THE 12 Cs FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS:
LOWERING ANXIETY THROUGH
CONGENIAL LEARNING TASKS

As we use language, we express our identities in ways that make us vulnerable to the reactions and opinions of others. This process involves risk taking that can cause us to inhibit our use of language. First, as well as second, language users experience this phenomenon. In the classroom, however, English Language Learners (ELLs) may be more severely impacted because of their tenuous knowledge of the language. As a result, their language growth may be unduly delayed, and they may refrain from engaging in active learning of content.

For ELLs, therefore, it is especially important to provide a low-anxiety environment so that motivation for learning is increased and schooling remains as anxiety reduced as possible. Young ELLs, in particular, require a nurturing environment to feel safe as they experiment with natural language. Older learners need an environment free from intimidation and feelings of inadequacy so they can link complex thinking with appropriate use of language.

This Bulletin explores two general forms of anxiety which ELLs can experience as they engage in learning through a second language. It will be followed by suggestions for creating a congenial atmosphere for learning.

ANXIETY IN THE CLASSROOM

Anxiety cannot be totally eliminated for ELLs in the classroom. In fact, one type of anxiety can be helpful. Facilitating anxiety, for example, keeps learners alert to learning and eager to participate as they grow in the use of language and knowledge of content.

Debilitating anxiety, on the other hand, creates excessive worry and self-doubt and results in reduced participation and avoidance of language use. One common manifestation of debilitating anxiety is performance anxiety, which is common to introverted students participating in oral reports, skits, role-plays, and other types of interactive activities.

Frustrating experiences in writing, listening, and reading also create a debilitating anxiety if the learning experiences are frequently incomprehensible or negative in nature. Traditional, teacher-centered, authoritarian classroom environments where learners are continuously made aware of their own ignorance; where they are expected to react to immediate stimuli without opportunities to process their learning; where every discrete detail of oral or written expression is analyzed; and where learning activities are irrelevant or annoying, rather than relevant and
helpful - all create an environment of debilitating anxiety.

Finally, debilitating anxiety can be brought about by culture shock as learners initially transition into the U.S. school and classroom environment. Such experiences are usually of short duration; however, while they occur, students can exhibit symptoms of panic, self-pity, sadness, alienation, and even physical illness.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CREATING A CONGENIAL CLASSROOM ATMOSPHERE

Although ELLs achieve enough English proficiency to work in the mainstream, they may experience a great deal of undue anxiety as they attempt to keep up with their peers in content instruction. It is invaluable for teachers to be aware of this unseen aspect of learning and to provide a congenial classroom environment for learning.

Scarcella and Oxford (1990) suggest a number of ways for teachers to reduce anxiety in the classroom:

1. Awareness. By being aware of the possibility of learning anxiety, teachers can become more patient with nervous students who seem unwilling or unable to participate in activities.

2. Positive Classroom Climate. Being respectful towards students, e.g., learning their names quickly and correctly, asking encouraging questions, avoiding overcorrection, and allowing, at least initially, for flexible ways to assess, are all ways in which a positive climate for learning can be encouraged.

3. Self-talk. Encouraging students to engage in positive self-talk ("I can do a good job on this test!"), "I AM a good learner" and "I'm learning something new and different every day!" as opposed to "I think I'm going to fail!") helps to deprogram negative feelings of self-esteem.

4. Cooperative/group learning. Pair/small group work helps to decrease performance anxiety, as well as allow for greater interaction among students.

5. Diaries and dialog journals. These allow students to express their thoughts and feelings in a relaxed way, provided that the teacher responds in a timely and nonevaluative manner (for dialog journals). In this way teachers can be very supportive to students without spotlighting or embarrassing them.

6. Rewards. Honestly rewarding students for quality work performance and giving them greater choice in selecting activities help them to increase their own intrinsic reward system.

7. Behavioral Contracting. Having students sign a contract outlining specific performance expectations in a sequential way, so that students know exactly what is expected, helps to reduce anxiety. Such contracts can be for short- or long-term duration.

8. Relaxation. An anxiety-reducing technique is to have students alternately tense and relax major muscle groups or to engage students in quiet, visual meditation. Another alternative is to engage students in slow, meditative movements, as in tai chi.

9. Student Support Groups. Extracurricular student support groups, where students can share learning strategies and prepare for class projects or exams together, help to provide emotional support and increase student confidence.

10. Mastery Learning. Allow ELLs the opportunity to redo tests and assignments, rewrite papers, etc. as a way to master content. This alleviates the anxiety involved in one-time performance assessment and provides opportunities for additional student practice of content and language.

11. Sharing Expertise. Look for opportunities to enable ELLs to share their unique experiences or knowledge in areas that other students do not have. Be careful, however, to avoid spotlighting students who are reluctant to share, thus causing greater anxiety.

12. School/classroom Resource Person. Designate someone from the student's culture - a facilitator or a student who has been in country a longer period of time - to serve as a friend and confident for sharing concerns.

SOURCES: