
Learning Language Under Tension: New Directions from a Qualitative Study

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This article examines the role of tension in the process of instructed second/foreign language acquisition, on the basis of findings from a comprehensive ethnography of the 7-week intensive beginners' class in the summer French School of Middlebury College. This project both completes and challenges the current research paradigm on "language anxiety," as it shifts the focus on the negative (anxiety) to a study of *tension*, defined as an unstable phenomenon that may be generated by any situation or event and may be perceived differently by each individual experiencing it. Our findings confirm that, regardless of its cause and manifestations, tension may engender *euphoric* or *dysphoric* effects (perceived as beneficial or detrimental), but also *non-euphoric* or *non-dysphoric* effects whose salience had previously not been established. These valuations appear linked not to the allegedly objective quality of instruction, materials and learning environment, but to personal expectations and a priori beliefs about language learning. In addition, we found it necessary to separate operationally the effects of tension in the cognitive and the affective domains, and assess these effects qualitatively, rather than quantitatively, because students reacted most productively not to the *degree* of difficulty and expectation in the course, or to the reduction of affective dysphoria (or "anxiety") by a nonthreatening teaching style, but to the *quality* of materials and activities. Their overall perception of the learning experience was ultimately bound to the opportunity to reinvent themselves successfully in the target language. Achievement of linguistic or communicative proficiency mattered less than the satisfactory development of an emerging L2 self, which had to be fostered by a curriculum and instructional method providing the best possible balance of both cognitive and affective euphoric tension. In retrospect, dysphoria under its various guises was not found to play a particularly strong role, because it was dismissed and forgotten in a remarkable "amnesty effect" triggered by the students' realization of their eventual achievements in the program.

IN THE PAST 20 YEARS, THE PURPORTED anxiety of learners has become a central concern of second/foreign language (L2/FL) acquisition research, which has focused almost exclusively on the negative effects of tension (or "stress") that induce anxiety. Although their existence is occasionally acknowledged, the potentially beneficial effects of tension have not been studied to the same extent, in part because most communicative teaching methodologies strive to reduce the perceived causes of language anxiety in order to create a more relaxed — and, it is believed, more productive — learning environment. Hence several questions

immediately arise: Can we dissociate anxiety and tension? What exactly is the nature of tension in an L2 learning environment? Must research primarily seek correlation between tension (or lack thereof) and achievement of certain instructional objectives?

Although it has brought clarification on certain aspects, such as the nature of language anxiety, research in this domain has not produced a satisfactory global picture of tension in the L2 process, perhaps because of the predominant [260] quantitative methodology, which must carefully isolate variables. It is obvious that discrete data collection procedures (typically through scaled-answer questionnaires) cannot yield holistic theories. In addition, most studies attempt to correlate the experience of tension with linguistic achievement, measured by single-item tests of grammatical manipulation, word recognition, dictation, repetitions, and so on, that seem quite irrelevant, and even antithetical, to communicative proficiency, now generally accepted as the purpose of language instruction.

Our ethnographic study of intensive beginners' classes in the summer French School of Middlebury College offered a way to resolve some of these methodological and epistemological issues. We knew that these students experienced a great deal of tension in various forms, not only because of the rigorous schedule and pace of the course — 5 contact hours per day, 5 days a week for 7 weeks, in full immersion — but also because tension was then explicitly claimed by the School's administration as an intended feature, even (albeit in a jocular manner) in its most negative aspects. Within the larger purview of studying the French school community as a culture (which extends far beyond the scope of this paper), our goal was to develop a *grounded theory* — one that is inductively based on the data rather than deductively derived from a predetermined hypothesis — on the role of tension in the process of instructed L2 acquisition.

We did not aspire to make any claims as to the possible relationship between tension and achievement for two reasons: first, because a naturalistic approach excludes such attempts at correlation, but second, mostly because we were interested in the *quality* of the learning experience, regardless of achievement. Indeed, our previous acquaintance with students in this program pointed us to the fact that some of the highest achievers were malcontent overall with the session, whereas others who had not done so well were quite pleased with it.

Naturalistic research aims to deliver what Geertz (1973) called a “thick description” of a particular setting, from which a grounded theory can emerge; there is no a priori hypothesis to verify or invalidate. For the purpose of studying tension, however, we had to deal with a number of extant methodological and epistemological constructs — most notably what is commonly considered “anxiety” and “stress” — which are often taken for granted, but which we found necessary to critique, recast, and sometimes eliminate altogether in our analysis. Thus our empirical study was complemented by theoretical reformulations prompted by the need to make sense of data that could not be interpreted with available conceptual tools.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

From Anxiety to Tension

Interest in affective variables of L2 teaching and learning, which had been emergent since the 1970s (e.g. H.D. Brown, 1973; Curran, 1976; Lozanov, 1979), was brought to the fore by Steven Krashen's hypothesis that stressful classroom environments contribute to a “filter” blocking easy acquisition (Krashen, 1982). This principle was to exert considerable influence on communicative teaching approaches in the years that followed. Since then, hundreds of research articles have touched upon the issue,¹ which is sometimes conflated with the larger concern of communication apprehension (see Daly, 1991; Daly & McCroskey, 1984), and comes under the wider umbrella of anxieties of all kinds: Math, Computer, Speech, Testing and — in French at least — Subjunctive Anxiety (Cox, 1986). Elaine Horwitz (1996), one of the most prolific scholars on the topic, even studied the effect of language anxiety on teachers.

Yet, for all the work conducted in this area, many fundamental questions remain unanswered. A comprehensive review by MacIntyre and Gardner (1991b) showed that researchers did not agree on whether to treat anxiety as a trait, a state, or a situation-specific phenomenon, and some points of contention have been acrimoniously debated (see, for instance the exchange between MacIntyre and Sparks and Ganschow : MacIntyre, 1995a; MacIntyre, 1995b; Sparks and Ganschow, 1995). In their preface to *Language Anxiety*, Horwitz and Young (1991) state that:

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For the past decade, questions about anxiety and language learning have emerged in virtually every aspect of language instruction . . . Teachers have long been aware of the fact that many of their students experience discomfort in the course of language learning [yet] researchers have been unable to establish a clear picture of how anxiety affects language learning and performance. (p. xiii)

Why such inability? We submit that, to some extent, research questions and designs are themselves to blame, as the main trend has been to try to establish cause and effect or even correlation between a large number of variables that are all but impossible to define quantitatively, such as [261] instructional factors (e.g., explicit teaching of grammar, error correction, use of video or computers), in order to find a measurable impact on student affect (Koch & Terrell, 1991) and thus potentially on achievement or proficiency (Ganschow, et al., 1994; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a; Young, 1991).

It is arguable that the extreme complexity of the language learning experience cannot be adequately reflected by quantitative (statistical) research alone: As Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted, “No *a priori* theory could possibly encompass the multiple realities that are likely to be encountered” (p. 41) in complex environments. This observation is certainly true of an immersion L2 program where any correlational hypothesis (validated by discrete-item testing or some other quantitative instrument) would fail to reflect the richness of a learning environment comprised not merely of classes but also of near-constant impromptu interactions outside of class and numerous organized activities.

What is more, quantitative methodology usually relies upon tests that contradict the communicative objectives of current language courses. For example, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991b) used 23 different tests in one study, each accounting for only one linguistic variable and involving tasks such as memorizing and transcribing strings of numbers read at the rate of one per second, or naming all the things in a refrigerator within 1 minute. Isolating such narrow skills, convenient as it is for statistical analysis, tells us precious little about the incidence of certain mental or affective states upon students’ overall communicative competence. Moreover, it tells us nothing about the role of tension in the learning *process*, given that lexical knowledge or a particular skill is evaluated as a *product*.

Unfortunately, solid qualitative research on L2 acquisition has remained relatively confidential and until recently was used primarily to buttress statistical findings (e.g., Brecht & Robinson, 1993). Although it has flourished in the field of English as a Second Language (ESL), where ethnography gained early recognition (see Watson-Gegeo, 1988, and the 1995 issue of *TESOL Quarterly*, especially Lazaraton), relying on “unorthodox, unmeasurable” data, as Cavalcanti (1982) put it, has remained a fairly marginal practice in other L2 scholarship. Despite efforts such as van Lier’s (1988) to define a research paradigm, despite the theorized possibility of generalization from qualitative research (Firestone, 1993), despite some interesting anecdotal studies (e.g. Preston, 1981), case studies, and a number of insightful diary studies (e.g. Bailey, 1983; Brown, 1985), Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research as a whole is still dominated by quantitative methodology (Lazaraton, 1995) in part because much of what is done under the label of qualitative research appears weak and anecdotal, for lack of setting and observing strict methodological guidelines (see Davis, 1995; Oxford & Green, 1995; van Lier, 1990). In particular, there have been few full-fledged ethnographies (such as Peirce, 1995 or Willett, 1995), which are logistically difficult to carry out and more difficult still to turn into journal articles.

More recent studies have failed to dispel a confusion that Scovel (1978) had reported in his earlier review of the literature: Conclusions have remained excessively tentative, and couched in cautious formulas pointing out that “speculations . . . suggestions, and possible tendencies . . .” prevail over hard evidence, in spite of claims that, “in the past few years, advances in theory and measurement have enabled more research into foreign language anxiety” (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991b, p. 86). In our view, the inconclusiveness of research in this domain suggests that correlational studies alone will not provide a satisfactory answer and that, in fact, the most accepted working hypotheses themselves may need revising.

When Gardner (1985) and Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) proposed to single out a specific “foreign language anxiety,” modeled upon but distinct from the already well-known “communication apprehension,” they firmly established anxiety as an *a priori*; its modalities would be studied, but its pertinence as an operational concept seemed beyond doubt. A specific self-report of language anxiety was then designed (Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986; Ganschow & Sparks, 1996), and in the past few years a considerable amount of research on that topic has been conducted without serious challenge to the epistemological soundness of this model.

In one of the few recent attempts at qualitative study of this phenomenon, for instance, Price (1991) focused on self-described “highly anxious” students and did not indicate that euphoric tension may also have a role to play — or even exist. She thus implied that anxiety is a mental *trait* (i.e., a personality constant, rather than a temporary *state*), and excluded in the process the voices of those who are *not* anxious, or at least who do not openly acknowledge it. She further assumed that interviewing “highly anxious” learners would be more telling than interviewing all participants in a setting, as if studying the negative should [262] allow us to draw conclusions about the positive. Finally, her avowed determination to avoid such obvious methodological pitfalls as “measuring” anxiety was foiled by the lack of a qualitative conceptualization of anxiety itself.

More generally, researchers have shown scant interest, in exploring potentially beneficial forms of tension such as *flow* (M. Csikszentmihalyi & I. M. Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; M. Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; M. Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), an optimal state of cognitive and affective alertness when learning or creativity become effortless and even exhilarating. The closest approximation to flow evoked in L2 research seems to be *facilitating anxiety* (Alpert & Haber, 1960; Kleinmann, 1977), defined as “apprehension . . . which is considered energizing and helpful” (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a, p. 519) — a familiar proposition to language teachers, albeit something of an oxymoron given the negative denotation of the word *anxiety*. The principle that some degree of learner anxiety might be desirable was clearly articulated in a series of interviews with four recognized experts in the field, who were asked whether they saw anything positive in it (Young, 1992).

In interviews with Young (1992), Krashen hypothesized, in reference to his own well-known dichotomy, that “anxiety has positive effects on language learning, not on language acquisition” (p. 160). In similar interviews, Omaggio-Hadley spoke favorably but vaguely of a “good kind of tension” (p. 161), whereas Terrell proposed that we abandon the word *anxiety* altogether in favor of *attention* and *attending to* (p. 161), and think in terms of “the learner’s productive state of alertness” (p. 162). Expressing some doubt’s about Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis, Terrell posited that acquisition does not occur automatically in the absence of affective blocks, but that “it needs a positive drive to go after something” (p. 161).

What seems most revealing about these answers is the almost unanimous tendency to shun the term *anxiety*” in favor of a positive counterpart, such as *attention*, *alertness*, *edge*, or simply *good tension*. Young concluded that all her respondents agreed (explicitly or not) on the validity of Yerkes-Dodson’s construct of “optimal arousal” (Young, 1992, p. 167). This basic psychological principle is usually visualized as a bell curve (or inverted U) with stimulation and performance as coordinates, with several variations, such as Hebb’s triple bell curve, to account for differences in task complexity (Hebb, 1955), or Kriegel and Kriegel’s (1985) “C Zone” of optimal stimulation and achievement, wedged between a “Drone Zone” (understimulation) and a “Panic Zone” (overstimulation). The latter model comes closest to M. Csikszentmihalyi’s (2000) concept of flow as a state of optimal experience “beyond boredom and anxiety” .

Once the focus has shifted away from uncritical acceptance of language anxiety and its reduction as an undisputed goal, we are still left with the need to establish a description of this state of flow through case studies. Our goal was to obtain through grounded theory methodology as complete a portrayal as possible of the mutually shaping factors influencing one another in the beginners’ learning process, phenomena, human interactions and reactions that could account for coexisting “multiple realities” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) within our setting. The experience of tension in all of its forms would therefore fall well within the scope of our study.

The Concept of Euphoric and Dysphoric Tension

Extant models did not appear satisfactory to us because they all consider stress as a quantitative parameter, that is, one that can only vary in degree (more or less intense). Much like M. Csikszentmihalyi (1988a), our “concern was about *the quality of subjective experience* that made a behavior intrinsically rewarding” (p. 7): not the “how much” but the “how.” Besides, as McGrath (1982) noted, predicating research on the presence of stress — a bad situation in itself — already introduces a value-laden assumption that taints ulterior attempts at understanding its multiple dimensions. For this reason, although we had initially used the terms *eustress* and *dystress*, with *stress* as a neutral allomorph (Selye, 1974), we finally opted for *tension* instead. Moreover, the advantage of such a lexical shift was to bring out the etymological sense of projection in the adjectives *euphoric* and *dysphoric*, which more accurately reflected our emerging concept of tension. This approach coheres with a model of stress now generally accepted by psychologists, who do not consider it a fully predictable, universal effect of inherently “stressful” events or situations but as the result of interaction (between a situation, the context

of its occurrence, and its interpretation by an individual) whose nature varies according to a number of factors, including expectations and person-environment fit (Caplan & Van Harrison, 1993; McGrath, 1982).

Once we started analyzing our data, it quickly became obvious that we needed to theorize value statements that were neither fully positive or negative, such as “this method is not ideal” and “this teacher is not bad.” We looked to European [263] semiotics where euphoria and dysphoria already exist as operational categories (Greimas & Courtès, 1982; Greimas & Fontanille, 1991; Lotman, 1990). According to this paradigm, individuals or groups attribute a value to every perceived reality they have integrated into their cultural frameworks. Once people perceive a given phenomenon (e.g., “I see someone talking to a group”), and after they make sense of it in their cultural paradigm (e.g., “(S)he is giving a lecture”), they may perceive it not only as *euphoric* (endowed with a positive valuation: e.g., “Her lecture was terrific / informative / enter-taining”), or as *dysphoric* (endowed with a negative valuation: e.g., “His lecture was awful / shallow / dull”) — but also as *non-euphoric* (endowed with a valuation that is not entirely positive, without being entirely negative: e.g., “Her lecture wasn’t bad”) or as *non-dysphoric* (endowed with a valuation that is not entirely negative, without being entirely positive; e.g., “His lecture wasn’t great”).²

It is important to note that this framework did not guide the data collection but was brought to bear ex post facto, when it appeared that our original category (eustress ~ dystress) was insufficient, although we had refined it by differentiating between the affective and cognitive domains.³ This framework remained fully congruent with semiotic theory, where the terms *euphoric* and *dysphoric* are not used in the psychological sense where they imply an affective state or response, but instead denote valuation (in what is known as a “thymic category”; see Greimas & Courtès, 1982) which can apply in both the cognitive and the affective domains. For example, students’ perception of a lecture can be positive from a cognitive point of view (i.e., beneficial to their learning) without being positive from an affective point of view (i.e., enjoyable, entertaining); these two valuations are not equivalent, nor does one imply the other.

As our analysis progressed, the logical-semantic underpinnings of semiotic theory helped us replace the established notions of “anxiety” or “stress” with a more precise provisional categorization consisting of eight terms, which can be arranged according to Aristototele’s “logical squares” used both in formal logic and semiotics (Figure 1).⁴ Such a model already challenges two fundamental premises of most research in this domain: that some events or situations are inherently stressful, and that certain individuals are inherently anxious about learning languages.

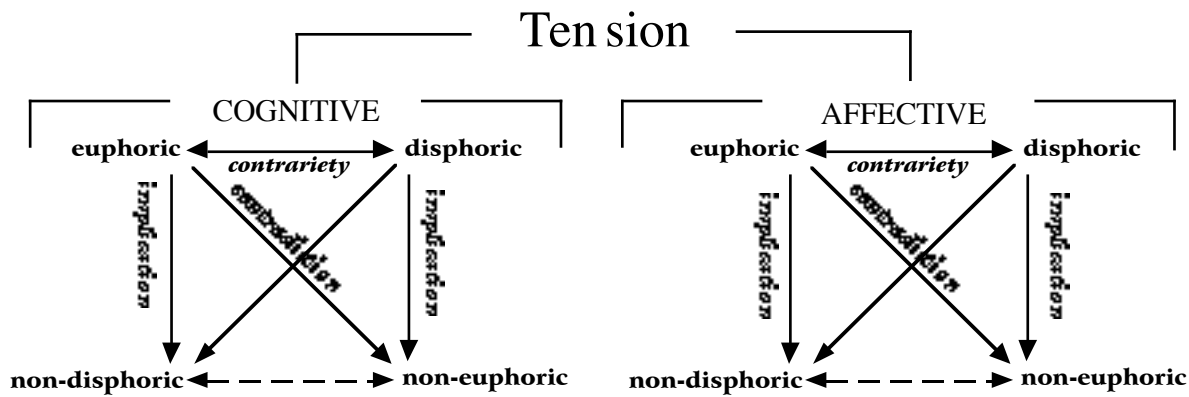
METHODOLOGY

Site and Informants

The Middlebury College Language Schools are known for creating an unusually high level of pressure in and out of the classroom, through a L2-only written pledge, full immersion, rapid pace of instruction, and the challenges posed by high-caliber peers as well as by expectations of teachers. The eight schools meet in a campus amidst the Green Mountains of Vermont, a rural and isolated location often credited for helping create a viable FL “bubble” indispensable to sheltered immersion. Whereas all communication in and out of the classroom is conducted in French at the school (theoretically at least), the physical environment remains essentially American, which allows students to function within familiar

FIGURE 1

Logical Squares for Cognitive and Affective Tension



[264] surroundings. The importance of a safe, predictable environment should be particularly stressed: The infrastructure of the students' life is preserved, in spite of the constraints put upon it, so that at any moment, in case of emergency for instance, one can instantly step back into the United States. Even though the French School environment, as one respondent put it, "creates a kind of obsession, which is good," it is an obsession which can be alleviated, as the same student observed, by a few hours off campus now and then.

In the French school, about 40 faculty and over 200 students at all levels (from beginners to doctoral candidates) are housed together or in close proximity, in modest, and in some cases Spartan lodgings. They take their meals at fixed hours in a communal dining facility and find other venues for interaction in the numerous cultural, recreational, and athletic activities sponsored by the school. The undergraduate session lasts for 7 consecutive weeks each summer, from late June to mid-August.

Our ethnography encompassed the entire session for full beginners (FR101) and false beginners (FR201) during the summer of 1994. The 30 students, ranging in age from the late teens to the late 20s, were mostly attending college or graduate school in the United States, with the exception of 3 business executives, 2 high school teachers, and a chef; only one student declined to participate in the study. Their motivations for learning French were extremely varied: Some were taking the course for college credit or to prepare for academic careers demanding a knowledge of the language, others in anticipation of work assignments abroad, and a few of them purely for personal enrichment. Most of them already spoke more than one language, including German, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Thai, Korean, and Japanese. There were 4 French-born instructors (2 for each course), three women and one man in their late 20s to mid-30s.

In addition to the 101 and 201 students, many others in the French School community served as informants: instructors, administrators, upper-level and graduate students, and family members of instructors. In order to respect the target language-only pledge, all interactions between researchers and informants were conducted in French — a challenging situation in the case of beginners, but one that would later prove invaluable in exposing wide differences between the in-class performance and actual proficiency of some individuals.

A peculiar feature of the Middlebury environment is that the instructional component is meant to be inextricably interwoven with the global experience outside the classroom, and myriad organized activities which, although seemingly extracurricular, are in fact supposed to be as important as the academic curriculum *stricto sensu*. We originally coined the word *pericurriculum* to describe this feature, which has been considerably strengthened since, and named *co-curriculum*. Movies, lectures, plays, sports, parties, and even meals do more than enrich the cultural exposure of the students and provide them for opportunities for communication: They also help create an ambiance and spirit, a sense of community which, intangible (and certainly unquantifiable) as they may be, are considered central to the Middlebury experience.

These activities are also supposed to play an essential role in allowing students outlets for distraction and relaxation, for the express purpose of diffusing the academic and linguistic pressure otherwise put on them. Given the outstanding results (both from the teachers' and the students' perspectives), there was reason to believe that some of this tension was beneficial, and perhaps even crucial, to the success of the program, although no one had ever precisely articulated how and why.

The 201 curriculum was then closely modeled on *French in Action: The Capretz Method*, a "teacher-proof instructional package" (Posner, 1992, p. 218) offering a 52-episode video series, a textbook, a workbook, a study guide, a teacher's guide, and audiotapes. Upon close scrutiny, the Capretz method turns out to be a compromise between the Direct Method of the 1940s (a thematic and L2-only approach to traditional, grammar-driven

instruction) and the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) of the 1960s and 1970s. It is an essentially mechanistic approach based on imitation, role-play, and pattern drills, though it does not openly focus on grammatical structures, but rather conceals them in a theme-oriented narrative with much cultural content. Except for compositions, assessment in 201 was method-driven and convergent, requiring specific study.

By contrast, the full beginners' course did not follow the Capretz method: The same video series was used, but only as a pre-text, a contextualized introduction of communicative situations, cultural information, vocabulary, and structures. The drills, role-plays, and exercises were replaced by communicative activities, often conducted in small groups. The activities were essentially constructivist in nature and involved the use of visuals and authentic documents brought in [265] by the instructors. Students were not held accountable for spending time working with tapes in the language laboratory, nor were they asked to use the *French in Action* materials in any way.

Data Collection and Analysis Techniques

The study was carried out jointly as participant observers by the authors who, having both spent the previous 5 summers in residence at the French school, were already familiar with its workings, its faculty, and its administrators. Although such familiarity with the setting arguably adds a measure of subjectivity to the research, it also allowed us to gain immediate, comprehensive, and in-depth access to people, places, and events, in addition to sparing us the lengthy discovery process that outsiders would have needed in order to understand the pedagogical and logistical principles at work in the school's operation. Indeed, our previous experience could be regarded as a necessary "prior ethnography" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 251), a part of the "prolonged engagement" (p. 301) indispensable to establishing credibility in a naturalistic study. The fact that many of our findings were not anticipated by anyone (colleagues, administrators, or ourselves) proves that whatever background knowledge we brought to the study did not bias our data collection or analysis.

Radnofsky was able to observe and interact with the students throughout the day, in and out of class, and conduct in-depth interviews with students and staff in French only. As one of two professors teaching French 101, Spielmann met daily with his students in class for 3 hours, interacted with them at meal times, as well as at social, athletic, and cultural functions.

Field data collection consisted of a palette of standard naturalistic techniques such as individual and group interviews (semi-structured and open-ended), observations (in and outside of classes), participant-teaching, impromptu casual interactions, analysis of documents (student papers and journals, school brochures) and of unobtrusive informational residues.⁵ We used a variety of psychological strategies (including therapeutic active/reflective listening and devil's advocate role-playing). All these techniques involved some sort of recording: written notes, diagrams and charts, audio- and videotaping with a dictaphone and a Hi-8 camcorder (approximately 90 hours of audio and video materials were gathered).

Data-gathering decisions in the field and those regarding analyses of those data often occurred simultaneously, though many analysis decisions were also made subsequently, as noted above. Daily debriefings between co-investigators and with an off-site debriefer provided an opportunity for the researchers to discuss findings in terms of methodological and substantive issues, identify paths to pursue, formulate possible theories, and determine questions that needed to be asked in subsequent interviews or observations.

In order to document all observations, interpretations, and questions throughout data collection, and later during analyses, the researchers either wrote or audiotaped extensive Field Notes: *Methodological Notes* that described procedures to collect or analyze data; *Personal Notes* tracing the researchers' own personal feelings, attitudes, concerns, anxieties; *Research Notes* that led to other studies that may be similar or related to this one; *Interview Notes*, that were taken during or shortly after actual interchanges and that helped us to reflect upon particular events occurring during the interview itself; and *Theoretical Notes* which reflecting the researchers' thoughts and tentative development of a theory to explain the phenomena being studied.

Transcripts of the audio portions were analyzed according to qualitative methods of constant comparison (Strauss, 1987) through the use of *Chromacode* (Radnofsky, 1994): Thematic strands were identified and collated into categories, each respondent's transcript being color-coded for instant identification. Data analysis involved alternatively induction of tentative theories or hypotheses, deduction from the tentative theory leading to further data collection, and reexamination of the data in an attempt at verification, in order to check out early hunches against recorded, observed events, and with participants, to see if the developing Grounded Theory was indeed based in the actual data.

Trustworthiness was ensured according to standard procedures involving (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) *credibility* (multiple constructions of reality are well represented through prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, member checks, and providing an audit trail — a set of accumulated documents that reflects the research process), *consistency* (findings have been triangulated, are traceable through an audit trail, and have emerged in methodological and theoretical notes), *neutrality* (findings are indeed those of the participants, and have not been determined by the biases and motivations of the researchers⁶), and *transferability* (providing enough [266] thick description of the setting and its events so that the reader may apply appropriate findings to another context).

FINDINGS RELATED TO TENSION

We focus here on the findings and the theoretical discussion of tension, which represent only a fraction of the data collected and analyzed throughout the study.⁷

Involvement in the Pericurriculum

What obviously distinguishes the Middlebury environment from a real-life setting is the wealth of scheduled pericurricular activities (lectures, films, plays, team sports, choir, cabaret, folk singing, study breaks, etc.), which, as mentioned above, were meant both to enrich the academic dimension of a student's experience and to provide an outlet for fatigue or frustration. Ideally, the curriculum and pericurriculum are inextricably interwoven; in practice, however, we found significant qualitative and quantitative variations in the way that students, especially beginners, experienced the pericurriculum. These variations reflected profound differences between the 101 and 201 courses which, in spite of their superficial similarities in schedules and materials, actually represented fundamentally opposite curricular philosophies and didactic approaches.⁸

For 201 students, laboratory work based on *French in Action* could then easily take 3 to 5 hours each day, which severely curtailed the time available for pericurricular activities, and literally isolated students in a booth, thus depriving them of two essential elements of the experience: spontaneous, naturalistic communicative opportunities and socialization, both of which turned out to have a strong influence on general well-being and on perceptions of one's success.

Students in 101 were explicitly encouraged to explore the learning approach that best suited them and to pursue personal interests as a means of naturalistic language acquisition. In the initial presentation of the course, students were told pointedly that all pericurricular activities were considered as much a part of the curriculum as the class itself. Since laboratory work was strictly optional, students had power of decision regarding the use of their study time. In addition, half of the assessment procedures — weekly personal interviews and journal (a sort of diary and scrapbook) — were open-ended and required no specific review. In addition, they could be used as vehicles to reflect the students' experiences in the pericurriculum.

The 201 students, having to spend hours in isolation listening to tapes and completing workbook assignments (mostly textbook-centered drills and exercises), quickly showed an attitude of unhappy resignation, as they were being led to believe that this regimen was a necessary condition of their success. Toward the end of the session, one of the greatest academic achievers of the class told us "I can tell you, for 7 weeks, it's been hell . . . because we must study so much. But I knew what it was going to be like." However, he also stood convinced that, although he would have liked to partake in them, pericurricular activities were a waste of time.

Similarly, a 101 student, who was expecting to be taught with the mechanistic, grammar-driven method he had experienced in previous language study, also voiced his opinion that pericurricular activities, as well as communicative activities during class time, were useless to him. He opted not to "play the game" and instead spent his time studying grammar and vocabulary on his own; yet he neither succeeded academically nor found himself satisfied with the program as a whole. Despite the methodological differences in their instruction and the differences in their level of success, both refused to place any trust in the school's self-proclaimed goal of integrating the curriculum and the pericurriculum. By and large, however, students in 101 said that they took advantage of the pericurricular activities and opportunities and tended to consider them both part of the experience — as well as a way to cope with it. One of them declared that tennis, soccer, and movies "are very good for learning French. It's no distraction; I think it is part of the course in general."

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The 201 students, on the other hand, reported that they were for the most part prevented from attending activities not only by the sheer amount of compulsory homework, but also by a focus on the Capretz Method which left little expansion space even outside of class, so that they found themselves shut out from pericurricular activities. Unfettered by such limitations, a group of five 101 students demonstrated vividly the potential of the pericurriculum as they decided to write and perform a song, “The Beginners’ Blues,” for the Cabaret, an end-of-session talent show. As one of them, Deborah, described it in her journal, the genesis of the song was in itself a rich heuristic experience: The students really had to play with the language to write lyrics that would be both comical and evocative, but also that would abide by French rules of prosody and rhyme — albeit in the blues form. After dozens of hours of collaborative work over several weeks, [267] Deborah concluded: “I learned a lot at the French School. But if every night had been a Cabaret, I would have learned even more!”

In this case, cognitive and affective euphoria were merged in a prototypical example of flow, as the task was self-imposed and “produced its own autonomous positive rewards” making it *autotelic* (M. Csikszentmihalyi, 1988a, p. 4). Yet the activity was also sanctioned within a framework set by the course and by the school: The songwriting project was not treated as extra work carried out in the student’s spare time, but as a perfectly acceptable — and even preferable — substitute to teacher-mandated homework.

In fact, the pericurriculum extended much further than officially scheduled events, and most notably could take the form of opportunities to socialize and communicate in French with a variety of people from the entire community. Although a few enterprising beginners actively sought to forge relationships with students at higher levels or even faculty members, cross-level communication was far from easy. There existed an implicit belief in the Middlebury system that communal living in the dining hall, the dorms, and other public spaces would naturally translate into communication between different ability groups. We discovered, however, that very strict, but invisible, boundaries were drawn, which tended to confine students of the lower levels to socialization within their own group.

The Emerging L2 Self

Invisible boundaries between ability groups might seem a problem peculiar to the setting, but in fact it related to the greater issue of loss and gain of identity in the course of FL learning. One of the most dysphoric experiences reported by beginners was that they felt infantilized and unable to project their “true” personalities because of linguistic limitations, which became even more critical outside of class, when actual socialization was at stake:

Because complex and non-spontaneous operations are required to communicate at all, any performance in the L2 is likely to challenge an individual’s self-concept as a competent communicator . . . Adult language learners’ self perceptions of genuineness in presenting themselves to others may be threatened by the limited range of meaning and affect that can be deliberately communicated. (Horwitz & Young, 1991, p. 31)

Our respondents described the appearance of a separate personality in the target language — or, as two students independently put it, of different “masks.” However, we also found that this emergent personality which manifested itself in physical demeanor (different ways and volume of laughing, speed and tone of oral communication, mannerisms, etc.) was distinctly dysphoric for some students, whereas for others it came as a pleasant surprise. Particularly striking was the realization that they had taken on ways of thinking and behaving quite distinct from those in their “real” lives: some students had become more talkative, others less sociable — but in any case, they sensed that they had significantly changed.

This metamorphosis was explicitly defined (if not appropriately described) some 30 years ago by Guiora and his research group (Guiora, 1972; Guiora *et al.*, 1975; Guiora & Acton, 1979) as “language ego,” a psychological construct based on the common observation that “‘one feels like a different person’ when speaking a second language and often indeed acts very differently as well” (Guiora & Acton, 1979, p. 199).

Since then, language ego appears to have been overlooked in SLA research, perhaps because it may take years to emerge and cause problems in the low-intensity environment of a typical high school or college course. In the course of the Middlebury program, we — and the students — had a chance to witness the fruition of a L2 self in a matter of weeks. The question was not whether personality change would occur and would induce tension —

it invariably did — but whether this tension would be euphoric or dysphoric, depending on the individual and on the circumstances. The early development of a dual L1/L2 personality bears crucial implications on curriculum and instruction: Just as authentic language learning cannot consist of translating the L1 into the L2 but means experiencing the L2 from within, the constitution of an L2 self cannot result from a mere transposition of one's L1 self; it is in many ways a reinvention of oneself. The lesson learned from our study is that the process has to be carefully prepared and facilitated from the early stages of instruction and in a deliberate, proactive manner.

Beginners needed to be given as many opportunities as possible to develop L2 personalities as complex and meaningful as their L1 personalities, even if different from them. Cognitive dysphoric tension caused by initial inarticulateness, although prevalent in both classes, was compounded in 201 by the fact that students, whose regular life was infused with cognitive challenges of all sorts, had to spend much of their time on choral repetitions, decontextualized grammatical manipulations, and [268] other such activities which they tended to find “oppressive.” A particularly sore point in *French in Action* was the method's alledged playfulness which, according to its creators, was intended to lighten the mood and facilitate learning;⁹ after a few days, it started having the opposite effect on our respondents by aggravating their frustration at feeling infantilized. Roger, a 201 student with an outstanding academic record, deplored this situation as follows:

The pledge is very annoying because, in my case at least, it is impossible to have an intellectual conversation; I simply cannot speak as fast as I think. And after 3 weeks without intellectual conversation, it's bad for my brain, because at home I have it [intellectual conversation] all the time with my friends And for me, there is too much homework, but it's not *good* homework; it's video and audio tapes: repeating.

What must be noted is that, in an earlier interview, Roger had acknowledged the positive value of the very same pledge which he found “annoying” 2 weeks later. The problem was that, after the initial period of linguistic struggle and alienation, he was again ready to focus on his normal intellectual needs — at that point, the pledge was no longer the single issue: What frustrated him was the lack of opportunity to exercise his mental capacities to their fullest extent within the scope of the class or in out-of-class activities, which he was barred from attending by compulsory homework. However “bad” and mechanistic, the homework was not the problem in and of itself: Although the various stressors had remained constant, the person - environment fit had changed and so had the nature of tension, from euphoric (the pledge as an incentive) and non-dysphoric (the homework, which was “not good”), to dysphoric (the pledge as an “annoying” barrier to self-expression, the homework as infantilizing busywork).

Though hindered by even more limited linguistic abilities, 101 students were regularly given the chance to explore their natural interests and challenge their mental agility in the performance of activities that required reflection and creativity — all within the scope of the curriculum, which was largely content-based and supported by authentic documents. The inductive approach meant that much of the material was presented as a puzzle to be solved, rather than as a fact or a rule to be memorized and applied, so that, as a result, most students focused on trying to communicate — often with enormous difficulty.

However, given that the activities frequently held actual significance to them (they were encouraged and allowed to work on materials of their own choosing, from philosophical texts to movies or articles on business), they were, on the one hand, quite gratified when they succeeded in expressing themselves and when their classmates and schoolmates responded to the content of their communicative efforts. On the other hand, even as they declared liking this kind of approach, many felt frustrated by the lack of explicit grammar instruction, which they believed would have accelerated their progress. In their opinion, inductive teaching was not necessarily more pleasant — and it was certainly less “efficient” — than traditional tell-and-drill methods. Thus affective euphoria coexisted with cognitive dysphoria.

In 201, however, the dearth of opportunities to demonstrate cognitive and creative capabilities was beginning to have dire consequences, as it stifled the development of the students' L2 selves. During interviews, Leslie, who would sometimes not speak a word for an entire class period and generally seemed extremely shy and retiring, turned out to be a vivacious, eloquent conversationalist. She not only had much to say, but offered remarkably perceptive observations on the French School setting and proved quite lucid about her daily disappearing act in class: “I think it's difficult to be myself in class and I hate myself for it... What I mostly miss here is being able to express myself.”

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In fact, the interviews showed that, given the right opportunity, Leslie was indeed quite able to express herself in French at a level she considered fulfilling, though still not the one she was accustomed to in her native language; yet, in class and in other social settings on campus, she thought that level horrible enough to prevent her from speaking altogether. Being quite conscious of this problem, she told Radnofsky one day just how much she appreciated the chance to communicate with someone not as a “student,” but as an equal, and even as a friend:

I like speaking with you, because it is an opportunity for me to feel at home I have the idea with you that I am myself, but during the day, no — [laughs] because there isn't time.

Naturally, such familiarity is attributable to Radnofsky's status because, not being a Middlebury professor, she seemed more approachable, and to her concerted effort at being particularly patient with the beginners — much more so than others on campus, we found, as students deplored the general reluctance of professors and schoolmates to invest time and effort in getting to know them. [269]

Most students needed some sort of a bond before they felt completely comfortable communicating with someone on a truly meaningful level. The problem for them was to be able to initiate such relationships early on in the session and prove themselves either socially or intellectually but without breaking the pledge, which many did anyway, we found out, in order to avoid the burden of isolation later. We realized that, in spite of the appearance of free socialization, groups formed and solidified in the first 2 weeks of the session — while beginners were still inarticulate — and did not tend to admit new members afterwards.

In addition to such dysphoric tensions generated by the L2 personality, we also found evidence of a strong euphoric counterpart, as some students discovered that the opportunity to reinvent themselves opened new social horizons. Katie, a 101 student who is not a native English speaker, described herself in her home and university surroundings:

I'm not exactly timid at home, but I don't talk very much; I'm rather the serious type Here, though, I find myself to be very sociable. I'm not timid; in fact I start conversations with people I don't know For me this is a total surprise; it's completely different! It's not me. OK, it's me also, but it's the opposite of the other me; it's me here and it's me there, but it's not the *real* me.

By far the most striking insight into the personality-altering nature of the language -learning experience at Middlebury was provided by Leslie, a 201 student who saw it as a reenactment of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*:

Leslie: It [*Magic Mountain*] seems exactly like Middlebury to me. It's odd; there are lots of connections, because it takes place in a sanatorium, and there are many people of different nationalities, and everyone speaks a foreign language, and in the book, the French is in French. It's interesting because the first character in the story lives there for 7 years, and here it is 7 weeks [laughs]. There's a chapter that I think about a lot here; its title is “*Walpurgisnacht*.” It's a type of carnival, and everybody wears masks, and for me at Middlebury, the mask is the language. It's so odd, because the first character, Hans Castorp speaks for the first time with a beautiful woman whose name is *Chauchat* [Laughs]: “Hot cat.”

[Laughs] I love it! And wearing his mask, he *tutoies* her [uses the informal, second person singular “*tu*” form]: “I love speaking French, because it's like speaking without speaking. It's like speaking in a dream.” And I often think of that here, because I think everyone is wearing the mask of language, because everyone is at a different level, and it is difficult to speak, and everyone needs to express themselves, but it's not possible with language.

Radnofsky: They have to rely on other things?

Leslie: Yes, yes, yes. People are more exaggerated because of that: They laugh really loud, and it's strange, because if it were in English, it wouldn't be the same type of laugh There is another connection for me, because when Hans Castorp is on the mountain, it is a place where he is free to be something that he cannot be in his hometown. I think it's the idea that life is left behind, and here it's the same thing. And here, most people don't come from Middlebury, so everyone is in a place where it's possible to be other things The idea of Hans Castorp on the Magic Mountain is to let yourself go for awhile, to be free, because there is not the chance to do that in the real world.

It would be tempting to attribute this otherworldliness to Middlebury's bucolic setting alone, but in fact the locale seemed less important than the FL, which provided students with an opportunity to be both themselves and another person. Once again, such alienation obviously involved tension, although its quality was variable; whether it turned out to be euphoric or dysphoric very much depended on whether the "Other" thus created was allowed to express him/herself and thrive within the curriculum, or was rejected into its fringes.

Therefore it appeared that the difficulty of the work required for class — a burden for nearly everyone because of the pace — did not constitute a quantitative issue, but a qualitative one; challenging but meaningful assignments rewarded the students with the possibility of exerting greater control over the building of their new French-language personality. Thus, the ego threat posed by the scaling down of one's communicative ability was not merely neutralized, but effectively turned into a potential source of cognitive euphoria. To borrow Guiora's terminology (Guiora *et al.*, 1975, p. 55), the "permeability of ego boundaries" had been facilitated in the best cases without overwhelming students with a sense of vulnerability.

What mattered most was whether students internalized the meaning of their work, even if it was not self-imposed; allowing them to set the parameters for a critical mass of the assignment [270] seemed beneficial, but not decisive. Conversely, in the Capretz method, so-called "creative" activities mostly consist of skits where two students impersonate characters from the *French in Action* story and duplicate a situation from the textbook storyline. Essentially, then, even when the 201 students had an opportunity to produce their own discourse in class, they found themselves bound to the oft-repeated scenes from the video and the stock characters in it. Such convergence, pedagogically appropriate as it may be to a certain point, ended up effectively discouraging students from in-class participation, and turned into a source of dysphoric tension, further exacerbated by the rigid instructional style of one of the teachers.

The other 201 teacher, who managed to create in her own class a pleasant atmosphere in which affective dysphoria was mostly unknown, did little to combat or neutralize the cognitive dysphoria generally produced by strict adherence to the method. When a change did occur in the last third of the session, after numerous complaints were lodged, new "fun" activities were introduced (with songs, poems, cartoons, and miscellaneous non-textbook materials); students judged them unchallenging, but at least pleasant and harmless — in other words, non-dysphoric, but far from cognitively euphoric. Yet, although dysphoric tension was often attributed to the tediousness and mindlessness of exercises, we seldom heard any student judging the class on a truly didactic or pedagogical level, or criticizing the curriculum as a conceptual whole. In fact, those two students who most outspokenly disagreed with the method used in either 101 or 201 found them both lacking in comparison to a grammar-centered approach, which they held as a standard. Here again, dysphoric tension arose from a disjunction between culturally-determined expectations and reality, not from a psychological predisposition of the students to language anxiety, or from any inherently stressful situation or activity.

Expectations and Beliefs

It is important to note that, without the exceedingly poor performance of one of their instructors (who was eventually relieved of her duties in mid-session), most 201 students would probably not have voiced any discontent about either the curriculum, the teaching, or the textbook, except perhaps in their written evaluations. From the way in which they spoke about it, we could determine that students considered whatever cognitive tension arose from the curriculum as non-dysphoric ("It's not so bad, really . . .") or non-euphoric ("It's not great, but we must endure it") and therefore not worthy of a stronger reaction than disinterest and disaffection. Obviously, they did not necessarily expect anything better, or at least anything different. In any case, they had made use of a number of coping strategies that had effectively diffused the strongly negative tension and allowed them to adapt.

This finding confirmed that expectations are crucial in determining how an event or situation can generate tension — regardless of how it could be judged by external, if not objective, standards (Coulombe, 1998). For instance, one widespread expectation was that all the grammar would be explained in detail in the textbook, in class, or in both, and that there would be detailed exercises. In 101, in keeping with the philosophy of curriculum integration, no separate grammar instruction was scheduled, but specific points were explained and discussed as they occurred in communicative situations. Although this approach might seem "natural" (as in the "Natural Approach to Second Language Acquisition and Learning, Terrell, 1977) and more interesting, it created serious

dysphoric cognitive tension in several students who came from traditional backgrounds of grammar-centered teaching.

Albeit in very different ways, both the 101 and 201 curricula approached grammar inductively, which most students found cognitively dysphoric because of what they perceived as a “lack of structure” rather than as a different type of structure; the fact that 101 students had a supplementary grammar book with thematic charts did not significantly alleviate their concern. In any case, the validity of a particular studying or teaching method seemed far less important than the learners’ deeply ingrained beliefs and expectations about what was supposed to work. In 101 a great deal of flexibility was built into the course so as to accommodate many of the students’ individual learning styles and preferences, and thus counterbalance some of the dysphoria generated by unmet expectations, but it did not always succeed, as students tended to focus on the approach imposed by the course, rather than on the freedom it allowed.

In one interesting example, however, a student with an extensive grammar-learning background, Philip, managed to reverse his initial dismay at the lack of systematic rule-stating and exercises in class. Convinced that his own learning style demanded a far more structured approach, Philip pursued it semi-independently, studying grammar outside of class and asking specific questions to his instructors [271] on a daily basis in the classroom, the dining hall, or anywhere else he could corner them. This coping strategy allowed him to turn an initially dysphoric situation into a euphoric one by exploiting the inherent flexibility of the course format to accommodate his particular craving for structure; ironically, he even praised in his final evaluation “the quality of grammar instruction” he had received.

Such behavior coheres with findings of studies in the psychology and physiology of stress, which have shown that the effects of a stressor will vary considerably as a function of the control that subjects are allowed to exert in trying to alleviate it (Henry & Stephens, 1977). Nevertheless, not all students took advantage of this opportunity to tailor the environment to their needs. Another 101 student felt uncomfortable about the suggested inductive approach to grammar, which she branded “intuitive”:

Deborah: With the intuitive method, when you learn grammar in context, you never forget it, and that’s very good; yes, I like this fact But when you learn the grammar in context, the tests are very difficult, [and] it is an enormous blow to your confidence.

Mary: Do you feel that the tests are more difficult than what you learn in class? That they don’t correspond?

Deborah: No, they do correspond, but . . . we must believe in our intuition . . . and when the test is very difficult...

Mary: You don’t trust your intuition?

Deborah: No. The grammar tests are more difficult, and I know I did not study enough.

In fact, Deborah felt at a disadvantage in comparison to some classmates who were “skeptics,” that is, who studied a great deal of grammar on the side, and seemed to get better test results than those who, like her, tried to “believe in the method” and learn in a global, non-analytical, “intuitive” way.

This feeling of unfairness caused strong cognitive dysphoria in Deborah, who firmly believed that she had “fallen behind” the very first week, although there was no real evidence to this effect, except for a fairly modest grade on the test. What seemed remarkable, in light of Deborah’s clear overall success in the course, was that a relatively unimportant poor performance on the weekly test had become so dysphoric despite the fact that the test really accounted for a very small portion of the grade.

If we try to make sense of her apparently disproportionate reaction to the test, we can appreciate how culturally-determined expectations can shape the experience of students who, in the United States, know two basic types of learning environments: one traditional, that is, strictly academic, characterized by a stern classroom atmosphere, difficult tests, and a real possibility of failure; the other humanistic or progressive, that is, relaxed and liberal, where tests are user-friendly, and the philosophy focuses on making everyone succeed. Whenever they are confronted with a new environment, students naturally tend to parse it into one or the other category.

The Middlebury Language Schools are very confusing in this respect because the atmosphere is extremely friendly and casual, with a high degree of familiarity between professors and students, especially in beginners’ courses, where first names are used for everyone, as well as the informal *tu* second person form of address. From all indicators, then, students initially parse the course in the humanistic category, and in so doing, come to expect loose and easygoing assessment practices.

Although the journal and the interview allowed a great deal of flexibility, the written *contrôle* and the listening comprehension test did not. In part because of the misinterpretation mentioned above, some 101 students

initially received much lower grades than expected, which resulted in dysphoric affective tension accompanied by a sense of unfairness. In fact, the tests did correspond to what had been done in the preceding week, as Deborah herself acknowledged, but required a precise command of the language that not everyone had attained. Many students had mistaken the relaxed instructional style, reinforced by the generally casual atmosphere in the French School, for a sign of complacency and low expectations on the part of their instructors.

Coping Strategies

It has long been established that the study of coping should be all but inseparable from that of stress or anxiety (Lazarus, 1966). Because it has become widely accepted that purported language anxiety is in fact inevitable, much research has been devoted to mitigating it through various countermeasures, either on the part of the teacher (e.g., Koch & Terrell, 1991), or on the part of the student (e.g., Donley, 1997). We witnessed a wide array of coping strategies that students deployed when faced with dysphoric tension and that worked effectively not only to provide relief, but also to delude instructors as to the actual cognitive or [272] affective state of their pupils. Teachers should not assume that all is well simply because nothing seems particularly wrong, nor can they expect students to complain systematically (to them or to the school administration) when something actually is wrong. We found that, even in cases of extreme affective and cognitive dysphoria directly related to curriculum and instruction, the strategy of many students was to distance themselves from the problem and try to ignore it, rather than to confront it actively and try to find a solution.

What we learned from observation of and from testimony about extremely diverse coping strategies is that students seemed to want to avoid confrontation with grievous problems at all costs. Those students who had had experience with productive approaches for preventing dysphoria of catastrophic proportions in fields other than language learning were able to deal satisfactorily with most predictable situations such as overwork, fatigue, and confusion. Even when more aggressive demands were made on the students, virtually all of them, including those who struggled in addition with a lack of intellectual stimulation, managed to cope somehow — at least to the extent that no one broke down and quit the program (as regularly happens) — but it was a shallow victory, obtained at considerable cost to their mental, and sometimes physical, well-being.

The severe cognitive dysphoric tensions that most 201 students underwent left them having to rely upon strategies that, though not always the most useful in terms of learning, proved necessary for their own peace of mind. These measures seemed effective in that none of the beginners left the program, although the dysphoria they experienced was strong enough for some of them to separate themselves mentally from the course and to skip classes, which is normally only done at Middlebury in case of physical illness.

Outside of those extremes, however, we found that the students had generally accepted a modicum of unpleasantness as a given. As 101 student, Philip, put it, “we must suffer,” echoing the school administration’s pronouncement that, “since no one has so far found an easy and pleasant way of learning a language,” the pain inflicted upon the students must be regarded as a fact of life. A 201 student, Tim, concurred:

It is not much fun, but it’s not the worst; I can’t imagine another way of learning that is better than this. I think that the philosophy of the system isn’t pleasant; it isn’t fun, but it works. And ultimately, all the problems and everything I don’t much like is part of the philosophy. It is a mixed bag But it’s not for the faint hearted here.

However, there seemed to be a basic imbalance in this boot camp “philosophy”: Although students were, on the one hand, encouraged to take advantage of the situations in which they might experience cognitive and affective euphoria (e.g., attending films and concerts, playing sports, acting in a play, singing in the choir), on the other hand, those in 201 found themselves prevented from doing so by the structure of the syllabus. In addition, they were merely warned about the impending difficulties and discomfort they would suffer — from mosquitoes to uncomfortable lodgings to those intractable French grammar rules — without being given a reason why these hardships were unavoidable, or some hints as to how they could be alleviated. In other words, euphoria was presented as dependant upon their active involvement, but dysphoria as the result of factors entirely beyond their control, with fatalistic resignation as the only suggested response.

This stance was justified insofar as it seemed impossible to accommodate the innumerable requests voiced about the quality of food in the dining hall, noisy neighbors in the dorms, or questionable teaching styles. Yet, we found that the philosophy of stoical acceptance then embraced by the French School (acceptance of heat,

mosquitoes, housing conditions, difficult work), albeit served with a good dose of bonhomie, tended to mask ignorance or dismissal of a number of cognitive needs expressed by the students. Such needs were unaffected by efforts to create and maintain a casual, informal atmosphere in and outside of the classroom.

Although it would have been inadvisable to act upon every request, demand, or complaint, their blanket dismissal may have had dire implications, given that learning may be severely hindered when students' basic needs for comfort and security are not met, or, more importantly, not taken into account (Maslow, 1943). The point seemed to be that students wanted to know that their expressions of concern were being listened to and considered seriously, even if, eventually, no concrete step could be taken to address them. Having a voice — no matter how articulate linguistically — was part of their desire to be treated as intelligent adults with well-formed personalities, rather than as irresponsible children. Alerted by their recriminations, we realized upon more insistent scrutiny that more advanced students and faculty members did routinely behave toward beginners as if their cognitive abilities matched their very rudimentary language proficiency. [273]

CONCLUSIONS

The first important point to draw from the findings we have discussed here is that *anxiety* did not emerge at all as a category from the interviews, although classroom observations showed that some of the students experienced states comparable to what has been described as *language anxiety* and *communication apprehension*. We can speculate that many students, if asked pointedly in a survey question “Do you suffer from language anxiety,” might have answered affirmatively, but one of the advantages of a naturalistic approach is to find out what respondents themselves choose to discuss, and in what terms.

Tension was most frequently expressed as frustration — at not being taught in the expected way, not having “enough grammar,” not being as articulate as in the L1, being infantilized by the curriculum, and being prevented from attending pericurricular activities by unstimulating homework (in 201). In any case, the traditional psychological categories of state and trait proved fairly irrelevant for understanding tension, which we propose to define as the result of interaction between individual expectations and the perceived reality of a situation. Therefore, we submit that less emphasis should be placed on neutralizing or counteracting supposedly stressful events or situations, and more energy devoted to fostering euphoric tension instead.

The unique Middlebury setting, with its symbiosis of curriculum and pericurriculum, made it possible for us to see that many sources of tension external to the classroom play a significant role in the quality of the learning experience — a role that has, for the most part, been unreported, given that research is usually limited to formal instructional curricula, and given that most of the settings involved in language research simply do not have a pericurriculum.

The tension we discuss in this report appeared as a very individual phenomenon which occurs uniquely in the reality of each student and is closely linked to personal expectations and a priori beliefs, especially about learning. As a result, its causes and effects defy systematization, especially when it comes to achievement. Yet, we discovered that students reacted most positively when they thought that whatever tension they experienced — dysphoric or euphoric, affective or cognitive — was somehow productive because its apparent causes were motivated by a pedagogical and didactical strategy they recognized as valid, regardless of the intrinsic value we SLA specialists might want to ascribe to any particular method.

This finding helped us understand that, although nearly all of our respondents expressed a strong dislike for doing grammar drills and exercises, they were equally vocal in their discontent when such exercises were absent or removed from the curriculum, because they have accepted and internalized the principle that there is no gain without pain.

Separating cognitive and affective tension holds important conceptual implications. Concerns about lowering the so-called “Affective Filter” have sometimes obscured the need to attend to cognitive stimulation, feeding a tendency to adopt a humanistic, student-friendly teaching style, but with no modification at the more fundamental level of curriculum. Our data indicated that, although the affective and cognitive domains are mutually influenced, they are not comparable entities, so that a surfeit in one does not compensate for a deficit in the other, contrary to what is often assumed.

All these findings contradict the traditional model of the learning curve where tension can only vary in degree, without euphoric / dysphoric or cognition / affect distinctions. Our data show that students are motivated and stimulated not simply by the *level* of difficulty, tension, and expectation in the course, but also by the *quality*

of materials and activities that truly challenge their cognitive abilities and contribute to the satisfactory development of their L2 personalities. Adequate euphoric cognitive tension ultimately determined their overall perception of the learning experience, as it afforded them the opportunity to reinvent themselves successfully in the target language: Achievement of linguistic or communicative proficiency mattered less than the satisfactory development of an emerging L2 self, which had to be fostered by a curriculum and instructional method providing the best possible balance of both cognitive and affective euphoric tension. The uneasy, sometimes painful constitution of this new self ultimately appears as the “core category” into which all thematic strands converge.

What drove our respondents most strongly was a desire to become fully functional as newly-minted speakers of French and to be treated accordingly by others in the community. These students struggled to establish fresh social identities in a manner comparable to the immigrant women studied by Peirce (1995). Reaching a given level of proficiency, which preoccupies teachers and determines how we build our curricula and syllabi, seemed quite accessory by comparison. Thus the intensive immersion crucible had dramatically revealed what remains invisible in regular courses [274] and generally does not emerge until students have spent significant time abroad: Even in an academic context, “language learning is the process of becoming a member of a sociocultural group” (Willett, 1995, p. 475).

The usual dichotomy between difficult and easy seemed less relevant than the nature of the difficulty: Self-referential activities, such as decontextualized grammar lessons and exercises, tended to be particularly dysphoric in proportion to their difficulty, contrary to content-based work with a student-centered basis and naturalistic development. We also found that using simplistic materials and activities — meant to be more accessible to beginners — mostly produced dysphoric tension by increasing an already painful feeling of infantilization caused by the students’ inability to communicate at their normal level of sophistication. Thus, the key to euphoric tension seemed to be closely linked to the perceived opportunity to reinvent oneself successfully in the target language.

Although Middlebury’s pericurriculum is unique, it functions as a concentrated form of the world outside the classroom, which, for many teachers and students, appears as the primary locus of real communication and enrichment — as opposed to the more traditional academic work done within the formal curriculum. Examples of severe dysphoric tension caused by a disjunction between the instructional curriculum and the pericurriculum suggest that they should be integrated as much as possible, in keeping with the principle advocated by progressive educator John Dewey that formal learning should always be a real-life experience. In other words, expecting students to communicate meaningfully and intelligently outside of class should translate into providing equal opportunity to do so in class as well, so that their L2 selves may begin to form and thrive within the curriculum.

In the absence of such favorable conditions, however, we found that students do not stop learning; their coping mechanisms help them regain some stability. One important realization came to us at the very end of the 7 weeks: In light of how much they had learned, most students seemed to dismiss many of the dysphoric episodes that had bothered them so much at the time they had occurred, because they all seemed negligible in retrospect. This “amnesty effect” was first of all justified by the realization of what they had accomplished, and the resulting euphoria was boosted by its practical implications in terms of social and pericurricular life: In the last weeks of the course, beginners finally had the linguistic ability to fit in, to hold long conversations, to understand films and televised French news, and to partake of all activities without feeling that they were imposing on others. At long last, they could become full-fledged members of the Middlebury community without being treated like children, and without being made to feel inarticulate.

It is tempting to espouse this “bottom-line” approach and dismiss dysphoric elements, which are eventually forgotten anyway (as well as euphoric ones) and which do not seem to add much to the total, but we should rather consider what the students’ experience might have been without undue dysphoric tension and with the benefits of euphoric tension. We should definitely take into account the impact of their continued involvement with the L2, where, again, “achievement” should not be reduced to a grade, or even to linguistic proficiency; more important is the students’ sense of the language and the culture they have studied, as well as their heuristic expertise — which will determine how they will keep learning — and indeed their desire to keep learning at all.

In fact, as far as grades were concerned, we noted remarkable discrepancies between the quantitative and the qualitative results of the summer session: Some of the people who had achieved the highest scores on paper were the ones who looked back on their experience as successful only in the strictest sense of the word, and displayed the attitude of grateful survivors of an ordeal that they would not wish upon the fainthearted — a situation which we can hardly regard as desirable.

We may conclude that the ideal goal of a pedagogical program should not be to limit itself to reducing affective dysphoric tension, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to seek to maximize cognitive euphoric

tension in order to facilitate the attainment of a state of flow, an optimal, self-directed absorption that will eventually induce affective euphoria. Reducing or even eliminating affective dysphoria — as eventually happened in 201 — results only in non-dysphoria, not in euphoria. Thus, when 201 students spoke of the method, they consistently resorted to double negatives as a morphological way of manifesting non-euphoria (“It’s not exactly intellectual work”) and non-dysphoria (“It’s not the worst”).

Because we know that it is virtually impossible to eliminate dysphoria altogether (partly because its occurrence is so random), it follows that our focus should be on the area where we may exert what Dr. Clara Yu, then Director of the Language Schools, referred to as “leverage,” in order to promote the euphoric cognitive tension that seemed to have [275] favorable effects on the majority of a diverse student population (in terms of personality, background, work ethic, human interactions, etc.).

Consequently, the issue of cognitive euphoric tension must be examined qualitatively, as we have stated, since it is meant to enrich — rather than just quantitatively intensify — the learning process. In addition to putting a great deal of pressure on students, the curriculum and method should attend to the quality of the students’ experience, in order to improve it within the scope of the standard instructional curriculum as well as across the pericurriculum (or the world outside).

However, this research revealed the essential interaction between the instructional curriculum and the pericurriculum; therefore, just improving either or both aspects of the program independently of one another is not enough to optimize euphoric tension. Instead, such a program should ensure proactively that there be a high degree of integration between the two major components of the L2 environment, both inside the classroom and in the world outside it.

Optimizing euphoric tension within the instructional curriculum means stimulating the students’ cognitive abilities in diverse ways so as to create the kind of cognitive learning opportunities that would be appropriately challenging even in their native language, and that would simultaneously help them construct their full-fledged L2 selves. This instructional decision does not involve simply making an activity more or less “difficult,” but rather designing it to be more or less significant in terms of its relevance to the learners’ overall intellectual needs, as well as more or less demanding in terms of cognitive complexity.

From this research, we have recognized that inflicting a tell-and-drill regimen upon language students may not always induce dysphoria: One 201 student claimed pure indifference (aphoria) after 2 weeks of *French in Action*, and most of his classmates had forgotten their days of despair by the end of the program. It does seem unfortunate, however, that many students expect such mechanistic, mind-numbing work and resign themselves to it when we know that qualitatively better learning can result from a content-based, communicative, and constructivist curriculum. Be that as it may, cognitive dysphoria experienced by the 101 students reminded us that even an instructional approach more closely related to what we might judge to be “right” can induce the wrong kind of tension among some learners.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In the course of listening, observing, discussing with each other, reflecting on the data, analyzing our findings, reading relevant studies, and fine-tuning our methodology, we fundamentally altered the way we looked at the issues at hand in the setting we studied. The very formulation of our original research question proved unsatisfactory, and we found ourselves grappling to redefine what we were examining: “stress” then, “tension” now, realizing in the process that its role in language acquisition was even less predictable than we had anticipated, and that the usual treatment of “anxiety” in the literature only represented the proverbial tip of the iceberg.

The conceptual bases that we have laid for a better understanding of tension in L2 acquisition need to be refined and examined in further qualitative and ethnographic research involving different populations. Moreover, we can only hope that future studies will reflect the awareness that anxiety and stress are neither one-dimensional variables nor inherent to a person or situation, and that simply reducing or suppressing them does not constitute an end in itself.

Finally, and most importantly, we submit that the study of tension in the L2 learning process should explore research paradigms where success is not merely measured by a score on a test or the production of discrete linguistic items in a controlled environment, but refers to the quality of one’s experience as an emerging Other — the wondrous metamorphosis that acquiring a new language is supposed to induce.

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NOTES

1. A keyword search with “language” and “anxiety” in the ERIC database (August 1999) prompted a listing of 555 titles.

2. The thymic category thus complexifies the modelization of value statements more commonly understood as a binary choice. (see M. Csikszentmihalyi, 1988b): “Emotion defines the attitude that consciousness takes towards the information [276] it is processing, basically in terms of an ‘I like it’ to ‘I do not like it’ axis” (p. 19).

3. To the traditional bell curve model of the relationship between stimulation and learning, we had first substituted a matrix with two intersecting axes (euphoric – dysphoric and cognitive – affective). This model also had a practical use in the early interviews when we used it to help students describe their mental states, as we indicated a number of possibilities in all four quadrants (“exhilarated,” “discouraged,” “bored,” “stimulated,” etc.). Such operational distinctions do not affect our belief that, ultimately, the learning process should be grasped holistically.

4. Aristotle’s “logical square” has been adopted by modern semiotics as a “visual representation of the logical articulation of any semantic category” (Greimas & Courtès, 1982, p. 308), in other words, as a way to map elementary structures of signification through the opposition of terms that define semic categories. The square structure reflects the existence of two types of opposition: *contrariety* (e.g., euphoric vs. dysphoric) and *contradiction* (e.g., euphoric vs. non-euphoric), which yields the “subcontraries.” Theoretically, the absence of all tension (*aphoria*) would occupy the center, although we do not represent it here for the sake of clarity.

5. “Information that accumulates without intent on the part of either the investigator or the respondent(s) to whom the information applies” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 279 - 280).

6. This trustworthiness is achieved through triangulation, an audit trail, a reflexive journal kept by the investigators to identify the possibility of “going native,” and case reporting using raw data.

7. Ethnography is normally reported in much longer monographs: A preliminary but more extensive version of this work, including longer and more numerous quotations from respondents, runs over 60 single-spaced pages. It is available through ERIC (Radnofsky & Spielmann, 1995), but an update can be obtained without charge by writing or e-mailing the authors directly.

8. It should be pointed out that the situation has changed since we conducted this study: 101 and 201 are now team-taught and essentially follow the same curriculum, which can be described as constructivist and communicative.

9. Because play has been described as the ultimate autotelic human activity (M. Csikszentmihalyi, 1988a), this strategy might seem legitimate, but in attempting to mandate playfulness (and on their own terms), the *French in Action* authors failed to grasp that it is precisely the inner-directedness of play that is appealing and that could be exploited pedagogically.

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