Reconstructing Learning Agency of Underachieving Students Through Classroom "Micro-Successes": A Qualitative Study of Grade 7 English Instruction in Hebei, China

Zhang Xirong, Amelia Binti Alias[*]

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

[*]**Corresponding Author**

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how "micro-success" strategies—small, structured, and attainable learning wins—reconstruct the learning agency of underachieving students in junior high school English classrooms in China. Grounded in positive psychology and social cognitive theory (Dweck, 2006; Dweck & Yeager, 2019), we conducted an interpretivist, qualitative inquiry using semi-structured interviews with 12 Grade-7 English teachers at a public junior high school in Hebei. Thematic analysis identified four interrelated themes: (1) cognitive conflict resolution via micro-success, (2) teacher decision-making in task stratification and feedback, (3) reconstruction of learner subjectivity (self-efficacy, voice, and ownership), and (4) maintenance of motivation through adaptive goals and attributional feedback. Findings show that micro-success reframes repeated failure experiences into incremental competence signals that help students transition from "I can't" to "I can try," with teachers' feedback language and task design acting as catalysts (Hattie, 2008; Wisniewski, Zierer, & Hattie, 2020). The study proposes a cognition–emotion–behavior framework explaining how classroom micro-successes enable identity-safe participation, strengthen self-efficacy, and support sustained engagement. Practical implications include low-threshold task segmentation, progress-visible feedback, and alignment with China's "double reduction" policy; methodological contributions highlight teacher-centered qualitative evidence for designing agency-restorative pedagogy.

Keywords: Micro-success; learning agency; positive psychology; junior high school

INTRODUCTION

Across many Chinese junior-high English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) classrooms, students who repeatedly struggle with English face a convergence of linguistic, cultural, and motivational barriers. Studies note persistent difficulties in idea development and language use among Chinese learners who often plan in their first language and then translate into English (Yang, 2019). These difficulties are exacerbated by exam-oriented practices that yield "dumb English"—test proficiency without communicative fluency (Zhang, 2024). Teachers also report heavy workloads and large classes that limit differentiated instruction, depth of feedback, and opportunities for higher-order thinking and collaboration (Byers et al., 2018). Together, these conditions breed disengagement, anxiety, and learned helplessness among lower-achieving students—patterns well documented in research on foreign-language classroom anxiety and socio-emotional dynamics in Chinese contexts (Han, Li, & Haider, 2022; Fang, Brown, & Hamilton, 2023). The pedagogical question is how to transform repeated failure experiences into credible, classroom-feasible signals of progress without abandoning curricular rigor or overburdening teachers.

Positive psychology (Dweck, 2006; Dweck & Yeager, 2019) and feedback research (Hattie, 2008; Wisniewski et al., 2020) offer a convergent answer: engineer short, authentic wins that students can see and feel. We define classroom "micro-successes" as brief, low-threshold, meaningful tasks that create immediate, visible progress within routine lessons. Micro-success strategies are not rewarding or gimmicks; they are instructional design choices—segmented tasks, precise modeling, and attributional feedback—that convert ambiguous effort into legible evidence of improving competence. Rather than claiming novelty at the level of theory, this study treats

micro-success as a contextualized enactment of well-established principles under real classroom constraints. Unlike individualized programs that are hard to scale in large classes, micro-success strategies can be embedded in ordinary classroom routines and require little extra preparation once teachers internalize the design logic (Hattie, 2008).

However, the literature remains thin on teacher-centered qualitative accounts of how micro-success is planned and enacted under authentic constraints of time, class size, and pacing. Survey and experiment-based studies leave "black boxes" around lived decision-making, feedback language, and moment-to-moment cognitiveemotional shifts (Gan, An, & Liu, 2021). This study addresses that gap by foregrounding teachers' narratives of task design, feedback choices, and perceived transformations among underachieving learners in a typical Chinese junior-high setting. We ask three questions: How do teachers describe changes in mindset and engagement during micro-success experiences? Which instructional strategies support agency reconstruction? What components of subjectivity rebuilding (e.g., self-efficacy, voice, ownership) emerge from these practices? Our contribution is twofold: a classroom-proximal framework linking micro-success to agency reconstruction, and design principles for low-threshold, progress-visible tasks and attributional feedback aligned to ongoing curriculum and policy reform in China.

This study advances current knowledge in three key ways. First, it offers one of the few classroom-proximal, teacher-centered qualitative accounts of how micro-success strategies are actually designed, enacted, and adapted within the authentic constraints of Chinese junior-high EFL classrooms. Existing research often describes feedback or scaffolding in abstract terms, but rarely documents the fine-grained decision-making— such as micro-step segmentation, attributional feedback wording, and moment-to-moment adjustments—that shape learners' cognitive and emotional experiences. Second, the study develops an integrative framework linking micro-success to the reconstruction of learner agency through a cognition–emotion–behavior triad. This framework explains not only why micro-success works, but how repeated, low-stakes wins accumulate into changes in participation, self-efficacy, and identity for underachieving learners. Third, by grounding the analysis in typical school conditions marked by large class sizes and exam-oriented pressures, the study generates practice-ready design principles—low-threshold tasks, progress-visible routines, and culturally attuned feedback language—that are scalable, sustainable, and aligned with current curriculum and burdenreduction policies in China. Together, these contributions bridge theoretical gaps, offer methodological depth, and provide actionable guidance for teachers seeking to support struggling learners without increasing workload.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning Difficulties in EFL and the Chinese Junior High Context

EFL learning poses persistent and multifaceted challenges for many students, particularly those who enter secondary school with weak foundational skills. A substantial body of research shows that difficulties in semantic knowledge, lexical retrieval, and contextual integration disproportionately affect listening comprehension and oral participation among underachieving learners. While cognitive diagnostic approaches such as Bug-GDINA have advanced the identification of latent misconceptions, these techniques remain insufficient for capturing the dynamic, interactional, and emotional processes that shape day-to-day classroom learning (Meng et al., 2023). Students' struggles are not merely cognitive; they are deeply embedded in the sociocultural fabric of Chinese junior-high schooling. High-stakes examinations and collective expectations place continuous pressure on learners, often producing cycles of anxiety, humiliation, and self-doubt following repeated academic setbacks (Han et al., 2022). These negative emotions, in turn, constrain learners' willingness to communicate, heighten avoidance behaviors, and suppress exploratory risk-taking—behaviors that are essential for language acquisition (Fang et al., 2023).

Moreover, the instructional ecology of many Chinese classrooms further complicates the learning trajectory of struggling students. The entrenched emphasis on grammar-translation approaches and extensive vocabulary drilling fosters what is often criticized as "dumb English"—a form of language learning that privileges accuracy on paper tests while marginalizing communicative competence. Such instructional routines inadvertently privilege already-competent students while rendering the learning pathways of low-achievers increasingly opaque and exclusionary. Socioeconomic disparities also affect learner readiness; students from lower-income

households may lack access to extracurricular learning resources, stable internet, or consistent parental emotional support, all of which shape their academic engagement (Zhang, 2024; Xu & Jin, 2024).

Teacher constraints further exacerbate these issues. Large class sizes, fixed curricular pacing, and assessmentdriven teaching leave limited room for personalized instruction or remediation (Byers et al., 2018). Under these conditions, struggling learners often receive generic or punitive feedback, which may inadvertently reinforce feelings of incompetence. Over time, many underachieving students come to internalize a lowcompetence identity, perceiving English as a domain where success is unattainable and effort brings little return. This identity tenacity significantly influences their classroom presence: they participate less frequently, produce minimal work, and exhibit reduced persistence in the face of challenge. Collectively, these factors converge to create a self-reinforcing cycle of academic struggle, emotional withdrawal, and declining agency. The Chinese junior-high English classroom thus emerges not only as a space where linguistic skills are taught, but also as a complex social arena where learners negotiate their sense of self, competence, and belonging. Understanding this interplay between cognitive difficulty, emotional burden, and sociocultural positioning is essential for developing pedagogical strategies—such as micro-successes—that can interrupt cycles of disengagement and rebuild student agency.

Feedback, Scaffolding, and the Micropedagogies of Support

Feedback and scaffolding play pivotal roles in shaping learner engagement and competence development, especially for students who struggle academically. Meta-analytic evidence affirms that well-timed, taskspecific feedback constitutes one of the most influential instructional interventions across domains (Hattie, 2008; Wisniewski et al., 2020). However, in many teacher-centered EFL classrooms in China, feedback is often delivered in monologic, evaluative, and occasionally deficit-oriented ways that foreground errors rather than pathways for improvement. Such practices limit opportunities for dialogic learning, hinder the cultivation of higher-order thinking, and may inadvertently reinforce learners' perceptions of inadequacy (Byers et al., 2018). When feedback becomes primarily corrective rather than developmental, it can erode rather than enhance learners' sense of agency. Scaffolding has emerged as a promising framework for addressing these limitations. Rooted in sociocultural theory, scaffolding seeks to situate learning within a learner's zone of proximal development and gradually fade instructional support as competence grows. Yet the literature reveals a recurring challenge: while scaffolding is widely endorsed, its micro-level enactment—how teachers break down tasks, design incremental steps, demonstrate models, and phrase feedback—remains under-theorized. Generic recommendations such as "provide support" or "sequence tasks" often obscure the granular decisionmaking that teachers must undertake in real time.

Recent studies suggest that the effectiveness of scaffolding depends heavily on the size of pedagogical steps, the degree of explicitness in instruction, and the emotional safety embedded in teacher-student interactions (Gan et al., 2021). For underachieving learners, overly large steps can induce frustration, while overly small steps may appear condescending or fail to build meaningful competence. Similarly, feedback that is emotionally insensitive can undermine dignity, even when academically correct. Thus, the intersection of cognitive structuring and affect-sensitive communication becomes a defining feature of effective scaffolding for learners with persistent difficulties. Emerging scholarship points to the value of micro-level pedagogical moves—termed here as "micropedagogies." These include providing visible progress markers, drawing attention to small increments of improvement, employing immediate and personalized validation, and adjusting difficulty in fine-grained increments. Such micro-moves not only support skill development but also reconstruct learners' emotional readiness to participate, which is especially crucial for low-achieving adolescents who often oscillate between hope and resignation.

Despite this emerging recognition, systematic empirical documentation of micropedagogical practices in EFL contexts remains limited. Most research describes scaffolding in broad strokes, leaving unanswered questions about how teachers tactically orchestrate micro-successes that accumulate into durable learning gains. This study contributes to filling this gap by investigating how teachers employ micro-successes through feedback language, task segmentation, and adaptive goal-setting to scaffold underachieving learners back into active participation.

Positive Psychology and the Reconstruction of Learner Agency

Positive psychology has reframed educational research by shifting attention from deficits to strengths, focusing on enjoyment, resilience, growth mindset, and the role of positive emotions in sustaining long-term learning. For EFL learners, especially those who struggle, positive emotions can buffer anxiety, enhance persistence, and widen "thought-action repertoires" that foster exploratory behavior (Dweck, 2006; Hu, Sidhu, & Lu, 2022). From this perspective, competence is not merely a stable cognitive trait but a dynamic perception shaped by learners' experiences of success, teacher feedback, and peer interactions. Repeated micro-successes—small but frequent experiences of progress—can gradually recondition learners' beliefs about their capacity and reshape their participation patterns.

A core tenet of positive psychology is that even minor improvements can generate "upward spirals" of engagement when learners attribute success to controllable factors such as effort, strategy use, or persistence (Dweck & Yeager, 2019). However, attributionally wise feedback is essential in facilitating these spirals. If success is framed as fragile, accidental, or externally controlled, its motivational impact is minimal. Thus, micro-successes must be coupled with feedback that reinforces agency, such as highlighting strategic behaviors, sustained effort, or specific choices that led to improvement. Despite these theoretical insights, research connecting positive psychology with classroom-based identity reconstruction—particularly for underachieving EFL learners—remains limited. Most studies on self-efficacy development, affective regulation, or cognitive conflict are conducted in controlled environments, short intervention cycles, or experimental tasks that lack ecological validity (Al-Yahyaie et al., 2022). These studies illuminate mechanisms but do not capture the lived processes by which adolescents gradually rebuild agency across weeks or months of classroom interaction.

Recent scholarship emphasizes that agency is relational and contextually situated, emerging from continuous negotiation between learners and their learning environment. For struggling students, classroom climates marked by safety, respect, and emotional attentiveness are especially vital. Teachers play a pivotal role by creating "identity-safe" spaces in which small successes are noticed, legitimized, and meaningfully integrated into learners' evolving self-concepts. When micro-successes accumulate within such environments, learners begin to reinterpret themselves not as "weak students" but as individuals capable of progress, persistence, and contribution. Furthermore, positive psychology underscores the importance of "broaden-and-build" processes: positive emotions broaden learners' attentional scope and build long-term psychological and cognitive resources. Within EFL classrooms, micro-successes can function as emotional primers that reduce fear of negative evaluation, encourage voluntary participation, and enhance willingness to communicate—factors especially relevant for Chinese adolescents who often experience shame-based withdrawal in language learning.

Research Gaps

Synthesizing the above literature, a conceptual gap emerges: existing research lacks classroom-proximal models that integrate (a) low-threshold task segmentation, (b) culturally attuned and dignity-preserving feedback language, and (c) adaptive goal-setting that cultivates learner subjectivity and agency. Few studies explore how these components interact over weeks of classroom life to reconstruct the agency of underachieving learners within the Chinese EFL context. This study addresses these gaps by theorizing microsuccess as a sequence of repeated, formative affirmations embedded in routine instruction, and by documenting how teachers in a typical junior-high setting orchestrate such micro-successes to reshape participation from avoidance toward active engagement.

Conceptual Framework

We adopt a dynamic triad—cognition–emotion–behavior—bridging positive psychology with social cognitive theory to explain how micro-success rebuilds agency (Figure 1). Cognitively, micro-success clarifies task affordances and makes progress perceptible; emotionally, it reduces shame and anxiety and elicits pride and interest; behaviorally, it nudges approach actions such as raising hands, attempting answers, and persisting (Dweck, 2006; Dweck & Yeager, 2019). Iterated over time, these loops stabilize self-efficacy, consolidate identity-safe participation, and scaffold a renewed learner narrative (Hattie, 2008; Wisniewski et al., 2020). The framework implies three design imperatives: (1) make the next step small and explicit, (2) make progress visible and attributable to strategy/effort, and (3) normalize iteration as the pathway to quality. In EFL, these imperatives

translate into tasks like sentence frames before paragraph writing, targeted verb practice before free production, and quick-read rubrics that spotlight exactly one or two improvement levers per draft.

Figure 1 Conceptual framework of this study

Building on this foundation, our conceptualization emphasizes that micro-success functions not merely as isolated moments of correctness but as structured, repeatable learning events that recalibrate how students interpret difficulty, effort, and their own competence. From a cognitive standpoint, each micro-success operates as a "perceptual cue" that reduces task ambiguity, enabling learners to see where they are in a sequence of subskills and what success looks like at the next step. For underachieving students who often feel disoriented in multi-step EFL tasks, such clarity counteracts cognitive overload and enhances their sense of predictability and control. This shift is crucial because predictability reduces cognitive anxiety and frees attentional resources for meaning-making rather than self-protection.

Emotionally, micro-success reshapes learners' affective landscapes. Shame, fear of negative evaluation, and accumulated frustration are known inhibitors of participation in Chinese junior-high contexts. Micro-success functions as an emotion-regulation mechanism by generating small but reliable experiences of pride, relief, and curiosity, counterbalancing negative self-beliefs. Over time, these positive emotional experiences expand students' "willingness-to-try zone," making them more receptive to challenges they previously avoided. The emotional safety that micro-success affords is especially important for adolescents, whose self-concepts are highly sensitive to teacher judgment and peer comparison. Behaviorally, the triad operates through a feedback spiral: as cognitive clarity reduces confusion and emotional safety softens fear, learners are more likely to take small academic risks—volunteering an answer, completing an optional exercise, or experimenting with a new expression. These approach behaviors then create further opportunities for micro-success, strengthening the behavioral loop. According to social cognitive theory, such reciprocal reinforcement is a hallmark of agency reconstruction, where learners begin to see themselves as causal actors in their learning trajectory rather than passive recipients of instruction.

Our expanded framework adds a temporal dimension, highlighting that agency is not rebuilt through one or two positive events but through the accumulation of micro-successes across weeks of classroom life. Each successful step becomes part of a longitudinal chain that gradually transforms avoidance-oriented identities into approach-oriented ones. We therefore conceptualize micro-success as a "slow-burn mechanism"—subtle in the moment but transformative in aggregate. Pedagogically, these insights translate into several actionable design principles. Teachers must engineer micro-steps that are achievable yet meaningful, such as isolating one target verb pattern before combining multiple ones. They must make improvement visible through color-coded drafts, checklists,

or brief teacher–student conferences that explicitly attribute progress to strategies, not innate ability. Finally, they must normalize iteration, framing redrafting, re-speaking, or re-listening as standard trajectories toward mastery, thereby destigmatizing struggle. In EFL classrooms, examples include using sentence starters before free writing, chunking listening tasks into keyword identification before full-sentence recall, or providing micro-rubrics that highlight only one pronunciation feature per round of practice. Through these targeted designs, micro-success becomes an instructional engine capable of reshaping how underachieving students think, feel, and act, ultimately reconstructing their learning agency in sustainable ways

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

An interpretivist qualitative design was adopted to capture teachers' lived experiences with micro-success strategies in authentic classroom conditions. Semi-structured interviews elicited detailed narratives about task design, feedback language, observed cognitive-emotional shifts, and engagement patterns. This design choice reflects the assumption that teachers' knowledge of micro-success is tacit, situated, and embedded in day-today instructional interactions rather than fully articulable through surveys or structured protocols. Consequently, the study sought thick, contextualized accounts that reveal how teachers notice small changes, interpret subtle student reactions, and adjust instructional choices in real time. The interpretivist stance also acknowledges that the researcher and participants co-construct meaning during interviews; therefore, probing questions, clarifications, and follow-up prompts were intentionally employed to access the nuanced reasoning behind teachers' pedagogical moves. By prioritizing meaning-making and classroom reality over experimental control, the study aims to illuminate how micro-success operates as a situated practice rather than as a prescriptive technique.

Site and Participants

The study took place at a public junior high school in Hebei Province (pseudonym: Qiming Middle School). Using purposive sampling, 12 Grade-7 English teachers who regularly work with students experiencing learning difficulties were recruited from an initial pool of 36 respondents. Participants had between 3 and 18 years of teaching experience (median 8). Individual interviews (approximately 60 minutes each) were scheduled over one month. The site was selected because the school represents a typical mid-performing junior high institution facing large class sizes, exam-oriented pressures, and heterogeneous student ability profiles— conditions under which micro-success strategies are both highly needed and challenging to implement. The purposive sampling ensured that teachers included in the study had direct experience supporting underachieving students, were familiar with the emotional and academic vulnerabilities of such learners, and had personally attempted instructional adjustments aimed at building confidence or incremental progress. Diversity in teaching experience was intentionally preserved to capture novice teachers' experimentation as well as veteran teachers accumulated pedagogical wisdom.

Data Collection

Recruitment proceeded with principal approval and multi-channel invitations (school social media and notice boards). Interested teachers contacted the researcher by email, received information sheets, and provided written informed consent. The interview guide explored background, typical strategies, exemplars of microsuccess episodes, feedback choices (e.g., wording, timing), perceived changes in student affect and agency, and constraints (e.g., pacing, class size, assessment demands). Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and audio-recorded with permission. During interviews, teachers were encouraged to recount specific classroom moments—such as a student's first successful sentence production, a shift from avoidance to participation, or a moment of pride following scaffolded feedback. These episodes served as anchor points for discussing the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral mechanisms underlying micro-success. The interviewer used reflective prompts (e.g., "What made that moment successful?" "How did the student respond afterward?") to elicit finegrained accounts of decision-making. Field notes were taken immediately after each interview to document contextual observations, rapport dynamics, and emergent themes that warranted deeper attention in subsequent interviews.

Data Analysis

Recordings were transcribed, anonymized, and analyzed thematically using NVivo. Coding combined inductive theme generation with sensitizing concepts from the literature (self-efficacy, attribution, scaffolding). An audit trail documented coding and recoding decisions; peer debriefing with a colleague experienced in qualitative analysis was used to challenge theme boundaries and enhance analytic credibility. Reflexive memos tracked the researcher's assumptions and reactions. The analysis proceeded in three cycles: (1) initial open coding to identify salient patterns across transcripts, (2) focused coding to group related codes into preliminary categories such as "dignity-preserving feedback," "manageable task segmentation," and "emergent participation markers," and (3) theoretical coding to connect categories with the study's conceptual triad of cognition–emotion–behavior. Attention was also paid to negative cases—situations where micro-success attempts did not lead to improved engagement—to refine the explanatory power of emerging themes. Memos captured analytic tensions, shifts in interpretation, and reflexive considerations related to the researcher's prior teaching experience. The combination of inductive and theory-guided analytic strategies enabled both openness to unanticipated insights and coherence with existing scholarship.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cognitive Conflict Resolution Through Micro-Success

From "I can't" to "I can try." Teachers consistently reported that low-threshold, attainable tasks created immediate, disconfirming evidence against entrenched self-beliefs of incapacity. For example, several teachers began composition lessons with two-line sentence frames featuring one targeted past-tense verb, then extended to a four-line paragraph; others used three-item vocabulary sprints before free production. When learners realized they could complete the first micro-step, their expectancy of success shifted enough to attempt the next step. As one participant put it, "For some students, the first correct verb in the right place is a bigger victory than a long essay" (T3). This shift resonates with growth-mindset claims that beliefs change when students experience success linked to controllable strategies rather than innate ability (Dweck, 2006; Dweck & Yeager, 2019).

Design levers. Teachers highlighted three levers: (a) task segmentation—breaking complex tasks into microsteps with explicit success criteria; (b) pre-correction—brief modeling or worked examples that reduce ambiguity; and (c) immediate formative feedback that confirms success quickly. Segmenting complex tasks made cognitive demands transparent; early wins were designed to be unambiguous before advancing to integrated performance (Hattie, 2008). Teachers emphasized that the first win had to be within near reach to avoid reinforcing failure. Discussion. Micro-success functions as a counter-example mechanism: it undermines global negative self-attributions with specific, recent, personal evidence of competence. Paired with attributional feedback—praise for strategy, effort, and process rather than fixed traits—micro-success reframes struggle as improvable and initiates a cognition–emotion–behavior spiral toward approach motivation (Gan et al., 2021).

Teacher Decision-Making: Task Stratification and Feedback Language

Stratification under constraints. Teachers described building "low floors, high ceilings": lessons began with an access point that nearly everyone could achieve, followed by optional challenges for early finishers. In large classes, stratification relied on tiered worksheets, differentiated prompts (e.g., choice of topics with the same grammatical target), and time-boxed rotations (e.g., 3-minute sprint → 5-minute pair check → 2-minute recap). This choreography preserved whole-class pacing while allowing individualized success paths (Byers et al., 2018). Teachers noted that predictable timing helped anxious students anticipate transitions and reduced fear of being left behind.

Feedback that builds agency. Participants emphasized process-specific praise ("Your past-tense verbs improved in lines 2–3"), feedforward cues ("Next, try linking the two clauses with 'because'"), and neutral error talk (treating mistakes as information). This language reduced shame, normalized iteration, and provided a map for the next micro-win. Teachers actively avoided global judgments ("good/bad at English") and instead pointed to actionable next steps—consistent with evidence that feedback works best when it is specific, timely, and oriented to the task and process (Hattie, 2008; Gan et al., 2021; Wisniewski et al., 2020). Decision-making in stratification and feedback reflects guided practice with modeled standards, gradually fading support while keeping success

attainable. By making the first step small and concrete, and by narrating progress in strategy terms, teachers generated repeated experiences of efficacy without diluting rigor.

Reconstructing Learner Subjectivity: Self-Efficacy, Voice, and Ownership

From passive recipients to co- authors. Across accounts, teachers observed students shifting from silence and

avoidance to volunteering short answers, asking clarification questions, and attempting optional items. Microsuccess accumulated into a credible self-story of progress; students began to anticipate—not fear—the next task. Teachers also reported growth in metacognitive talk (e.g., "I can do the first part; the second part I need help with"), indicating ownership and calibrated self-assessment (Hu, Sidhu, & Lu, 2022). One teacher described a formerly withdrawn student who, after several weeks of consistent micro-wins, started initiating peer checks and asking for sentence starters rather than waiting passively (T9).

Identity-safe participation. Teachers intentionally embedded choices (e.g., item order, partner selection, or optional challenge) to grant voice and control without derailing pacing. These subtle affordances signaled trust and lowered the social cost of error. Over time, students reclaimed a sense of competence within classroom norms, and teachers reported fewer incidents of disengagement or refusal behaviors. Subjectivity reconstruction hinges on repeated, low-stakes demonstrations of competence that re-author identity from "weak student" to "learner in progress." Micro-successes, therefore, are not merely motivational tricks but identity work—altering the narrative resources students draw on when facing future tasks (Dweck, 2006; Dweck & Yeager, 2019).

Maintaining Motivation: Adaptive Goals, Visible Progress, and Routines

Adaptive goals and visibility. Teachers employed micro-goals (e.g., "three precise verbs"), visual trackers (tick boxes, mini rubrics), and routine cycles (attempt → quick check → improvement) to maintain momentum. These structures made progress legible and reinforced a cadence of success. Several teachers used mini whiteboards to make first-try attempts public but low-stakes; others used sticky-dot charts to track personal goals.

Cultural and policy alignment. Participants connected micro-success routines with national aims to reduce burdens while improving quality, using modularized drills, gamified vocabulary sprints, and short writing frames to support efficient practice without excessive homework (Zhang, 2024). Teachers emphasized that homework volume decreased when within-class routines reliably produced progress-visible practice. Sustained motivation emerged when students repeatedly experienced competence and teachers reliably signaled the next attainable step. Micro-success thus functions as a maintenance system for agency, especially in resourceconstrained, exam-oriented settings (Hattie, 2008; Wisniewski et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

Micro-success strategies offer a feasible, scalable means to rebuild the learning agency of underachieving students in junior-high EFL classrooms. By engineering immediate, attainable wins, making progress visible, and using attribution-wise feedback, teachers help students resolve cognitive conflict, re-author their learner identity, and maintain approach motivation. The proposed cognition–emotion–behavior framework clarifies how repeated micro-successes stabilize self-efficacy and participation under real classroom constraints. Implications include concrete task-design heuristics, feedback stems, and routine structures that can be embedded in daily lessons without substantial additional preparation. Future studies should test micro-success routines with observational and outcome data and explore transferability across subjects and regions.

The findings provide actionable insights. For teachers. Design "low floors, high ceilings": begin with the lowest viable step and add optional challenges; make progress visible using micro-rubrics, tick boxes, and short reflection prompts; use attributional, process-specific feedback to consolidate self-efficacy and direct the next action; routinize micro-success cycles (attempt → check → refine) so iteration feels normal rather than punitive. When possible, script feedback stems ("I noticed… Next, try…") to maintain specificity under time pressure. For schools. Provide predictable lesson arcs (e.g., quick start → model → try → feedback → extend) and lightweight tools (tiered worksheets; mini whiteboards). Support peer coaching focused on feedback language and task segmentation; organize short "gallery walks" where teachers share micro-success task designs. Use

collaborative planning time to pre-build banks of sentence frames, worked examples, and mini rubrics. For policy and curriculum. Align micro-success design with short, high-yield practice over volume; modularize materials to reduce after-school burden while preserving competence signals. Assessment policies should recognize frequent formative checks that document growth, not only summative products.

This study reflects one school, one subject (English), one year, and teacher perspectives only; it lacks classroom observations, student and parent voices, and quantitative outcome data. Transferability is therefore tentative. Future research should integrate mixed methods (e.g., observational coding, work-sample analysis, and pre–post outcomes), include multiple schools and subjects, and test the framework in varied cultural contexts.

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