

On Diversity in Teaching and Learning: A Compendium

Faculty Teaching Excellence Program
Office of Academic Affairs
University of Colorado at Boulder
Norlin M400A, Campus Box 360
Boulder, Colorado 80309

www.colorado.edu/ftep

www.colorado.edu/ftep/downloads/ondiversity.pdf

Diversity and Language: ESL Students in the University Classroom

Anne Bliss, Ph.D.

*University Writing Program and ESL Coordinator
University of Colorado at Boulder*

As increasing numbers of students, faculty, and staff who speak English as their second language (ESL) join the university community, they inject not only diversity in the use of language, but differences in attitudes and cultural orientation as well. Although there is no count of the number of ESL students on campus, we know that for the 1995-1996 academic year foreign students make up 4% of the total student population. 2.3% of the undergraduates and 12% of the graduate students are international students. Add to this group the immigrant and long-term resident ESL students, and we have a sizable percentage of students who are not native speakers of English. Especially in the university classroom, ESL students often find themselves at a loss for words. They may not comprehend the logic underlying the instructor's lectures or expectations for assignments. Their home culture may affect their behavior in the class, with instructors, and with other students. Often, a second language student may feel and act "at odds" with the system and the culture of the university.

Stereotyping ESL students is just as damaging as stereotyping "minorities," and lumping all ESL students as "foreign students" ignores important differences in background, culture, and language. The Malaysian woman studying chemistry and covering her head to show her devotion to Islam may be very different from the Kuwaiti woman who *appears* much the same, with a scarf covering her head. The immigrant student may have been in the U.S. for many years or may have arrived recently, and in either case may be making a desperate attempt to acculturate *or* to cling to the home culture and language. Furthermore, an ESL student may be a member of a family that has resided in the U.S. for many generations but has elected to speak a language other than English as the home language or "mother tongue." And, of course, a student who struggles with English is not

necessarily a student who "is stupid," "can't hear," or "doesn't understand."

When we look at international ESL students on campus, we should realize that we are often viewing the "cream of the crop"—those very able students who, in their home countries, competed for and won sponsorship to study in an American university. These students were judged by the same admission standards as native English speakers, except that the international ESL students also had to pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). The TOEFL is hard; native English speaking students often have great difficulty with the vocabulary, reading, and analysis sections of the test. These international students or their sponsors are paying a premium for their education; not only do they pay for out of state tuition, room and board, books, and fees, but they may have very high airfare costs and opportunity costs that may go unrecognized by the university. And in most cases they are not allowed to take jobs while they are in this country.

ESL immigrant students may have escaped from Vietnam on a boat, have immigrated from Mexico or farther south with parents who are now custodians at the university, or been stellar students and athletes in republics of the former U.S.S.R. Many of these students have well-educated parents who, because they did not know English, have taken entry level jobs to support their families. These students are generally motivated, hard working, and very serious about getting an education. Trying to learn English at the same time they're carrying a full load of classes and working 20-40 hours a week to cover expenses is no fun; if an immigrant student seems "sleepy," there may be a very good reason.

Finally, students who may or may not be minority but who grew up speaking a home language other than English, or a dialect other than standard American English, may have special understandings to offer, as well as special needs. The student from a big city who uses Black Urban Dialect may write "he be" in an essay exam response rather than "he is"; the student understands the meaning, but expresses that meaning in non-academic, non-standard English. The student who grew up

speaking Italian at home and English at school may have some interesting sentence structures, as will the bilingual student who speaks Korean most of the day and omits articles (a, an, the) from both oral and written English. It is important to recognize the difference between surface structures and comprehension. A student may understand the course material perfectly well but use sentence structures, diction, and style that are very confusing to native English speakers. Or, of course, the confusing surface structures may keep you from seeing that the student is misunderstanding the course material in exactly the same way as are your non-ESL students.

How can we value these second language students and help them in their studies and their lives at the university? First of all, recognizing that there is great diversity among ESL students leads to appreciation for those differences and sensitivity to the varying challenges they face. It is important to make sure *all* students are welcome and comfortable in the classroom; color, culture, religion, gender, language, and other differences should be valued. Classes would be pretty boring if all students were clones.

Coupled with other techniques for working with diversity in the classroom, the information presented below may provide some means of understanding and working with ESL students.

1. Consider the logic of the student's home language. How does it work? Some languages follow the linear structure of English; others employ a more circular or repetitive structure. The student who seems to be repeating the same idea in different words and who never presents a thesis or comes to a conclusion may be following the rhetorical structure and logical patterns of the home language.

Arabic, for example, allows and may even encourage diversion from the main point; when an Arabic speaker writes a paper in English, the paper may make sense for a while to the English-speaking audience, and then suddenly it may seem to go way off track. Eventually, the paper may seem to regain its focus, only to lose it again. This rhetorical structure, which appreciates adding interesting information or a story to a linear text, is beautiful and correct in Arabic, but it generally does not work well

for papers at a Western university, which we usually expect to follow either a deductive or an inductive pattern, with a thesis at the beginning or a conclusion at the end. Or consider a Korean student who may seem to write or speak in a repetitive, circuitous form. In Korean, if the repetition is well structured, the audience is guided subtly to the student's conclusion, even though that conclusion may never be stated. When this student writes in English, however, an American reader may keep wondering when the student will make his or her point or why the student seems to keep repeating *almost* the same idea. The student understands the material and how to think about it according to Korean linguistic and cultural patterns; the instructor can help the student reorganize the material for a reader or listener who expects academic English: a linear structure and a stated thesis or conclusion.

Instructors and students may also benefit from considering the distinctive linguistic structures and habits of English. For example, English uses articles (a, an, the) to mark indefinite or definite nouns; many languages do not have such markers and instead rely only on the context to determine which item may be under discussion. Misuse or no use of articles can complicate the student's speaking and writing. Also consider the complex ways in which English uses verb tense and voice to indicate subtly whether or not one agrees that the findings of a particular experiment are accurate or generalizable. A student who writes, "the results were applied to the majority of cases" but intends to say "the results apply to the majority of cases" may confuse the reader or convey inaccurate information. A second-language writer who has not mastered this convention may innocently convey a skepticism, or an endorsement, that he or she does not intend.

Academic English, in particular, uses many "attributors" to mark the "ownership" of particular statements: which assertions are claimed as the author's own; which represent other scholars' work with which the author agrees but for which the author takes no direct responsibility; which represent counterarguments with which the author disagrees, etc. Even native English speaking students may be confused about how to interpret these markers in their reading or

how to use them in their writing; consider the difficulties for second language students. The results can be disastrous when students omit attributors---anything from apparent self-contradiction to apparent plagiarism. You can help by showing students exactly why their text is confusing and where to insert the appropriate ownership signals.

2. Some ESL students may seem shy or unwilling to participate actively, particularly if the class is interactive. These students may not want to expose themselves as ESL speakers; they may worry about whether the instructor or students can understand them. In some cases, the students have experienced ridicule in other classrooms or an impatient teacher who was unwilling to wait for the student to put ideas into words. Some cultures place a high value on reticence. Others have oral languages, such as many Native American languages, that encourage listeners to form mental pictures of what they hear. This takes time, and it takes even more time to sort the images and reach a conclusion. Patience and respect for the students' culture and language usage are important. ESL students are a diverse group, but rarely are they students who "are stupid," "can't hear," or "don't understand."

For some students, a participatory class may be a new experience, as their previous schooling may have featured only lectures and seat work. In some cultures, teachers are revered and treated with the utmost respect. Students may have been taught not to look directly at the teacher, but to keep eyes downcast. These students will generally be reluctant to participate, and they may be especially reluctant to speak directly to the teacher. Some students have been taught by teachers who themselves were not native speakers or were speakers of a dialect of English. These students may be uneasy with academic English and native English speaking instructors. Encourage them to visit you during your office hours; you may learn a great deal from each other.

3. Think about homework assignments, quizzes, midterm exams, and final exams. An ESL student who comes from a schooling system that gives exams only at the end of the school year will need to make a major

adjustment. Perhaps turning in homework assignments will be familiar, but a weekly quiz or three exams during the term may be quite confusing, even threatening. A brief explanation of the exam system and the differing expectations for different types of tests will help these students.

4. Schedules can also cause problems for some ESL students, particularly the international students. Cultures and languages treat *time* and *space* differently. Some languages, such as Vietnamese, use the same word form for action that happens in the present and for action that happened in the past. Vietnamese speakers report that time simply "is"-- it's "all around." English tends to treat time as linear, and in the university, deadlines are "approaching" and "the term is flying by."

Time in the university culture moves fast. In English, we tend to think of the future coming toward us from the front and the past leaving behind our backs. In some other cultures and languages, the future is behind the speakers' backs because they can't see what will happen; the past is in front of them because they can see what has happened. Some students from Senegal once claimed that "time just keeps rolling around"-- they had no sense of urgency, of deadlines, of planning a certain amount of time for a project, or of scheduling their daily activities. The university culture and the linear concept of time posed many difficulties for them.

We can help these students understand and cope with class schedules and a linear time frame by providing a well-organized syllabus at the beginning of the term and referring to it occasionally, especially before beginning new topics, papers, or projects. Some instructors organize classes according to a calendar format, which gives a visual representation of assignments, tests, and projects. We can also help students understand our expectations for meeting deadlines by explaining how much time an assignment may take, and by reminding them to allow extra time for reading or writing in a second language. Native English speakers sometimes have trouble meeting our deadlines; consider how an ESL student with a different time frame must adapt.

5. The high percentage of ESL students in the sciences and engineering may speak to their interest and skill in math or structured sciences. Or those students may simply have recognized their difficulties with English and steered away from such fields as psychology, history, or political science. Some ESL students have confessed that they really wish they could study literature, but reading so much English is very difficult; meanwhile, they have a 3.6 GPA in chemistry or a 3.4 GPA in computer science engineering. Others claim that the reading and writing are not too hard, but they have problems thinking about "philosophical ideas" or "theories" in English.

We can integrate language learning across the curriculum. Clarification of theoretical or philosophical elements of courses will help not only the ESL students, but others as well. Instructors in the sciences can encourage students to read humanities and social science literature related to science. Such reading can provide fresh perspectives on pure and applied science, broaden the students' outlook, and serve as the basis for class discussion. Faculty teaching reading-intensive core courses who meet with second language students during office hours can ascertain that the students understand what they've read. Such techniques facilitate development of language as well as critical thinking.

6. The university expects ESL students to adhere to the same standards as other students. Since ESL students are especially likely to need help in meeting those standards, yet be reluctant to seek assistance, it is important that you, your TAs, and your students be on the same page in the rule book. International students may come from countries with vastly different standards concerning getting help, plagiarizing, cheating on exams, etc. Likewise, instructors have variable standards about how much expert or tutorial help is allowable, when students may work together, and so forth. The best course of action is to spell out your own rules, and put them in writing. In particular, if you are willing to make allowances for surface errors in the written work of second language writers, make sure your students and your graders know the limits exactly.

Perhaps the answer to many ESL difficulties lies in patience, understanding, and time. Research shows that concentrated effort may lead to near-native expertise in a second language after five to seven years. Our students don't have that much time; they feel a sense of urgency to get an education and get to work. We must find ways to sharpen their English as we teach them other subjects. Discussing the culture of the classroom, including the expectations, rules, and procedures, can help international students adjust to a strange and scary situation. And a few minutes of counseling or explaining how to organize written or spoken English for academic purposes can go a long way with most second language students. Our classrooms offer sites for growth and learning; sharing the linguistic and cultural understandings of our ESL students brings diversity and enriches us all.

Sources for Assistance:

If you wish to learn more about second language issues or to obtain assistance for your ESL students, the following campus resources are available:

- Developmental ESL Courses
International English Center (IEC)
492-5547
Linguistics Department
492-8041
University Learning Center
492-1416
- Equity/ Diversity/ Curriculum Library
492-3359
- ESL Writing Courses
University Writing Program
492-3606
- Tutorial Assistance
Academic Skills
492-5474
- International Student Issues
Foreign Student and Scholar Services
492-8057
Office of International Education
(OIE)
492-7741

- International Teaching Assistants
Graduate Teacher Program
492-4902

Anne Bliss

Biography

Anne Bliss is an instructor for the University Writing Program; she serves as the Program's ESL Coordinator and as the Learning Disabilities Liaison. She holds a bachelor's degree in English language and literature, and a master's degree in linguistics with a specialization in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Her Ph.D. studies were in bilingual and bicultural education, and her dissertation was the first published study of the effects of intensive pre-graduate training on international students. Her current research interests include English as a Second Language, comparative and contrastive rhetoric, the effects of computer

usage on composition, and long-term studies of the effects of American graduate education on international students.

Anne is also internationally recognized in the field of natural dyes made from plants and other natural materials. She has published several books on natural dyes, including North American Dye Plants, and written numerous articles about natural dyes, handspinning, and handwoven and handcrafted textiles.

During the summer of 1995, Dr. Bliss spent a month doing collaborative research and teaching English with the English faculty of Novosibirsk State Technical University, Novosibirsk, Siberia, Russian Federation. She also served on a Ford Foundation team in Hanoi, Vietnam, teaching English to researchers at the Center for Family and Women Studies and to members of the Vietnam delegation to the Fourth United Nations Conference on Women.