Anxiety in Language Learning: Recognition and Prevention

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The high levels of anxiety found in some educational environments are an almost insuperable block to effective learning. So called facilitating stress is only rarely a useful pedagogical device, since it requires a high level of student self confidence and only operates in the later stages of certain types of learning. Anxiety among students leads to poor performance and hostility, which threaten the teacher's professional self esteem. Unconscious retaliation under various rationalizations aggravates the problem. Appropriate responses include early identification of the problem, avoiding the escalation of mutual hostility, therapeutic management of stress—but especially prevention. In an experiment in stress prevention and management at a Canadian university, the usefulness of personal acquaintance with students, realistic reassurance, and the avoidance of threatening behaviours were assessed. Five case histories illustrate the successes and limits of this approach.

Responses to Moderate to Severe Anxiety

Moderate to high anxiety is most commonly found in schools with ethnic or linguistic minority students—particularly when the teacher is not of the same ethnic background as the students—as well as in a variety of other educational environments where there is a discrepancy between the expectations or perceptions of student and teacher. This anxiety, which afflicts both students and teachers, is frequently the most crucial factor in undermining the learning process or even blocking it completely. It leads to high rates of absenteeism, dropouts, and burnouts, as well as to a host of associated antisocial behaviours. It is involved in at least two critical vicious circles: one with intellectual impairment, the other with hostility.

From a teacher's point of view, student anxiety is a disaster. Stuart and Sundeen (1979) describe the intellectual implications of "moderate, severe, or panic levels of anxiety" as including "impaired attention, poor concentration, forgetfulness, errors in judgement, preoccupation, blocking of thought, decreased perceptual field, reduced creativity, diminished productivity, confusion" (p. 82). Moreover, the atmosphere in a class with several anxious students is likely to be tense. "The relationship between anxiety and hostility is particularly close, since the pain one experiences with anxiety frequently gives rise to anger and resentment toward those perceived to be responsible" (Stuart & Sundeen, p. 81).

Blue and Blue (1984, pp. 302-303) measured anxiety in Native students at Brandon University using two medical checklists designed to reveal psychosomatic complaints. They found that on average Native students begin the year with a score of 6.42 (versus 3.8 for the general student population) and that their scores continue to rise until the Christmas holidays. They then fall to 5.12 in January, and then rise again during the second semester. The more stress-

prone students have an average score of about 10 by December. They further report that at this point some members of this group become involved in "a variety of risk-taking episodes" such as attempted suicides, alcoholic binges, and the like (p. 306).

Similarly, Kathryn Molohon (1984) describes moderate to severe anxiety in a segment of the Indian community in northern Ontario—those "in between" traditional and acculturated lifestyles—with regard to education. In the communities, Molohon reports "sabotage of non-Indian social institutions," "physical damage to the buildings and property," and "obscene phone calls to teachers." She attributes the behaviour as "ongoing expressions of helplessness and frustration" by people who "have not had ... much opportunity to control their own lives" (pp. 63-64).

Besides anger, impaired intellectual performance, and withdrawal, excessive stress produces physiological reactions, such as headaches and sleep disturbances, and in severe cases may give rise to a wide variety of psychosomatic illnesses. This is probably an important factor in some health-related absences from class. As anxiety rises progressively to impair cognitive functions, the student begins to anticipate ultimate failure. As the student relinquishes the hope of success, a grieving process sets in. This accounts for many of the observed symptoms of severe anxiety, for the grieving process has five classical stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and resignation. Although not all people experience all of them or in exactly that order, they represent the usual reaction to bad news. To the serious student, a growing anticipation of academic failure is bad news indeed.

Such anxiety problems are most visible in student populations drawn from cultural groups that traditionally have been underserved by the educational system, and whose lifestyles have included little booklearning. However, a little thought will be sufficient to convince the reader that not only students belonging to racial or linguistic minorities suffer from anxiety related to their educational experiences. Anxiety results whenever one has a highly valued goal and perceives oneself as being unable to control the factors crucial to achieving it. In the case of the Northern Ontario students, evidently those with more traditional lifestyles escape much of the stress because they do not value formal education highly—and fully "acculturated" ones often feel it is within their power to succeed. It is those "in between" who suffer the greatest anxiety.

No student is completely immune to even severe levels of anxiety when confronted with novel tasks that must be mastered under time pressure. In my days as a student nurse, I experienced this in a particularly dramatic way:

One of the skills I acquired as part of my nursing training was taking blood pressure. I often do this for friends and elderly relatives, and do not find it difficult at all. However, I initially learned under time pressure, with antiquated equipment, and from experts who had no idea how to explain to another person the procedures which came so naturally to them. Therefore, like many of my classmates, I felt very unsure of my technique. Moreover, I was soon assigned cardiac patients with peripheral vascular disease and faint pulses, for whom accurate recording of blood pressure was vital. Unsure that my best efforts

would be adequate to the task, I frequently asked staff nurses to verify my results.

My instructor soon noticed and decided I had a problem. So, securing the cooperation of a patient with a strong pulse, she set out to coach me. After taking his blood pressure herself, she left all the equipment in place and had me listen: all I heard was the beating of my own heart. She looked puzzled. "It's real strong," she said. "Thump, thump, thump." She listened again, and handed me the stethoscope. Again, I heard nothing. That afternoon, when instructors and students had left the floors, I slipped back into the ward and took the man's blood pressure: the heart sounds were loud and clear. There were other incidents of this general type, and together they contributed nothing to the length of my nursing career. The effects of anxiety on academic learning are no less severe, as I have documented elsewhere for Native students taking Cree and Saulteaux (Proulx, 1986).

If anxiety is so important a factor in disrupting social relations in the academic community and the learning process itself, why has relatively little attention been paid to it by the teaching profession? True, we are trained as scholars to deal with cognitive problems, and there is nothing surprising in our focus on the relationship between the material to be used in teaching and the nature of the learner's language learning ability. But perhaps another factor is the discomfort the educator often feels with the topic. After all, if students are bored, anxious, or frustrated in our classrooms it is hard for us not to feel a bit defensive about it. Could our own performance as teachers be to blame? For unlike cognitive problems, whose locus is external to the pedagogue, affect is a product of the interaction between teacher and student—and the teacher is generally the dominant party in this interaction.

Besides student anxiety, with all its unfortunate effects, it seems likely that classrooms with anxious students produce anxious teachers. We generally have little or no training as scholars and educators in recognizing the early signs of anxiety nor in dealing with emotional problems. Thus, because the success of our students is a highly valued goal for us, and we do not feel secure that we can successfully intervene with the anxious student, we ourselves become anxious. By their actions, our anxious students deprive us of our self image as competent professionals, which is at the core of our identities. This arouses powerful negative feelings, which our training has not prepared us to deal with.

In extreme cases, this may have the effects on cognition described by Stuart and Sundeen (1979): "impaired attention, poor concentration, forgetfulness, errors in judgement, preoccupation, blocking of thought, decreased perceptual field, reduced creativity, diminished productivity, confusion." Moreover, "the pain one experiences with anxiety frequently gives rise to anger and resentment toward those perceived to be responsible" (pp. 81-82).

There is therefore a further danger. As intellectuals, we are quite capable of rationalizing our anger in sophisticated ways. We will generally not vandalize property nor make obscene phone calls, and rarely will we express our negative feelings directly. Instead, we may tend to develop subtle patronizing attitudes

that belittle the students, or punitive attitudes cloaked in academic standards. Such tendencies may be hard to resist if we are not consciously aware of them.

Responses to Mild Anxiety

One body of perfectly legitimate research data, which may at times be misused in a punitive way, is that which shows beneficial effects of mild anxiety on performance (see also Selye, 1975). What makes these research results so dangerous is (a) that it is often hard to distinguish mild from moderate anxiety in all the members of a large class, and (b) there is a contradictory and equally valid body of research data showing diminished results even when anxiety is mild. The two sets of findings has led Scovel (1977, pp. 138-139) to distinguish "facilitating" versus "debilitating" anxiety, relating them respectively to the "fight and flight" mechanisms of the limbic system.

He does not speculate on what conditions bring forth the one or the other, and it is crucial that we do so: without at least a working hypothesis which can be tested in the field, we will never discover how to minimize debilitating anxiety, nor how to create its facilitating counterpart.

I would like to suggest that anxiety is debilitating when one lacks the preparation and experience needed to give one confidence that the problem can be successfully resolved. When one feels sure that one is able to cope successfully with the problem at hand—having dealt with others of the same sort in the past, and having sufficient knowledge and training to undertake the new variant—one gets a fight reaction. Provided this reaction is mild, and the task at hand is relatively uncomplicated, it may be a spur to constructive action and thus facilitating. If, on the other hand, the stress is too great or one lacks sufficient knowledge or experience to be confident of success, the response will be flight.

A somewhat similar view has been expressed by Machlowitz (1980), based on studies by Suzanne C. Kobasa, a University of Chicago psychologist studying business executives:

The difference between coping with and collapsing from stress depends on the body's response to it.... The healthy ones [executives] ... shared 3 characteristics: the belief that they can control or influence the events in their jobs; an ability to feel deeply involved in or committed to the activities of their lives; and the anticipation of change as an exciting challenge to further development. (pp. 114-115)

This suggests that what is facilitating anxiety to one student will be debilitating to another.

This is consistent with the implication of studies showing differential response by people with high and low IQs to "high anxiety" (not defined, but surely mild to moderate anxiety by clinical standards [Scovel, 1977, p. 137]). The same anxiety was found to provide "negative reinforcement to the low IQ student" attempting to learn a difficult skill, but "positive motivation for high IQ students" after the initial stages of exposure.

Similarly, it is consistent with the finding that "increased anxiety is likely to improve performance at later stages of a learning activity, but conversely hinders academic performance at earlier stages of the same activity" (Scovel, 1977, p. 136).

However, even a "fight" reaction will be counterproductive if intricate reasoning is required. This is because the action of the sympathetic nervous system evolved for coping with critical emergencies where an almost instant response was necessary for survival. When fully activated, it short-circuits most of the neocortex and entrusts survival to the more primitive portions of the brain and even to reflex arcs controlled from the spinal cord. A sabre-toothed tiger would never have waited around for our ancestors to consider intricate plans for escape.

There is also some indication that neuromuscular tasks such as speaking and athletic skills are particularly adversely affected by anxiety. Thus Scovel (1977, p. 135) mentions an experiment showing that "the higher the arousal level of the swimmers during the pre-race period, as measured by palmar sweating, the poorer their results in actual races." This may seem odd, considering the usefulness of neuromuscular proficiency in dealing with physical crises, but evidently crises require speed of response more than proficiency. This being the case, the chances of even mild anxiety improving performance in language learning are rather poor, and the risks high.

Another common belief among teachers, which may or may not at times involve covert expression of hostility, is the view that correcting errors (or punishing them, in terms of behaviourist psychology) is a particularly effective means of bringing about improvement. Moreover, although it is based on a logical fallacy called regression to the mean, experience seems to reinforce this belief—so that commonly it is most firmly held by the most experienced teachers.

Regression to the mean works as follows: over short periods of time, learning does not much change a student's performance. Instead, changes are due to random variation. The overwhelming majority of results are average ones (i.e., they fall close to the mean), while a few fall significantly above or below that average. Hence, if one result is particularly good, probability dictates that the next is very likely to be worse: that is, closer to the mean. Similarly, if a result is especially poor, the next is almost sure to be an improvement, just as a matter of statistical chance.

Now consider what happens in the classroom: a student bungles something, the teachers corrects it, the next performance is better. The teacher concludes that the correction is responsible for the improvement, although in reality the correction has produced anxiety and hence has had a negative impact on learning. Similarly, when a good performance and praise are followed by poorer work, the teacher is wrongly discouraged from further praise.

This is not to deny that the correction of errors may be essential to language learning, a point presently being debated in the literature. However, overt correction is only one type of negative feedback, and one that is likely to increase student anxiety. More subtle forms, such as confirmation checks, clarification requests, and a simple failure to understand "all identify the learner's utterance as anomalous in some way" (Schachter, 1984, p. 172). These types of feedback are more natural, and may be adequate to most language learning situations. If explicit corrections are needed at some point it should be

made clear that this is only to further improve already successful communication (p. 172).

While the difficulty of the task at hand is surely the main source of student stress, it also results in cases where a student is underchallenged. As Luckman and Sorensen (1980) put it "In a study of stimulation levels and stress, persons who were either understimulated or overstimulated were found to suffer more stress and were shown to release greater amounts of catecholamines than those persons who were moderately stimulated" (p. 64). In rare cases, a teacher may create such stress for a majority of the students in a class (rather than just one or two bright ones) by excessively "drilling the basics" in response to student errors. Such a course of action, whether motivated by covert hostility or misguided good intentions, is ultimately counterproductive.

Just as teachers at times may tend to respond to anxiety with covert hostility or psychological withdrawal, so do students. While covert and overt expressions of hostility in the classroom and elsewhere attract the greatest attention and most seriously attack morale, withdrawal is statistically far more frequent among students from some cultures, for example, Algonquian. In such groups, the students most in need of instruction are known for missing class after class, and they account for a large majority of the failures. Attack and withdrawal seem radically different, but they have a common root: a fear of failing the course. Students who find the subject material too easy and hence boring are a close second for absenteeism.

These, then, are the main signs and symptoms of anxiety in the classroom, and I need not belabour the havoc they wreak on academic performance.

An Experiment in Anxiety Reduction

In a previous paper (Proulx, 1986) I suggested ways of coping with moderate and high anxiety in Native students taking university language courses. As I stated in that paper, however, high anxiety is an extremely intractable problem once it has occurred—and the solution of choice is prevention.

Thus, after identifying possible sources of anxiety and devising techniques for anxiety reduction, the next step in my research was to try out those techniques in the classroom. I therefore accepted an invitation to do so in the Native Teacher Education Programme at a central Canadian university during a three-week summer session in July, 1986. I have described some techniques for reducing exam anxiety elsewhere (Proulx, 1987). The remainder of this paper is a report on other aspects of that experiment.

It is important to point out that at the university in question, the student population, and the duration and content of the course and its context, are all somewhat different from their counterparts in my previous teaching, and I have no detailed information on the degree of stress experienced by students at that specific university in other years or in other classes. It is thus quite possible that uncontrolled factors are in part responsible for the results achieved.

However, it has been argued (e.g., by Brumfit, 1984, chap. 1) that social science methodology (employing rigorous controls) is not suitable for the evaluation of teaching because there are too many factors involved for it ever to

be possible to control adequately for them, and, alternatively, that the degree of artificial simplification required to maintain strict controls would invalidate the results in any case. "Methodology," he argues, "thus becomes a form of discussion analogous to the formation of political and social policy, rather than to the procedures of the descriptive sciences" (p. 20).

I am persuaded by his arguments and believe that the validation of the techniques I used in this course must rest not on any tests I might apply, but rather on further experimenting by thoughtful teachers in a variety of situations, adapting these techniques to local conditions. Until a technique is proven effective in this way, it must be regarded as merely an idea worthy of consideration.

My approach to preventing high anxiety involved a thorough rethinking of everything that would go on in the classroom, whether important or apparently trivial, and seeking the least stressful alternative in each case. I made only one exception to this principle: the course content itself remained what I felt was educationally best, regardless of the impact on stress levels.

It was my policy to challenge this class to think analytically, to discover that knowledge lay within them. This was in conflict with their habitual strategy of imitation, and was a significant stressor for most of them.

Of my stress reducing strategies, three were particularly important: first, showing personal concern for each student as an individual; second, various techniques for reducing fear of failure; third, not shaming students. The three are closely related.

In order to show my personal concern for each student, I took early steps to establish good communication. I invited students to share their concerns with me, and established a "feedback committee" consisting of a male and a female volunteer to transmit the anonymous concerns of students who might be too shy to speak to me directly. I asked all students to sign up to have lunch with me once in the cafeteria, in groups of twos and threes.

The feedback committee was not used after the first day, but one student who came directly to me mentioned its existence as evidence I must really want to hear about problems. This student, let us call him Raymond, came to my quarters in late evening and began a long description of the educational situation at his reserve and his part in it. Recognizing that he was talking around his reason for coming, I pointed out the lateness of the hour and asked him for his main reason for speaking to me.

Raymond then showed signs of intense anxiety, denied he had come for any particular reason, then after some encouragement blurted out it was terribly important to him to succeed in his studies and he was worried about it. Not having seen any of his academic work, I avoided direct reassurances since these would have been empty. However, I reminded him of some of the previous achievements he had mentioned to me, and told him I saw no reason why he should not be equally successful in the future. I invited him to bring any specific problems that might arise to me once the course was under way.

I followed up our interview by checking his work frequently in class, and giving an occasional word of praise. He remained a bit tense throughout the course, but his anxiety levels remained low to moderate and his work was good.

A majority of students had lunch with me during the first week of the course, and topics discussed ranged from details of class activities to problems with their children. I took the opportunity to learn their names—something I am not good at—and to find out about their career goals. The students who had lunch with me generally showed few signs of anxiety in the course.

One, let us call her Amy, missed her lunch date and handed me a note the next day excusing herself on the grounds of personal problems. I immediately interviewed her in private, where she stated she was "very nervous," had problems with English, and had lived all her life in a small reserve and felt lost away from it. She complained of chest pains and stated a doctor near her reserve had told her she had high blood pressure. She believed she had heart trouble and seemed frightened.

On questioning, the pain she described bore no resemblance to angina pectoris, but rather seemed to be the product of muscular tension in the rib cage. After discussing the case with instructors at the university nursing faculty, I took her there for a blood pressure check: it was low normal. She was reassured abut her physical symptoms, and was invited to return for further checking if they recurred.

An academically superior who was fluently bilingual befriended Amy and gave her social support. The reassurance and support no doubt made life more comfortable for her—but she continued to have high anxiety expressed by evident sadness and partial withdrawal, and her academic performance was and remained unsatisfactory.

It is hard to be sure in this case if poor academic performance gave rise to anxiety, or if anxiety blocked learning. By the time I met with her, both factors were probably involved in a vicious circle. However, by her own account she had been "very nervous" on the reserve. Very likely, then, she arrived on campus with full-blown anxiety problems that could not be overcome in the relatively stressful environment of summer school.

A half dozen students signed up for lunch as a group, rather than in twos or threes. None of these kept their appointment, perhaps in part because they were not reminded. Nor did they make later appointments. Not surprisingly, I generally did not get to know the six students as well as their classmates, and some expressed anxiety through a somewhat muted hostility. One, who showed signs of being critical and argumentative in class, responded well to a combination of non-threatening intellectual explanation and (when the opportunity arose) praise and recognition of her work, which was good.

In summary, those students who took advantage of the opportunities for personal contact with me seem to have avoided high anxiety, or they quickly reduced it to manageable levels. Those students who did not have such contact were much more likely to require stress management interventions of the sort I discussed in my earlier paper (Proulx, 1986). While this is not an unexpected

result, it does underline the value of establishing a personal relationship with the individual student.

My means of reducing the fear of failure were chiefly a flexible grading system (in which no one exam would significantly lower a grade), and a set of practice examinations prior to the real thing. Prior to the real exam, I reminded the students that I already had enough material from their earlier work for grading purposes, should they "blow" the exam. In a few cases, where stress evidently impaired performance on the real exam, I did in fact substitute material from the practice exam for grading individual students.

In addition I used a couple of class hours to go over the results of quizzes and homework with students individually and privately, and to encourage and counsel them. Individual counselling with respect to quizzes provided an opportunity for students to voice concerns and ask questions in private, which probably relieved a lot of anxiety.

One student, whom we may call Terry, and who had missed lunch with me and who had missed several classes as well, took the opportunity to tell me what he felt was wrong with the summer school. Most of the remarks were about other courses, but he was upset with our class discussion of the Absentative inflection. In his dialect, this inflection was reserved for respectful reference to the deceased—and he was shocked that in other dialects it was used more freely (e.g., for dead bees).

Terry was aware that he was from "a very conservative reserve," and accepted my explanations for why the Absentative was discussed. He remained uncomfortable with the university, and expressed his alienation with absences from class. Nevertheless, the opportunity to ventilate his feelings was probably beneficial, and he did pass the course.

With regard to grade related stress reduction, there are dilemmas. Denial is a very effective strategy for some students in dealing with the fear of failure. Some may retain low anxiety by refusing to think about grades or evaluation at all, and this may become difficult if the instructor calls too much attention to the matter. For those students who are doing well, realistic reassurance may be an excellent substitute for denial. But the student doing poorly should be allowed to avoid facing this as long as possible, while giving helpful feedback on specific points that need improvement. Only in the rare case where a student is bright and relaxed, and just plain lazy, should the spectre of failure be raised. On the other hand, uncertainty is often more stressful than bad news (in people not using denial). Hence accurate evaluation and feedback are essential to most students at some point.

This being the case, such practices as grading and returning quizzes may reduce anxiety in some, and raise it in others. Also, anxiety can be expected to rise before a quiz in all students and to drop afterward, especially in those who did well. Given this dilemma, my practice was to delay evaluation as long as possible, which is not long in a three-week course, and to give individualized feedback and general reassurance.

By and large, my strategy in that course seems to have worked well. Some students certainly did suffer from moderate to high levels of anxiety while

writing some tests, as indicated by their better performance on practice tests. However, this did not significantly lower their final grades, and pre-exam anxiety was not high in class.

In deference to northern Algonquian culture, I avoided correcting mistakes in public. When I asked the class questions, I let them all call the answers out anonymously. Then I would call on someone whom I knew had or was close to the right answer. When written work was being done, I circulated among the students and discussed it with them in whispers. I handed back papers individually. Student feedback on the course evaluation questionnaire showed a particularly high level of satisfaction on this point.

This is a particularly pleasing result, and may be part of the reason why attendance—which was not required—was very good in the course. This is in contrast with my earlier teaching, where I had used the same techniques of error correcting for Algonquian students as for Anglos. The same course evaluation questionnaire used on these earlier courses showed satisfaction on this point among the Anglos, but not the Algonquians.

A number of more or less minor points were also designed to contribute to a less stressful experience in the course. Since Algonquians are accustomed to learning from the highest status members of their kin groups, I dressed rather more formally for classes than had formerly been my habit. On the assumption that red ink on papers has negative connotations to students, I substituted green. I received no feedback on either point.

I attempted to involve the students in setting up the goals of the course. This brought out the rather major differences in some of our views as to what education is for. Notably, they wish to acquire linguistic knowledge by repetition and imitation, where I would like them to develop analytical skills through creative problem solving. It was left largely to me to work out compromises we could all live with.

A few problems arose that may ultimately have been due to anxiety, but not of the usual kind arising from the new environment, fear of failure, or culture shock. Rather, the immediate stressor seems to be an ideological position, whether based on personality structure or intellectual (mis)understanding.

One student, let us call her Barbara, was very withdrawn early in the course. She seldom spoke, did not have lunch with me, and I eventually became aware of an icy hostility. When she eventually spoke, it was to make what appeared to be carefully rehearsed attacks on the course content. This was done publicly, at awkward times (such as just as the students were beginning to write an exam).

I at first assumed the garden variety of anxiety, and pointed out that she was doing satisfactory work, and that her performance on the tasks she objected to was just as good as on those she was accepting of. But reassurance had no effect. Intellectual explanation had no effect either. She insisted that the language of the classroom should be Ojibwa: it made no difference to her that I did not speak Ojibwa, nor that some of her fellow students were Cree.

I at first suspected that she disliked me personally. She had not had lunch with me, and I had been slow to learn her name. Had she taken offense? And then I noticed her very traditional dress and hairdo, in stark contrast to those of

her classmates. Perhaps she disliked all Anglos? But then other students complained about her: "She keeps telling us we don't talk right. We can't say anything around her without being criticized. We tell her that's our dialect, but she won't listen."

Barbara appeared to have a rigid personality masking deeper psychological problems I was not competent to assess. On the surface, there appeared to be elements of paranoia, which is thought to be an ego defense against overwhelming anxiety. However, this anxiety may well have been of long standing, since it seemed to have had time to restructure her whole personality, and she did not respond to the usual anxiety reduction techniques. At best, these techniques may prevent the problem from getting worse; they are unlikely to resolve it.

Barbara represents an extreme case of ideological antagonism: a set of values or beliefs about how things should be (realistic or not) that are in conflict with those dominant in the environment. These generate anxiety unless the conflict can be resolved, which it sometimes can.

For example, Joe was a likeable student who nearly flunked his first year Algonquian course because he had not learned the Roman orthography in use at that university. He did know syllabic writing, but insisted that he wanted to learn Roman and signed up for the classes in which it was used. I got him as a second-year student, and he showed no sign of previous exposure to the Roman orthography in use. I counselled him to switch into the syllabics section of the course, but he insisted on learning Roman.

Shortly into the course he seemed suddenly to understand the sound/grapheme correspondences being taught, and became quite upset. "I won't do it!" he cried. "If I write this way, everyone in my reserve will have to learn to speak differently. That's impossible!" He was too agitated for my explanation of the arbitrary nature of orthography to be fully understood, but other students in his work group did understand and evidently did succeed in persuading him once they understood the nature of his problem. With this problem resolved, Joe began to learn. Unfortunately, he did not have time to catch up to his classmates, and had serious pre-exam anxiety. Despite reassurance, he wrote a poor exam and was promoted on the basis of other work.

In Joe's case, the ideological conflict was rather limited in scope and based on a misunderstanding. Hence it could be resolved. In Barbara's case, I am not aware of any misunderstanding. She wanted a course on the grammar of her (sub)dialect of Ojibwa, taught in her (sub)dialect of Ojibwa. She was enrolled in a course in Algonquian grammar, with students speaking several varieties of Ojibwa and Cree and with English as the language of instruction. Due to her own predispositions, she could not accept this.

Because the signs and symptoms of ideological conflict somewhat resemble those of ordinary anxiety, it is important to distinguish them. The anxious student requires primarily realistic reassurance. The student with an ideological complaint needs either explanation, if the problem is a misunderstanding, while the crank should perhaps be tactfully ignored. In the latter case, the instructor's response is really aimed at the other students present.

With the exception of the incidents described above which required therapeutic intervention, low to moderate stress levels were maintained in the course, in contrast with the high levels I encountered in my earlier teaching of northern Algonquians (reported in Proulx, 1986). Besides fewer visible signs and symptoms of anxiety, I found increased student satisfaction expressed on the anonymous course evaluation questionnaire on the last day of the course (though they still thought the material covered was too hard), and greatly reduced dropout and failure rates.

While further experimentation is required, the preliminary evidence is that the stress-preventing techniques described above work. It is important to point out, however, this course had 18 students in it, and clearly some of the key techniques employed would not be possible in courses with much larger enrollment.

The methods I used to help prevent anxiety among my Algonquian students during the course are tailored specifically to Algonquian culture, and some details might require adaptation in classes drawn from other cultural backgrounds. The important points, I think, are (a) that we recognize the potential of anxiety to prevent learning from taking place and to disrupt classes and lives, and (b) that there are practical means of minimizing anxiety and coping with it once it occurs. Until this is done, improvements in the cognitive approaches to language learning will have little impact on the populations at risk.

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