

By Marian Kisch

Lack of basic English skills can hamper international students from speaking up in class or doing well in their academic courses.

Helping Faculty Teach International Students

ON A U.S. CAMPUS a female student from the United States is assigned to head a group in which Saudi men are participants. A Japanese woman complains about the directness and perceived bossiness of team members in a class project. An international student is confused about references, such as Daffy Duck, that were used in a lecture.

Cultural differences are only one of several challenges facing college and university instructors as more and more international students arrive on their campuses. The increase has been significant over the past several years—from 191 in 2006 to 497 in 2013 at James Madison University (JMU) in Harrisonburg, Virginia, from 220 in 2007 to 520 in 2014 at the University of San Diego (USD), from 293 in 2005 to 436 in 2013 at the University of St. Thomas (UST) in St. Paul, Minnesota, and from 561 in 2008 to 1158 in 2013 at the University of Tulsa, Oklahoma (TU). In fact, TU ranks fifth in the nation for the largest percentage of international undergraduate students by *U.S. News and World Report*. At Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond, Virginia, more than 1,500 international students are now studying at the institution, up almost 35 percent from 2006.

Students in the United States hail from more than 60 countries, but Saudi Arabia and China are the predominant ones. India, Vietnam, South Korea, Mexico, Kuwait, Angola, Oman, and Canada are also well represented.

Business and engineering are the top choices for international students. At TU petroleum engineering accounts for more than half the international population (many students are sponsored by their governments or oil companies), with business programs growing in popularity, especially by the Chinese.

“The faculty is looking at substantial changes in enrollment of international students within a short period of time,” Cheryl L. Matherly, vice provost for global education at TU, says. At the same time, she points out that the impact on enrollment is not equally distributed across the TU campus. Business has seen a spike of 50 percent and petroleum is oversubscribed. Arts and science classes are rising, but there’s been little impact on computer science.

“It’s never been an issue,” she says, “that international students shouldn’t be here; rather, teachers are concerned how to deliver the best quality education.”

Wide Array of Challenges

With all this diversity, what challenges do university professors face when dealing with international students in their classrooms? Academic integrity ranks number one, relating mostly to plagiarism and citation. Lori Friedman, director of international student services at UST, says: “Many students come from countries where they are taught to spit back what the experts—professors—tell them. They’re not used to paraphrasing or citing their sources when preparing research papers.”

Many live in a “collectivist” society where not sharing answers is going against the cultural norm, she says. “Here we call it cheating; they call it sharing.”

Amber Bennett Hill, director of international student and scholar programs at VCU, agrees. “International students come with different expectations about what is acceptable and what is cheating. Americans learn about plagiarism from kindergarten, whereas students from other countries may be used to citing facts without citing sources.”

Group work is another source of concern. Cultural norms, such as the separation of women and men in countries like Saudi Arabia, can lead to difficulties when working on a project with U.S. students. And the way Americans work in groups is foreign to some international students who are reluctant to express their own opinions because that may be discouraged in their home countries.

At USD a Japanese student was upset about the perceived bossiness of the people in her group, according to Greg Grassi, associate director, office of international students and scholars. In Japan, tasks were assigned in



To promote academic success for international students, Virginia Commonwealth University has implemented a holistic plan since August 2013.

different ways and the student was trying to navigate the process so she could contribute and disagree without offending others. “If left unaddressed, these issues often lead to a sense of isolation and lack of group participation by international students,” Grassi explains.

Lack of basic English skills can hamper international students from speaking up in class or doing well in their academic courses. At UST all international students have met English proficiency requirements. But at VCU about 25 percent first spend one to four semesters in the English Language Program (ELP). Hill reports the majority of these students do graduate. International students who apply directly to JMU must be proficient in English, Jonathan Kratz, assistant director of international students and scholars services, says. But they can opt to first enroll in a pathway program that provides first-year academic coursework along with English language skills. Tulsa recently upped its TOEFL requirement from 60 to 80 to recruit students with stronger English language proficiency.

Terminology that faculty use in the classroom can often be confusing to international students. References to popular culture icons readily recognized by U.S. students don’t register; sarcasm and slang are often taken literally. Friedman encourages teachers to be careful about the

words and phrases they use so everyone understands what they’re saying. Hill says her department works with faculty to explain and modify cultural references that are not native or readily understandable to international students.

Since most university instructors are not schooled in teaching writing in their subject areas, outside sources are employed. At TU writing support is given to international students both pre- and postmatriculation. A new graduate-level course there focuses on professional and technical writing.

Solutions for Faculty

Although most instructors enjoy having international students in their classrooms, they need support from their institutions. Otherwise, they could feel alone and overwhelmed.

So, what is higher education doing about this challenge? New faculty orientations and department meetings spell out expectations, challenges, and solutions.

At St. Thomas, scenarios are used to help faculty explore difficult situations. One example: “Two first-year students are sitting in a faculty member’s office. The professor has discovered they turned in identical papers. The students are roommates, one an international stu-

dent. Their resident adviser gave them her paper to use as a reference. Response from international student: ‘Someone told me it’s perfectly fine to do this.’ Discussion follows.

“The foreign student’s culture cannot be taken as an excuse for failure,” Grassi says. “We have to set up an environment so everyone knows what is expected, and how to handle it when expectations are not met.”

The style of faculty in the United States and abroad can differ, sometimes causing misunderstandings. If international students are having a problem, their teacher may, in a casual way, suggest an office visit. But Chia-Yen Lin, director of USD’s international students and scholars program, says it’s important to be more direct and set up a specific time to come; this is more in line with what they experience at home. “Otherwise, the student may never show up and an opportunity is lost to deal with the issue at an early stage,” she says.

A unique approach was taken at VCU in August 2013 when a faculty learning community was formed to develop knowledge, skills, methods, and programs to support the academic success and wellness of its international students. This group of 16 met every two weeks, gathering information, sharing, listening to speakers, and searching the literature for appropriate material. The second semester was devoted to developing strategies and resources within their departments and sharing at new faculty orientations and online.

International Offices Support Teachers

Typically colleges and universities have various departments that handle each piece of the international student experience. But at VCU they have integrated all these services into International Student and Scholar Programs: academic, immigration, and student/community engagement. “It’s one-stop shopping for international students and faculty,” Hill says. She attributes the 3.7 percent retention increase from 2008 to 2013 in part to this integrated approach.

To deal with the increasing numbers of international students, some universities have

10 Practical Tips for Faculty

- 1 Be proactive in communicating with international students.** Even a short conversation after class about the student’s home country can help the student feel more comfortable and can build rapport. Do your best to learn how to pronounce students’ names, even if it takes a few attempts.
- 2 Normalize “office hours”** on the first day of class as most international students are reluctant to visit faculty offices unless they are compelled to do so. Keep in mind that in many parts of the world, professors and students rarely interact directly so some international students may seem initially distant or avoidant.
- 3 Check-in with students after assigning group work** and offer suggestions. Clear group/individual expectations are also helpful as international students may not be accustomed to cooperating in an academic environment.
- 4 Talk to students individually about participation and encourage students to share their unique perspectives;** ask questions like “how would this issue be perceived in your country?” to inject an international perspective on global issues.
- 5 Be conscious of discussions/topics that presume a nuanced understanding of American history and politics.** International students will often nod along in agreement although they may not follow the discussion.
- 6 Recognize that language proficiency is not usually their primary barrier to academic success;** many international students struggle more with academic writing and the volume of reading assigned. Help international students to prioritize readings and refer students to campus resources for more help.
- 7 Clarify your expectations on class policies** including attendance requirements, homework submissions, etc. If you notice an international student missing a deadline or arriving late to class consistently, use these situations as teachable moments and emphasize the importance of promptness and deadlines in the United States. Remember that international students are going through a process of cultural adjustment. Classroom culture is only one of the many ways they have to confront cultural differences every day.
- 8 Provide examples of successful coursework.** Often international student struggle to understand what qualifies as an “A” paper or presentation. Providing samples of “A” work can help international students to track their progress and to identify areas where they need to improve.
- 9 Understand the difference between degree-seeking and exchange students.** Exchange students make up the minority of international students at most U.S. colleges and universities are less likely to be familiar with U.S. academic culture and may experience more initial challenges.
- 10 Collaborate with your office of international students and scholars.** Unsure if an issue with one of your students reflects a cultural difference? Working directly with the international student office is a great way to handle challenging interactions with students. Keep in mind that international students may have to make academic decisions to protect their immigration status. In these cases, it’s best to advise students to seek help in the international student office.

–University of San Diego, Office of International Students and Scholars



Virginia Commonwealth University provides resources such as English language tutoring with one-on-one support.

created new positions. At VCU an English language support coordinator assists students and faculty on reading and writing strategies, and a transition coordinator works with ELP students before they enter regular academic classes and during their first year of study.

Tulsa also created a new position, assistant dean for academic English programs for international students. He works closely with the English department and the writing center, as well as assessing programs and reporting to the faculty about strategies that are working well in the classroom.

At JMU one academic adviser is designated to work exclusively with international business students.

USD uses a collaborative approach when an international student is struggling, either academically or personally. Initially the faculty member may meet with Grassi or Lin and the assistant dean to come up with a game plan. Then the student is called in to go over possible resources and solutions.

“This targeted hands-on approach helps us address issues in the early stages and may alert us to concerns that might be affecting the student’s ability to focus on his or her studies,” Grassi says. “Otherwise, the student might simply attend class and eventually be placed on academic probation or be disqualified.” This approach, while time consuming, is encouraged at USD and viewed as a proactive student retention strategy.

Many international offices conduct surveys to identify problem areas. After canvassing its faculty and staff, Tulsa developed

a year-long global development program in which they offered workshops on engaging non-native students in the classroom and in the community, and identifying resources to deal effectively with a global classroom. A workshop on pronouncing Chinese names was especially popular.



NAESA has a tool designed to help international students adapt to the U.S. classroom environment: *U.S. Classroom Culture*. This can be helpful to faculty when working with international students, as well as in student orientation programs. Order online at nafsa.org/pubs.

Student Orientations Pave the Way

Many schools sponsor orientation programs when international students arrive at their U.S. university. At UST there’s a week-long program dealing with academic expectations, immigration, course registration, and campus resources.

USD offers summer orientation programs to get international students acclimated before the start of classes. Last year they sponsored six-week programs for undergrads and three weeks for graduate students. Although the summer experiences are optional, Grassi says it’s catching on and is now mandatory for graduate accounting students.

VCU has taken orientation programs even further, literally, traveling to India last year to deliver a two-week program for the joint MBA program with Christ University in Bangalore. The business faculty expressed concern that the 40 to 60 Indian students who came to Virginia for their second year of study were deficient in group work, presentation skills, and academic integrity.

Sometimes information comes from unexpected places. In 2012 Friedman worked with a Saudi doctoral student who decided to do qualitative research on his fellow students’ struggles. Since English was not their first language, some students found it difficult to quickly take notes in classes; they were unaware that they could get help. Another obstacle was course selection. In Saudi Arabia, students were told what classes they would take. In the United States it was overwhelming to have such a wide selection; they needed some hand holding. Other issues related to critical thinking, group work, vocabulary, and slang. This information was shared with key UST faculty for enhanced understanding and appropriate changes were made in orientations.

Moving Forward

U.S. educators have high hopes for improving the relationships with their international students. Kratz plans to sponsor a survey this year to collect information from both students and faculty “to see if there is a disconnect with what is perceived as the needs of international students.” He also wants to find ways to attract more faculty and staff to attend workshops. In her quest to reach more faculty, including adjuncts, Friedman plans to do three to four presentations each year.

“We believe what we are doing is helping our faculty teach everyone better,” Hill says. “If they are being clearer in their explanations because they have international students in their classrooms, it helps everyone in the classroom.”

IE

MARIAN KISCH is a freelance writer in Bethesda, Maryland. Her last article for *IE* was “Community Colleges Partner With Brazil” in the March/April 2013 issue.