**Teaching International Students**

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International students enrich higher education by bringing their languages, cultures, and perspectives to their peers and, in so doing, heighten social awareness, cultural literacies, and broad intellectual development for everyone (Wong 2018; Luo and Jamieson-Drake 2013). However, while international students contribute much to their classrooms and campuses, they also confront many challenges. Adjusting to higher educational settings is a challenge for students from any cultural or academic background, but international students often face additional difficulties. While they, like any student, must find ways to succeed academically and socially, they also must do so often in a foreign language and within legal systems and cultural landscapes that may be unfamiliar. The resulting cultural alienation and confusion, in addition to financial and cultural pressures to succeed, can cause their college experience to be riddled with uncertainty and anxiety. The classroom experience is also challenging, since international students often confront a culture of teaching and learning in higher education that is substantially different from that to which they are accustomed.

For educators to aid international students in negotiating their lives in higher education and thereby to enhance a multicultural and cosmopolitan campus culture for all, it is imperative for instructors and staff to better understand the challenges of international students and how to develop inclusive spaces of teaching and learning. In recent years, the Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching has hosted a series of conversations with international students and faculty. The following guide represents many of the concerns raised in these discussions and suggestions for how educators may best support international students, and in so doing, enhance their campus. This guide also explores inclusive teaching practices that can be incorporated into classrooms across a wide array of disciplines and teaching contexts.

**Terminology:**

Throughout this guide, we use the term “international student” to encompass a wide variety of experiences, but we recognize that this is imprecise and that students who may fall into this category are highly diverse, with varied experiences of language, formal visa status, citizenship, and cultural familiarity. Some international students were not born in the U.S., but may have attained U.S. citizenship and be heritage English speakers, and thus may not see themselves as international students. Others may have competencies in English as a second language (ESL) and a student visa, but may be less familiar with American culture, thus identifying clearly as an international student. These students and many others we refer to as international students for the sake of addressing some common experiences, but we recognize that they may prefer to identify as an English language learner (ELL), someone using English as an additional language, immigrant, bilingual student, another term, or some combination. In what follows below we will attempt to address teaching and learning issues with some precision, even as we hope this collection of insights will support international students from across many experiences with highly varied identities.

**Teaching Techniques:**

*Class Discussion:*

Class discussions can provoke anxiety in any student, but international students and English language learners may feel uncomfortable speaking in front of others due to language barriers, a lack of familiarity with social or cultural cues, differing educational backgrounds, and other factors. You may consider generating discussions that meet the following goals:

* Transparency. Due to cultural differences across educational systems, some international students may be accustomed to a teacher-centered classroom (i.e., the instructor directs most classroom activities, often through a lecture-based model). When they enter classrooms that emphasize modes of self-directed or collaborative learning, such as student-led discussions, they may need additional help understanding the rationale and structure for participation.
* Clarify expectations. If categories such as “discussion” or “participation” appear within your syllabus or grading policy, it is important to define your expectations at the beginning of the course. What does participation look like in your discipline or in your particular classroom? Communicate with your students about *why* you require active participation, especially by describing the benefits you think it brings to the learning process. It is also helpful to be very practical and transparent about what goals you have for discussion and what skills you are assessing through student participation.
* Incorporate multiple forms of participation. If verbal full class participation is not essential to your course goals, consider offering alternative participation strategies such as small group discussion, think-pair-share, individual meetings with the instructor, informal blogs, discussion board posts, after-class email exchanges, or other assignments that allow students to demonstrate their engagement with course content.
* Distribute questions. Providing potential discussion questions before class gives students time to reflect and formulate more complex responses.

*Group Work:*

Research shows that collaborative practices and learning communities benefit traditionally underrepresented students by encouraging engagement between learners of diverse backgrounds, leading to increased multicultural competence (Soria and Mitchell 2015). You may consider the following techniques as part of a strategy of realizing these practices:

* Diversify group work. Asking students to turn to a classmate or form a group can create opportunities for peer education and can be a helpful discussion strategy. However, students sometimes can self-segregate or gravitate towards other students like themselves, so consider organizing group discussions or projects intentionally to promote more diverse groups and dialogues throughout the course.
* Organize study groups. If students have an assigned group and meet frequently either in-class or for study sessions, they may form a classroom community and develop closer relationships with other students, aiding their learning. They can ask their peers for additional help rather than having to approach the instructor if they feel intimidated. Implement a check-in or other way to regularly assess the effectiveness of the student groups. This is particularly useful for international or ELL students who may need more assistance developing proficiencies in language or cultural competencies.
* Group projects. High stakes group work may be difficult for international students. If a grade is attached to group work or collaborative projects, a student may feel like a burden if they do not understand how to contribute. Consider using group work for low stakes brainstorming so that students can build a rapport with their classmates and even potentially practice language learning in an informal setting. Also, consider giving individual students, particularly international students, clear roles (e.g., facilitator, devil’s advocate, notetaker) and assignments as part of their group work. [Learn more about using roles in group work.](https://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/resources/teaching-methods/group-work-in-class/using-roles-in-group-work/)

*Assessing Student “Engagement”:*

If a student looks disengaged or is not participating verbally, that does not necessarily indicate passivity or a lack of engagement or understanding. In many cultures, students are accustomed to high degrees of deference to faculty, and thus may be habituated to listening actively but quietly, avoiding eye contact, and not initiating dialogue. For faculty who are more accustomed to students who make eye contact or who challenge with questions or critique, this can appear to be disengagement. Rather than reading these cues as disengagement, instructors could determine student understanding through:

* Classroom Assessment Techniques.  Incorporate activities such as minute-papers on what they have learned and/or their remaining questions or issues that are still unclear (i.e., "muddiest points").
* Guided prompts. Instructors could use reading notes, digital social reading assignments, quizzes, discussion boards, blogs, and reflection papers that are tied to a prompt that requires application, critique, and/or synthesis. Rather than participating verbally, students would thus be given the opportunity to respond to course content through a variety of mediums.
* One-on-one meetings. Faculty can require individual check-ins with all students to ensure they are engaging and developing towards the learning objectives. However, because international students may be unaccustomed to this as a teaching practice, it may help to clarify their function and what may be required of the students.

*Instructor Presentation/Performance:*

International students or English language learners may need to translate language in their head as the instructor speaks, or they may need extra time to take notes in another language. In order to communicate effectively with all students, instructors can develop a clear teaching or presentation style that incorporates slower speech, accessible questions, and pauses for reflection. These techniques are elaborated below:

* Speaking style. Experts in any discipline may unconsciously speak quickly because they are familiar with their subject and they may extemporaneously pursue tangential subjects with cultural references that are unique to their home culture. International students can best understand these topics more easily if the instructor uses slower speech, clarifies culturally specific references, and pauses periodically for reflection and note-taking time. It is worth noting that changing your speaking style too much may be unnecessary and/or insulting, since it may appear patronizing. Consider clarifying and slowing your speech, and then check in with students a few weeks into the course to evaluate whether your presentation style is effective. This could be done through an anonymous Google Form or poll that is distributed to all students.
* Question format. It is useful to check in during instructional time in order to gauge understanding, but students often feel uncomfortable asking or responding to questions in front of their peers for a variety of reasons. They may respond more willingly to open-ended questions such as: “What part of the previous explanation is still unclear?” These types of questions invite students to acknowledge gaps in understanding (rather than asking a question such as, “Are we all ready to move on now?”). More specific questions that intentionally assess student understanding are far better than general ones designed to simply move class along. Pause for 10-15 seconds before transitioning to the next topic. This will provide students with the time necessary to process, reflect, and respond, especially if they have less language or cultural familiarity with the subject. Instructors could also create a “questions/feedback” discussion board or quiz on their course management system, in Google Docs or Forms (note: in China the Google platforms are not accessible), or encourage/require individual office hour check-ins.
* Explanations of major assignments. Provide both written and verbal instructions for all assignments. International students or English language learners may have to translate the instructions as the instructor speaks, so they may miss some material. Restate important ideas throughout the lesson and vary the phrasing/terminology as information is presented.
* Closed captioning. If PowerPoints, Google Slides, or other slideware are being used during a class period, consider providing closed captioning for this content. Some English language learners might be more familiar with written language than with spoken words. With captions, students also have the opportunity to go back through the slides later to read through what they may have missed, or to translate unfamiliar concepts/phrases when they have more time.

**Curriculum Design:**

Curricula appears differently across diverse cultural and educational contexts. International students should not have to do all of the work of adjusting to the U.S. classroom—the instructor can adapt some of their course materials to better support students from a range of backgrounds. Some suggestions for a culturally responsive curriculum design are provided below:

* Varied assignment structure. Implementing a variety of assignments and building some student choice into their subjects/formats can help students from different backgrounds find relevance and meaning in the course through multiple or personalized access points. For example, an international student may not be comfortable taking timed quizzes or exams in a second language but might perform well on an untimed written assignment. Additionally, a student may not feel comfortable writing an essay on American history events but might feel more engaged if they could choose a historical event from another cultural context. Assessing students through multiple forms is likely to also assess multiple skills and abilities, so instructors may benefit from using different formats (papers, tests, quizzes, projects), media (written, audio/video, digital), and both formative and summative assessments throughout the course. However, if you offer students choice, it would be helpful to be exceedingly clear with all students, international or domestic, about what range of options might be available, with examples.
* Consider the limitations. Interrogate popular/traditional assignments within your discipline and assess their effectiveness for international students. For example:
	+ Oral presentations. Public speaking can be daunting for students from any background, and international students may be especially uncomfortable speaking in front of the class due to language barriers or unfamiliarity with the practice. Alternative presentation formats could help students access the material more easily. For instance, instructors could consider assigning group presentations with specific roles that require different levels of public speaking (i.e., one student could design the presentation while another conveys most of the information to the class).
	+ Off-campus work. Some courses require internships, community service, volunteer work, or service learning. These requirements can pose issues for international students who have limitations based on their work visas. Moreover, some international students may not have a driver’s license, understand the city bus system, or have access to other forms of transportation. Check in with your students to make sure they are all able to participate in these activities, and arrange alternative assignments if necessary.
	+ Language expectations. Consider grading based on content more than grammar/mechanics. Also, be mindful that English language learners may not be as familiar with academic English, disciplinary jargon, or local/colloquial language.
	+ Writing assignments. If English is their second language, your students may be spending quite a lot of time at the [Writing Studio](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/writing/), the [English Language Center](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/), or other campus centers. Consider offering extra credit if they provide evidence that they are using campus resources. Reach out to them to offer additional support if they seem uncomfortable taking advantage of these resources for whatever reason.
	+ Models. Using academic articles or other professionally written examples could intimidate or discourage students. Providing approachable, but effective student examples of major assignments could serve as more inclusive models, alongside clear language about how the models are exemplary and how they might be improved.
	+ Syllabus design. The syllabus serves as the introduction to your course for many students. Offer clear expectations or directions for each component of your course such as discussion, participation, and major assignment descriptions. Examine your textbook or reading selections and assess whether these course materials reflect a diverse array of cultural reference points. Consider including an [inclusivity statement](https://kaneb.nd.edu/rsrcs/teaching-well/syllabus-inclusiveness/) or list of [community guidelines](https://guides.library.pdx.edu/c.php?g=527355&p=3605354), particularly if you are teaching a discussion-driven course.
	+ Rubrics. Consider using rubrics to clarify criteria by which assignments will be assessed, and expectations for different levels of performance. Rubrics can have any format or content you want to provide, but should be intentional in their representation of the criteria of assessment you will use. Transparent rubrics can be helpful to all students as they seek to do their best on assignments.
* Special considerations for online curriculum design. Faculty can help to ensure that international students who are learning online (especially from other countries) can receive equitable treatment.
	+ Discussions. In hybrid or other synchronous classes especially, faculty may privilege in-person dialogue via video conferencing (such as Zoom). This can have the effect of excluding online students from conversation. Please endeavor to give time and opportunities for online students to contribute to the discussion fully, and not include them marginally (e.g., only at the end of the dialogue). Also, please be attentive to time zone issues as international students may be contributing to the discussion late at night or early in the morning, which could affect their participation.
	+ Asynchronous materials. It is good practice to offer course materials that students can access asynchronously so that they have more control over when (and how) they view the content. For example, consider providing transcripts of your lectures or links to reading materials that you discuss verbally. Also, consider transforming any presentational elements you currently perform in synchronous meetings into asynchronous materials that students may review independently. This can have the added benefit of focusing synchronous discussions on the forms of teaching for which they are best suited, namely interactive dialogue and collaborative learning.
	+ Accessible online platforms. Avoid selecting an online platform that may exclude international students. Google platforms, for instance, are not available in China, so others may be worth using if Chinese students are participating in the course. Check-in regularly with all students to ensure they have the resources needed to succeed.
	+ Online testing. Learning management systems (Canvas, D2L, etc.) provide instructors with tools to create tests and quizzes that students complete through the online platform. Some limitations exist in these tools:
		- Many testing tools have built-in plagiarism detectors that can pose challenges for international students (see the “Academic Integrity” sections below).
		- When creating an online test, faculty can typically choose between several question formats (multiple choice, long-form response, short answer, etc.). For each type of question, the instructor should clarify their expectations in terms of length and content. Some question formats may be unfamiliar to students who have not previously enrolled online.
		- Instructors also should consider the benefits and drawbacks of imposing a time limit on quizzes or tests. Consider your course goals and determine whether or not speediness is a desired learning outcome. Research shows that white students are more likely to succeed in a timed exam than minority students (Henderson 2004; Curcio, Chomsky & Kaufman 2014) and that women’s performance diminishes on exams with time pressures (Ayshford 2020). Eliminating time constraints can help students who need to translate questions, identify definitions for unfamiliar terms, or otherwise engage with the course content on their own timeline.

**Academic Integrity:**

Academic integrity refers to the exchange of ideas and knowledge that is honest, trustworthy, fair, respectful, and responsible (International Center for Academic Integrity 1999). Practically and most frequently, the term denotes work that is undertaken honestly without plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, or cheating. Plagiarism or academic dishonesty appears differently across academic institutions and cultures. International students may not be familiar with U.S. plagiarism policies—in some cultures, borrowing or repeating someone else’s ideas can be viewed as a form of flattery (Scollon 1995; Simpson 2016). Additionally, some Asian cultures “encourage collectivism, memorization, and group work,” so students studying in Western countries “may face difficulties when adjusting to academic standards that encourage individualization” (Simpson 2016). Offer an overview of plagiarism or academic integrity within the context of your course and your culture, or use that provided by Vanderbilt’s English Language Center, which you can see [here](https://sway.office.com/3huIdA8uTF2IOfpu):

* Assess the penalties. If you know or suspect that a student has plagiarized, invite them to participate in a conversation about academic integrity. Consider allowing the student to re-do the assignment or revise the plagiarized sections, rather than failing them for the assignment or the course.
* Plagiarism software. If using a plagiarism detector like TurnItIn or SafeAssign, explain this process to students and justify your use of these programs. You may choose to enable the setting that allows students to view their own TurnItIn/SafeAssign reports so that they can see how frequently they are integrating research or outside sources.
* Defining plagiarism. Invite a member of the the English Language Center, Writing Studio, or Office of Student Accountability into your classroom to discuss plagiarism or academic integrity, since this could be beneficial for all students. Again, the ELC has created [this useful tutorial](https://sway.office.com/3huIdA8uTF2IOfpu) on academic integrity that draws insight from across Vanderbilt’s campus community.

**Getting to Know Your Students:**

Our diverse students bring with them many perspectives that can become part of campus academic and social life, but only if we understand them and integrate them into our work as educators. To help students find belonging and contribute to our classrooms and campus life, U.S. students and faculty need to gain familiarity with each other’s cultural backgrounds and perspectives. To help all of your students through this process of multicultural exchange, you can integrate getting-to-know-you strategies throughout your course. Activities like those listed below can help generate a classroom community in which students recognize and value the personal and intellectual contributions of others:

* Icebreakers. Icebreakers can be a useful way to introduce students to both the instructor and their classmates. However, instructors should strive to create ones that are culturally inclusive. For example, if asking about students’ origins, be conscious of phrasing. Rather than asking, “What’s your name and what city/state are you from?” instructors could simply ask, “What is your name and where are you from?” In this way, the instructor is not assuming that all students are from the United States, and students from different countries do not have to offer additional explanations about their origins. During the icebreaker activity, instructors can also avoid questions that require students to speak in front of the class for long periods of time in case they are uncomfortable with public speaking or are unfamiliar with this practice.
* Unconscious bias. As you learn more about your students’ unique identities, avoid making assumptions:
	+ Some students will not identify as an international student, even if they are not from the United States. While their cultural background does affect their life as a student, it may not always shape or define their classroom behaviors or student identity.
	+ If a student has a less common accent, discloses that they are from another country, or does not communicate in the way to which you are accustomed, don’t assume that they will not succeed in your class or understand the material. Simply check in with them throughout the course, as you would other students, to make sure they are on-track.
	+ Some international students find that faculty members are unwilling to learn more about them because it requires extra effort or because the instructor assumes that they will not have enough in common with the student. Demonstrate your interest in your students’ individual backgrounds and perspectives by valuing their contributions during class discussions, conversing with them during office hours, or researching their country/culture.
	+ Be willing to admit when you have a question about a student’s background or experience. Acknowledge that you want help if you experience a misunderstanding but avoid expecting the student to do all of the work of teaching you about their culture—do the necessary research for yourself as well.
	+ It is useful to incorporate current events into your course; however, the expectation that international students will know about U.S. popular culture can result in exclusion and miscommunication. Instructors should try to be mindful of not presenting the U.S. experience as a universal experience, and consider providing extra context for the cultural references used in class.
	+ Recognize that some international students may need to spend a great deal of time conducting additional research to fill in any contextual gaps. If you are teaching an American history course, for example, students from different cultural backgrounds may have to do extra work to keep up with the course material. Consider checking in with students at the beginning of the semester to gauge their background knowledge, and provide resources that may help them succeed.
* Names. Take the time to learn your students’ names and pronounce them as correctly as possible. Avoid making jokes about how “impossible” their name is to pronounce, or how you will “never remember that name.” If they prefer to use an English name, respect that decision and use the appropriate/preferred name. If you need assistance in learning how to pronounce their name, do not hesitate to ask upon your introduction to the student.
* Information sheets. Consider distributing a student survey or “[student information form](https://sites.nd.edu/kaneb/2020/08/07/setting-the-tone-designing-a-productive-first-day-of-class/)” that asks students relevant questions about how you can help them to feel comfortable and thrive in your course, including, but not limited to, their prior educational experience, their interests in the content of the class, things that would help them to succeed in the class, preferred names and pronouns (see the English Language Center’s [pronoun guide](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/resources/pronoun-guide/)), or anything else they might care to share. This could help you to get to know not merely your international students, but all students, and can guide your teaching in ways that are more personalized and meaningful.

**Office Hours:**

Approaching instructors for help can be intimidating to many students, but international students may not be accustomed to meeting individually with perceived authority figures due to differing cultural practices. Visiting an instructor’s office or asking questions without being prompted might feel disrespectful to some students. Encourage students from all backgrounds to seek individualized attention when needed:

* Offer multiple forms of help. Rather than reserving office hours for course-related topics, use this time to have general conversations with your students. Learn about their interests and experiences and check in with them about their emotional well-being.
* Alternative terminology. Consider using a term such as “Student Hours” or “Conversation Hours.” Framing it this way might reduce the anxiety students feel from approaching authority figures in their own space.
* Manage personality expectations. Be patient with students who resist being familiar or chummy. International students, as well as students who are simply reserved or introverted, may express themselves differently when speaking individually with a faculty member, or may not know what relationships are appropriate. Consider providing students with clear guidelines on what you believe to be the appropriate professional relationships you wish to establish with students Some students may also regard Office Hours as remedial—consider requiring all students to attend Office Hours once or twice throughout the semester so that individuals do not feel singled out or penalized.
* See the Center for Teaching’s [Office Hours guide](https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/office-hours/) for additional resources.

**Cultural and Social Awareness:**

Cultivating a culturally responsive classroom can enhance learning outcomes by generating support and awareness for international students’ unique experiences. Instructors can demonstrate their commitment to student success by considering:

* Sense of belonging. Maintain a list of international student clubs and other campus resources (a preliminary list can be found in the next section). If an international student appears isolated, recommend these resources so that they can feel socially connected to campus communities. Please see the English Language Center’s [weekly digest](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/calendar/) with a list of campus events and resources for international students seeking engagement and belonging.
* External factors. Recognize that international students might face additional stressors:
	+ Their families might be very far away, making it difficult to travel home for holidays or family emergencies. This can lead to feelings of isolation and/or guilt.
	+ Health insurance coverage. It is more expensive for international students (versus U.S. citizens or domestic students) to seek financial assistance for medical attention and mental health needs.
	+ The onus for integration is often placed on international students. They are pushed to integrate into U.S. culture or are tasked with teaching others about their cultural values and educational tenets. Domestic students can reach out to international students rather than placing the majority of social burdens on them. Domestic students could attend international student events on campus, invite them to participate in small group discussions, and specifically ask them to share their opinions or experiences. Faculty can normalize this effort in their courses by being intentional with how they organize and facilitate group work, assigning and discussing texts from a variety of cultural origins, offering extra credit to students who participate in culturally diverse events on campus, and incorporating activities on unconscious bias into their curriculum.

**Campus Resources:**

*International Services and Programs:*

[English Language Center](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/)

* This center offers contextualized noncredit English language courses, workshops, language resources, and one-to-one Academic Speaking, Academic Writing, and Pronunciation consultations to students and faculty who use English as an Additional Language, regardless of their level of proficiency. The ELC strives to help international students achieve their academic, professional, and social goals.

[International Student and Scholar Services](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/isss/)

* This office offers programs and services to assist international students and scholars from across the university.

[The Center for Teaching](https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/)

* This center offers teaching-related support to instructors from any level, background, or discipline.

*Student Offices and Programs:*

[Office of Leadership Development and Intercultural Affairs – Dean of Students](https://news.vanderbilt.edu/tag/office-of-leadership-development-and-intercultural-affairs/)

* This office initiates, develops, and implements multicultural education in the areas of policies, services, and programs for the entire student body.

[International Student Organizations](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/isss/campus-and-community/vu-orgs-activities/)

* Lists information on organizations sponsoring programs and offering support systems for international students at Vanderbilt. Includes social events that bring multicultural awareness and increase international/domestic student connections on campus.

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