



Motivation Under Constraint: An SDT and Affective Filter Perspective on Repeating EFL Nursing Students in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This study explores the role of learner motivation in the re-engagement of low-proficiency English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners repeating a core grammar course. Situated within applied linguistics, the research draws on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the Affective Filter Hypothesis to examine how prior negative academic experiences shape learners' motivation, emotional responses, and classroom participation. The study adopts a qualitative case study design focusing on four undergraduate nursing students in Saudi Arabia repeating an English grammar course following previous failure. All participants reported heightened anxiety, reduced confidence, and strong self-imposed expectations, compounded by perceptions of falling behind their peers. Data were collected over one academic term through classroom observations, reflective teaching journals, and informal learner feedback, and were analysed thematically. Findings indicate that learners' motivation was significantly constrained by affective factors, particularly residual trauma associated with prior failure and fear of further underperformance. These factors contributed to an elevated affective filter, limiting participation and engagement. However, the implementation of supportive instructional practices, including scaffolded tasks, individualised feedback, and the development of a low-anxiety classroom environment, was associated with gradual improvements in learner confidence and willingness to communicate. This study contributes to applied linguistics by highlighting the dynamic interaction between motivation and affect in contexts of repeated academic failure. It underscores the importance of addressing emotional barriers as a prerequisite for meaningful learner engagement and offers pedagogical implications for supporting at-risk language learners.

Keywords: agency; anxiety; emotion; learner; re-engagement