Affective literacy for TESOL teachers in China

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ABSTRACT
It has been recognised that the efficiency of foreign language learning is enhanced through attention to factors such as stress, anxiety and motivation (Wei 2007), or the affective environment through which students learn language. This article proposes the creation of an appropriate affective environment for language learning through the teaching of themes that create a bridge to the personal side of English teaching and engage with the desires of Chinese learners. Affective literacy is the term given to the approach outlined in this article. It combines research that has gone into exploring affect in language teaching (Schumann 1998; Young 1999) with work on affect in second-language acquisition (Gardner and MacIntyre 1993; Arnold 1999). This article addresses three aspects of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) that are relevant to teaching in China:

• building positive attitudes towards English teaching and learning by attending to the affective environment of the classroom
• a student-centred pedagogy that rewards the learner through emotionally satisfying experiences
• interpersonal meaning as a core concern for the TESOL teacher, so that Chinese learners may use English to build relationships.

It also presents five themes that develop a motivational and emotional backdrop through which teachers of English in China can attend to the motivational and psychological aspects of teaching and learning, and through which students of English in China can take control of their own learning.

Introduction
Interest in the affective domain of education stems largely from the work of Bloom, Mesia and Krathwohl (1964), who charted the affective strata of learning. This has been used to attend to the motivational and psychological aspects of teaching and learning that might impinge upon the potential to develop positive pedagogic relationships (Gunning 2007). The consideration of affect in language learning, and affective literacy as a teaching and learning practice for the TESOL environment, picks up on this interest in the affective strata of learning in educational literature and research and proposes it as a modus operandi for teachers in China.

The historian Mark Amsler (2004: 2) has defined affective literacy as ‘a broad range of somatic, emotive responses to reading a text. Affective literacy seeks out the life-principle, messy and complex, threading through reading activities and gestures toward bodily economies of reading and transacting texts.’ If we relate this statement to learners of English as a Foreign Language in China, English language is the text that the learners are reading, and the life-principle corresponds to the sociocultural context of China, where learners are also engaged in learning the English language.

From the philosophical, psychological and linguistic literature around affective literacy we can draw themes and activities that will specifically help Chinese learners of English as a Second Language and their TESOL teachers.

Philosophical literature
The relationship between affects and language learning can be traced back to the work of Baruch Spinoza (1883). Spinoza proposed that affects are bonds that link rational conduct with life. His system of affects built a coherent argument in his opus, Ethics, and a non-dualistic system for understanding the connection between the world and human endeavour. His ideas have been taken up and used by philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1989) and Gilles Deleuze (1995), and latterly by feministic thinkers such as Genevieve Lloyd (1989) and Luce Irigaray (1993). These thinkers are unified in their application of affects as necessary yet complex elements in the construction of language and thought, as they provide a link between communication and emotion.
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Psychological literature
The link between communication and emotion has crossed over into the field of psychology, where Freud (1953) used affects as a way of explaining the representational power of dreams as they delve into subconscious desires. Joseph Forgas (2001) has identified and investigated affects as essential elements in social thought and his scientific approach to affects has begun to answer some of the difficult questions relating to affects, society and language.

Linguistic literature
It could be stated that the work of establishing the role of emotions in language has been consistently problematic. The voice quality investigations of Laver (1980), the expressive language of Stankiewicz (1964) and poetic language of Jacobson (1960) have indicated the role of emotion in parts of speech. Affects have also been identified in research with respect to lexis (Hughes 1991; Wajnryb 2004) and in the genre and frame theory work of Labov (1972). Yet it could also be stated that the difficulty of defining affects has led investigators to turn to other more specialist areas of linguistics, where the definitions of terms and the consequent development of theory is more straightforward. The consistent thread that can be drawn from the linguistic literature is that affects are present as unstable yet vital parts of speech. People cannot communicate effectively without affects, yet a clear and definitional explanation of how they work is elusive. Perhaps this is why the philosophical line of thought from Spinoza, with regards to affects, culminating in recent post-structural and feminist approaches to language, helps in understanding how affects work. If translating this conclusion to the practice of affective literacy, it could be stated that the precise definition and theory of affects in language is less important than building a coherent position with regards to emotion and language that puts affects to work in the everyday business of teaching English.

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This is not the place to detail the complex ways in which affects and language have coincided in research, but it is worthwhile noting that the conception of affective literacy draws on a rich and diverse literature. Chinese learners of English need affects to stimulate their desire to learn English and to improve their affective textual practices in the classroom. The TESOL teacher should therefore analyse any teaching material for affects and emotional impact as one of the moving bases of affective literacy practice.

The case of China
The Chinese education system has been categorised as examination driven (Zhengyou 1988). Students in such a system are generally very successful in terms of their ability to remember facts and formulas and to apply them to practical problems. However, they often do not become competent within the social and cultural environments where the skills that they have learned are relevant. If they lack context, exam knowledge may well be lost before students have a chance to apply it, especially if it entails short-term memory material, which will not be readily transferred to fixed memory capacities (Ashcraft 2002). The most pressing issue for TESOL teachers, which comes from the nature of the education system in China, is fluency and emotional control in the spoken English of students. Affective literacy is designed to encourage and promote strong affective ties between language teaching contexts and learning. The themes developed below aim to make the work of TESOL teachers in China easier, by applying affective literacy as a critical pedagogy (Chacon and Alvarez 2001).

In China the prestige of English has grown in tandem with the Chinese modernisation program. In September 2001 English was introduced as a compulsory subject in Grade 3 in all elementary schools, to be taught by qualified teachers. Coastal cities, such as Shanghai and Beijing, have been required to offer English from Grade 1 since 1999 (Bain and Chen 2004). Chinese education is the epitome of a high-stakes system, originating from an imperial civil examination called ke ju through which qualified government officials were selected. Most English teachers are concerned with the issues that arise from the focus on examinations and which limit student access to other forms of knowledge and skills. However, since the widespread introduction of communicative language teaching in the early 1990s, the focus has shifted from grammar translation to effective communication in the target language (Jiang 2003). The concept of English learning has been influenced by the Confucian doctrine of learning for the sake of the knowledge itself. Driven by economic globalisation and the
A need for intercultural communication, TESOL in China is moving beyond learning the rules of language, sentence patterns and vocabulary. It is now paying attention to improving communicative competence, providing relevant cultural input, and understanding how language varies in different social and cultural discourses (Liao 1996).

Yet English classes in China are often controlled by the teacher, who functions as a transmitter, passing on textbook-based knowledge as accurately as possible. The students are not given much opportunity to discover knowledge for themselves. Chinese students may be viewed as passive learners, but they take their learning very seriously and have been brought up to respect wisdom, knowledge and the expertise of the teacher (Lee 2000). This is the reason they are perhaps less likely to reveal their own opinions, and tend to hide their personal abilities.

Since the introduction of communicative language teaching to China (Huang and Hatch 1978), English teachers have advocated reform of traditional teacher-centred methods. Affective literacy is a pedagogy for English education in China that supports such reforms and develops the motivational and emotional backdrop through which students may take control of their own learning.

**Theme 1: Getting to know you – language interactions**

One of the greatest challenges for English teachers in China is developing fluency in English interactions in the classroom. Affects can help with this process because they are linked to the cultural fabric of the group and the ways in which they are communicating on an emotional level. Brown (1994: 65) states that a ‘language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that we cannot separate them without losing the significance of either language or culture’.

The teaching and learning of English in China is compulsory for high-school students, who learn English not only for the sake of the language itself, but also for mastery of what Ellis (1994: 165) calls ‘communicative competence or illocutionary acts’.

Most students are likely to misinterpret English expressions if they lack familiarity with the target language culture. For example, a student in one English class, who excelled in every aspect of school life, was elected as a representative of the school to participate in various social activities organised by the education authorities. The English teacher said to him, *You are a lucky dog!* After this comment, the student was unhappy with the teacher. Upon reflection, the teacher realised that this reaction was understandable because the student was influenced by traditional Chinese culture, where the word *dog* carries negative connotations and is used in many phrases describing emotions and feelings of hatred or dislike. This contrasts with Western cultures, where dogs symbolise faithfulness and loyalty.

Affective literacy suggests that this example is about more than learning idiomatic phrases. It is the responsibility of the teacher to take account of the emotional impact of words, as they may be literally translated. Similarly, efforts to use humour to encourage fast and enjoyable English-language interactions should be linked to humour in the first-language culture. If the students are asked to tell jokes or recount funny anecdotes in English, the emotional significance of humour will be Chinese. If teachers try to broaden the cultural horizons of the students by telling jokes, they need to understand that certain humorous affects do not exist in Chinese. For example, *blonde jokes* rest on the Western cultural assumption that blondes may be characterised as dumb for humorous purposes: this assumption is not shared in China.

When working with affective literacy, the TESOL teacher will consider the differences in meaning and the impact of English phrases and will align fast, interactive and engaging language exchanges with positive emotional impacts from words and exercises. Mismatches in affects may arise from not considering emotional impact, as illustrated in Figure 1.

**Theme 2: Using idols in the TESOL classroom**

The world is saturated by the global media, which is an increasingly powerful aspect of everyday life in China, as media companies seek new markets and embed themselves in the Chinese education system (Huiping and Qilian 1997). The notion of celebrity accompanies the spread of global media networks, and this may be presented to a Chinese audience through the term *idols*. Students can be influenced by their idols in a number of ways – by their lifestyle choices, their images, characters and,
indeed, by their motivation to learn English. The affective influence of idols can help to promote the development of literacy abilities in the classroom (Towell 2001). American Country Music is one unit in a Chinese high-school TESOL textbook (English Office of People’s Education Press 1996). This unit aims to teach students how to make suggestions, how to give advice to others and how to use the past perfect tense. Students are required to gain a basic knowledge of American country music and to describe one or two singers they like. They are provided with the opportunity to enjoy country music at the beginning of classes, to practise the expressions in the songs and to talk about their favourite idols by using phrases in the textbook (eg Have you heard of …? / That is a good idea! / You’d better … / I think you’d enjoy it).

This unit is an example of affective literacy that uses the fascination with idols to increase the use of descriptive and interrogative language (Klima and Bellugi 1966) (see Figure 2). TESOL teachers can use idols as a positive stimulus for the discussion of character or for questioning the motives, ethics and life choices of idols. They can also ask students to discuss the advantages and sacrifices that being an idol entails in contemporary society. They can ask students to respond to the question, What is the difference between the fictional and non-fictional characters of your idol? The idol theme may be well served by using a survey technique to understand the primary idols of interest to the class. This information will break the unit down into lifestyle, motives, image, what makes the idols famous, cultural and social aspects of the idols, and their fan bases.

Figure 2: Idol exercise

Who is your idol?
Can you explain why you like them?

Theme 3: Comic strips and picture books as narrative and speech aids
Students in China learn about the syntax, rhythm, vocabulary, grammar and pacing of the English language by repeating and retelling stories. Although the stories are written in English, comprehensible input comes from the predictable nature of narratives (Krashen 1985). The rich illustrations in comic strips and picture books, combined with the prop of the narrative, create contexts that may enhance student understanding of English through storytelling (Commins 1991). Young and emergent English learners in China,
who could be intimidated by large amounts of written text that have no visual cues for meaning, are more likely to succeed in the TESOL environment through the use of comic strips and picture books. Most English-teaching textbooks in China contain text-related pictures, from which students learn to read narrative by decoding the visual images and by giving meaning to the text (Anstey and Bull 2000). With the support of graphic information, students are able to improvise the story and this facilitates their linguistic emergence (Anstey 2002) and comprehension of English.

Comic strips and picture books are prompts to using language, and this aspect of affective literacy resonates with the research into language acquisition that suggests pictures stimulate complex emotional-linguistic responses in the viewer (Kiefer 1995). These responses take into account the cultural conditioning of the viewer, and visual media can play an important role in determining ability to decode and understand symbols. Affective literacy, using comic strips and picture books, is the process by which this decoding may be used by the TESOL teacher to enhance the teaching of English. Figure 3 is an example of a comic strip, which may be used to decode, tell stories, and indicate direct speech and thought.

Figure 3: The watchmen by A Moore

![The watchmen by A Moore](Moore, A 1987)

**Theme 4: Love and war**

TESOL research increasingly proposes that students should engage with quality English literature as a supplement to their language experiences (Paran 2006). The study of literature offers students enhanced opportunities to understand and interpret language through talking about the themes or topics of literary works. The use of literature assists students to challenge and scrutinise their own attitudes, values and beliefs (Department of Education Tasmania 1997) in English. For example, the theme of love can be studied through reading and performing Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. The use of literature in the TESOL classroom includes the study of film, and the film *Titanic* by James Cameron has been employed recently as instructive material for high-school English students in China. Through the film they are encouraged to explore the emotions that inspire the characters in the film. Students have been divided into small groups and asked to brainstorm their ideas about love, and about the types of love that they are able to articulate, through questions such as *What is love like? / Besides people, what else can we love? / What is the definition of love? / What are the feelings associated with love?* In a similar way, the theme of war involves many penetrating and powerful affects. The emotions of the class will be stirred and activated through engagement with texts such as *Slaughterhouse-five* (Vonnegut 1969). Through the study of such texts students can discuss issues that arise with respect to war.

It is the job of the TESOL teacher to scaffold the language of texts (Fitzpatrick 2004) and to facilitate intense discussion about important themes. Affective literacy on these occasions allows the TESOL teacher to bring powerful texts into the classroom, and to explore the emotive reactions that insightful texts may create in an audience.

**Theme 5: Technology – gettin’ jiggy with it!**

Technology dominates communication in everyday lives and has a great impact when integrated into the curriculum to achieve clear and measurable educational objectives (Forum 2001). Computers can be used as language-learning tools in conjunction with a plethora of virtual applications (Cole 2005). For example, Chinese students now learn English on the Internet, which can avoid the potentially demotivating routines of the classroom...
By surfing the Internet, students can research and identify problems that interest them. They can brainstorm new cultural ideas in discussion groups and test these out in order to draw conclusions about lifestyles and values (Cole 2007). Students are able to get immediate feedback about their ideas through chatrooms or personal sites, can watch funny videos on YouTube, or catch up with world news and events from around the globe. The Internet has the potential to be an immersive affective literacy environment, where learning takes place in a mediated sense and where TESOL teachers take a less prominent role in the learning landscape because they are not solely structuring or delivering the curriculum.

Students interacting with a computer can listen to and view English-language websites, using their motor skills to reinforce the interactive learning process by connecting physical actions with the desired results of the activity. Exercises related to pronunciation may be combined with visual aids such as intonation graphs to help students compare their pronunciation to target pronunciation. Chinese students are interested in learning fashionable catch-phrases that appear on the Internet, such as PK\(^1\) or gettin’ jiggy with it. Technologies, such as the Internet, accelerate access to new words and give students a window onto the ways in which the English language is changing. TESOL teachers can use affective literacy to unpack these developments and to keep up to date with the language trends that engage their English learners.

### Assessment of affective literacy

Affective literacy places a strong emphasis on the connective and emotional side of TESOL teaching. This can be assessed through the use of negotiated rubrics (Department of Education Tasmania 2003) that allow the TESOL teacher to gather feedback data about affective literacy units and to scaffold further intervention into English teaching and learning. Table 1 is a model of the way in which teachers can track the effectiveness and progress of their affective literacy TESOL environment. Each TESOL theme may also be broken into its linguistic, social and cognitive components to allow for greater detail in course evaluation and planning and to chart student progress through each theme.

Table 2 illustrates how teachers can encourage

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**Table 1: Tracking effectiveness and progress of affective literacy environment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>It hasn’t done much for me</th>
<th>I am improving steadily</th>
<th>This is really helping</th>
<th>Wow, I’m so fluent at this!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1 – language interactions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme 2 – using idols</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme 3 – comics and picture books</td>
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<td>Theme 4 – love and war</td>
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<td>Theme 5 – technology</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Self-assessment criteria around Theme 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability to engage in fast language interactions</th>
<th>I’m not very good at this</th>
<th>I’m getting better</th>
<th>Yes, this is a lot easier now</th>
<th>Fantastic! I’m great at this</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability to understand fast language interactions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ability to use correct emotional affects in language interactions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ability to interpret emotions in English-language interactions</td>
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self-assessment of a teaching theme through criteria, in this case Theme 1, *Getting to know you – language interactions*. The teacher and students should engage in meaningful dialogue about the appropriate nature of the criteria and exactly when and how to use them. These criteria will provide information to help students succeed with each theme and it should act as a basis for further discussion about the TESOL learning environment.

**Conclusion**

The TESOL themes that have been presented in this article are starting points for developing different strands of affective literacy in TESOL and are linked, via feedback, to the application of affective literacy. Assessment is used as an ongoing formative process that may be included in the affective literacy classroom to develop new TESOL strands. Teachers will need to employ imaginative, critical and synthetic thought processes in order to expand the themes and to fill out the specific teaching and learning sequences that best suit their teaching situations. Each theme may be broken down into its component parts and taught according to the relevance and immediacy of the ideas and the ways in which the students engage with them. The TESOL teacher will need to be flexible and ready to improvise and follow the changing desires of the students, as they use affective literacy themes to expand their English repertoires.

**Note**

1 The origin of *PK* is *Penalty-Kick*, as used in sports. It carries the connotation of one-on-one rivals and can be used as a gerund that means deciding who is the winner and loser in a competition.

**References**


