

IMPLEMENTING SOFT-POWER AS AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING STRATEGY TO ENHANCE SPEAKING ENGAGEMENT: A CASE STUDY IN A THAI SCHOOL

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| Article Info | Abstract |
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| Article History Received: December 2024 Revised: April 2025 Published: July 2025 | <i>English language teaching in Thailand faces persistent challenges, including barriers related to teacher competence, insufficient English fluency, and a lack of effective teaching methods and strategies. Socio-individual and cultural factors, such as low self-esteem, also reduce students' motivation in speaking practice. This study explores how the Soft-power strategy can address these issues by emphasizing active participation, collaborative learning, and experiential techniques like group discussions and real-life conversations that foster a supportive classroom environment. Using a qualitative descriptive design, the study involved 15 fourth-grade students over three months. Data were collected through classroom observations and questionnaires. The findings show that Soft-power strategies significantly enhanced student engagement. For instance, more than 86% of participants strongly agreed that the strategy helped them build confidence in speaking English, while over 66% reported enjoying and feeling comfortable during the activities. The analysis also revealed reduced student anxiety and more positive peer interactions. The results suggest that Soft-power strategies offer a promising alternative to traditional methods by fostering a supportive learning environment for long-term language development. These findings offer valuable insights for educators and policymakers aiming to transform English instruction in non-native, multilingual settings.</i> |
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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, English is widely used for communication in various fields, including education, science, technology, trade, and politics (Khabibulloyevna, 2024). In response to this phenomenon, English language proficiency has become a compulsory requirement for education (Darus, 2024). A survey of 113 countries worldwide found that Thai English proficiency ranked 101 with a proficiency score of 416. (EF EPI EF English Proficiency Index a Ranking of 113 Countries and Regions by English Skills, 2023) It is ranked 7th compared to English proficiency in the 10 countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Ngiwline, 2024). The index also revealed that Thailand has a very low English proficiency compared to other ASEAN countries, with Singapore in first place having a proficiency score of 631, followed by the Philippines with a score of 578 in second (Samaranayake et al., 2024)

Within this context, engaging students in English speaking remains a significant challenge (Biswas, 2024). At Jiawaranon-unit 4 School, disengagement is often observed, marked by low self-esteem, illiteracy, and lack of student motivation that are exacerbated by the prevalence of teacher-centered methods (C. Escandallo & G. Baadillo, 2024). As English is not used in students' daily lives, many perceive speaking English as unnecessary. However, meaningful speaking development depends on students' active participation in interactive learning (Alshuraiaan, 2022). Prior research also confirms that self-esteem is closely linked to speaking confidence and overall English proficiency and overall English proficiency (Gultom & Oktaviani, 2022). Foreign language Anxiety has a complex effect on academic achievement in foreign languages, with higher anxiety levels leading to lower levels of English proficiency (Damayanti & Listyani, 2020; Oflaz, 2019; Ozer & Akçayoğlu, 2021). Excessive anxiety reduces students' motivation to learn and practice speaking English (Jain & Sidhu, 2013).

Beyond learner-related factors, teacher methods also significantly shape speaking skill development. At Jiawaranon-Unit 4 School, English instruction is still largely teacher-centered, with teachers functioning as the main knowledge holders and students as passive recipients (Mai & Eamoraphan, 2020; Meethongkhaw & Forhad, 2021). The teacher becomes the main source of knowledge and authority in the classroom and conveys information by lecturing, and students are expected to absorb and remember the information (Altun, 2023). To address these issues, a collaborative program by the Loei Primary Educational Service Area Office 2 brought together Thai English teachers and Indonesian English education students to introduce Soft-power strategies in combination with experiential learning methods.

Active learning, in this context, encourages student participation through practical, experience-based tasks, such as group discussion, simulations, and in-context communication (Dejene & Chen, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2022; Talbert & Mor-Avi, 2019). Experiential learning promotes not only cognitive engagement but also emotional and social development (Garay-Rondero et al., 2008; Namaziandost et al., 2019). When combined with Soft-power strategies rooted in empathy, encouragement, and gradual confidence building, this approach creates a safe, engaging, and responsive environment for speaking practice (Millatina et al., 2020; Miranda & Wahyudin, 2023).

This strategy was applied through techniques such as think-group-share, brainstorming, and small-group collaboration. These techniques encourage students to express ideas, solve problems, and participate actively, thereby enhancing both cooperation and communication skills (Octarina et al., 2021; Srihandayani & Marlina, 2019; Widiastuti Sri et al., 2022). Dividing students into small groups for in-class tasks helps students become more confident and active in sharing ideas so they can improve their cooperation and English-speaking skills (Crisianita & Mandasari, 2022; Hung & Mai, 2020). While various studies have explored either affective learning or task-based interaction separately, little research exists on the intersection between Soft-power strategies and experiential learning in EFL speaking instruction, particularly among young learners in multilingual environments.

This study aims to fill that gap by exploring how Soft-power strategies influence speaking engagement in Thai classrooms through experiential methods. The research questions guiding this study are: (1) What challenges are faced in speaking English? (2) In what way do Soft-power strategies enhance these challenges?

Research Method

This research employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore students' engagement and experiences in English speaking through Soft-power strategies. A qualitative descriptive method describes, identifies attitudes, and observes written or oral data from participants (Kalu, 2019). The intervention took place over three months, with Soft-power

English classes conducted five times a week, each lasting 60 minutes. The session content followed a progressive sequence, starting with vocabulary building, pronunciation practice, and sentence structure, followed by small group discussions, roleplays, and experiential learning activities with real-life communication situations. The learning process was designed to be student-centered, emotionally supportive, and reflective of Soft-power principles aimed at boosting confidence and reducing speaking anxiety.

Participant

The research subjects were selected through purposeful sampling. The purposeful sampling strategy will ensure that the students' perspectives as research subjects provide the information needed to improve the conclusions (Habidin et al., 2019; Nurdiana et al., 2023). The research focused on a 4th-grade English PBL (Problem-based learning) class at Jiawara Non-utit 4th School, Loei Province, Thailand, consisting of 15 students. This class was chosen due to their intensive participation in the program, with daily afternoon sessions lasting two hours, offering more consistent exposure compared to other groups.

Data Collection Technique

The data collection techniques used are observation, questionnaires, and visual documentation to ensure methodological triangulation. Weekly observation notes were taken throughout the three months, focusing on student engagement, participation, and speaking behavior during classroom activities. The questionnaire consisted of 11 Likert-scale items, developed by adapting insights from relevant studies and then reviewed and refined collaboratively with the research advisor to ensure validity and contextual appropriateness. Items measured aspects such as confidence, enjoyment, group interaction, and self-perceived improvement in speaking. The instrument was rated on a four-point scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. Documentation such as photographs and classroom video recordings served as supplementary evidence for key behaviors, environmental dynamics, and implementation fidelity during the intervention.

Data Analysis

Based on the results of observation, data reduction, data display, and data verification were some of the stages used in the analysis of this qualitative data. The outcomes of the observation were thoroughly analyzed in descriptive of text. To address the research questions, the identified findings were then presented and integrated with relevant supporting data from other sources. In addition, the results of questionnaires were analyzed by calculating the percentage of each question item based on a four-point Likert scale. A triangulation technique using multiple data search questions.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Obstacles and challenges faced in speaking English

The results of this study are summarized in Figure 1, which presents the primary challenges in speaking English among Thai students. These are categorized into three themes: teacher competence, cultural-linguistic barriers, and student psychological issues. These findings directly address Research Question 1, which explores the difficulties faced by students in acquiring speaking skills.

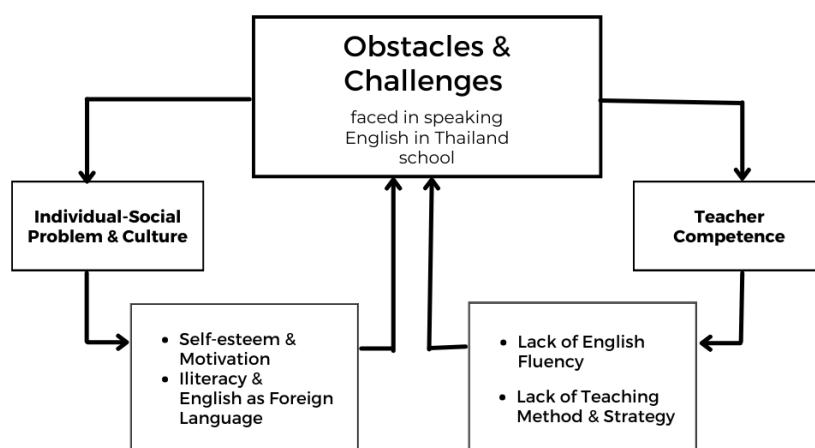


Figure 1. Challenges in Speaking English at Thailand School Flowchart

Teacher Competence

Lack of English Fluency

In terms of teachers' competence, classroom observations revealed that many English teachers exhibit pronunciation errors that are often transferred to their students. As shown in Table 1, common mispronunciations illustrate how teacher errors influence learners' pronunciation. This confirms the importance of improving teacher training in phonetics and phonology, in line with the studies that highlighted the link between teacher input quality and student language accuracy.

Table 1
Common Mispronunciation Thai English Teachers

| English Word | Correct Pronunciation International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) | Mispronunciation (IPA) | Mispronunciation (Indonesian Latin) |
|--------------|---|---------------------------|--|
| Sugar | /ˈʃʊɡər/ | /ˈtʃuka/ | cuka |
| Teacher | /ˈti:tʃər/ | /ˈti:tɛa/ | tice |
| Apple | /ˈæpl/ | /ˈæpen/ | apen |
| Strawberry | /ˈstrɔːberi/ | /ˈsətroːberi/ | stobeli |
| Read | /riːd/ | /red/ | red |

The teachers tend to mispronounce English words due to phonetic interference from their native language. Table 1 presents examples of such pronunciation errors. If left unaddressed, these errors can result in students adopting incorrect pronunciation habits, as students often emulate their teachers' speech. This phenomenon underscores the need for improved language training programs designed to address pronunciation challenges and enhance the overall English fluency of teachers in non-native speaking environments.

The mispronunciation of basic verbs or nouns, as shown in Table 1, is an important issue because these basic words are often used in classroom instruction and daily interactions. For example, a teacher pronouncing /riːd/ instead of /red/ for "Read" may confuse students and lead them to imitate this incorrect pronunciation. These examples emphasize the need for consistent phonetic training and correction during teacher development programs. This problem has led the Thai government to cooperate with Indonesia, where English pronunciation is less dominated by the mother tongue, Indonesian.

Lack of Teaching Method and Strategy

Learning to speak English was a multifaceted process that required effective methods and strategies, especially in a non-native context. The role of the teacher was pivotal in facilitating this learning, as they served as the primary source of language input, feedback, and motivation (Pishghadam et al., 2021a). In fact, in Thailand, many teachers still use the teacher-centered method. The teacher-centered method is often characterized by the traditional lecture format where the teacher is the main source of knowledge and students as passive recipients, which can pose some obstacles in teaching English speaking skills in Thailand (Pishghadam et al., 2021b).

The continued dominance of a teacher-centered approach in Thai classrooms inhibits student autonomy and interaction. This traditional structure contributes to students' low confidence in speaking English and further intensifies speaking anxiety, particularly in large classes where individual participation is minimal (Chi & Mai, 2020; S. Alqurashi & A. Althubaiti, 2021). This method only focuses on one-way communication and often does not facilitate peer-to-peer interaction, which is crucial for practicing English conversation, as speaking a new language requires interaction (Güneş & Sarıgöz, 2021). Interaction can be done through feedback by teachers; immediate and constructive feedback is essential for learning a new language (Ha et al., 2021). In a teacher-centered classroom, opportunities for individualized feedback are limited, it has non-specific corrections. When feedback is provided, it is often generalized rather than tailored to individual student needs, making it less effective (Misiejuk et al., 2021). This is also supported by the fact that this method uses contextual learning and has limited real-life context. Teacher-centered methods often fail to provide this authentic learning experience, even though speaking skills improve significantly when practiced in real-life contexts.

Individual-Social Problem & Culture

Self-esteem and Motivation

Self-esteem plays a significant role in language learning, particularly in acquiring speaking skills (Gultom & Oktaviani, 2022; Pratiwi et al., 2020). In Thailand, where English is a foreign language, students' self-esteem can greatly influence their ability to speak English confidently and effectively. Students with higher self-esteem typically experience lower levels of anxiety, which positively affects their speaking performance (Harmanto et al., 2023). Thai students with low self-esteem often reported higher levels of speaking anxiety, which hindered their participation and performance in speaking activities.

The studies indicate varying levels of self-esteem among Thai students learning English, often influenced by factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic background, and previous language learning experiences (Jacob & Graham, 2019; Maghfiroh et al., 2024). The students generally exhibit moderate levels of self-esteem, with noticeable differences between urban and rural students. Urban students often have higher self-esteem due to better exposure to English and more resources. Students with higher self-esteem tend to perform better in speaking tasks, demonstrating greater fluency and confidence (Maghfiroh et al., 2021; Mega & Sugianto, 2020). The students with higher self-esteem achieved better speaking assessment scores than those with lower self-esteem (Ainul et al., 2024). So, the classroom environment, including the teacher's attitude, peer interactions, and teaching methods, significantly affects students' self-esteem (Puyod & Ajah, 2020). Also, a supportive and inclusive classroom environment, where students feel safe to express themselves without fear of judgment, positively impacts their self-esteem and willingness to participate in speaking activities (Ali et al., 2020).

Besides, psychological factors that significantly impact the process of learning to speak English, especially in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context is students' motivation

(Alamer & Almulhim, 2021). High self-esteem improves language learning outcomes as students are more motivated to practice, seek feedback, and improve their speaking skills (Alamer & Almulhim, 2021; Paudel, 2020). Student motivation presents significant challenges: lack of vocabulary and knowledge, nervousness and anxiety, self-determination, and teacher strategies (Farikah et al., 2023; Jacobi, n.d.). Many students struggle with a limited vocabulary and insufficient grammar knowledge, which hampers their ability to construct sentences and express their thoughts clearly (Octaberlina et al., 2022). This can lead to frustration and decreased motivation to participate in speaking activities. In this situation, the student who tries to speak English in front of the class can be intimidating. Nervousness and anxiety will come over, often exacerbated by fear of making mistakes or being judged by peers and teachers (Vadivel et al., 2022). The emotional hurdle can significantly reduce students' willingness to engage in speaking tasks. This indirectly reveals that an environment that does not encourage speaking practice can reduce students' motivation. Students are more motivated when they perceive their learning environment as supportive of their needs for competence and relatedness (Octaberlina et al., 2022; Rusdin & Purwati, 2023). Motivation is linked to higher levels of engagement and better language learning outcomes.

Illiteracy & English as A Foreign Language

Thailand's overall literacy rate has shown significant progress in recent decades, with relatively high levels of basic literacy among the adult population. However, *functional illiteracy* remains a serious challenge despite the increase in basic literacy rates, especially in areas or communities with limited access to quality education (Owada et al., 2019; Zua, 2021). *Functional illiteracy* refers to a condition in which individuals can read and write but it cannot use these basic literacy skills effectively in everyday life or in more complex contexts, such as understanding instructions or academic materials in English (Olaniran, 2020; Zua, 2021). The alphabetical differences between Thai and English exacerbate this condition (Dandee & Pornwiriyakit, 2022). The Thai writing system uses a different script, with complex structures and pronunciation. As a result, many students face difficulties in learning and mastering the Latin alphabet used in English, which ultimately hinders the acquisition of basic skills in EFL (Berendt, 2020).

In addition to script-related issues, the approach to learning English in the Thai education system often still relies on rote methods rather than interactive and practical language use (Phisutthangkoon, 2021; Winkelhaus et al., 2022). This approach limits students' ability to speak English fluently and contextually. The English curriculum may also not be regularly updated to reflect more real-life relevant language use and appropriate teaching methods (Sarasean, 2024). Another challenge is the lack of direct exposure to native English speakers or immersive learning environments, which is crucial for developing speaking skills (Tran et al., 2024; Yan et al., 2024). Limited learning opportunities outside the classroom and using one textbook as the main source reduce students' exposure to various contexts and common sentences in English (Maghfiroh et al., 2021; Nikitova et al., 2020). As a result, many students become unfamiliar with common sentences used in daily life, which causes them to feel embarrassed to use English in real situations (Akram et al., 2020).

In addition to the problem of *functional illiteracy*, there is also another challenge in the form of *absolute illiteracy* in learning English. Many students do not even have the basic ability to recognize Latin letters or understand simple words in English (Abdallah, 2021; Rakhmawati & Mustadi, 2022). This condition is commonly experienced by students in areas that have limited access to quality education (Akram et al., 2020; Rakhmawati & Mustadi, 2022). This basic inability further widens the gap between urban and rural students and affects the success of English language learning programs implemented in schools (Akram et al., 2020; Cuong, 2021).

Soft-power as Strategies Address the Challenge

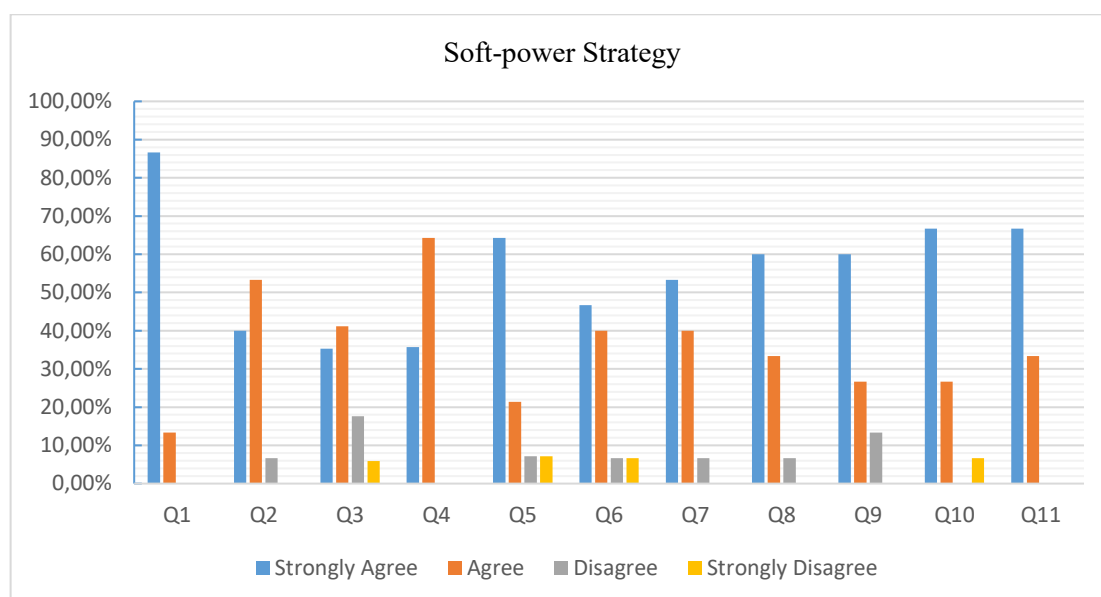


Figure 1. Quisioner Result

From the data above, the focus on enjoyment and engagement in Questions 1, 2, 5, 6, and 7 is directly tied to enhancing students' self-esteem and motivation in speaking English. When students feel at ease and happy in their learning environment, they are more likely to engage in English-speaking activities without fear of judgment. This comfort reduces anxiety and fosters a sense of confidence, which is essential for building self-esteem in language use. Additionally, students are intrinsically motivated to participate when they find activities enjoyable, and this intrinsic motivation is crucial for language learning as it encourages students to practice speaking English actively, ultimately improving their fluency and confidence.

More than 86% of students (Q1) strongly agreed that they felt more confident in speaking English after experiencing the Soft-power strategy. This suggests that increased emotional safety and enjoyment during learning are closely associated with a greater willingness to speak. This aligns with previous research, which emphasized the link between learner motivation, emotional safety, and performance in the EFL context (Alamer & Almulhim, 2021).

Furthermore, Question 7's emphasis on students' desire to continue these activities reflects the sustainability of the Soft-power approach. High interest in continuation suggests that students not only find the activities enjoyable but also see them as valuable enough to pursue long-term. This commitment indicates an increased sense of learning autonomy, directly addressing self-esteem and motivation issues by empowering students to take charge of their learning. By prioritizing student-centered, enjoyable methods over traditional teacher-centered approaches, the Soft-power strategy fosters a supportive and engaging environment. This environment promotes the self-confidence necessary for risk-taking, intrinsic motivation for consistent practice, and an enduring interest in language learning, essential for sustained engagement and improvement in English proficiency. This addresses Research Question 2, regarding how students respond to the Soft-power strategy, and provides evidence that the method not only supports short-term engagement but fosters continuous motivation and learner independence (two key goals) in 21st-century EFL teaching.

In Q4, Q8, Q9, Q10, and Q11, which assess growth across specific language skills—most notably, speaking and listening. More than 60% of students selected “strongly agree”. This improvement focus also underscores that the Soft-power strategy promotes a student-centered learning environment, contrasting with traditional teacher-centered methods. By prioritizing engaging, interactive activities, this approach shifts the focus from teacher-led instructions to active student participation. Positive feedback on speaking and listening skills suggests that students are benefiting from the freedom to practice and explore language in a supportive setting, which directly counters the limitations of teacher-centered approaches that can stifle student expression. This transition to a student-centered model not only enhances language skills but also addresses self-esteem and motivation issues by giving students a sense of ownership and confidence in their learning process. As a result, Soft-power strategies provide evidence that such methods can effectively overcome the constraints of teacher-centered classrooms, encouraging students to actively engage, practice, and improve their English skills.

Besides, the focus on gradual progression in Q2 helps address both self-esteem and motivation challenges as well as issues related to language learning for EFL students in Thailand's schools. By breaking down learning into manageable steps, this approach minimizes the sense of being overwhelmed that students often feel in language acquisition, particularly in a foreign language context. This structure not only supports incremental skill-building but also fosters a sense of accomplishment at each stage, boosting students' self-esteem as they experience visible progress. The step-by-step approach also helps maintain student motivation, allowing learners to focus on one aspect at a time, reducing anxiety and creating a clear path forward. For EFL students who may struggle with the complexity of English, a structured, gradual method provides a more approachable and achievable learning experience, encouraging consistent participation and reducing the fear of failure. Thus, this aspect of the Soft-power strategy effectively supports self-esteem, motivation, and confidence while also making English learning more accessible in an EFL setting.

Pedagogical Implications for EFL Practice

In light of these findings, integrating Soft-power strategies into EFL teacher training programs is highly recommended. Future educators should be equipped not only with linguistic and methodological competence but also with emotional and motivational tools to foster student confidence and reduce speaking anxiety. Curriculum developers are encouraged to embed experiential learning modules, culturally responsive content, and step-by-step language activities that promote active participation and sustained speaking practice. Group collaboration and real-life pedagogical shifts directly respond to the challenges identified in Research question 1, offering practical and sustainable solutions for enhancing English speaking skills in multilingual, low proficiency EFL settings.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted obstacles and challenges students face in speaking English, which include teacher competence, individual social problems, and cultural barriers. Teacher-centered methods and a lack of innovative teaching strategies often hinder students' active participation and engagement, exacerbating their struggles with speaking English. Moreover, individual challenges, such as low self-esteem and motivation, further complicate language acquisition, especially in contexts marked by illiteracy and English being taught as a foreign language. These issues create a learning environment that can be intimidating and ineffective for many students.

The implementation of Soft-power strategies, however, demonstrates significant potential in addressing these barriers. By fostering a student-centered, engaging, and supportive learning environment, these strategies effectively reduce anxiety, enhance self-

esteem, and encourage intrinsic motivation. The focus on gradual, step-by-step learning, group activities, and real-life application ensures that students not only develop their speaking and listening skills but also build the confidence necessary to use English in practical contexts. Additionally, Soft-power strategies empower educators to adopt more inclusive and interactive teaching methods, shifting away from traditional teacher-centered approaches.

This study's outcomes, including 86,67% of students reporting increased speaking confidence and over 66% enjoying collaborative activities, suggest that Soft-power strategies are effective tools for EFL teaching, particularly in multilingual and low proficiency settings like Thailand. These results carry practical implications for educational policy and teacher training as they support the integration of emotionally responsive, student-centered pedagogies into EFL curricula.

Overall, this research highlights that Soft-power strategies provide a comprehensive and sustainable solution to the challenges faced in English language learning. They address the technical and social dimensions of speaking English and promote long-term engagement and proficiency by creating an enjoyable and inclusive learning experience. These findings advocate for the broader adoption of Soft-power approaches to transform English education, particularly in EFL settings. Future research could examine how these strategies perform across diverse student populations, education levels, and national policy frameworks to determine their scalability and long-term impact.

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