

## Addressing the Learning Needs of Speakers of English as a Second Language

Enabling speakers of English as a second language (ESL) to achieve the established objectives in a course without hampering the ability of the other students to do so poses a special challenge, but it is one that generally can be addressed with only relatively minor modifications in one's routine way of teaching. Some of these techniques you may already use, and many may benefit all students in a course, not merely the speakers of English as a second language.

### General

Most of our ESL students will understand written English much better than spoken English. The less that ESL students have to depend on their listening skills to achieve the learning objectives in a course and the more that they can rely on their reading skills to do so, the better their chances, in general, of doing well in the course. Providing these students, therefore, with access to as much of what they need in the course as possible in written form—in textbooks, on CourseWeb, in handouts, and otherwise—is perhaps the single most important thing that one can do to address their needs.

Various portable electronic devices enable ESL students to look up the meanings of words. When an ESL student seems to be texting in class, therefore, he or she may actually be looking up the meaning of a word (though, of course, it is possible that the student *is* texting).

### Lectures

Understanding lectures will be the biggest challenge for many ESL students, a task made even more difficult by the need for them to take notes at the same time.

To help ESL students comprehend lectures, one can:

- Allow students to record lectures
- Put lectures on Panopto so that students can review them
- Use visual aids (anything that will help lessen their dependence on language alone to understand the lecture)
- Provide students at the beginning of the class with an idea of what will be covered in class that day
- List the main points of the lecture at the beginning of the class
- Provide a written lecture outline
- Provide lecture notes in a handout at the beginning of the lecture or on CourseWeb (ideally before the date of the lecture)
- Use the print form rather than the cursive form of letters on the board in class (avoid printing in all capital letters and especially mixing cursive and printing in the same word and sentences)
- Use PowerPoint or write key terms and other important information on the board
- Make PowerPoint slides available on CourseWeb or give students copies in class  
(When instructors use PowerPoint, they tend to lecture more quickly than when only writing on the board.)
- Provide briefly any necessary background information

(An international student may lack some of the historical and cultural knowledge [including current pop culture] that we can assume American students to have.)

- Define important new or unfamiliar terms and explain new concepts
- Repeat key ideas or express them again in different words
- Summarize or review important information periodically in a lecture
- Enunciate words clearly and try to avoid running them together
- Pause (for a fraction of a second) where it seems natural in a sentence and between sentences rather than slowing your rate of speech
- Speak more slowly only when saying key words
- Avoid speaking exceptionally quickly  
(Native English speakers may be able to understand rushed speech at the end of a class session but ESL speakers probably will not.)
- Inform students that questions are not only acceptable but encouraged and allow time for questions in class  
(Many of our international students are from cultures in which students do not ask questions in class and hesitate to ask them here because they think that asking questions is impolite or that it implies to an instructor that the teaching has been poor.)
- Encourage students to use your office hours to ask questions  
(Some international students may be uncomfortable asking questions in class even if the instructor has solicited and encouraged questions from the students.)

### **Assignments**

To help ESL students perform well on assignments, one can:

- Give all assignments in writing (not merely orally)
- Provide students with an example of a good response to a written assignment
- Point out to the students user-friendly features of the textbook (e.g., the glossary, chapter overviews and reviews, etc.) if you are using a textbook
- Explain or model the process of critical reading if this is the kind of reading required  
(While reading will be the language skill in which most ESL students will be the strongest, they may read only for information and be unfamiliar with reading critically.)

What constitutes plagiarism varies across cultures. While students who have completed their English-composition courses should understand what qualifies as plagiarism in academia in this country and know how to avoid it, international students even more than our other students will benefit from a review of the subject and an understanding of discipline-specific citation conventions.

To help ESL students avoid plagiarism, one can:

- Explain what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable use of source material

- Explain why citing sources is important and point out proper citations in textbooks or other course materials or give examples of proper citation form in the discipline
- Model the citation of sources in class lectures and discussions
- Give students guidance in how to synthesize and evaluate their sources
- Explain the synthesis of ideas and information and point out the synthesis of ideas and information in the textbook or other course materials or give other examples of the synthesis of ideas and information

### **Class Discussions**

Many international students have experienced only classrooms in which students are expected to listen to lectures and take notes without contributing anything in class or asking questions. They, therefore, may be very reluctant to say anything in class, particularly to express an opinion or an original idea. Though many may never acclimate themselves to an educational setting in which students are encouraged to ask questions and become an active part of the educational experience, there are nevertheless ways of trying to foster their participation in class.

To help ESL students participate in class discussions, one can:

- Try to draw on international students' special knowledge of their cultures and countries
- Consider calling on specific students if you want them to participate in a class discussion
- Allow students a little more time to think of their response than we usually do since they need time to think not only of *what* they want to say but of *how* to say it.)
- Give questions to be discussed in class in writing at the beginning of the class or at the class session before the day on which they will be discussed
- Have students write their responses before calling on them
- Include more small-group discussions (perhaps followed by whole-class discussion)

### **Exams and Quizzes**

Exams and quizzes can be especially challenging for an ESL students because of the need to read (and sometimes write) with a time limit and without a means of looking up the meanings of words.

To assess ESL students' attainment of the course objectives accurately in tests, one can:

- Give the students the instructions on tests or explain them beforehand in class, on CourseWeb, or in a handouts
- Provide sample questions and answers beforehand (some international students may not be familiar with some kinds of questions)
- Give students practice tests as homework or to help prepare for tests
- Avoid vocabulary with which the student may be unfamiliar; use the same vocabulary on tests and quizzes that was used in class
- Avoid complex sentences where simpler ones would suffice

- Make an additional effort to eliminate typographical and spelling errors on tests as ESL students may assume the spelling is correct and spend time trying to decipher the meaning of what they believe is a word
- Allow students to ask the meanings of words that they do not understand if knowledge of the words is not being tested