Middlebury’s Language Schools are renowned for their excellence in producing high levels of language acquisition. The experience of language immersion, combined with the language pledge, (a formal commitment required of all students to speak, listen, read, and write in their language of study as the only means of communication for the entire summer session), open opportunities for students to communicate in their target language and deepen their cultural understanding.

This intense program may produce tension. Some of this may be pleasurable, stimulating, “euphoric” tension, and may enhance the learning experience. However, “dysphoric” tension – disagreeable, discouraging – may also result. What follows is a brief description of some source of dysphoric tension and things students can do about it.

Language is one of our primary modes of self-expression. When learning a new language, we are initially limited in our ability to demonstrate our cognitive and creative capabilities using our fledgling language skills.

Embarking on a new language is like entering a new reality, for language is used not only for communication but as the medium through which we construct our world. The words available to use influence how we think about things.

In this “new reality” our sense of self may be altered. Because of our limited language abilities, we may begin to perceive of ourselves as less competent than in our ‘native language personalities’. This may be unnerving for Middlebury language learners who are highly accomplished professionals, teachers, graduate students or undergraduates in their ‘real’ lives.

When arriving at Middlebury, one is confronted with a new social milieu. Making friends and discovering one’s position within this setting are natural concerns that many face. With limited communication skills, it may be difficult to let one’s personality shine through.

A social hierarchy may develop where more accomplished speakers seek out other accomplished speakers. Relatively inarticulate beginners may feel frustrated at their inability to express complex ideas or make a precise point. They may find their ability to relate to others affected.

Some students react by withdrawing from social interactions and feeling lack of self confidence. Depression or anxiety may even result.

Students often go through several phases of feelings with regard to the language school experience. “Should I even be here?” “Am I at the right language level?” are questions that many students confront at the outset.
Coping strategies

- Seek out opportunities to engage in activities where your skills, intelligence, and creativity can be expressed. It will remind you about who you fully are.
- Participate in sports and exercise: this is an excellent mode of self-expression that requires minimal language use.
- Go for a walk alone: enjoy nature and solitude
- When necessary, call family and friends at home to put language school (and other) concerns in perspective.
- Visit the Center for Counseling and Human Relations: it can provide you with a space where you can talk about your concerns (in English) and allow the full expression of your personality. (the language pledge is suspended at the Counseling Center).
- Most of all, try not to be too hard on yourself; remember, making mistakes is a natural, integral part of learning a new language.

Tips on Being a Good Language Learner
(from the Language Schools Handbook)

- Be observant: Keep your eyes and ears open. Much of what you need is going on around you rather than in your teaching materials.

- Be (or become) an extrovert, participate: Jump in, ask when you don’t know, make mistakes. Experiment, learn to develop guessing strategies and be willing to make hypotheses.

- Be prepared for frustration: interacting with others in another language can be a humbling experience. Increasing one’s proficiency in a second (or third) language and culture takes both time and concentrated effort. Learn to be self-conscious in a productive way. While you are at it, get some exercise and stay as rested as you can.

- Be your own teacher: develop your own strategies, figure out what works for you – taking notes outside of class, mnemonic tricks, talking to yourself, etc.

- Use memorization: look for routines, fixed or formulaic chunks of language you can use over and over, bits of songs or plays, etc.

- Aim for discourse, not words: think beyond the sentence, in terms of context, relationships, and overall meaning. A perfectionist’s approach to detail will almost certainly prove counterproductive. Especially in the beginning, attention to meaning should come before attention to form.

- Go with the flow: do not rely on rules or explanations to the exclusion of keeping things moving. Develop your ability to paraphrase and use circumlocutions when you do not know a word, rather than give up or lapse into silence.