

**THE TEACHING PROFESSOR CONFERENCE**  
**Cambridge, MA**  
**May 22, 2010**

## **INTEGRATING THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT INTO YOUR CLASSROOM**

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You may remember your first days as an undergraduate student, perhaps away from home for the first time. You may remember feeling a little, somewhat or a whole lot confused regarding what you were supposed to do in order to deal successfully with your new location and your new status. Some of the simplest things, such as remembering where your dorm was, finding classroom buildings and the classrooms within them, how to access exotic security systems such as card slides may have been new to you, but you quickly learned how to negotiate these things. Importantly, if all else failed, you were easily able to ask another lost-looking freshman what to do. If s/he knew, so much the better; if not, at least there were two of you who were flummoxed, and you could ask a third person what to do. As isolated as you may have felt, you were deeply enmeshed in American culture, and many things most international students deal with as brand new issues were never issues for you.

I decided to do this workshop based on my experiences as a Fulbright Scholar in the Slovak Republic last year. No, I had no difficulty finding my classroom, but I did have the benefits of a crash course in the Slovak language, a superb, full time translator and a wonderful English-speaking liaison professor to help me make the transition from a small liberal arts college in Vermont to a 12,000 student university in eastern Slovakia. I also had the support of the university - the University of Presov - which deeply wanted me to succeed. Meeting with the Dean, the Rector (President) and others in SR, such as the diplomatic personnel from the US Embassy helped to cement my status as a person who could ask for assistance and receive it without question. To be blunt, everyone had a vested interest in my comfort and success; this may not be true of the international students you meet, and this may be a cause of future problems for them – our expectations of them and for them may be based on our unconscious, deeply-rooted cultural expectations and therefore unrealistic, as we'll see in a few minutes.

When I started actually teaching classes in SR, I began collecting information and research materials on the experiences of those who moved from one culture to another in order to study, and I compared and contrasted those findings to research I conducted at several colleges upon my return to the US last spring. I found significant differences between students who came from different areas of the globe, and I will report these to you. I hope you'll find these findings interesting and valuable in your teaching. Do please remember that while I will generalize about the “International Student”, of course not every student from every country will demonstrate these characteristics. My statements, however, do reflect not only the literature on international students but my own finding as well.

The students I interviewed and observed for this presentation represented countries in Africa, Europe (Western and Central), Asia and Central America. While I found many similarities among these students, I discovered contrasts as well. The Western European students (specifically, Belgium, Portugal, Spain and Norway) generally had a much stronger grasp of English and were far more used to American-style classroom dialogue, give-and-take and even disagreement than their non-Western European peers.

Please understand that while much of this presentation/workshop will highlight difficulties international students may encounter while pursuing higher education in America, we will also be detailing solutions to them. Remember that if you understand the potential difficulties, you will be able to meet them with proactive, effective strategies! Also, no criticism or attitude of cultural superiority should be inferred by my remarks today; other countries have run successful universities for centuries. My discussion is designed solely to sensitize you to the expectations of international students and to help you to help them to make successful accommodations to our system.

Let me begin to sensitize you to the experiences of many international students. We'll take a moment to reprise your experiences as a first-year student so we can compare and contrast them with those of many international students. Each of you undoubtedly, as a native-born American freshman, took for granted the general cultural milieu in which you found yourself in your new location. At the time, you probably didn't realize you lived in one; it was learned early in life, was generally unconscious and therefore unexamined. Its presence simply made it easy for you to behave in certain ways – you didn't have to think about things, you simply performed them “correctly”, at

least according to American cultural standards. These things included, but weren't limited to, speaking and understanding English like a native, having a certain amount of assertiveness, having an understanding of the American system of education including grading, graduation requirements, and so on. Even the layout of the campus was probably something you didn't have to think about. By contrast to what is common about many American campuses, many European and Asian universities have little or no formal campus. University buildings have been constructed or purchased wherever possible, so a student would expect to have to find different offices and classrooms scattered throughout the city. Some of the other cultural similarities you experienced probably included looking and dressing rather like your peers, expecting a certain amount of freedom which would allow you to come and go as you pleased unless specifically prohibited, and so on.

The crux of this presentation is the signal fact that many international students do not share these common cultural expectations and norms. For them, moving to the US requires a total realignment of their expectations and understanding of what is normal student behavior. Your understanding of and responses to this necessary realignment can make the difference between success and failure for an international student.

I'm going to focus primarily on the academic adjustment international students must make in this presentation, but you should remember that academics are often inextricably intertwined with necessary social adjustments. The first of these adjustments is the adjustment to the American language:

*1. "But I did fine on the TOEFL!" Or "But s/he did fine on the TESOL!"*

As self-evident as it might appear, international students often have significant difficulty dealing with American English. It was the single most significant difficulty my research subjects reported in adjusting to American higher education. The TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is an excellent test. It measures whether a student has mastered a certain level of formal English. It can be given via Internet or at a fixed brick-and-mortar location. It tells the college about an applicant's ability to listen, read, speak and write in English. It also contains materials on academic course content, campus situations and familiar topics. It requires students to provide a sample of their own English usage and verbal pronunciation. One might think that an adequate score on the TOEFL would indicate the student's proficiency in the classroom and on the campus. Many of my students, however, indicated that there are a number of areas which the TOEFL didn't prepare them for. These include:

- Speed of lecture – a student who has learned English spoken by foreign-born teachers is usually used to a slower rate of speech and may not be able to comprehend the more rapid rate of speech used by the typical native-born college professor. Related to this is the issue of:
- Accent and/or enunciation – several of the students I interviewed reported difficulty understanding the regional accents of certain professors (e.g., Deep South). Enunciation of English is a laudable goal, but most native-born American speakers slur many words and phrases. (For example, “Jeet” = “Did you eat?”). Additionally, if you have an international accent, your accent may decrease the international student's ability to comprehend

instructions, discussion, and so on. Why doesn't the student speak up? We'll see in a few minutes when we discuss respect for the professor.

- Speed of reading – many international students read English slowly. They typically spend far more time reading textbooks and other assignments than native-born students; this makes attendance at other college functions problematic and inhibits social interactions with native-born peers. It is also anxiety-provoking, as they see peers out engaging in other activities while they struggle.
  
- Americanisms - the slang you use may be new enough or region-specific enough to be incomprehensible to the typical international student, even though the TOEFL works to assess it. Also, I found that many of my subjects did not expect sarcasm on the part of professors (not directed toward them but said to express actual disagreement). For example, saying “The Bush Administration sure did a fine job responding to Hurricane Katrina” may be easily interpreted as sarcasm by the American student who remembers “Heckuva job, Brownie” and the nationwide response to that statement. The international student, not having the historical background his/her peers have, may easily misinterpret the statement as true, much to his/her detriment.
  
- Discipline-specific language – while you may define words specific to your academic discipline, your definition could contain language so specific, abstruse or technical that international students still do not comprehend it.

For example, if I define the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test as being a “*metric for assessing receptive language*”, I should probably expect many international students to be confused by the term “metric”. Does it refer, in some arcane manner, to the system of measurement used by most of the rest of the world or something else? I certainly may have defined the test for most of the class, but not all of it.

- Cultural/historical idiosyncracies – we all know about “9/11”; foreign-born students may think of it as September 11 and be unaware of the shortened reference. This is easily remedied if the professor sees his/her student does not spontaneously comprehend the reference. But how about the Oklahoma bombing? Again, the native-born Americans all know about it, but most international students do not. Similarly, most of these students would know about the Clinton presidency, but they might not be aware of the issues surrounding his impeachment and the distractions from effective government it may have occasioned. Referring to a TV show, popular novel, etc., may also prove problematic. “I’d like to buy a vowel” may be second-nature to us, but it is rocket science to the international student. Casual references to these and many other culture-specific events during a lecture stop the learning process in its tracks while the international student puzzles over them, tries to understand them from context, ignores them or asks a neighbor for clarification.
- Anxiety – once again, my research shows that many students do well in a formal test situation; however, when asked to interact spontaneously with

peers as well as professors, they become hesitant, anxious and less sure of themselves. Anxiety is the enemy of optimal functioning in many areas, and comprehension and spontaneous linguistic facility is one of them.

Related to the issue of receiving clarification from peers is the fact that typical native-born students often do not recognize the inhibiting aspects of language difference and therefore do not always allow for the international student to be less-than-perfect in pronunciation, comprehension, and so on. While native-born students may initially be sympathetic to the difficulties evidenced by international students, they may soon tire of what they perceive as excessive dependency on the part of their international peers. Similarly, the native-born student – and you - may simply think that if someone has a question or a problem, all s/he need do is ask the professor. This leads us to the second point I found, namely:

2. “Only stupid people ask questions”

Many students from other cultures have learned that their purpose in attending university is to learn whatever it is that the professor has told them to learn. Slavish, word-for-word memorization and reporting of what has been said in class or in texts is what will be asked on the exam (often only one per semester), and deviation of whatever kind is considered to be an incorrect answer. A number of the African students I interviewed reported being beaten for failing to memorize properly. Although this took

place at the secondary level, it indicates the place rote memorization holds in the academic lives of my students.

Critical thinking may not only be ignored in other cultures' institutions of higher education but might even be considered subversive in some. One student reported that in her home country (in Asia), the repressive government was so concerned about having too many intelligent young people gather together to genuinely discuss and debate issues that it radically decentralized higher education throughout the country in order to minimize the possibility that such dialogue would occur. Small "universities" having only a relative handful of students have become the norm nationwide. Of course, this did indeed inhibit the feared "subversive" dialogue, but it also made high quality university-level instruction difficult to obtain, as there were so few qualified professors to staff so many venues and so little access to libraries.

Related to this topic is the fact that American students are usually able to take responsibility for at least some of their learning. Many will seek out assistance when and if they feel they are falling behind or will at least accept a referral for tutoring, etc. Some international students, however, will see a request for assistance as a failure and shameful; they will refrain from accessing easily-available institutions for assistance until it is too late. Japanese students seem particularly vulnerable to this mindset. Connected to the problem of appearing "stupid" for asking questions is the next topic:

### 3. "Only hostile people ask questions"

While we might not always be used to it, the majority of the world's population holds the college professor in high esteem. Asking questions of a professor, therefore, might indicate in some cultures that the questioner does not agree with the professor's statements. Even a question asking for clarification might imply that the professor's lecture is obtuse and therefore be insulting. Either way, the international student will frequently refrain from asking questions, even when questions are sought by the professor, in order not to cause "embarrassment" or put the professor on the spot. My experience in SR is instructive, as NO student asked any question initially, even when I earnestly solicited questions. I will discuss how I dealt with this issue later in this discussion.

4. "I respect you. How do I present myself to you?"

An associated issue is that of how a student should present himself or herself to the professor. Eye contact, so important in our culture, is often seen as insolence in African or Hispanic schools. Calling a professor by his/her name may also be forbidden. My experience in SR is instructive here in that no professor ever speaks individually with a student with the office door open. It is considered disrespectful, as it allows anyone who passes by the possibility of hearing what the professor and student are discussing. The issue of leaving the door open in order to prevent possible impropriety or the appearance thereof is considered immaterial when weighed against the loss of privacy. Additionally, in some African colleges, individual conferences are held only if the student pays the professor for the extra time, so a typically underfunded African student may assume that s/he has no real individual access to professors in the US. In some other

cultures, female students do not address male professors (e.g., Congo, some Muslim nations).

5. *"If I memorize everything, I'll do fine on the test"*

Time and again, I found this thinking to be common among international students who are not from Western Europe. Rocked by common American test protocols such as "Compare and Contrast the Following", they were grievously unprepared for American-style exams, which called for critical thinking. They were eager to spend endless hours memorizing texts and lectures, but they were unprepared to take that knowledge and examine it critically, deconstruct it or offer personal opinions about it. An issue associated with memorization is the workload all students are expected to shoulder. In some countries, such as Honduras, professors may not give assignments. Whatever the student does is on his/her own time, as no syllabus is given. The only measure of the student's performance is how well s/he does on the one exam, an essay which is given at the end of the semester. The multiple-choice test, so dear to some American professors, is essentially unknown in many of the developing world's universities.

6. *"At home, we can buy copies of lectures"*

Attendance and participation, both critical components of many American college grading procedures, are often not required nor expected in foreign universities. As the lectures will be the same every time the professor delivers them, there is no need for students to attend classes regularly, especially since there will be no interaction between the professor and students. Even if one cannot buy the lectures, if one student attends the

class, s/he can relate its contents to classmates, and they can study those notes. One student from Tanzania noted that if one learned the lecture s/he was assured of an A, as the classes were completely and solely exam-oriented.

7. *“I know it’s a fine paper, because I got it off the Internet”*

An increasing problem in China is the use of the Internet to download excellent term papers and submit them unchanged to the professor. The rationale for this practice derives from the notion that someone else, i.e., the professor or a nameless “they” is an expert, while the student is a novice and has shown good judgment and scholarship by finding the best paper available on the Internet. A step removed from this, one also sometimes practiced by American students, is the practice of “cutting and pasting”, that is, taking word-for-word sections from a number of Internet articles, pasting them into a single document and submitting it as original work. International students need to understand the difference between this practice and using attributed quotations and references. One of my African students had never written a five-page paper before and had no idea how to proceed. With the assistance of her professor and our tutoring center, she was easily able to develop the requisite skills to perform this task.

Related to this is the culture-specific norm that individualism or competitiveness is not prized and in fact may be seen as arrogant. For example, one of my students from Congo was quite reticent about reading her work to the class. Her professor was quite

pleased with it, but the student feared looking like a “tall poppy”, as a New Zealand student might put it, and consequently feared being ostracized by her peers.

A problem related to this is the fact that many developing countries use textbooks that are egregiously outdated in addition to being in short supply. The student who comes to the US with a high school education may not be as well prepared as the designation “high school graduate” implies. My students from Vietnam, Congo, Uganda and Burma were used to high school textbooks several decades old. In SR, students did not have access to some valuable texts, as they had not been translated into Slovak; they depended on lectures and Internet assignments to learn, and even though English is mandated to be taught in elementary schools, a shortage of qualified teachers prevents this from happening in many schools outside the metropolitan areas.

8. *“If we all stick together, we’ll all be OK”*

This is one cultural assumption that is actually correct and is borne out by a good deal of prior research. International students tend to group together in the US for obvious social, cultural and linguistic reasons. Many report that their closest friendships in college are formed with fellow countrymen. While this is so and should not be discouraged, professors should also strive to integrate international students with native-born in order to broaden all students’ outlooks and perspectives. I am reminded of the African student who bemoaned the fact that one American student had no idea of what the EU was and felt it unnecessary to learn about it. While we may never save that particular American student from his outlook, we should bear in mind that international students who are the most successful and comfortable in American colleges are those

who have been able to develop friendships and extensive contact with native-born students.

9. “Of course I know it’s a computer – we have them at home”

Maybe so, but the computers at home may not be up-to-date, have the latest software, work properly or have been readily available to all students all the time. In Bangla Desh and many countries in Africa, for example, the Internet is not widely available outside large cities, so students may not have facility with it, even if they are familiar with it. Schools outside the major cities typically do not have Internet, and where it is available, it’s expensive. Wide availability of computers on your campus does not mean that all students will be facile in their use.

10. “And I have to take this course because...?”

In most parts of the world, higher education is far more narrowly constructed than in the US. In other words, students go to a university to study a particular discipline, e.g., economics, history, and so on. They may have little understanding of why certain courses that have nothing to do with why they came to the US are required. Their background in that area may be quite limited as well. Much of the rest of the globe does not follow the model of the liberal arts paradigm, requiring extensive grounding in a wide range of subjects. These facts may inhibit an international student’s motivation to persevere in the face of some of the difficulties we’ve already mentioned.

**SUGGESTIONS for the PROFESSOR**

1. Identify the international students in your class AT THE BEGINNING of the semester and meet with them, despite their (probable) anxiety about meeting with you. Remember their feelings about closed/open doors, appearing “different”, “stupid”, and so on. Spell out the requirements for the course, avenues for extra instruction and assistance, and so on. Give them a handout which details the specifics you expect any student to know. These might include the acronyms (e.g., IDEA, etc.) you will use, terms and language you expect any student to know prior to coming to your class. Your offer to extend yourself to these students in and out of class will pay many dividends over the student’s career at your college.

2. Understand that the “honeymoon” won’t be over just because you met with them. Cultural differences and expectations are acquired over a lifetime and aren’t discarded immediately. American students are likely not to recognize this and to expect American-like behavior from ISs very quickly; don’t be like them.

3. Self-advocacy is a vital, learned skill. Just because YOU have made yourself available and open doesn’t mean that other professors can be expected to do so. You can help your students to advocate for themselves by assisting them in making appointments with other professors to discuss their needs.

4. Give a quiz at the beginning of the semester which asks the questions you expect all students should know the answers to in order to benefit from taking the course. In addition to seeing what students' levels of preparation are, you can inspect their responses for English comprehension, time needed to complete the quiz, and so on. For example, in my field of education, I expect that all American students will know that we have kindergarten followed by twelve years of public education, paid for by taxes. In Canada, students attend for thirteen years; in Slovakia, it's ten. In China, students attend until age sixteen, unless they're poor. And so on!

Speaking of assumptions, cultural and otherwise, don't forget to tell students what numbers on a test correspond to which letter grade. One of my Ugandan students was dismayed to find that the 60 she achieved on one of her first tests was a failing grade; "In Uganda, a 70 is an A!" Her peers from Congo agreed.

5. Group students with similar needs/backgrounds together. Pro: they offer support to one another, which is critical for their success; Con: they stay segregated and do not benefit from interaction with native-born students. Research consistently shows that creating opportunities for positive interaction between native- and-foreign-born students pays off in enhanced adjustment for the international student. It also shows that such students have higher self-esteem than students who do not have these interactions.

Get the best of both possible worlds by pairing them with a native-born volunteer for the first assignment and then wean them so that they can meet other members of the class.

No small group assignments in your syllabus? Create them!

6. Refusal to ask questions: in class, divide students into small groups (2 or 3), give them a problem/short article, etc., and have them report on it as a group. The ISs will begin to feel more comfortable speaking in class as they continue to engage in these activities, especially if there is no appearance of disrespect. Eventually, you can have them create short summaries of the article and, especially, ask questions gleaned from the article. I had good success using case studies which the students read in small groups, then discussed with other groups and developed questions and comments based on their readings.

7. Use whatever facilities are available at your college – this may include a learning center, tutoring center, international student center, and so on. Don't make the mistake of assuming students will automatically approach one or more of these facilities independently; they often do not! Computer skills, in addition to study and writing skills, can be learned if the students come to the appropriate venues for instruction.

## **A QUIZ to SENSITIZE YOU to CULTURAL DIFFERENCES**

1. You are teaching an introductory course in your discipline. Name three assumptions you have about your students' readiness to learn.

2. You are teaching an advanced course in your discipline. Name three assumptions you have about your students' readiness to learn.

3. You are teaching a required course in history for first year students. This course has nothing to do with an international student's proposed major, economics. Considering the fact that American students typically understand the necessity for taking courses in diverse subject areas, how would you present this course to an international student who comes to you, saying essentially, "This isn't why I came to study in the US. I came to read economics".

## **EXERCISES**

1. Write out all the acronyms your profession uses. In my field of education, for example, it's not unusual to have a dozen or more, e.g., IEP, CSE, COH, FAPE, IDEA, AYP, etc.
2. Write out what you watch and/or listen to on a regular basis, e.g., NPR, "Dancing with the Stars" ☺, etc. How many references do you think you make to these in your classes on a regular (or irregular) basis?
3. Write out what cultural events, shows, important dates, recent historical American events you might refer to in class, which you expect all students (at least the American ones) to know without your having to explain them.
4. What was your native language when you entered college? Had you visited the campus/city before you enrolled?

5. When you first got to the institution where you are currently teaching, how long did it take you to master the campus and surrounding areas? To find a place to live? To set up a bank account? To get settled in your office? And so on, and so on and so on!

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES for STUDENTS**

While the resources listed below are not typically part of the classroom, they are very useful and are provided in order to remind the professor that they are available for international students.

1. International students' office
2. Tutoring center
3. Counseling center

## **A QUIZ to SENSITIZE YOU to CULTURAL DIFFERENCES**

1. You are teaching an introductory course in your discipline. Name three assumptions you have about your students' readiness to learn. (Linguistic competence, knowledge of where to go if having trouble with the course, asking for meeting with the professor)
2. You are teaching an advanced course in your discipline. Name three assumptions you have about your students' readiness to learn. (Knowledge of basic terms/findings/etc. in the discipline,
3. You are teaching a required course in history for first year students. This course has nothing to do with an international student's proposed major, economics. Considering the fact that American students typically understand the necessity for taking courses in diverse subject areas, how would you present this course to an international student who comes to you, saying essentially, "This isn't why I came to study in the US. I came to read economics".

