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# The Affective Filter Hypothesis and its Enlightenment for College English Teaching

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**Abstract:** First put forward by Dulay & Burt in 1977, the affective hypothesis aims to illustrate the affective factors' influence in the process of foreign language acquisition. Later, it became an indispensable part of Krashen's SLA theory. This article mainly puts its emphasis on the following: motivation, self-esteem and anxiety. Based on the illustration of these three aspects and the current educational situation in colleges, the author points out that during their teaching process, teachers should make their best to optimize students' emotional factors, low their affective filters that is, high motivation, low anxiety, and self-esteem.

**Keywords:** Affective filter, Motivation, Self-esteem, Anxiety

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## 1. Introduction

In 1977, Tracy Terrell, a teacher of Spanish in California put forward a new philosophy of language teaching, which he called the "Natural Approach"<sup>[1]</sup>. In other words, the Natural Approach grew out of Terrell's experiences teaching Spanish classes. Later, Terrell received joined forces from Stephen Krashen<sup>[2]</sup>, an applied linguist at the University of South California, in explaining the theoretical rationale for the Natural Approach. What Stephen Krashen contributed to the Natural Approach is his influential theory of second language acquisition. Krashen's theory is actually an amalgam of five hypotheses: 1) the acquisition/learning hypothesis which claims that learning and acquisition are separate processes; 2) the natural order hypothesis which says that there is a natural order of morpheme acquisition; 3) the monitor hypothesis which claims that one may call upon learned knowledge to correct himself when they communicate or write; 4) the input hypothesis which assumes that the comprehensible input is crucial for acquirers advanced second language acquisition; 5) the affective filter hypothesis which states the importance of the right "affect" for acquisition to take place<sup>[3]</sup>. In this article, emphasis will be laid on the affective filter hypothesis and its implications to the current college English teaching in China.

## 2. The Affective Filter Hypothesis

An affective component is an indispensable part of Second Language Learning<sup>[4]</sup>. Though an important part of Krashen's SLA theory, the affective filter hypothesis was first raised by Dulay & Burt in 1977. The principal purpose of this

hypothesis is to illustrate the affective factors' influence on the process of foreign language acquisition. And Dulay defined the affective filter as an innate processing system which subconsciously impedes the learners' absorption of the target language. A helpful way of conceptualizing that influence is to regard affect as a "filter" through which the input has to pass before it is acquired. Krashen sees the learner's emotional state or attitudes as an adjustable filter that freely passes, impedes, or blocks input necessary to acquisition. Based on research in second language acquisition, the affective filter hypothesis has identified three kinds of affective variables: motivation, self-esteem, and anxiety.

### **2.1. Motivation**

According to Longman Dictionary, motivation is "the state of being motivated, or the need or purpose." To put it another way, motivation is the definite purpose for certain activity; or the endless effort in order to achieve that goal. In the realm of foreign language teaching, researchers have different classifications for motivation. Brown (1981) sorted motivations into three groups. The first is global motivation which refers to the learners' general attitude towards foreign language acquisition; the second is called situational motivation which is the learners' motivation under natural learning situation; and the third is task motivation which is the motivation towards a specific task<sup>[5]</sup>. However, among all researches about motivation, the most prominent is Gardner & Lambert's classification.

Gardner & Lambert's ideas about motivation were largely influenced by Mower's view of L1 acquisition. Mower is a leading person in L1 acquisition. Borrowing the concept of identification from Mower, Gardner and Lambert proposed a construct they called integrative motivation. A learner is "integratively motivated" if he is learning the foreign language through a desire to learn more about a culture, its language and people, that is, to "integrate" more within the target-language society. By way of contrast to integrative motivation, Gardner and Lambert introduced the concept of "instrumental motivation", in which the learner is motivated to learn an L2 for utilitarian purposes, such as furthering a career, improving social status or meeting an educational requirement, and so on<sup>[6]</sup>.

### **2.2. Self-esteem**

Krashen believes that a learner's personality factors have some bearing on his achievement in foreign language learning. Among all personality factors, self-esteem plays a very important role in language learning. Self-esteem is one's good opinion of one's own worth, it is a positively psychological trend of pursuing the fulfillment of one's own worth, and it also acts as the core of human being's health. Learners who possess high self-esteem and positive personal image have more chances to succeed in learning. The reason of this phenomenon is that those people usually dare to adventure and are not afraid of making mistakes which give them more opportunities to communicate in foreign language. On the contrary, people with low self-esteem lose many chances under the same circumstances.

Shavelson, Hubner and Stanton proposed a ternary hierarchy to account for self-esteem. In this hierarchy, global self-esteem, or the individual's overall self-assessment is put at the highest level; at the medial level is specific self-esteem which illustrates how individuals perceive themselves in various life contexts( education, work, etc) and according to various characteristics( intelligence, attractiveness, etc.). At the lowest level is the evaluation one gives oneself on specific tasks (writing a paper, driving a car, etc.). Based on her research on a French oral production task by American college students, Heyde found that students' performance had some relationship with all three levels of self-esteem, the highest correlation existing for task self-esteem. And the most prominent discovery of her founding is that students' task self-esteem fluctuated from class to class<sup>[6]</sup>. Assuming that the students in the classes are randomly distributed, it may be possible for the instructors to enhance some influence on the students' self-evaluations.

### **2.3. Anxiety**

Anxiety, also called psychological abnormality, is one of the variable emotions. It is commonly recognized that anxiety is the uncomfortable emotional state which is caused by frustration of one's self-esteem. And the frustration is caused because the individual can not fulfill his setting goal or cannot overcome the threat of the difficulties. Oxford deemed that

language anxiety is one of the principal factors that influence one's language learning and it is not that in common sense but the uneasy psychology caused by the uncertainty of employing the target language. Dulay(1982) made it clear that an individual's foreign language proficiency can be identified by the degree of his anxiety. Some scholars classified anxiety into two types: facilitating anxiety and debilitating anxiety. Facilitating anxiety motivates the learner to "fight" the new learning task; it gears the learner emotionally for approval behavior. Debilitating anxiety, in contrast, motivates the learner to "flee" the new learning task; it stimulates the individual emotionally to adopt avoidance behavior (Larson-Freeman, 2000). Anxiety can be also divided into "state anxiety" and "trait anxiety". The former refers to a learner's specific anxiety to a situation during his learning process while the latter means an individual's permanent predisposition towards anxiety. According to K. M. Bailey's (1983) diary study of her own competitiveness and anxiety while learning French as a foreign language, it is "state anxiety" but not "trait anxiety" that determines whether the anxiety is debilitating or facilitating<sup>[6]</sup>.

For the majority of Chinese students, the anxieties they possess during the foreign language study are mainly ability anxiety, class anxiety and test anxiety.

### **3. Enlightenment of the Affective Filter Hypothesis on College English Teaching**

In general, the affective filter hypothesis states that acquirers with a low affective filter seek and receive more input, interact with confidence, and are more receptive to the input they receive. High motivation, low anxiety and self-confidence and good self-image are the conspicuous features of the low affective filter. In this sense, therefore, optimizing students' emotional preparedness for learning will be helpful for the purpose of building a low affective filter. Just as Hu Wenzhong mentioned that verbal communication, non-verbal communication and social communication were all deeply influenced by values<sup>[7]</sup>. Therefore, to bridge the gap between different values is also a part of affective filtering. And Zhu Xudong pointed out that affection played a vital role in the work of teachers, and teaching was not only the simple transmission of information and textbook knowledge; it is also a dynamic interactive process of rational and emotional interaction between teachers and students<sup>[8]</sup>. So for college English teaching, some suggestions are recommended in order to form such an affective filter which can facilitate learners' foreign language learning.

#### **3.1. Cultivating students' interest in foreign language learning and intriguing students' motivation towards foreign language learning**

Motivation for foreign language learning can be intrigued, interest can be cultivated, learning conditions can be improved. For teachers, the most important thing is to arouse students' motivation for learning English. Motivation does not necessarily promote acquisition, but rather results from it: those who meet with success in SLA become more motivated to study.

In China, the majority of foreign language learners have instrumental motivations except for those whose are interactively motivated because of their unusual family background or interest. Due to the special educational system in China, students with instrumental motivations perform well in their foreign language learning. Under this circumstance, teachers should firstly make use of students' instrumental motivations to inspire their curiosity, arouse their longing for success, which will gradually convert students' motivations from instrumental one to integrative. Liu Yi believed that "being a teacher is a profession that requires a lot of emotional investment. Only when college English teachers regard teaching as a part of their life can they truly find happiness, joy and satisfaction in teaching, which can more effectively enhance teaching effectiveness"<sup>[9]</sup>. Secondly, the process of foreign language teaching should adhere to the principle of acquisition, that is, the contents of teaching should be arranged from simple to complex, and from the known to the unknown. Finally, the materials teachers instruct in class should be in accordance with students' language proficiency, otherwise students' interest in language learning will be hampered which will in turn be detrimental to their motivations.

### 3.2. Building up students' self-confidence and reducing their anxiety

In foreign language learning, students' confidence refers to their confidence both in their teachers and in themselves. The former requires the teachers to be knowledgeable, friendly, and responsible. However, in foreign language learning, students' confidence in themselves is more important. Just as what Krashen said (1982), students with high confidence in themselves can perform well in their foreign language learning, and are usually less inhibited, which in turn prevent their confidence from being threatened by mistakes. For the purpose of maintaining students' self-confidence, teachers should hold a positive and receptive attitude not only to students, but to the mistakes students make during their foreign language learning, while students should show their due respect to and trust in their teachers, and cooperate well with teachers in and out of class.

As building up students' self-confidence and reducing their anxiety are two closely related facets of foreign language learning, high self-confidence demands low anxiety in students. According to the affective filter hypothesis, anxiety will influence students' intake of foreign language. Thus, teachers should try their best to put students in the state of "off the defense" for the sake of reducing their anxiety. Oxford put forward thirteen suggestions to lessen students' anxiety. These suggestions can be classified into the following groups: (1) in foreign language teaching, teachers should provide students with more opportunities to enjoy the feelings of success in learning. At same time, students who are suffered from language anxiety can have the chance to save their self-esteem and self-confidence through their successful practice in class, which will enable students to realize that language anxiety is a transient phenomenon and is also avoidable. (2) A merry, friendly and harmonious class atmosphere should be created by means of music games and so forth. Certain tolerance to students' language ambiguity is allowed, and unnecessary competition in class should be got rid of. (3) Various classroom activities should be accessible for different students' learning styles and learning strategies, and also ensure that students are familiar with their goal in study, thereafter helping them to achieve their goals by employing suitable learning strategies.

## 4. Conclusion

In a word, as an indispensable part of Krashen's theory of second language acquisition which is considered to be the representative of Natural Approach, the affective filter hypothesis has great influence on foreign language learning. In order to pursue an optimization of foreign language learning, a low affective filter is desirable. Just as Yu Yi expressed in her book, "the mission of teachers is to impart the utmost valuable knowledge and skills to students in a moral way"<sup>[10]</sup>. Hence, teachers should arouse students' motivations, build up their high self-esteem and lower their anxiety.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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