

Teaching International Students: Supporting, Listening, and Speaking

Faculty Focus Volume 2, Issue 3: March 21, 2005

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Several important issues and classroom management strategies related to listening and speaking skills can make the classroom experience a positive one for international students.

Most of the pedagogical suggestions below could be applied to all students, not only to those from different countries. At the same time, however, there are difficulties and needs unique to non-native English speakers. Domestic students may express concerns similar to those of international students, but the reasons behind those concerns are different. For instance, according to English-as-a-Second-Language faculty member Diane Belcher, "domestic students may choose not to participate in class discussion because of being introverted, uninterested in the subject matter, or unprepared for that day's lesson. International students, on the other hand, may be silent for any of those reasons too, or for other quite different reasons having to do with linguistic proficiency, cultural conventions, or educational background."

Research findings and pedagogical suggestions discussed in this article focus on three listening and speaking problem areas for international students: (a) difficulties in note-taking and comprehension, (b) a lack of second-language confidence, and (c) unfamiliarity with the U.S. academic classroom discourse patterns and expectations.

Note-taking and listening comprehension

Some researchers have documented that because international students don't understand the language, they experience difficulty taking notes. This inability to comprehend may also contribute to their silence during class discussions.

Pedagogical suggestions:

- Speak clearly and at a reasonable pace.
- Avoid inaccessible vocabulary, culture-specific words, or slang.
- Make the good use of non-verbal communication strategies (e.g., gesture and eye contact).
- Encourage students to audiotape the class, if they think it might help their comprehension.
- Encourage students to copy or borrow notes from peers and discuss the notes with peers.
- Write key terms on the board and ask comprehension-check questions.
- Invite students to ask questions if there is anything they do not understand.
- Use visual aids to enhance students' comprehension.
- Provide an outline or key terms on handouts, the blackboard, and/or overhead projector transparencies.
- Post main points or any visuals used in class on the Web, or send via e-mail either to all students or upon request.
- Use legible handwriting on the board. Cursive script may be difficult to decipher.
- Encourage students to talk with you informally or during office hours so that they become familiar with your dialect