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### Encouraging Non-Native English Speakers in the Classroom

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## Encouraging Non-Native English Speakers in the Classroom

January 13, 2021 | By Marivic Lesho  
Instructional Design

International students are a vital part of the community at American universities. There are innumerable benefits to this intercultural exchange, but for students to have the best experience, instructors need to be prepared to address certain language-related challenges. We need to be sure that we're fair in how we assess the work of non-native English speakers, that we help them continue to develop their English skills outside of ESL courses, and that we create an environment that's welcoming to everyone.

### Language Challenges in the Classroom

Mastering a language requires more than just learning the grammar and vocabulary. There are nuances to communication that aren't usually taught in a classroom, and language is so closely tied to culture and social interaction that we might not even realize when we're facing a language barrier. These invisible barriers can result in students losing confidence or feeling isolated, and instructors unfairly evaluating their language skills and overall performance. Here are some language-related issues instructors should be aware of:

- **Mastering different styles:** It takes time for students to develop a sense of when to use formal vs. informal language, and they may not know that different fields have their own writing styles (Angelova & Riazantseva 1999).
- **Culture-specific writing conventions:** In English, the burden is on the writer to clearly explain their arguments in a conventionalized order. Students from places like China, however, might not be used to spelling out every detail, since in Chinese writing, the reader has more responsibility in interpreting the meaning (Angelova & Riazantseva 1999).
- **Cultural differences in classroom interaction:** International students are often perceived as too quiet, but silence is often unrelated to English ability. Turkish students, for example, may find it inappropriate to "show off" or discuss personal experiences in class (Tatar 2005). In one study (Lee 2009), Korean students reported that they're used to deferring to the teacher and "saving words" to sound smarter; they preferred to speak only when they had something truly substantial or relevant to say, as opposed to the workshopping style of American classroom discourse. This attitude is related to the common complaint that discussions often devolve into "students reading articles and saying disconnected things" (Pinheiro 2001).
- **Recognizing English variation:** Students may not have been educated in American English. British English is the ESL model in some countries, and places like India, the Philippines, Jamaica, and Nigeria have their own local dialects

and standards. It may look odd to American instructors when students write “conducted a research,” instead of “conducted a study” or “conducted research,” but such variants may actually be grammatical in international dialects and shouldn’t be considered second language errors.

- **Unfair assessment:** The assessment of non-native English writing can be inconsistent, particularly when a holistic scoring method is used (involving one overall score) instead of a more analytic method that breaks the grade down into subcategories (Huang 2009). Instructors often focus heavily on writing errors and assign disproportionately low scores, despite strengths in the content.

### **Tips for a More Inclusive Classroom**

Now that we’re aware of these language issues, here are some ways to make life easier for international students and yourself as an instructor. These tips are based on my experience teaching linguistics to non-native English speakers in Ohio and Germany, but many are backed by the research listed below.

#### **Writing**

- Use rubrics so that grading is consistent and assignment expectations are clear. In i4, we recommend that grammar, spelling, and punctuation be limited to 10% of the grade. Organization/structure can go into a separate category, but the main focus should be on content.
- Don’t feel obligated to correct every grammatical error. Too many corrections can be overwhelming, and students need to learn to edit themselves. Point out some recurring issues they need to work on, and if they need more extensive help, refer them to resources like your university writing center (if available) or Purdue OWL.
- Consider having some low-stakes assignments, like discussion posts or journals, where their grammar isn’t graded, and they can use less formal language. Students feel freer to express their ideas, and they get to practice different writing styles.

#### **Speaking and Participating**

- Keep discussions focused. Step in to summarize key points or redirect to relevant topics, and don’t let the most talkative students dominate the floor.
- Don’t interrupt students with grammar corrections. Let them get their thoughts out, and if necessary, gently paraphrase what they said afterward to confirm the meaning and summarize the point for the class.
- Try small group discussions. Each student has to speak more, but they get to know each other, so they might be less nervous when it’s time to talk in front of the whole class. Peer interaction is also helpful for language learning.
- Tailor your discussions and activities to the different backgrounds represented in your class. In my linguistics courses, I’ve asked Korean students to provide grammar examples from their language or had the whole class analyze pronunciation in K-pop videos. New concepts are easier to learn when applied to familiar topics. I also like giving students the chance to feel like experts sometimes, since I know firsthand that learning in a second language can often leave you feeling stupid.
- Value different kinds of participation. I’ve used rubrics that include not just speaking but also quality of discussion, attendance, preparation, and group work participation.
- Don’t enforce English usage when it’s not needed. It’s your call if you want all class activities to be in English only (personally, I don’t mind students conversing among themselves in another language), but it is not helpful to police and penalize students for speaking another language outside of class.

Above all, have empathy, and remind yourself how impressive it is that your students have chosen to learn in a second (or third or fourth) language. These tips are helpful for native speakers too, so they help to make the classroom a better space for everybody. If you have any other tips, please share!

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