

Techniques for Serving International and ELL Students

Adapted with permission from Dennis Bricault's "Techniques for Serving International Students"

Purpose

In an effort to assist Bryant University in supporting international and English language learning students both inside and outside the classroom, the International Community of Practice is providing you with a short list of guidelines and tips for your consideration.

Context

Increasing the number of international students on campus has been identified as one of Bryant's strategic goals. Exchange partnerships with universities worldwide, our own partnership with Bryant Zhuhai, our Academic English Language program, and the large number of multicultural and multilingual students applying from both within the United States and from abroad continues to diversify our student body. Some of these students are English Language Learners (ELLs) while others speak English as a first language.

Cummins (1989) notes that it takes second language students anywhere from five to ten years to master academic English. Though they have met language proficiency requirements for entry, most of our students will not yet have this amount of academic English study *prior* to their experience as college students. Therefore, it is important to note that they are still in the process of acquiring important academic language skills. Even for students who speak English fluently, but who are coming from another culture or place in the world, the way they've experienced education and their expectations for 'success' in and outside of the classroom may be very different from your expectations as their instructor. Thus, the transition to U.S. academic culture is a process that should be acknowledged as a part of their experience and supported, as necessary.

Some of our students have been placed in Bryant's Academic English Language (AEL) program, which is a small, one-semester transition program taking place during the fall semester. This determination is based on their language ability as it relates to standard proficiency testing, which is the norm among institutions of higher education. ELL students scoring above the threshold (an 80 on the TOEFL or 6.5 on the IELTS) are able to enroll directly into mainstream courses without having to participate in the AEL program or take part in any other form of structured support. Those scoring below these thresholds are enrolled in the AEL program.

Students who complete the AEL Program will have had:

- One semester of focused language development, where they have applied themselves to developing:
 - Listening and speaking, taking notes, making presentations, purposefully engaging in small talk, and participating in group discussions;

- Reading and writing, featuring several rhetorical styles of writing, essay organization, support, citations, and discussion of issues such as plagiarism and use of sources.

What You Can Do

Faculty members often ask, “How do I meet the needs of ELL students without compromising high standards or operating under a double standard?” We would 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 challenges:

- **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). Principles of Universal Design for Learning are extremely helpful for multilingual students. Provide multiple examples; consider the use trans-cultural examples and analogies. Activate subtitles of video content to assist in comprehension of spoken English. Give the student a few extra moments (up to 15 seconds) 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 or in text through a projection device. Speak deliberately and at a reasonable pace. Paraphrase complex ideas. Avoid ambiguous language in class and on tests. Allow (and let ELL students know) that they can ask for clarification of questions on exams and quizzes regarding non-class specific content. The ability to seek clarification for *non-class specific vocabulary* will allow these students to bridge gaps in knowledge that are complete in the lexicon of native English speakers and will reduce stress during testing time. Write keywords and concepts on the board. Be aware that body language (in particular, certain hand gestures) mean different things in different cultures. *Show* patience.
- **Handling written work.** When dealing with ELL 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 thought 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 an ESL Writing Specialist, the Writing Center (in ACE), or the Assistant Director of ACE for International and ELL students (contact information included below).

If writing is an important part of your class make it clear to ELL students. Give the first writing assignment early. Have students keep a journal, if appropriate. Consider providing a rubric. 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. LCS and Communications faculty will need to maintain their high standards regarding language control while at the same time recognizing that ELL students are not likely to achieve the same level of fluency and range of expression as a native speaker.

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 ELL 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 AEL program have had practice in group work, 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 and to embrace what it means to be part of a team. If class participation forms an important part of your class, make this clear to them early in the course, taking time to define what it means to you. Take into account that attendance and punctuality are culturally situated. Your related expectations in these areas may represent an adjustment to new expectations for some students; it's helpful to encourage students to attend your office hours to talk about their understanding of your expectations.
- **You may encounter serious difficulty.** It's likely that some ELL students will be significantly challenged by coursework. To help them manage this before it becomes a major problem, here are some approaches that you can try:
 - **Use the buddy system** by pairing an ELL student with an American study partner. This will give the ELL student an opportunity to discuss classwork on an informal but regular basis. This could also serve as service learning or extra credit for the domestic student.
 - **Encourage (or require) study groups.**
 - **Allow for note sharing.** Following a lecture and recording it at the same time proves an incredibly demanding cognitive exercise for students still developing their linguistic

fluency. If there are lecture notes provided, or PowerPoints available through Blackboard, this can alleviate some of the stress associated with learning while trying to record information. Alternatively, if there is an identified “note sharer” for the class, additional copies can be shared with ELL students as an aid to check their own notes against.

- **Refer students** to ACE and the Writing Center. ACE is staffed by peer tutors, professional learning specialists, and professional math specialists and offers one-on-one appointments, group appointments, and labs for a variety of academic subjects. The Writing Center provides one-on-one services with professional writing specialists and student writing consultants. ESL specialists in language acquisition and writing are also available to meet with students, working with them one-on-one to assist them in reaching their linguistic and academic goals.

- **Allow for extra time on exams.** You might get a letter requesting this directly, on the basis of academic English language fluency. Joel Swenddal, Assistant Director of ACE for International and ELL Students, issues letters to faculty for this purpose on a case by case basis *after* meeting with the student to clarify their areas of difficulty and facilitating appropriate scheduled academic support through ACE and The Writing Center. Of course, being a native speaker of a language other than English is not considered a learning disability, but it can be a source of increased test anxiety for some students. Slower cognitive processing in English, increased ambiguity when interpreting essay prompts and exam questions, concerns about grammar and conventional use of language, and a higher demand to decipher new academic and colloquial vocabulary can increase exam anxiety. Often, simply allowing students extended time will alleviate this anxiety, increasing their chances of top exam performance.

- **Contact the Assistant Director of ACE for International and ELL Students**, Joel Swenddal (401-232-6165). He will be able to suggest some strategies for you and/or the student. He serves as a direct contact for multilingual students, helping them navigate the many options available to them for academic support and aiding in their transition into U.S. academic culture. Given current staffing, however, he is not equipped to meet the needs of last minute drop-ins who need a paper proofread. Please note: If you believe you have a student with significant language challenges, please notify Joel as early as possible so he can get in contact with the student and connect him/her with supplementary support services.

- **For more information:** Members of the International COP would be happy to present an expanded version of this introduction in a workshop or as a part of a unit or department meeting. Contact Joel Swenddal (contact information above) for more information.

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Additional Resources

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