

Techniques for Serving International Students

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Purpose

In an effort to assist North Park faculty in dealing with international students both inside and outside the classroom, I have compiled a short list of guidelines and tips for your consideration.

A Little Context

When are ESL students prepared to meet the rigors of mainstream coursework? Should they be required to complete ESL before being allowed to take any "regular" courses? Cummins (1989) notes that it takes students anywhere from five to ten years for a second language student to master academic English. Clearly, our students cannot be expected to make this kind of time investment. A few of our students have been allowed to enroll in mainstream courses while completing the ESL program, but this has been the exception rather than the rule. Students who finish the advanced level of ESL have had *at least*:

- one semester of listening and speaking, which features listening to lectures, taking notes, making presentations, and engaging in small talk;
- one semester of reading and writing, featuring several rhetorical styles of writing, essay organization, support, citations, and discussion of issues such as plagiarism and use of sources;
- one semester of structure, featuring proofreading and complex sentence structure;
- exit tests in writing and speaking.

What You Can Do

How do faculty members meet the needs of ESL graduates without compromising high standards or operating under a double standard? I suggest that this is a matter of consideration and awareness rather than one of accommodation and compromise. Here are some suggestions (drawn largely from Cochran [1992] and Christinson & Stoller [1997]) that you might try with your international students who have some language problems:

- **Avoid stumbling blocks in class.** When addressing the student, use natural but conventional speech. Learn each student's name -- but don't assume that the names are given in the same order (e.g., first-last) as in the U.S. Ask how the student wants to be addressed in class (e.g., if s/he has an American nickname). Minimize your use of slang, idioms, and references to purely American culture (music, sports, arts, and media). Provide multiple examples. Use trans-cultural examples and analogies. Give the student a few extra moments to process information, especially when asking them a question. Provide written guidelines to assignments (with due dates, if applicable); write assignments (legibly!) on the board (with due dates). Speak deliberately. Paraphrase complex ideas. Avoid ambiguous language in class and on tests. Write key words and concepts on the board. Be aware that body language (in particular, certain hand gestures) mean different things in different cultures. *Show* patience.
- **Problems with written work.** When dealing with ESL students' work, feel free to read it "holistically." Do not feel obligated to correct and explain every grammatical point; instead, make comments regarding organization of ideas and presentation of facts. Keep in mind that "one of the most widespread writing problems has nothing to do with language, but rather with thought patterns, with students' inability to distinguish what is important from what is trivial (Cochran, 1992, p. 9). International students grapple with linear rhetorical writing (our though pattern) as opposed to spiral or zig-zag digressions favored in Asian and Arabic writing, respectively. Nevertheless, if a student's work is clearly inadequate, refer that student to a departmental tutor, the tutorial center (in the library), or the ESL Office.

Make it clear to ESL students if writing is an important part of your class. Give the first writing assignment early. Have students keep a journal, if appropriate. Explain what an office hour is (and isn't) and make sure they know where your office is located.

Prepare students for essay exams by giving examples of questions and both strong and weak answers. Save copies of the strongest and weakest responses to use as examples in the future. Provide students with a brief checklist of expectations for term papers. Allow students

to hand in outlines and early drafts. If possible, explain in a conference how a paper must be revised. English and Communications faculty will need to maintain their high standards regarding language control while at the same time recognizing that ESL students will never achieve the same level of fluency and expression as a native.

Tests should allow students adequate time; avoid cultural bias. Evaluate answers to essay questions holistically, grading content rather than mechanics, if applicable.

- **Class participation.** Don't expect ESL students to express themselves fluently in class at first -- often these students come from backgrounds where class participation (e.g., asking questions of the instructor) is not encouraged or even allowed. Rest assured that graduates of the ESL program have had practice in small and large group work, group presentations, and videotaped projects. They all have much to add to your classes; however, it will often take a great deal of courage for them to take the plunge! Encourage other students to be patient and respectful. If class participation forms an important part of your class, make this clear to them early in the course.
- **Expect** that all ESL graduates will have at least some problems with classwork. To deal with this eventuality before it becomes a major problem, here are some approaches that you can try:
- **Use the buddy system** by pairing an ESL student with an American study partner. This will give the ESL student an opportunity to discuss classwork on an informal but regular basis. This could also serve as service learning or extra credit for the American student. If pairing students outside of class is not feasible, put ESL students with strong students during class discussions, group work, or lab work.
- **Encourage (or require) study groups.**
- **Use a departmental tutor** or refer students to the Tutoring Center.
- **Contact the ESL Office (x 4942).** We might be able to suggest some strategies for you and/or the student. Given current staffing, however,

we are **not** equipped to meet the needs of "drop-ins" who need a paper proofread!

- Students with severe language problems have most likely come through more than one semester of ESL (at North Park and/or other schools), roughly the equivalent of the second semester of the second year of a foreign language. These are students who are generally highly motivated but for whom the language barrier is still a major challenge. Notify me as early as possible about each case and I can give you a brief history on the student.
- Advisors should encourage students to enroll as early as possible in Fundamentals of Composition and English Composition, because "the time lapse between completion of developmental writing courses and the taking of freshman composition is significant" (Smoke, 1988).

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