



### III. INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

#### SECTIONS:

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This chapter is written for US faculty and TAs who teach international students. Faculty and TAs from other countries who want to learn more about the cultural and academic assumptions of US students may consult the books listed under “Information for International TAs” in Appendix II.

In the past decade, the number of international students at U.Va. has grown dramatically. The university benefits in numerous ways from the knowledge, skills and perspectives brought by students from different parts of the world. However, as newcomers, international students face multiple pressures that may affect their academic performance. Foremost among these is their level of English language proficiency (accent, enunciation, slang, colloquial phrases, etc.), but there are many other stresses that they may also encounter. Many international students report that they find the instruction of their classes fast-paced because they must make a number of adjustments, not only to language and communication styles, but also to the US educational system, and to other cultural and social differences, all while trying to absorb new material and ideas. Being aware of these pressures, as well as the non-academic ones faced by international students can help you respond to them in ways that enhance their academic performance.

Chief among the non-academic obstacles that international students encounter is the real and perceived scrutiny they undergo when applying for a visa. The tightening of immigration restrictions that followed the attacks on September 11, 2001, have made it difficult for many international students to get their visas approved or renewed in a timely manner. Students from South Asia, the Middle East, and many other Arab nations face particular scrutiny: Male students between the ages of 16 and 45 who come from twenty-five countries within these geographic regions must “go through special registration procedures upon arrival in the United States, including fingerprinting, which have led many of them to complain that they are being treated like criminals.” (Jacobson 1). This scrutiny extends not only to their visas, but also to their course of study, if it includes science courses listed

on the State Department’s Technology Alert List. If, for example, an international student signs up for a course in biochemistry or nuclear technology, he or she could be subject to investigation. If a student asks you about immigration issues, refer him or her to the International Studies Office or the International Students and Scholars Program (982-3010, 208 Minor Hall).

Another unfortunate result of 9/11 has been a rise in reports of hostility directed at some international students. Across the United States, international students have encountered threats, racial profiling, physical violence, and other forms of overt and subtle discrimination (*Know Your Rights* 1). If you suspect or are informed that a student has been a victim of harassment or violence, refer him or her to the Office of Equal Opportunity Programs (EOP, 924-3200). See also the section on harassment and assault in Chapter IV.

#### Strategies for Teaching International Students

##### General Principles

- Be explicit about your expectations and try to give examples or model what you are talking about.
- Focus on meaning first and grammar and style later.
- Stress fluency in communication along with correctness.
- Try not to foster the student’s fear of errors.
- Reinforce the student’s strengths while explaining what he/she still needs to work on.
- Recognize that students may be differently acculturated to classroom situations.
- Don’t assume that a student who looks “foreign” is an international student or that one who exhibits writing difficulties is necessarily a non-native speaker.

##### Students who are Non-Native Speakers of English

International students who come from non-English-speaking countries, as well as US students who were raised in a household where English was not the primary language spoken, may find their academic performance affected in several ways.

These non-native speakers may combine the patterns of their primary or secondary language with English patterns. Students who are deaf may experience a similar form of language interference in their written work if their primary language is American Sign Language.

Students who are aware that they exhibit such patterns in speaking and in writing, or who perceive that their English vocabulary is less extensive than their classmates, may be hesitant to speak out in class discussion. In extreme cases, it may be difficult for other students to understand what they say, and their remarks may be ignored or even interrupted. Non-native speakers may also have difficulty understanding the idiomatic language or fast-paced speech that characterizes many class discussions. This perpetuates a cycle that makes it difficult for such students to participate. Yet participation is crucial if students are to improve their oral skills and become confident about their abilities, as well as to become part of the classroom community. To encourage non-native speakers to contribute to class discussion, consider using the following techniques:



*In the classroom:*

**When students make unclear remarks, paraphrase them before building on them** (“so you are saying that . . .?”). This gives such students an opportunity to correct you if you have not understood what was meant; other students also understand the comment and so are less likely to ignore it. To avoid singling out international students, apply this technique to American students’ comments as well.

**Make sure students understand directions and assignments.** Students from many cultures—and many individuals—believe it is polite to nod in response to someone’s words. When such a nod masks lack of comprehension, difficulties arise. If students have misunderstood previous directions, check with them individually after class about future assignments. Instead of asking,

“Do you understand this assignment?” say, “Tell me what you need to do for Wednesday.” You can clarify directions for all students by having a volunteer rephrase them during class.

**Write it down!** Use visual aids and write down key terms during lectures or while giving directions. This will help non-native speakers significantly with their comprehension of the material.

**Let students who hesitate to speak in class contribute first in small groups or through electronic discussion groups on Instructional Toolkit.**

For students who hesitate to speak on the spur of the moment, **provide assignments or questions that the student can prepare beforehand.** To avoid favoritism, you can give these assignments or questions to all students.

**Contact the Center for American English Language and Culture (CAELC, 924-6166) on behalf of students who have serious language difficulties.**

If you are concerned about an international student’s lack of participation in class, for example, he or she may be interested in practicing fluency and conversation with a native speaker through CAELC’s language consultant program. CAELC also offers an array of courses to help students with their written and oral English. For more information about these services, see the CAELC website (<http://www.virginia.edu/provost/caelc/>).

Non-native speakers may also experience problems in their written work and may express a strong anxiety over correctness, which dominates any concerns over the content of the material. If their problems seem relatively minor, this support might come from you or from a writing handbook (see especially a chapter on editing for ESOL in Diane Hacker’s *The Bedford Handbook*, used in ENWR courses and readily available at student bookstores). For more severe writing problems, encourage or even require students to use the Writing Center regularly, preferably with a standing appointment with one tutor.

One way to judge how much writing assistance a non-native speaker might need is to examine the types of errors being made. Typically, non-native speakers with writing problems will have repeated and consistent patterns of nonstandard usage that seriously hinder their communication of their ideas. Such patterns could include the following errors:

- *verb forms* (e.g., “It is important that science conducting experiments”)
- *prepositions* (e.g., “I went of house”)
- *articles* (“a,” “an,” “the”) (e.g., “I went to house,” “the science is important”).

The use of nonstandard verb forms indicates a more serious linguistic interference than the use of nonstandard articles or prepositions, which are the last part of a language to be mastered, particularly in English. As mentioned above, if a student exhibits only minor nonstandard article and preposition usage, and this usage does not hinder his or her oral or written communication, you need not take any special action.

### **Cultural Differences for International Students**

International students' relations to other cultures may continue to affect their academic performance and learning responses in ways beyond language interference. For instance, students from some Asian, European, and Latin American cultures may have been taught that it is a sign of disrespect to look directly at teachers when they are speaking, to question them directly, or to differ from their opinions. Understandings of audience expectations differ between cultures as well; students may have been taught that to state their opinions directly and forcibly in discussions or writing is egotistical as well as disrespectful. They likely have also been taught not to speak in class unless called upon. Depending on their school culture, they may have had more experience memorizing information than critiquing arguments or asking questions. For this reason, students from such cultures may be more hesitant to speak up in class discussion than some other students. Their writing may also rely heavily on abstract and passive constructions that obscure the direct presentation of their ideas. Such cultural differences may be combined with gendered differences, and so may particularly affect female students from such cultures. To respond to these cultural differences, consider the following strategies:

#### *In the classroom:*

**Ask international students to contribute their opinions without forcing them to criticize directly another person's (and particularly your) views.** You can focus at times on reaching consensus rather than on raising a debate.

**Emphasize that all students are welcome to come by during office hours** to ask a question or follow up on an idea from class or to contact you by email or phone, if you prefer.

#### *Responding to student writing:*

Rather than assuming that international students do not have a strong thesis or handing back their papers with a cryptic comment ("Write more clearly" or "Needs strong thesis"), **let students know they have permission to express their ideas**

**directly in their written work, and that in our academic culture, we encourage them to do so. Give them specific directions for the direct style you prefer.** A model or example can be very instructive.

**Comment first on the meaning and organization of the essay** and only after that on the grammar and style.

**Comment on errors in terms of general patterns of language use**, rather than on discrete instances.

That is, group the errors together (a problem with articles, or verbs, inconsistent past and present tense, etc.), and comment on the main rule, rather than circling each individual error.

**Set up a hierarchy of errors** and focus on the most important. Comment on the rules you most want the student to learn. Since the student cannot learn to correct everything within the confines of your course, focusing on a limited number of kinds of errors will give both you and the student a sense of progress. To enhance this sense of progress, you may even wish to focus at certain times on errors that can more easily be corrected rather than on those that are most important.

