

Teaching International Students Across the Curriculum: Supporting Academic Listening/Speaking

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Adaptation, indeed, is what is expected of the two parties – significant development in the case of the students, and a greater awareness and sensitivity in the case of teachers. It is an important caveat that one seeks to develop or adapt the students, not to transform them.

- Jeremy F. Jones, 1999, p. 251 -

When you have non-native English speaking international students in your classroom, there are several important issues and classroom management strategies related to speaking and listening skills that you may need to keep in mind to help them have a positive classroom experience. Most of the pedagogical suggestions below could be applied to all students, not only to international students. At the same time, however, we need to be aware that there are difficulties and/or needs of international students, which might not be shared by domestic students. Domestic students may express concerns similar to those of international students, but for different reasons. For instance, “domestic students may choose not to participate in class discussion because of being introverted, uninterested in the subject matter, or unprepared for that day’s lesson. International students, on the other hand, may be silent for any of those reasons too, or for other quite different reasons having to do with linguistic proficiency, cultural conventions, or educational background” (Dr. Diane Belcher, former Director of ESL Composition Program at The Ohio State University, currently a professor at Georgia State University).

Research findings and pedagogical suggestions are discussed in this article involving the following three main possible problematic areas of international students in classroom participation related to speaking and listening: (a) difficulties in note-taking and comprehension problems, (b) a lack of second language confidence, and (c) unfamiliarity with the U.S. academic classroom discourse patterns and expectations.

Note-Taking and Listening Comprehension Are Difficult

Lack of note-taking skills and problems with note-taking are troublesome areas most often reported by international students, as well as listening comprehension problems. Consequently, students’ lack of comprehension may contribute to their silence in oral classroom discussion (Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Ferris, 1998).

Pedagogical Suggestions

- Speak clearly and slowly with steady speed.
- Avoid inaccessible vocabulary, culture-specific words, or slang.
- Make the good use of non-verbal communication strategies (e.g., gesture and eye contact).
- Allow and encourage students to audiotape the class if necessary.
- Encourage students to copy or borrow notes from peers and discuss the notes with peers.
- Write key terms on the board and ask comprehension-check questions.
- Invite students to ask questions if there is anything they do not understand.
- Use visual aids to enhance students’ comprehension.
- Provide an outline or key terms on handouts, the blackboard, and/or overhead projector transparencies.
- Post main points or any visuals used in class on the web, or send via e-mail either to all students or upon request.
- Use legible handwriting on the board; cursive script may be difficult to decipher.
- Encourage students to come see you during office hours in order to become familiar with your speech.

A Lack of Second Language Self-Confidence Inhibits Speaking in Class

Non-native English speaking international students have expressed difficulties in oral classroom participation because of a lack of confidence in their ability to express themselves and in their ability to formulate ideas in English and to respond quickly in a discussion (Cheng, 2000; Liu, 2001, Liu and Littlewood, 1998; Morita, 2002, among others).

Pedagogical Suggestions:

- Recognize that language learning doesn't happen at once.
- Be patient and allow longer wait-time when asking for oral participation.
- Ask the whole class to write down their ideas first and then report them to the group.
- Design and use low-anxiety-provoking "structured" small-group activities and then report to the whole class.
- Ask culturally-relevant questions while not putting students on the spot to represent a certain culture.
- Consider activities which can raise international students' self-confidence.
- Give feedback that emphasizes value of students' contributions.
- Use a listserv to provide an alternative way to raise the otherwise hidden voices of those who are shy and anxious or reluctant to speak up in class.

U.S. Academic Discourse Patterns and Instructors' Expectations Are Not Clear or Familiar

Unclear and conflicting expectations between instructors and international students may cause confusion and misunderstanding for international students (Ferris, 1998).

Pedagogical Suggestions:

- Be aware that international students may have different prior educational experiences and expectations.
- Don't assume that international students naturally understand your expectations of them.
- Provide specific and clear instructions about classroom activities both in writing and orally.
- Have an open discussion on teachers' expectations and the nature of the classroom.
- Encourage students to contact you personally if anything is still not clear.
- Be familiar with students' cultural background, but at the same time be careful not to stereotype or over-generalize it.
- Be aware of individual differences.

We need to keep in mind that there are multiple factors affecting international students' classroom participation patterns in addition to the factors discussed here. You, as teachers, play a critical role in creating a positive learning environment for everybody, including international students.

Special Note:

Most of the pedagogical suggestions listed here came from the real voices of round table participants on "Teaching International Students" held by the Office of Faculty & TA Development at The Ohio State University on February 20, 2003 and some pedagogical suggestions come from the previous research. The eleven participants consisted of ESL professionals, the director of the Office of International Education (a support unit for international students), instructional consultants from FTAD, subject-matter instructors, and international graduate students.

For more information and resources, please download this e-book through the Maryville University Library: [entitled, *International Student Adaptation to Academic Writing in Higher Education*](#)

<http://proxy.library.maryville.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e095mww&AN=811067&site=eds-live&scope=site>

Or contact Sara Parrott, Coordinator of International Student Success (sparrott1@maryville.edu)

Or visit the International Admissions page: <https://www.maryville.edu/admissions/international/>