

Helping International Students Succeed in University Programs

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Introduction

Imagine you have been selected to study your discipline in a university in another country. You've already studied that country's primary language and researched information about the university and the city in which it is found. You feel pretty confident that, after a short time of adjustment, you'll be able to settle into university life without too many problems. But when the first day of classes arrives, you find yourself overwhelmed by all the redtape and protocols that no one bothered to explain to you ahead of time. In your classes, your mind begins to numb because the professors talk so fast and use academic jargon and don't seem to follow any kind of an outline in their presentations. As soon as you think you understand a point enough to write something down in your notes, the professors have already gone on to another topic. Neither do they seem to notice that you are struggling. There's no one else from "home" in the entire university, so you feel entirely isolated and powerless. People stare at you because you're obviously not "one of them" and no one takes the time to get to know you. The ability you thought you had to speak the language has evaporated because all of a sudden real people don't sound like your language teacher and there's too much input for you to process. You want to succeed and know you have the capability, but the language and culture barriers seem overwhelming.

Unfortunately, all too often, this scenario describes the experience of international students who come to the U.S. not completely prepared to study in our universities. Unless universities offer support in both academic and interpersonal areas, international students can become easily overwhelmed by the differences not only in language and culture but also in the expectations of our educational system.

As faculty members, we have a responsibility to provide opportunities for all of our students to succeed. By addressing the diversity of learning styles they represent, providing opportunities for authentic assessment, and respecting the cultural backgrounds of all of our students, we can create a classroom environment conducive to learning that reaches everyone. See my articles on learning styles and addressing the needs of divergent learners on my homepage, <http://people.cedarville.edu/local/Employee/loachb/>.

The following suggestions for teaching international students are divided into three topics: 1) understanding the profile of your international students; 2) classroom protocols; and 3) academic accommodations for international students who are non-native speakers of English. At the end of this article is an annotated bibliography of other useful resources.

1) Understanding the profile of international students

- Students who display good basic interpersonal conversational skills (BICS) in English (can talk about everyday topics like family, personal bio, etc.) may not have developed adequate cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) to handle reading, writing, speaking or listening comprehension in English at the specialized level needed for university-level content courses. This doesn't mean that they aren't intelligent enough to handle university courses but rather that they need time to bring their English-language skills up to speed with their native language abilities.
- International students undergo a double set of adjustment experiences—culture shock in adjusting to life in the U.S., but also the expectations of our educational system (see sections 2 and 3 below for more information).
- Faculty and staff members would benefit from gaining information about the native cultures of international students in order to form points of contact and avoid stereotyping or misunderstandings that stem from ignorance of their cultures. Reading books, watching media presentations, visiting authentic restaurants, participating in ethnic holiday observances, etc. are ways to build bridges to the students' cultures. Also, reading sources on intercultural communication (appropriate eye contact, touching, personal distance and other culturally-shaped behaviors) gives insight into differences in non-verbal communication patterns (see #2 in Print Resources).

2) Classroom protocols: suggestions for helping international students to adjust to the U.S. educational system

- Explain the rationale for each learning activity as you introduce it to your class and how students should study/respond in order to gain maximum benefit from that activity. (At some point every student may object to some activity that doesn't fit his/her preferred learning style, so giving a rationale can help them to understand the purpose more).
- Introduce class participation gradually. International students are often more accustomed to being passive recipients of the professor's comments because the professor is seen as the unquestioned expert on that topic. (For them, to question the professor or disagree with him/her would be disrespectful.) Start with questions that elicit short answers or facts, then follow-up questions, and lastly with opinion or evaluative questions. Assure the students that their contributions are welcomed and appreciated.
- Look for ways to infuse more multicultural references and models into your course content, using pertinent examples from various parts of the world.

- Don't embarrass your international students in front of the rest of the class—self-monitor your comments for stereotyping or unconsciously racist remarks (e.g., “girls aren't good at math,” “all Klingons are hot-tempered”); *do* ask sincere questions about the students' home culture, but *don't* make them the “spokesperson” representing their entire country or ethnicity (are all Americans like you?).
- Speak clearly in your presentations; provide visuals or an outline for students to follow; use transitional phrases (“now, let's look at...”) to signal a new topic.
- Avoid idiomatic expressions and slang that may be unfamiliar to international students (example: “this was a ‘slam dunk’ idea”).
- Explain any cultural or historical references your students may not be familiar with (same as trying to talk to today's U.S. students about anything that happened before 1990!).
- At the beginning of the semester, meet specifically with the international students to discuss your teaching methods, expectations for attendance, tardiness, other class rules, preferences for self-directed learning, etc. Allow the students to express any concerns they might have. *Learn how to correctly pronounce each student's name.*
- Depending on the student's home culture, he or she may be more accustomed to an educational approach based on memorization and recitation of facts, rather than independent or critical thinking. The professor may need to provide models of his/her expectations for self-directed learning, as well as encouraging international students to realize that they can and should contribute their own valid observations and reflections as they interact with course material.

3) **Academic accommodations for international students who are non-native speakers of English**

- Allow extra time for taking tests and use of English/FL dictionary, if needed.
- Allow for time to re-write papers in conjunction with help from the Writing Center tutors (the criteria for what constitutes good formal writing varies from culture to culture; students may need to learn to adapt to the Western linear approach).
- Give specific feedback on assignments (instead of just “re-write” or “awkward,” try “I'm not sure if you're presenting this idea as fact or opinion—please explain”).
- Academic texts are typically use more complex language, more abstract and/or specialized vocabulary (e.g., “conductor” in a science course is different from “conductor” in a music class) and different types of visual aids such as charts and graphs—in essence, material that is more “information-packed,” more concentrated and less contextualized. Faculty can assist by providing more “advanced organizers” to help students anticipate text content and also encouraging students to use a study strategy such as SQ3R (survey, question, read, recite, review) to manage content. Faculty can also assess their texts'

- readability levels through various tests such as the Raygor Readability assessment (see information at the conclusion of the Resources section).
- In class or conferences, don't ask "do you understand?" because they will probably politely respond "yes" whether they understand or not; to do otherwise would challenge your authority and competence as a professor. Instead, ask the students to repeat the main ideas of what you've said or ask "What more can I tell you about X?"
 - Encourage students to meet deadlines for turning in assignments by presenting them as the students' personal obligation to you ("I'm really waiting to see what you have for me") and not just an opportunity to exalt oneself for a good grade in competition with others.
 - Clearly explain your policy and the institution's stand on plagiarism. In some countries, knowledge is in the public domain to be shared by all (even during a test!) or, if the students have been taught that only the expert's opinion is authoritative, the students will present that instead of developing their own ideas.
 - Go out of your way to give the students some extra attention so that they know you care about them as persons.

Resources (Print)

- 1) Clark, Lynne and Dava Waltzman, eds. **Faculty and Student Challenges in Facing Cultural and Linguistic Diversity**. Charles C. Thomas Publishers, 1993.

Specifically aimed at administrators, faculty and supervisors in professional education programs of allied health (nursing, nutrition, social work, etc.) but gives ample general principles for helping international students and American ethnic minority students to develop study skills, ways to adjust teaching methods, understanding diverse communication styles, etc. (A lot of the material for this paper is adapted from this source.)

- 2) Flaitz, Jeffra, ed. **Understanding Your International Students: An Educational, Cultural, and Linguistic Guide**. University of Michigan Press, 2003.

Lists profiles of students by country and includes cultural information, commonly used teaching methods and learning styles, teacher-student relationships, forms of address, etc., and sample "problems" that may arise with each nationality. Second section lists common greetings and simple phrases in each language.

- 3) Gunderson, Lee. **ESL Literacy Instruction: A Guidebook to Theory and Practice**. Regents/Prentice Hall, 1991.

Discusses challenges in literacy for non-native speakers of English of all ages; includes information on assessment and effective strategies to improve reading skills.

3) Heggins III, Willie J. and Jerlando F. L. Jackson. "Understanding the Collegiate Experience for Asian International Students at a Midwestern Research University." **College Student Journal**, 37, 3 (Sept. 2003), p379-92. (Available through Centennial Library > Research Databases > Professional Development Collection)

Discusses factors that influence Asian students' U.S. college experience and how their feelings and attitudes toward their experience affect their ability and motivation to persist and complete their degree at those institutions.

4) **New Directions for Higher Education**, issue 117 (Spring 2002). Available online through Centennial Library online catalog.

Issue dedicated to topics related to helping international students achieve success in U.S. colleges and universities.

5) Tseng, Wen-Chih and Fred B. Newton. "International Students' Strategies for Well-being." **College Student Journal** 36, 4 (Dec. 2002), 591-8. (Available through Centennial Library > Research Databases > Professional Development Collection)

"Presents a study that examined the perceptions of international college students of the sources of well-being during their study abroad. Analysis of the strategies of the students for gaining general well-being; Evaluation of the coping skills for adjustment to attain well-being; Conclusions and implications of the study."

Internet Resources:

6) "Resources for College Bound Students." College Internet Connection: Private and Homeschool Friendly Colleges and Universities. Available at: <http://www.homeschoolfriendlycolleges.com/resources.htm> (accessed 8/10/04).

Lists many links to websites with advice on various topics such as concentration, critical thinking, improving memory, listening, note-taking, etc.

7) "Teaching Diversity." Diversity in Business at Fisher College. The Ohio State University Fisher School of Business. Available at: <http://fisher.osu.edu/diversity/teach.htm> (accessed 7/13/04).

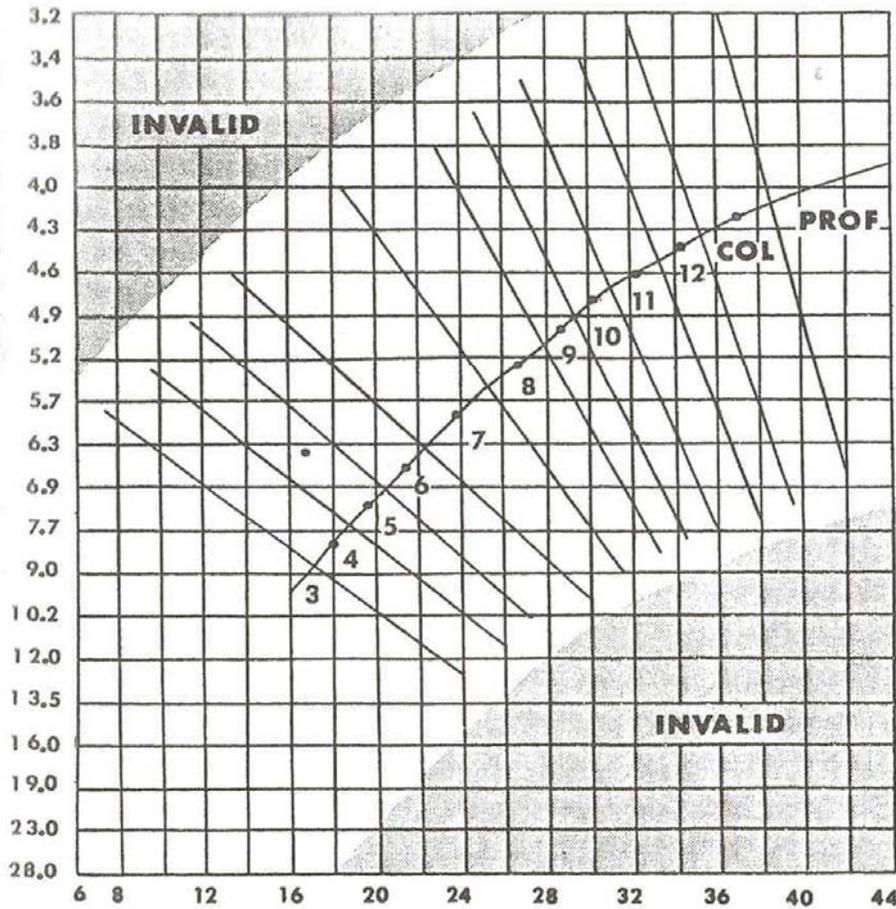
Discusses tips for equitable teaching and group activities.

8) Kim, Soonhyang. "Teaching International Students Across the Curriculum: Supporting Academic Listening /Speaking." The Ohio State University Faculty & TA Development. Available online at: <http://ftad.osu.edu/Publications/intloral.html> (accessed 7/13/04).

Discusses tips for clearer class presentations and encouraging student participation.

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The following graph (p. 7) demonstrates the Raygor method for calculating text readability levels. As the directions indicate, three 100-word passages may be selected and then analyzed for average number of words per sentence and average number of words with more than six letters. The average of those tabulations can then be located on the graph to determine the reading level represented by the text. Then, ideally, the student's reading ability should be assessed to determine if s/he can independently function with the content features, or will need some instruction or adapted materials.



Directions:

Count out three 100-word passages at the beginning, middle, and end of a selection or book. Count proper nouns, but not numerals.

1. Count sentences in each passage, estimating to nearest tenth.
2. Count words with six or more letters.
3. Average the sentence length and word length over the three samples and plot the average on the graph.

Example:

	Sentences	6+ Words
A	6.0	15
B	6.8	19
C	6.4	17
Total	19.2	51
Average	6.4	17

Note mark on graph. Grade level is about 5.

This graph is not copyrighted. It may be reproduced. Copies can also be obtained from Dr. Alton L. Raygor, University of Minnesota, 192 Pillsbury Drive S.E., Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455.

Figure 2-5 The Raygor Graph