

Exploring EFL Teachers' Understandings of Language Learning Psychology

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ABSTRACT

Despite having become a key field in applied linguistics, language learning psychology (LLP) research is found to emphasize more on learners rather than teachers. 30 EFL teachers reported on their understandings on LLP within the EFL contexts in this study. How the teachers working in three different schools in Thailand conceptualize and apply five LLP constructs, namely 1) motivation, 2) willingness to communicate, 3) emotion, 4) self-concept, and 5) group dynamics in their classrooms were explored with a mixed-methods design including a survey and interviews. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analyses were undertaken to find out any relationships among these five LLP constructs, whereas qualitative findings were investigated thematically. It was found that motivation, willingness to communicate, and emotion appeared vital in the teachers' classroom experiences. The teachers also described their role in creating the emotional side of the classroom and in creating a supportive and positive learning environment. The findings shed light on teacher psychology and professional wellness and the role of teaching practices that take into account emotional responses.

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INTRODUCTION

Language learning psychology (LLP) is, in fact, part of every language learner and teacher. It includes motivation, attitudes, self-perception, emotions, and even social connections that act on classroom interaction (Mercer et al., 2012). According to Stevick (1980), success in language learning is not mainly about using well-developed materials or innovative approaches. What is more crucial is what happens inside the classroom with teachers and learners in the language classroom. The idea continues to be valid since teachers and their human side are at the core of language education.

While a lot of research has focused on learners' psychology, less attention has been paid to language teachers. In fact, teachers are not just the ones giving knowledge in the classroom, but their attitudes and emotions, and even interactions with students impact classroom learning and affect students' motivation, and learning engagement (Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018). How teachers think and feel about language learning, including their beliefs about ability and their emotional experiences in class, can greatly affect how classrooms operate. Exploring teachers' perspectives on LLP therefore helps better understand how psychological factors function in actual classrooms and how relevant theories about LLP are reflected in teaching practices.

To illustrate, teachers are not only just the ones who teach learners, but they also support learners emotionally and as a result their own well-being and perception have some impact on students' learning (Gkonou & Mercer, 2017). Positive psychology in language teaching (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Oxford, 2017) shows that teaching and learning include understanding and satisfaction. So, a teacher's emotional abilities are just as important as their teaching methodology. When teachers deal with tension well, comfort students with care, and show eagerness in class, they create well-developed classrooms that help students grow both academically and personally.

Notwithstanding the significance of LLP for teachers, educational and EFL research into how teachers understand and prioritize LLP constructs is still under explored. Many teachers use intuition, drawing on experience rather than any theoretical concepts when dealing with student behavior or responding to emotions. Thus, bridging this gap between research and teacher practice is vital if LLP is to benefit teacher education and professional development in the long term.

Since this study is set out to look into EFL teachers' perspectives on language teaching concerning language learning psychology (LLP), it examines which elements of LLP are found significant, how these teachers see their role as language teachers in motivating and emotionally supporting learners, including what strategies they use while teaching in the classroom. Using surveys and interviews, this mixed-methods study examines how the teachers interpret and apply LLP in their everyday teaching practice.

This study is deemed necessary given two main reasons. First, it adds to the understanding of language learning psychology by underscoring EFL teachers' experiences and viewpoints. Second, it offers guideline for including psychological aspects in teacher education which helps to raise awareness for preparing teachers who can support learner development of emotions and motivation in diverse classroom environments at present.

The study aims to answer two research questions:

1. What aspects of language learning psychology (LLP) do teachers consider most important in their professional teaching contexts?
2. How do teachers conceptualize and apply LLP constructs (motivation, willingness to communicate, emotion, self-concept, and group dynamics) in their classroom practices?

Addressing these questions helps explain how teachers understand the psychological aspects of teaching and how this awareness guides their classroom practices. The study also seeks to explore what teachers believe about their role in supporting students' motivation and emotions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Learning Psychology (LLP) combines the cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of language education. Simply put, it looks into how people think, feel and believe, which affects how they learn and teach languages. Mercer et al. (2012) refer to LLP as the study of the psychological and responsive experiences of those involved in language learning. This perspective sees the classroom as dynamic and vibrant, full of the exchanges of ideas and dialog including the teacher and the student.

According to Stevick (1980), it is believed that successful language learning depends more on relationships than on textbooks or practices. This view then supported current studies on emotions and personal elements such as motivation (Dörnyei, 2005), and identity (Norton, 2013). At present, more researchers also look at how teachers' feelings and beliefs determine what happens in the classroom (Gkonou et al., 2020; Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). Therefore, it can be argued that LLP integrates the human, emotional, and social aspects of learning and teaching languages.

Teacher Psychology and Professional Identity

Teachers do not just deliver lessons. They take their identity into the classroom and thus their experiences and values influence how they lecture or conduct classes (Borg, 2006). How they educate students is also linked to their emotions (Day & Gu, 2010). When teachers are keen and emotionally healthy, they are more likely to create engaging learning environments (Mercer et al., 2016).

Recently, more attention has been given to teacher emotions. Lately, Jennings and Greenberg (2009) introduce the notion of a classroom where teachers' emotional intelligence supports positive relationships. According to Goleman (1995), emotional intelligence refers to the ability to understand one's own feelings while reacting well to others. In language teaching, having this ability helps teachers manage cultural disputes and misconceptions. Also, it helps them to remain calm during challenges, and care for students' learning progress.

Motivation and Self-Concept in Language Learning

Of all the psychological constructs studied, motivation proves to be the most frequently investigated. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) conceptualize motivation as a vibrant system of desires, goals, and influences that empower behavior. The L2 Motivational Self System connects motivation to one's self-image as a successful or unsuccessful language learner. Simply put, when teachers recognize what motivates their students, they can then develop lessons that relate to learners' goals and cultural background (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008).

Another applicable idea is self-concept, which is about how people see themselves in certain scenarios (Mercer, 2011). When learners think of themselves positively, they appear more confident and regulated. Teachers can support this by giving constructive feedback and more balanced goals. Mercer (2016) also suggests that teachers understand the classroom by looking from students' point of view as to help them feel energized and in charge of what is being learned.

Emotions, Affect and Well-being

Emotions and thinking go hand in hand language learning. Imai (2010) argues that when students work together, emotions can support or delay their progress. MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) even revealed that positive feelings like enjoyment and eagerness increase engagement and creativity, while anxiety or embarrassment (Horwitz et al., 1986) can make students feel demotivated and evade any risk.

Teachers also encounter similar feelings. Dewaele (2015) suggests that how teachers manage their feelings affects how they deal with challenges. Positive psychology, according to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), urges teachers to avoid stress and focus on growth and well-being. As Mercer and Gregersen (2020) see, a teacher's happiness and determination are not only important but also key to developing a positive learning environment.

Group Dynamics and Relations

Classrooms are seen as communities of practice in which relationships and goals develop over time (Wenger, 1998). Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) even purport that group dynamics come with trust and reinforcement, letting learner take more risks. Teachers therefore play an important role in starting and sustaining this togetherness through classroom dynamics and constructive feedback.

From this viewpoint, motivation, emotion, self-concept, and group dynamics collaborate rather than disintegrate. According to Complexity Dynamic Systems Theory (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2020), some affecting or social interactional changes can result in major learning impacts. Teachers therefore have a main role in maintaining balance and pointing out the ways these factors lead to the learning process.

Teacher Wellness and Exhaustion

Keeping motivation and emotions in tune is fundamental for teachers' own well-being. Day and Gu (2010) indicate that having a clear purpose helps teachers stay away from any mental fatigue. Mercer and Gregersen (2020) recommend reflective habits, such as peer discussions and mindfulness to help teachers become aware of their emotions.

Regardless of theories about LLP, many teachers still find these ideas difficult to apply. Research shows a gap between academic theory and what happens inside classrooms (Gkonou & Mercer, 2017). Teachers often describe their understanding based on terms from their own experiences rather than theory. Because of this, professional development should involve workshops and case studies on bridging theory with practice to minimize this gap (Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018). By and large, LLP is a complicated system that takes into account thinking, emotions, and social interaction. While teachers' beliefs and emotions are deemed as playing an important role, few studies have explored how teachers understand and use LLP concepts in various educational contexts. Thus, this study aims to fill that gap by exploring how EFL teachers under study grasp and apply LLP notions in their teaching practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study used a mixed-method approach, making use of both quantitative and qualitative data to better understand how teachers view Language Learning Psychology. It was exploratory in nature, focusing on what psychological aspects EFL teachers see as most important and how they actually make sense of these ideas in their classrooms. The research *Journal of English Teaching*, 12(1), February 2026. 96-108, DOI <https://doi.org/10.33541/jet.v12i1.7881>

was carried out in three main stages. First, an online survey was conducted. This was followed by interviews with selected teachers to explore their views in more depth. In the final stage, the findings from both phases were brought together. Overall, the study was conducted on the basis that teachers' voices and experiences should lead to how psychological insights are understood and applied in language teaching.

Participants

The participants were purposively chosen from three high schools in Thailand with distinct school contexts and student populations. 30 Thai EFL teachers were included in Phase 1. These teachers were secondary English teachers with at least an M.A. in English, ELT, or Language Studies from local and universities abroad. Most had at least five years of teaching experience and reported some professional development experience associated with language teaching and learning in their career. All participants took part voluntarily and were evidently informed about the purpose and objectives of the study.

In Phase 2, 11 teachers were deliberately chosen upon consent for partaking in semi-structured interviews. The selection criteria considered teaching experience, gender, and willingness to provide more feedback on their professional practice. The individual interview sessions aimed to discover teachers' personal experiences and teaching conducts on how specific psychological dimensions influence their teaching.

Instruments, Procedures and Analysis

Two instruments were used in this study, an online survey questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was administered to gather demographics, featuring 14 items divided into five key areas of language learning psychology (LLP): motivation, willingness to communicate, emotion, self-concept, and group dynamics in their classrooms respectively. Generally, the teachers scored how important each area was perceived on a five-point Likert scale and replied to an open-ended question, justifying the two most important psychological factors. The follow-up interviews then probed the teachers' conceptual understanding of LLP and how they integrated these principles into their everyday teaching practice. Prompts were included to encourage them to describe what LLP meant and to share the strategies or approaches they used to support students' motivation and emotional health. Both instruments were reviewed by three experts in language education, and all questionnaire items showed acceptable IOC scores (.79-1.00). A small pilot study with five teachers yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .82, indicating that the questionnaire items were consistently reliable.

The data were collected in two main phases to allow the questionnaire results to inform the interviews. First, the online questionnaire was distributed to the secondary teacher participants who could complete the survey at their convenience online, and all responses were checked for completeness before being coded numerically for analysis. In the second stage, the selected teachers were approached for the interviews which were conducted mainly in Thai. The interview session lasted approximately 20-25 minutes each through Zoom. The interviews were audio-recorded with permission and later transcribed. Also, selected interview scripts were returned to the interviewees for member checking.

The responses from the questionnaires were processed to identify which LLP constructs the teachers perceived as most important in their teaching practice. For data analysis, descriptive statistics and correlations were employed to see how the constructs related to one another.

The qualitative data from the open-ended responses and interviews were examined thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedures. The analysis focused on recurring ideas and how they formed themes that reflected the teachers' understandings of LLP within their school contexts. The teaching environment was also taken into account, as it influenced how teachers interpreted psychological concepts and described them in their practices. The quantitative results and qualitative themes were then holistically integrated through narrative integration, where data from both phases of the study were considered together during interpretation. This showed how teachers' views of LLP developed from the survey findings and their classroom experiences, and how these views related to their professional beliefs and teaching practices.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, what it involved, and how the data would be used. Their participation was completely voluntary, and each teacher provided informed consent before completing the questionnaire and joining the interviews. Their responses were kept strictly confidential and they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

FINDINGS

The findings are presented in line with the two research questions. The first concerns which aspects of language learning psychology (LLP) the teachers consider most important in their professional contexts. The second examines how the teachers understand and apply five LLP constructs in their classroom practice

Findings from the Questionnaire

The questionnaire demonstrates how the 30 teachers evaluated key LLP constructs on their classroom practice. Motivation was seen consistently as the foundation of language learning. The teachers tended to view motivation as coming from interpersonal interaction, emotional support, and classroom dynamics, rather than an independent entity. Many teachers commented that motivation is repetitively shaped by teacher behavior, bonding with peers, and the overall atmosphere of the classroom.

Willingness to communicate was also highly valued. Most of the teachers described it as a sign of learners' comfort and affective intelligence. Emotion, group dynamics, and self-concept were also rated quite highly (above 4.0), suggesting that the teachers viewed LLP as a combination of correlated psychological elements instead of a separate main element.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of LLP Constructs (n = 30)

LLP Construct	Mean	SD
Motivation	4.56	0.41
Willingness to Communicate	4.38	0.49
Emotion	4.32	0.52
Group Dynamics	4.21	0.47
Self-Concept	4.09	0.58

As seen in Table 1, the high mean scores in all constructs show that the teachers viewed LLP as a significant part of their teaching. Their written feedback also offered more

detailed input, with many describing how every day's challenges, such as heavy workload, exam pressure, mixed proficiency levels, and large class sizes affected the psychological aspect of learning. Several teachers underscored the need to build trust in learners and offer encouragement, especially when learners appeared worried or nonchalant. A few others noted that even a carefully planned lesson could fail if students lacked motivation or did not feel motivated psychologically.

Some teachers also commented on their own intrinsic roles. A few saw themselves as learner motivators, while others acknowledged the emotional effort involved in supporting learners who struggle in learning by adjusting their voice tone, or activities in response to how learners seemed to feel during a lesson. In this regard, the importance of teachers' emotional awareness in shaping the classroom atmosphere was addressed.

To investigate how the psychological constructs relate to one another, correlation analyses were conducted as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Correlations Among LLP Constructs

Construct	Motivation	Willingness to Communicate	Emotion	Group Dynamics	Self-Concept
Motivation	-	.68**	.72**	.65**	.59*
Willingness to Communicate	.68**	-	.61**	.58*	.47*
Emotion	.72**	.61**	-	.63**	.52*
Group Dynamics	.65**	.58*	.63**	-	.49*
Self-Concept	.59*	.47*	.52*	.49*	-

$p < .01^{**}$, $p < .05^{*}$

From Table 2, these correlations reveal that the teachers in this study viewed the constructs as strongly connected. To illustrate, motivation was closely aligned with emotion (at .72), indicating that the teachers likely see students' emotional states as influencing their willingness to learn, endure, and interact. Likewise, the strong relationship between group dynamics and emotion (.63) implies that the social environment of the classroom contributes rather greatly to how students feel and behave. The moderate relationship between self-concept and motivation (.59) shows that the teachers believed that students' confidence in their abilities influences how willing they are to learn and stay committed. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the small sample size, the correlation results are construed carefully and are used mainly to complement the qualitative findings rather than to imply causal relationships.

A clear remark from the results is that emotion was related to all other constructs. Its strong ties with motivation (.72), willingness to communicate (.61), and group dynamics (.63) show that teachers saw emotions as shaping many aspects of classroom behaviour. This means that when students feel positive, secure, and supported, they are more likely to participate, cooperate, and take risks in learning. Overall, the teachers seemed to believe that improving students' emotional experiences can strengthen several other areas that support successful language learning.

Interview Findings

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From 11 interview sessions, how the teachers understood and enacted LLP in their classrooms was further investigated. Most of the participants generally viewed LLP as a set of interrelated processes of emotion and cognition that evolve throughout the lesson. The teachers appeared to describe classroom life holistically. Motivation, conviction, emotions, and group relationships were seen as persistently influencing one another. Several teachers explicitly said that it was impossible to separate emotional willingness from communicative willingness.

One participant noted, *"When students feel relaxed, everything else is just fine. If they feel nervous, everything stops."* Another teacher pointed out how a positive tone could change a lesson: *"A warm and sincere start makes such a big difference. Students just open up more."* These excerpts show how much teachers bring in emotion with motivation and willingness to participate.

Many teachers reported they relied on their intuition and classroom experience to understand how students were feeling or thinking. Signals or signs such as body language and tone of voice often helped them consider simplifying the lesson, giving support, or adapting an activity as deemed proper. Even though most admitted not having learned LLP formally, their everyday practices echoed LLP ideas. They referred to showing enthusiasm, using a sense of humor to lessen anxiety, and giving students some room to show their emotions openly and supportively. The analysis comes into four main themes as shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Major Themes from Interviews

Theme	Overall Meaning
Creating a Friendly Learning Classroom	Students engage more when feeling safe and appreciated.
Building Motivation Together	Motivation rises through support, encouragement, and mutual effort.
Connecting With Students	Trust and good relationships help students relieve and communicate.
Teachers' Feelings Affecting Teaching	Teachers' feelings and emotions affect the class atmosphere and student engagement.

As noted in Table 3, these themes show that the teachers perceived how feelings influenced teaching and learning in general. They noticed that how they felt, whether weary or boosted, affected students' reactions and engagement. Some mentioned the challenges of managing their emotions, while others shared the satisfaction they felt when students became more self-assured. From the interviews, it can be concluded that the teachers were aware of the emotional side of language learning and played a vital role in directing it.

From the questionnaire and interview analyses, a clearer insight of how the teachers perceived LLP in their professional practice emerges. A joint display table (Table 4) presents the integration between the quantitative constructs and the qualitative themes.

Table 4

Joint Display of Quantitative Constructs and Qualitative Themes

LLP Construct (Quantitative)	Qualitative Theme (from Interviews)	Connection
Motivation	Building Motivation Together	Teachers encouraged and supported students, which helped keep motivation strong.
Willingness to Communicate	Creating a Friendly Learning Classroom	Students engaged more when the classroom felt calm, friendly, and comfortable.
Emotion	Teachers' Feelings Affecting Teaching	Teachers' emotions influenced how focused students were and how the class felt.
Group Dynamics	Building Classroom Relationships	Good relationships helped students work together and try new ideas.
Self-Concept	Fostering Learner Confidence	A supportive atmosphere helped students feel more confident in themselves.

The five constructs, motivation, emotion, willingness to communicate, group dynamics, and self-concept, were not seen as isolated but connected and they complement one another in daily classroom life. Teacher beliefs, self-reflection, and professional experiences bonded these psychological constructs and the educational choices made by the teachers.

The teachers regarded themselves as being responsible for developing the climate of their classrooms. Many noted that their reactions and behaviors were often reflected in how keenly students participated and cooperated in class. In line with teacher psychology learning, a dual relationship between teacher emotions and student participation is seen here. The teachers in this study also recognized this in their current practice in that their own emotional state could help students feel more willing or unwilling to engage in classroom learning.

The teachers also shared some ways in which they made use of LLP in their pedagogy. A few teachers reflected their feelings, both positive or negative, after class, on their own and with peers while some made time for students to discuss personal or academic issues with. Several teachers purposively designed communicative tasks that were supportive but challenging. They also encouraged students to help one another and tried to be open and enthusiastic whenever they interacted with students.

From the overall findings, LLP is not simply a theory, but it is what EFL teachers experience every day including classroom interactions, emotions, and teaching professionalism. Even though their teaching contexts and levels were different, they concurred that emotional dimension and strong relationships are essential to effective language learning

DISCUSSION

The teachers in this study view Language Learning Psychology (LLP) as an underlying integration of motivation, emotions, communication willingness, self-concept, and group dynamics. These results are in agreement with previous studies claim that affective and cognitive dimensions work holistically rather than independently (Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018; Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2020). Also, teacher awareness of motivation as both a personal and social process aligns with Dörnyei's (2005) concept of the L2 Motivational Self System. Nonetheless, the teachers in this study in fact based their understanding of psychological constructs on their classroom experience. As opposed to relying on formal theory, their psychological insights came essentially from their everyday classroom practice, awareness, and emotional reflection. However, it should be noted that the quantitative results signify the teachers'

views of LLP constructs and are interpreted together with the qualitative findings, without suggesting statistical prediction.

Teacher Psychology as a Motive Drive

The teachers in this study acknowledged their presence as creator of the emotional vibes of their classrooms. They mostly perceived that their emotion, confidence, and even level of enthusiasm and care greatly influence how students feel and react. When the teachers are pleased with their work, they tend to show positivity, and this often helps students become more flexible and relaxed. However, when the teachers feel tired or unappreciated, they usually notice that students are less engaged as well.

This two-way correlation exhibits why teachers' mental health needs support as well. Mentoring provision, fruitful conversations with colleagues, and professional development activities which help foster social and emotional skills can make a difference. According to Jennings and Greenberg (2009), teachers with strong emotional competence are more likely to develop classrooms where supportive relationships and mutual understanding become part of everyday practice.

Motivation and Emotions in Tune

The study also sheds light on how motivation and emotions come together in classrooms of multiculturalism. Motivation was found to be the strongest LLP element, but the teachers did not refer to it in isolation. For them, motivation was linked closely to students' emotions, their relationships with teachers and peers, and the whole classroom climate. This aligns with MacIntyre and Gregersen's (2012) notion that positive emotions help learners think better and stay motivated.

The teachers also noticed that students choose to engage not because of their proficiency in English, but because they feel supported and connected to others. This is in line with Dörnyei and Murphey's (2003) position that real communication actually happens when there is trust and group belonging in the classroom.

Situated Understandings

The teachers were found to apply LLP principles in different ways contingent upon their classroom contexts. Some teachers emphasized the use of group interaction and a sense of humor to boost student motivation, while others underscored empathy and emotional welfare, especially in large size classes. In more exam-focused settings, some teachers described the need to support students psychologically while also retaining academic standards.

Fundamentally, the results resonate that LLP is not a static framework, but a flexible, applied approach cultivated by school anticipations, learner traits, and social values and norms. Ushioda's (2009) point of view is in support that motivation and self-concept are closely guided by social and contextual values.

Integrating Theory and Practice

A gap between academic terminology and teachers' everyday classroom practice was observed based on the survey and interview data. Even though most teachers were unfamiliar with LLP terms, they on a regular basis applied its principles by building rapport and motivation, and responding to students' emotions. This paves way for directing teacher education programs which need to introduce relevant findings accessibly and practically. Reflective activities, such as discussing emotional experiences or examining classroom case

studies would help teachers relate psychological theory to their own teaching practice (Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018).

Integrating LLP into both pre-service and in-service teacher training could help reinforce teachers' feelings of control over actions and their consequences. As soon as the teachers realize the psychological conventions underlying motivation and group dynamics, they are prone to teach with greater purpose and commitment. According to Bandura (1997), belief in one's own teaching ability promotes determination and creativity.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Some specific implications can be derived and reflected. Firstly, teacher education programs should incorporate psychological knowledge as a primary professional skill for teachers. Training can include how to regulate emotion, reflect on teaching, and communicate with language learning students as teachers. Secondly, school policymakers and administrators should prioritize teacher well-being as essential to effective teaching, not just an added advantage or perk. With support systems including peer mentoring and organized work administration, the emotional climate of classrooms is likely to be more promising. Finally, future research can examine long term and multicultural methods to evaluate how teachers' use of LLP evolves with time and in response to current educational needs and challenges.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how EFL teachers conceptualize and apply practical theory from Language Learning Psychology in their teaching practice. According to the teachers, learning is seen as closely associated with motivation, emotions, self-concept, and even shared relationships in the classroom. They also believe that their feelings and motivation are of consequence, that is, effective teaching depends not only on knowledge and expertise, but also on who teachers are as people.

The results signify that motivation is an important construct in all classrooms, but it can only be sustained with emotional rapport and dependence between teachers and students. The teachers constantly described learning as a mutual process geared by interaction and care. What the study emphasizes is that teachers should serve as reflective professionals who are emotionally aware and responsive to their learners. It supports the need for teacher education that considers emotional compassion, flexibility, and strong relationships as vital. The findings demonstrate that language learning psychology is not just the theory that exists for language teachers, but it is what teachers and students actually experience regularly in the language classroom.

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