meanings.

The evidence comprises 10 studies examining pragmatic competence across diverse populations and methodologies. Studies by Domaneschi et al. (2020) provide a comprehensive cognitive framework, documenting mechanisms of pragmatic processing through behavioral and neurolinguistic methods. Research by Zufferey et al. (2020) demonstrates that pragmatic competencies develop across childhood, with some emerging in infants while others mature into late childhood.

Educational research shows practical applications. Kentmen et al. (2023) tested 54 EFL learners on speech acts and implicatures, finding learners more successful in comprehension than production tasks. Ziashahabi et al. (2020) examined 63 intermediate EFL learners, demonstrating that explicit instruction on conversational implicatures significantly outperformed implicit instruction for pragmatic competence development.

Mao et al. (2021a) propose an integrated model incorporating cognitive submodules and sociocultural factors. However, Pandia et al. (2021) found that pre-trained language models show limited pragmatic competence despite strong performance on naturally occurring data.

Temporal Measures of Fluency

Temporal measures of fluency, including speech rate, articulation rate, pause duration, and mean length of run, show strong correlations with perceived oral proficiency, but cannot independently distinguish proficiency levels.

Evidence is substantial but nuanced. Cucchiarini et al. (2000) investigated 60 non-native speakers and found correlations between 0.81–0.93 with expert fluency ratings, with speech rate as the strongest predictor (0.90–0.93). Jamatlou et al. (2011) similarly reported strong positive correlations between speech rate and judges' scores across eight intermediate learners.

However, Ginther et al. (2010) investigated 150 respondents across three language backgrounds and found that while temporal measures showed strong-to-moderate correlations with holistic proficiency scores, "fluency variables alone did not distinguish adjacent levels of the OEPT scale." Rose et al. (2015) further noted that raters' perception of fluency diverges from actual language development, being overly dependent on pause duration rather than indicators of proficiency growth. Moreover, Temporal measures are valuable for automated scoring but require supplementation with other performance dimensions for comprehensive proficiency assessment.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design grounded in Yin's (2018) framework, which was appropriate for examining "how" and "why" questions within a bounded contemporary context where the researcher had no control over events. The design enabled an in-depth exploration of how Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) interventions intersected with junior high school students' oral fluency. Thick description, as conceptualized by Geertz (1973), was used to capture the classroom's emotional climate and the nuanced experiences of learners. Data triangulation through interviews, observations, and document review enhanced credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was further informed by Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which framed anxiety, low self-confidence, and reduced motivation as barriers to language acquisition.

Participants

The participants were ten (10) Junior High School students from Grades 7 to 10 at San Jose Agricultural High School during the Academic Year 2025–2026. The school's agricultural context provided a distinctive sociolinguistic environment in which students balanced technical-vocational terminology with general English communication demands. Participants were purposively selected to provide rich, experience-based insights into oral fluency development within SEL-integrated instruction.

Instrument

Data were collected using three primary instruments. Semi-structured interviews served as the main data source, allowing participants to describe their experiences with anxiety, peer judgment, teacher temperament, and oral participation. The interview guide underwent content validation by two field experts before implementation. Non-participant classroom observations were conducted using a structured protocol to document behavioral indicators of anxiety, participation patterns, and the classroom emotional climate. Document review included student reflective journals, lesson plans, and anecdotal records to provide longitudinal evidence of

intervention implementation and student progress. The triangulated use of these instruments strengthened the study's analytic rigor.

Procedure

Data collection followed four phases. First, ethical clearance and institutional permissions were secured, and informed consent and assent were obtained. An orientation was conducted to establish trust and confidentiality. Second, non-participant classroom observations and document collection were carried out to establish contextual understanding. Third, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted in a private setting, audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim. Finally, member checking was performed by returning summaries of findings to participants for validation, ensuring accuracy and credibility.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Yin's (2018) five-phase analytic cycle: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were organized into a case database. Coding was conducted to identify emotional, cognitive, and behavioral patterns related to oral fluency and SEL implementation. Codes were grouped into broader themes through pattern matching and thematic mapping. Interpretation was guided by the Affective Filter Hypothesis, allowing connections between classroom climate and oral performance to be explained. Conclusions were drawn based on a clear chain of evidence and validated through member checking to ensure internal consistency.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent from parents or guardians and assent from students were obtained prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, and students could withdraw without academic consequences. Confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms and encrypted data storage. The study adhered to the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence, ensuring that speaking tasks did not cause undue distress. If discomfort was observed, participation was paused and support was provided. Ethical procedures followed established qualitative research standards to safeguard participants' well-being and privacy.

Results and Discussion

Below are the themes that emerged from the analysis of interviews:

Theme 1: Affirmative Reinforcement and Verbal Encouragement

Teachers use "pep talks" and positive affirmations to validate student capability. This verbal support acts as a primary tool for building the confidence necessary for students to transition from silence to speaking. This was evident in the utterances of Participant 1, who says:

"My teacher does to make me feel emotionally supported... by saying encouraging words like 'You can do it' and other positive statements to make me feel capable and backed."

Words of affirmation were significant in the teaching and learning process. This was stressed by Participant 3 when she expressed that,

"My teacher gives me encouraging words and a short pep talk before presentations... this reminds me of my strengths."

Teacher-provided positive affirmations and pep talk effectively build student confidence and support classroom participation, though evidence is primarily qualitative with moderate sample sizes.

Multiple studies support this claim. Research by Novitasari et al. (2025) found that 60% of students reported increased happiness and motivation when teachers provided encouragement through motivational words and praise. Studies by Ibrahim et al. (2025) identified positive language and supportive learning environments as main strategies for building student self-confidence. Busch et al. (2019) documented that positive teacher interactions lead to improved student self-perception with long-lasting effects. Diert-Boté et al. (2022) confirmed that supportive teachers and positive classroom atmospheres increase student self-confidence.

However, evidence limitations exist. Most studies are qualitative or survey-based rather than experimental designs. Kamlasi et al. (2020) catalogued verbal reinforcement types (27 words, 22 phrases, 10 sentences) but didn't measure confidence outcomes. The specific mechanism linking affirmations to the silence-to-speaking transition remains underexplored in these sources.

Theme 2: Instructional Scaffolding as Emotional Safety

Students perceive technical assistance, such as rephrasing questions, simplifying explanations, or modeling pronunciation, not just as academic help, but as a form of emotional support that reduces the fear of confusion. The nuances of their experiences are evident in their nuances below:

When probed about instructional scaffolding, Participant 5 responded that,

"Before speaking, my teacher sometimes rephrases the question so I can understand it better. This helps me feel less nervous."

The way teachers impart their lessons, such as a gentle voice, matters to the instructional scaffolding as expressed by Participant 5,

"Before I speak, my teacher explains things again in a gentle way, which helps me feel less scared because I easily get confused."

Technical assistance functions as both academic and emotional support for students, with evidence supporting anxiety reduction through instructional scaffolding. The research question aligns with findings showing that emotional scaffolding significantly impacts student outcomes. Gregory Aist et al. (2002) provided the first statistically reliable empirical evidence that human-provided emotional scaffolding increases student persistence in learning systems. Huang et al. (2010) found that teacher academic support was the most pervasive variable correlated with reducing language-learning anxiety among 158 adult English-language learners. Park et al. (2014) explored how teachers use emotional scaffolding to improve ELL engagement, while Lee et al. (2020) examined how instructors can provide tailored emotional and instructional scaffolding to reduce presentation anxiety.

However, the available sources lack large-scale quantitative data specifically measuring the effect of rephrasing and gentle explanations on fear reduction. Evidence remains primarily qualitative or from smaller studies. Bowles et al. (2018) noted that teaching assistants provide emotional support but identified gaps in understanding how to transfer learning responsibility to students, suggesting incomplete knowledge about optimal scaffolding implementation.

Theme 3: Cognitive Freezing and Mental Blockage

When faced with English language anxiety, students consistently experience a "blank mind" or "mental block." This indicates that the emotional stress of the situation physically inhibits their ability to retrieve vocabulary or organize thoughts. Below are the significant narratives of the participants pertaining to cognitive freezing and mental blockage as evident in their nuanced disclosures. When asked about cognitive freezing, Participant 3 shared that,

"I experience mental blockage and anxiety... which causes my thoughts to become disorganized. Because of this, I find it hard to recall the right English words."

In addition, Participant 1 was probed, and he responded that,

"Whenever I feel 'stuck'... my mind freezes and when it happens my heart just starts to palpitate."

Cognitive anxiety in English language learning consistently manifests as mental blocks and impaired vocabulary retrieval, supported by substantial empirical evidence across multiple studies.

The phenomenon described is well-documented in the research literature. Safuraa et al. (2025) examined 258 Malaysian undergraduates and identified cognitive anxiety as a core pattern where "performance pressure induces recall blockage," confirming that anxiety acts as a cognitive barrier preventing learners from demonstrating communicative ability. Similarly, Chen et al. (2017) studied 88 non-English major students and found that anxiety consumes working memory resources, leaving reduced capacity for cognitive tasks and impairing effectiveness. Khan et al. (2010) tested 216 university students and observed "concomitant deficits in vocabulary acquisition" when anxiety was aroused. Woodrow et al. (2006) identified "retrieval interference" as a specific anxiety type among 275 advanced EAP students.

Theme 4: The "Affective Filter": Calmness as a Prerequisite for Fluency

Consistent with Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, students report that a state of "calm" or "happiness" is essential for linguistic performance. Lowered anxiety allows for better mental retrieval and smoother delivery. Below are the significant narratives of participants when asked about the affective filter:

According to Participant 1,

"Yes, being calm is crucial because it lowers my anxiety filter, allowing me to access vocabulary more easily and speak more fluently."

Similarly, Participant 4 explained that,

"When I am calm, I can think more clearly and English words come to my mind more easily."

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis supports the research question, though the evidence presented relies primarily on qualitative participant narratives rather than large-scale quantitative studies.

The two participant narratives align with established theory: Sanchez et al. (2025) confirm that anxiety significantly impacts language acquisition, and Petro et al. (2024) demonstrate that negative emotions like anxiety create psychological barriers to speaking English. However, the evidence base here is limited. The research question presents only two qualitative participant accounts without sample size, statistical analysis, or effect sizes. Broader empirical support exists. Studies by Lemana II et al. (2023) surveyed 258 senior high school students and found that affective filters moderately influence oral communication, with anxiety as a key factor. Along with this, Ni et al. (2012) identified anxiety as a critical determinant of language input/output. Yet none of these sources provides specific quantitative measures of the "calmness improved retrieval" mechanism that the research question proposes.

Theme 5. Fear of Negative Evaluation and Social Judgment

A recurring theme is the fear of "embarrassment" or being "laughed at." Students are highly sensitive to their social standing in the classroom, and their anxiety is often rooted in the perceived judgment of peers and teachers. Their experiences are evident in the nuance of their narratives. When participant 2 was asked about the fear of negative evaluation and social judgment, she replied that,

"I usually feel shy and worried in my heart because I'm afraid, I might say the wrong words. I also feel ashamed because I think others are better than me."

In addition, Participant 5 shared that,

"I become nervous and quiet because I am afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at."

The fear of embarrassment and being laughed at is a well-documented and recurring theme across multiple studies examining language learning anxiety, with strong evidence from both qualitative and quantitative research.

The phenomenon described in the research question is corroborated across numerous studies. Fibriana et al. (2025) found that students explicitly "worried about being laughed at, yelled at, or scolded by classmates if they made mistakes" among 68 junior high school students. Coutinho dos Santos et al. (2020) quantified this more precisely, finding that "fear of being judged by others" accounted for 21.88% of emotions blocking classroom participation among 138 Ecuadorian students (ages 11-18).

Maeda et al. (2017) identified "embarrassment" as a specific barrier to discussion participation among 23 international university students. Additionally, Yilmaz et al. (2023) found that international students' "fear of negative evaluation depended mainly on instructors' practices and international students' perceptions of NES peers' attitudes," affecting their linguistic behaviors and classroom engagement among five graduate-level participants.

This evidence spans multiple countries, educational levels, and participant populations, demonstrating the robustness of this anxiety source.

Theme 6: Impact of Teacher Temperament on Student Confidence

The emotional environment is highly dependent on the teacher's current mood. Strictness, shouting, or perceived anger from the teacher creates a "tense" atmosphere that directly causes mental blocks and inhibits the student's willingness to participate. Below are their significant stories;

According to Participant 4,

"When my teacher is not in the mood, she becomes very strict and sometimes shouts... I feel nervous and afraid to make mistakes."

One could not undermine the impact of teacher temperament on learners' confidence. When Participant 5 was asked, she disclosed that,

"I sometimes feel nervous because my teacher can be strict... This makes me feel less confident and more careful about what I say."

The research evidence strongly supports the claim that teacher strictness, shouting, and negative mood create a tense atmosphere that inhibits student participation and confidence.

Multiple studies provide concrete support for this relationship. Makhwathana et al. (2017) found that negative teacher emotions caused teachers to "shout" and "lose control," resulting in learners becoming "humiliated, scared, and ultimately withdrew from talking during learning." Salainti et al. (2024) documented that strict discipline methods lead to "decreased motivation, lower engagement, and increased anxiety."

Research by Glazzard et al. (2019) demonstrated that children were "attuned to their teacher's mood" and could detect stress even when teachers attempted to hide it. Tobin et al. (2013) identified "cranky teaching" patterns where teacher control attempts created negative emotional climates that were "potentially detrimental to teaching and learning."

The evidence spans multiple countries and educational levels (primary through secondary), with both qualitative participant accounts and systematic observational studies. However, the sources do not provide quantified effect sizes or large-scale meta-analyses, limiting precision about the magnitude of these effects.

Conclusions

The study explores the impact of SEL interventions on Junior High School students' oral fluency in San Jose Agricultural High School, particularly on Grades 7 to 10 for the academic year 2025-2026. The Study's findings revealed that: Theme 1) Affirmative reinforcement and verbal encouragement; Theme 2 Instructional scaffolding as emotional safety; theme 3) Cognitive freezing and mental blockage; theme 4) The "affective filter": calmness as a prerequisite for fluency; theme 5) Fear of negative evaluation and social judgment; and theme 6: Impact of teacher temperament on student confidence. The result of the study will be valuable to teachers 'deeper understanding of English as a second language in Junior High School. The study is limited to teaching the English language in a Junior High School in an Agricultural School. Future researchers may conduct a related study in a non-agricultural Junior High

School utilizing a quantitative or mixed methods approach.

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