REDUCING CLASSROOM ANXIETY FOR MAINSTREAMED ESL STUDENTS

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Roger London  
Action Research Project  

**Research Topic: Reducing Classroom Anxiety for Mainstreamed ESL Students**

**PROJECT RATIONALE:**

The problem I chose to address with action research began as a search to discover new methods that I could use to increase class participation of studious, yet reticent students. In collaboration with my mentor teacher at an urban middle school (SCHOOL S), we identified one female student (STUDENT C) who is extremely quiet during class and never participates unless called upon. When called upon, she answers very quietly, but correctly. This particular student is unique in that she is a Colombian immigrant who has lived in the United States for approximately 3 years. Since the number of English Language Learners (ELLs) in our schools has increased dramatically, I immediately came to the realization that I have never learned, as a regular classroom teacher, what adjustments I can or should make when teaching mainstreamed ESL students. This paper presents the implementation of a comprehensively researched plan aimed to help STUDENT C assimilate to mainstream classes by attempting to reduce her specific classroom anxieties.

**SCHOOL S—ESL PROGRAM**

Previous studies in educational research have detailed many issues regarding the difficulties students face when learning a foreign language. I conducted my study at an ethnically and culturally diverse urban middle school. Many schools in America fit this description. These schools include a subpopulation of immigrant students who are at various stages of language development. Districts establish an ESL program to bridge the

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*For the purposes of this research, a “mainstream classroom” refers to any class in which English Language Learners are placed in a classroom predominately made up of native English speakers.*
language gap and facilitate learning. The ESL program at my school is an immersion program in which students are not permitted to speak their native language in class. According to ESL teacher Michelle Bastinelli, this methodology of second language acquisition is one of the methods that are supported by educational research (personal communication, May 7, 2003).

**STUDENT C**

I first met Student C during her ESL class. I was pleasantly surprised to see a well-adjusted, happy teenage girl. Even though there were only 3 girls in the class, I was unable to identify the “extremely quiet” girl who “doesn’t say a word.” These descriptions, which her regular classroom teachers gave, were absent in her ESL classroom. While researching, I confirmed that it is common for ESL students to feel safe and comfortable with a class of other ELLs (English Language Learners) as opposed to native English speakers. This variance between the two different types of classrooms is even more pronounced in girls (Pappamihiel, 2001).

During ESL class, Student C worked well with her peers and had a positive attitude. She laughed and smiled frequently and appeared to truly enjoy the class and her classmates. She currently is placed in an advanced ESL class because she has tested at limited to fluent levels of English reading and writing skills. Although overall she is advanced, her oral skills test at a very limited-to-limited level. When student C attended mainstreamed English, social studies, and reading, I observed a very different student. On the plus side, she was the “perfect student” in that she diligently took notes and paid attention. However, she never volunteered and spoke very little. In her reading class, she was 1 of 3 students (18 total) who did not answer any questions in this highly participatory
class. She did react to humorous moments and when called upon at the end of class, she answered the question correctly in a very soft voice. Her reluctance to participate is common for ESL students as they make the transition from the secure ESL classroom into the mainstream classes. Michelle Bastinelli stated that: “Many of her students are afraid to talk because of the way they sound. Or they are afraid that other will make fun of them. It is very important for kids this age to fit in” (personal communication, May 7, 2003).

WHY THE TIME IS NOW

My goal is to reduce Student C’s mainstream classroom anxiety in order to enhance her learning experience in the foreign environment. Given the short duration of the study, I determined that it would be most beneficial to focus on reducing STUDENT C’s mainstream classroom anxiety. Overt changes in her mainstream classroom behavior will ultimately stem from the success in achieving this goal. However, in my opinion, it would not be possible to draw any definitive conclusions without witnessing her complete transition out of the ESL program. I believe that it is extremely important to help Student C reduce her mainstream classroom anxiety now, because next year she will no longer attend ESL classes in high school. She will share the common anxiety associated with attending a different, larger school along with the specific challenges of learning in a second language environment. Also, I am concerned that since she is studious and quiet, she runs a greater risk of “getting lost in the shuffle” and might not feel comfortable asking for help. Finally, I believe that reducing her classroom anxiety will ultimately improve her oral skills in English.
SOCIAL vs. ACADEMIC LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

I did not notice any difficulties with Student C’s oral skills. This led me to believe that she had all the skills necessary to succeed in the classroom, but the common anxiety felt by mainstreamed ESL students held her back. My research shed some light on the error of my thinking. According to J. Cummins, “Even though many [ESL students] have good English skills in terms of social proficiency (BICS), many are still struggling with the type of cognitive academic language (CALP) necessary for success in the mainstream classroom (2000). This gap between social and academic language proficiency has implications that need further investigation from a systemic perspective, but as teachers we have the ability to assess the specific situation in our classrooms. Pappamihiel raises a serious question in her study, Moving From the ESL Classroom into the Mainstream:

As researchers and ESL teachers, we know that CALP usually takes anywhere from 5-7 years. Yet, are we making this distinction clear to ESL students, mainstream teachers and parents? (2001)

I will look at this question as it pertains to student C in order to see if any unrealistic expectations cause her anxiety.

RESEARCH IN PRACTICE

N. Eleni Pappamihiel conducted a study on English Language Anxiety in 8th grade Mexican girls who moved from the ESL classroom into the mainstream. She recommends that teachers should use affective assessment to guide teaching strategies throughout the transition (Pappamihiel, 2001). In her study she used an adaptation of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) constructed by Horowitz, et. al. (1986). This first step is important because students experiencing anxiety have been found to have
more difficulty with constructing correct grammatical usage than students in a relaxed state (Horowitz, et. al. 1986).

Intuitively, most teachers are aware that cultural differences will exist when immigrant students adapt to an American mainstream classroom. But, America’s diverse immigrant population makes it nearly impossible for a teacher to truly understand the significance of this fact; and, more importantly, what she personally can do. Carmen Simich-Dudgeon advises teachers to explicitly teach English Language Learners the important attention behaviors in their classrooms, which they attribute to learning (1998). For example, a teacher can explain directly to the student the importance of making eye contact with her, volunteering to answer questions, asking questions when something is not understood, and any other behaviors that she values in her classroom (Simich-Dudgeon, 1999). Even more specifically, teachers of English language learners may need to spend time teaching and practicing the appropriate functional language that takes place between teacher and student (ERIC Clearinghouse on Language and Linguistics, 1994). Ultimately, the ESL student, ESL and mainstream teacher, and parents need to get together and set clear expectations of classroom success in order to alleviate any additional academic related anxiety (Pappamihiel, 2001).

Teachers can try to alleviate the anxiety of students that fear failing in the mainstream classroom by using different teaching strategies and methods of assessment. Authentic assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning. This is even truer for immigrant students learning the English Language (Walqui, 2000). Self-assessment and self-monitoring of language learning are widely supported forms of authentic assessment.
(O’Malley & Chamot, 1989). Deborah J. Short suggests the use of reading logs in content areas (e.g. social studies) to monitor understanding (1991).

RESEARCH CONCLUSION

The monumental need of the ESL student is to interact normally both socially and academically in the mainstream classroom. Social and academic anxieties are the core impediments to adaptation and learning. Thus, teachers need to understand the specific nature of these anxieties by using an affective measurement scale to identify the specific anxiety-provoking scenarios the ESL student experiences. Furthermore, teachers need to work collaboratively with the student, parents, and each other to set clear performance and behavioral expectations. ESL students need to learn the practical, functional nature of the classroom and practice the functional language needed to participate fully. Finally, structuring self-assessment as well as classroom activities aimed to maximize an interactive academic experience is essential.

ACTION AIM

This study hopes to reduce the classroom anxiety STUDENT C experiences in her mainstream classes. Optimally, STUDENT C will feel less anxious if she does not understand something in class. In addition, she will not worry as much about asking the teacher for help. Finally, the intervention will hopefully ameliorate her fear of failing and change distorted beliefs and expectations that cause anxiety.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Does an affective assessment of mainstreamed ESL students guide teachers to succeed in helping to reduce the classroom anxiety of these students?
STRATEGY

PART 1: In order to help reduce STUDENT C’s anxiety in her mainstream classes, I identified which academic situations make her anxious, and, also to what degree they do so. STUDENT C completed a bilingual adaptation of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (see Appendix 1). The results guided the implementation of a strategy to address her specific anxieties (see Part 2 below). The results also provide the baseline data needed to evaluate the success of the intervention.

PART 2: I will work individually with STUDENT C to help her reduce her anxiety in the classroom. First, I will discuss the results of the anxiety scale with her to determine what, if any, distorted beliefs she has regarding her mainstream American classrooms that provoke anxiety. I will address these anxiety-provoking beliefs by working with her teachers, parents, and her to clarify any unreasonable expectations she has placed on herself. Currently, STUDENT C always worries about failing classes (see item 17, Appendix 1). This is an example of one item on the anxiety scale I will address using this strategy.

Since she is usually worried if she can’t understand everything the teacher says (see item 13, Appendix 1), I will give her a self-monitoring tool that will enable her to record what she understands and doesn’t understand (see Appendix 3). This classroom comprehension log will enable her to keep her own record of classroom activities and provide her with a bigger part in her learning process. She will be encouraged to ask the teacher or me items that she did not understand. Since she is also always afraid to ask the teacher for help (see item 15, Appendix 1), STUDENT C and I will practice through role-playing asking the teacher for help. STUDENT C will then move on to the “live version”
of asking for help by asking the actual teacher (Social Studies or English). I plan to let STUDENT C’s teachers know ahead of time that she will ask them a question in class. STUDENT C will also be aware of this. Finally, STUDENT C will assess her overall classroom anxiety daily in her classroom comprehension log (Appendix 3).

DATA ORGANIZATION

I presented data assessing STUDENT C’s foreign language classroom anxiety level prior to the intervention strategy in a table shown in APPENDIX 1. I used anecdotal data to report the on-going and post-intervention results (APPENDIX 2) discovered when addressing the specific areas of classroom anxiety revealed in APPENDIX 1. I chose this method of comparison because it provides more insight into my conclusion than empirical data. The anecdotal evidence describes psychological, cognitive, affective, and social components of the intervention strategy that cannot be discerned from a numerical table.

CONCLUSIONS

I believe that affective assessment (i.e. administering the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale—FLCAS) can serve as a guide for reducing classroom anxiety in ESL students. Some items measured (e.g. nervousness when speaking English; Appendix 1, #6, #7) are an inherent part of the process of learning a foreign language and decrease over time. Also, other measures are common to many teenagers and are difficult to remedy (e.g. fear of failing, fear of asking the teacher questions). The teacher needs to determine the source of this anxiety. If the source of anxiety is language related (e.g. STUDENT C’s fear of asking the teacher questions), the teacher and ESL student can develop and implement a procedure for asking questions similar to the strategy developed for STUDENT C. The FLCAS identifies several areas related directly to the
teacher/student relationship. Teachers can use these results to open a dialogue with the
student in order to develop strategies to address these issues. Opening communication, in
itself, is probably the greatest single action a teacher can initiate to reduce a student’s
anxiety in her classroom. Validating the ESL student’s anxiety helps teachers establish a
rapport and trust. Affective assessment provides teachers with a concrete means to open
communication regarding the emotional state of the ESL student. This is especially
helpful for teachers that would otherwise not know how or if to address the affective state
of the ESL student.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I recommend that regular classroom teachers with ESL students in their classroom
administer affective assessment similar to the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale
depicted in Appendix 1. Teachers should identify the specific items that make the student
anxious. The teacher needs to discuss the results with the student. By asking the ESL
student, “Why does [insert anxiety producing activity] make you nervous?” the student and
the teacher can develop a plan together to address the situation(s). The teacher should also
ask the student, “What do you think we could do to help reduce your anxiety when [insert
situation]?” The teacher should present the student with any strategies developed.
Communication is the key to reducing anxiety and enhancing the learning experience.
Teachers can use dialogue journals to reduce initial anxiety and safeguard against a
breakdown in communication.
## Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale

1 = siempre verdad; 2 = usualmente verdad; 3 = algunas veces verdad
4 = casi nunca verdad; 5 = nunca es verdad

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How do I feel in class?</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Como te sientes en clase?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 I am nervous when the teacher speaks to me in class.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me pongo nerviosa cuando el profesor me habla en clase.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 I am embarrassed when I answer the teacher in class.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me da verguenza cuando le respondo al profesor en clase.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 I worry about making mistakes in class.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me preocupa hacer errores en clase.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4 I get nervous when speaking in class.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me pongo nerviosa cuando hablo inglés en clase.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 I worry that the teacher will ask me a question.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me preocupa que el profesor me haga una pregunta.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 I feel self-conscious when speaking in English with my classmates.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me siento cohibida cuando estoy hablando inglés con mis compañeros.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 I am afraid that others will laugh at me when I speak English.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temo que otros se rian cuando hablo inglés.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 I get so nervous in class that I forget everything.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me pongo tan nerviosa en clase que se me olvida todo.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 I get nervous if I haven’t prepared for class.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me pongo nerviosa si no me he preparado para la clase.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 I feel anxious even if I have prepared for class.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me da anciedad inclusive cuando me he preparado para la clase.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 I worry if the teacher corrects me in class.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me preocupa que el profesor me ira a corregir en clase.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 The more I study English, the more I get confused.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entre mas estudio el inglés, mas me confundo.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 I worry if I can’t understand every word the teacher says.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me preocupa no entiendo todo lo que el profesor dice.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*1=always; 2=usually; 3=sometimes; 4=almost never; 5=never
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>How do I feel in class?</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>In pair-work, I worry if my partner is better than me at English. En trabajo en grupo. Me preocupa que mis compañeros son mejores que yo en Ingles.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>I am afraid to ask my teachers for help. Temo pedirle ayuda a mis profesores</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>I am afraid to ask my classmates for help Temo pedirle ayuda a mis compañeros de clase.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>I worry about failing classes. Me preocupa fallar las clases</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>The English class makes me most nervous (more than other classes). La clase the Ingles me hace nerviosa (mas que las otras).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>I often daydream in class. Algunas veces me distraigo en clase.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>I worry about tests. Me preocupan los exámenes.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), Horwitz, E. K. (1986).
APPENDIX 2

STUDENT C—ON GOING and POST-ASSESSMENT DATA

Action Aim A:

STUDENT C will feel less anxious if she does not understand something in class.

Post Intervention Results:

STUDENT C did not find the classroom comprehension log (Appendix 3) useful. She understood everything discussed in class. STUDENT C revealed that she sometimes cannot understand words, but she always understands the content. She has already been instructed by her ESL teacher to keep a vocabulary journal to address this issue.

Action Aim B:

STUDENT C will not worry about asking the teacher for help.

Post Intervention Results

When I asked STUDENT C why she was afraid to ask the teacher for help, she responded that she was scared she would use the wrong words. In addition, she stated that she would feel more comfortable speaking with teacher alone rather than in front of the class. Together, STUDENT C and I determined that writing out the questions before approaching the teacher would help alleviate this performance anxiety. STUDENT C and I met with her teachers to inform them of our work. STUDENT C felt more comfortable speaking with her teachers using this process. However, she still maintained a degree of anxiety during these interactions. However, many native English speakers are also reticent in their communication with adults, especially authority figures.

It is important to note that STUDENT C felt comfortable with me from the very beginning of this project. I spoke to her (nervously) using Spanish sentences that I constructed prior to our first meeting. This approach demonstrated my empathy and respect for her efforts at learning English. In addition, STUDENT C did not previously speak to anyone regarding the feelings/anxieties she experienced during the language
learning process. Recognition and validation of her anxiety were therapeutic in their own right.

**Action Aim C:**

STUDENT C will not worry as much about failing.

Post Intervention Results

STUDENT C worries about failing because she wants to do well. Her pressure comes entirely from herself. This worry is common among many students (native English speakers and ESL) who want to do well in school. No intervention can really change this outlook. STUDENT C might currently experience some increased anxiety because she is new to American public education system. It is probable that success and experience in American schools will reduce her fear of failing.
APPENDIX 3

CLASSROOM COMPREHENSION LOG

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT I UNDERSTAND FROM THE TEACHER</th>
<th>WHAT I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND FROM THE TEACHER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FROM THE BOOK</td>
<td>FROM THE BOOK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FROM THE NOTES</td>
<td>FROM THE NOTES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HOW NERVOUS DID YOU FEEL TODAY IN CLASS?
As I think about the work I completed for this project, I realize that I have gained a great deal of knowledge pertaining to ESL students. Prior to the study, I really did not know how or if I should teach these students differently from the average student. Now I realize that the mainstream ESL student is unique and responds best to specific teaching strategies (e.g. collaborative learning). I realize that it is important to recognize that ESL students are very different than special education students in the mainstream classroom.

This study helped me understand the classroom related anxieties students face. I explored the depths of STUDENT C’s classroom anxiety and attempted to address troublesome issues. During this process, I gained a better understanding of which situations in particular provoke anxiety for STUDENT C and other ESL students. I also believe that I gained insight into the psychological/emotional state of all middle school students as a result of this project.

My early success in developing a good rapport with STUDENT C helped to increase my confidence in my ability to work well with middle school students. I believe that some aspects of this project when customized for a specific student would be helpful when tutoring individual students. Most students who need tutoring are most likely anxious about their current performance. I think that students will respond better to me during a tutoring session if I recognize, discuss, and understand their worries. This project made me realize that teachers are the primary source of anxiety for both ESL students and regular students. This fact reiterates the importance of presenting a non-threatening, positive learning environment that meets the varying needs of a diverse student body.
WORKS CITED


