Communication Strategies for International Graduate Students:

Surviving and Thriving in American Academia

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Western

INTRODUCTION

Communication Strategies for International Graduate Students: Surviving and Thriving in American Academia was written primarily for international and newcomer American graduate students to familiarize them with the norms of communication in the United States. International students need to be familiar with American norms about communication in order to be successful when they teach, communicate with their supervisors, and apply for jobs, as cultural differences exist in all of these realms. Those who work with international students would also benefit from reading this manual to become aware of alternate norms of communication in order to support, understand, and work productively with students from other cultural backgrounds.

While the manual is not meant to be prescriptive about how international students *ought to* behave, it touches on some delicate issues that are highly sensitive and sometimes invisible. Each newcomer must decide for himself or herself how much to adapt his/her behaviour to reflect American norms while in the United States. The problematic aspect of not abiding by the norms in a host country is that the nationals may not be familiar with cultural differences in norms and may misinterpret the student's behavior, which can then have negative consequences for the international graduate student. (In this manual, international graduate students are sometimes referred to as international teaching assistants if the focus of the unit pertains more to their experience as teaching assistants.)

I would like to thank The University of Western Ontario for supporting intercultural work on its campus and Dr. Debra Dawson for her constant enthusiasm and for including this work in the Teaching Support Centre. Special thanks go to Dr. Nanda Dimitrov for being an excellent mentor. I would like to thank the following individuals for their editorial comments: Nanda Dimitrov, Natasha Patrito, Gayle McIntyre, and Arash Lahouti. I would like to thank Dr. Betsy Skarakis-Doyle and the undergraduates Becky, Shawn, Angie, Justin, and Elizabeth, who appear in our videoclips, for consenting to be videotaped and for sharing their perspectives. I would also like to thank Bilal Bakht for his concrete additions and constant willingness to help. Very special thanks go to all the students who have taken Communication in the Canadian Classroom and who have given me permission to include their comments, experiences, and examples in this manual. Their presence in my classes offers unending joy and unending instruction to me.

I would greatly appreciate any questions, comments, or requests for additions that you may have after you have read it. Feel free to contact me at nlegros2@uwo.ca or at 519-661-2111, extension 80231.

Nadine Le Gros

UNITS & CHAPTERS	DESCRIPTION OF UNITS
Culture American Norms Culture Shock Graduate Culture Shock	… introduces students to ways that cultural differences manifest in American academia and familiarizes students with American norms. The units on culture shock offer concrete strategies to reduce anxieties related to living and working in foreign cultures.
Supervisor Relationships Being Direct Power Distance Giving and Receiving Feedback	… features strategies for finding a balance between taking initiative and showing respect in supervisor relationships and introduces language devices to achieve productive discussions with one's supervisor. This unit also examines cultural differences in delivering feedback so that ITAs can incorporate feedback they hear from their supervisors and deliver feedback effectively to their students.
Letter Writing Conventions Letter Writing Conventions Writing E-mails	… highlights the dos and don'ts of formal and informal letter and e-mail writing by drawing upon original examples of international student work.
Educational Assumptions Presenting an Argument Teaching Methods The Language of Teaching	… demystifies common behaviours of American undergraduate students, including information about the American teaching and learning environment. This unit offers international students strategies and language devices to help them become more effective instructors and more active participants in class.
English Skills Dictionary Work Do Make Have Research Meanings in Context Power of Passives Woulda Coulda Shoulda When No Means Yes Formality of Words	… includes highly practical resources and some exercises for international graduate students to expand and refine their language skills.

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CULTURE

What is culture?

> *"Culture [is] those deep, common, unstated experiences which members of a given culture share, which they communicate without knowing, and which form the backdrop against which all other events are judged."*
>
> - Edward T. Hall

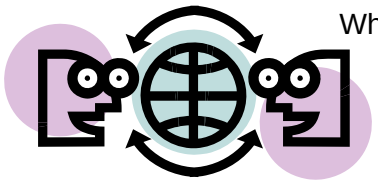
Why do international students need to know about cultural differences?

The success that international graduate students enjoy in their multiple roles with their supervisors, colleagues, and students hinges on their understanding of cultural differences. When people do not share the same cultural background, they will have different expectations regarding how others behave and communicate that can create misunderstandings. Knowledge of the cultural background of the host country can turn what could be potentially unpleasant misunderstandings into moments of deep learning. The intention behind this manual is to introduce international graduate students and their mentors to certain norms and communication patterns in America of which they need to be aware in order to understand people's intentions accurately.

Norms are behaviours that <u>most</u> people in a given society would consider to be appropriate. While the manual is <u>not</u> meant to be prescriptive about how international students ought to behave, it touches on some delicate issues that are sometimes invisible and highly sensitive. Each newcomer must decide for himself or herself how much to adapt their behavior to reflect American norms while in the States. The problematic aspect of not abiding by the norms in a host country is that the nationals may not be familiar with cultural differences in norms and may misinterpret the newcomer's behavior, which can have negative consequences.

To illustrate this, let us consider the following interaction that a graduate student from Pakistan had with his supervisor. In some cultures, it is considered

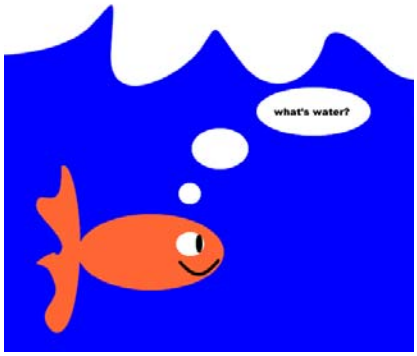
inappropriate to ask a supervisor for clarification, as this would imply that the supervisor had not done an adequate job of explaining something. In English speaking countries, it is an expectation that if one does not understand something, one *should* ask for clarification. The student learned about the cultural expectations of a North American supervisor and was able to negotiate understanding in this meeting very successfully.



When I joined [the university] a year ago, I found it hard for me to understand my supervisors during biweekly meetings. I hesitated to request them to repeat what I did not understand. I considered it impolite to ask for repetition. I learnt in [a communication class] that it is fine to request politely to the supervisor to repeat if I do not understand anything. This has helped me a lot. Just the other day I was discussing my results with my supervisors and all of a sudden one of my supervisors said, what's the exciting number? Rather than acting like a dumb, I at once replied, "Excuse me sir, if you could explain what you mean by exciting number." The professor passed a smile and explained me what he meant by exciting number. – a PhD Student in Engineering

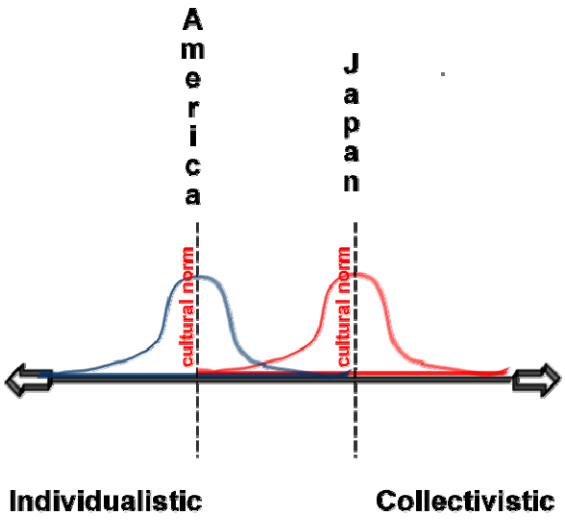
If this student had not learned about the cultural differences surrounding asking for clarification, he might not have had a successful meeting with his supervisor. As he was able to ask for clarification about what "exciting number" meant, not only did he and his supervisor have a successful meeting, but they have also established the groundwork for productive communication for future meetings.

So, back to the original question: what is culture? Culture is to people what water is to a fish. When we live in our culture, we tend not to have a great awareness of it. It is so implicit in our environment that we just assume that it is a constant in the world. Dr. Salman Akhtar described how when he was living in India, he wasn't *living in India*. He was just living. When he went to the United States, then he understood what it meant to be living in India (Szemberg, 2008). When we are "just living" in our countries, we may think we know about cultural differences, because we know about obvious differences in others. We know in some countries women wear the *hijab*, or in others, people eat raw fish. What people underestimate is the more invisible and subtle differences, which can be more significant *because* of their invisibility and subtlety.



Generalizations vs. stereotypes: When discussing cultural norms, it is very important to distinguish between speaking in generalizations and speaking in stereotypes. When we use a generalization to describe a culture, we refer to a tendency that *most* people in a given group might have to believe certain things, behave in certain ways, and hold certain values. However, if people apply a generalization to *all* members of a culture, then the statement becomes a stereotype (Bennett, 1998). For example, we could say that Americans tend to value individualism. (In fact, some value individualism to such a degree that they will be especially sensitive to stereotypes.) For the most part, this would be true. An example of a stereotype would be: all Americans like football. *All* Americans do not like football. Some despise because it is a symbol of overbearing national culture; others consider it to be a very dangerous sport; and others simply find it long and boring. A distinction between generalizations and stereotypes needs to be drawn in order to enter into any dialogue about cultural differences, because while norms do exist, ***all societies have people whose behavior, beliefs, and values do not reflect those of their larger society.***

Equally important when considering cultural differences is the concept of spectrums. For example, below is the spectrum of individualism versus collectivism. In their most basic terms, individualistic cultures tend to stress the importance of individuals over the importance of the group, whereas collectivistic cultures tend to value the importance of the group over those of the individual (Hofstede, 1980). The diagram below indicates that America is more individualistic than Japan.



(Adapted from M. Bennett)

While the cultural norm in America is individualistic, and the cultural norm in Japan is collectivistic, many people within each culture would be outliers — people who are different than their cultural norms. Some Americans may be as collectivistic as would be considered normative in Japan, and conversely, the beliefs, values, and behavior of some Japanese would be closer to what would be considered the American norm on the spectrum.

For detailed examples of some American norms that are important for international graduate students to be aware of, please see the unit on American Norms.

LINK

Cultural Perspectives Questionnaire IMD Switzerland
http://www.imd.ch/research/projects/CPQ.cfm?bhcp=1

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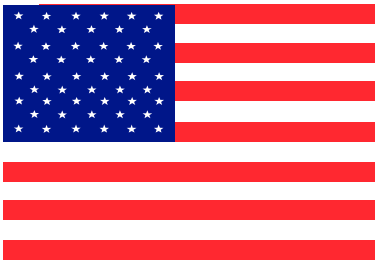
AMERICAN NORMS



Before reading this unit, it is strongly recommended to read the unit on Culture.

The following are examples of cultural differences that might impact on behavior and/or communication in the American classroom and society. The list is by no means exhaustive; many more cultural differences exist. The examples included here were derived from conversations with and questions posed by international graduate students.

Norms are behaviors that most people in a given society would consider to be appropriate. While the manual is not meant to be prescriptive about how international students ought to behave, it touches on some delicate issues that are sometimes invisible and highly sensitive. Each newcomer must decide for himself or herself how much to adapt their behavior to reflect American norms while in the United States. The problematic aspect of not abiding by the norms in a host country is that the nationals may not be familiar with cultural differences in norms and may misinterpret the newcomer's behavior, which can have negative consequences. Norms in America vary greatly from region to region.

Facial expressions: Do faces move more or less when people speak in America than they do in your country? Do people smile more or less? What does a serious expression convey? What does a smiling face convey?

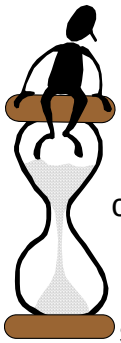
In America, people's faces tend to move a lot when they speak, and people tend to smile fairly easily. Smiling is, however, generally not meant as an invitation to speak. American students may find a teacher with a serious expression harder to approach than one who is smiling, as a smiling face conveys friendliness. It is especially important for international teaching assistants to smile at their students when they are teaching or if they meet with them during office hours.

Eye contact: Is it respectful to look somebody in the eye when they are speaking? Is it more respectful to look down when somebody is speaking to you?

Making eye contact is very important in America. Generally, Americans will maintain eye contact when they are listening, and they will alternately maintain and break eye contact while they are speaking. In America, a very common expression heard when parents are speaking to their children is, “Look at me when I am speaking to you.” It is considered a sign of respect to look at somebody when they are speaking.

International graduate students need to be very careful to try to observe American norms regarding eye contact. If you do not make eye contact when it is expected, you may communicate that you are not interested in what is being said. International teaching assistants need to engage in eye contact with their students while they are teaching, as eye contact communicates interest, enthusiasm, and confidence as an instructor. Maintaining eye contact can feel very uncomfortable for individuals who come from countries where *not* maintaining eye contact is the norm. Begin by maintaining eye contact for short periods of time, and then make a conscious effort to work on extending the length of eye contact.

Pause time in conversations: How long do people pause after another person speaks before they begin speaking? Is it appropriate to interrupt/speak at the same time as another person?



Generally speaking, Americans avoid interrupting other people when speaking. Interruptions do sometimes occur - friends, partners, and close associates might complete each other’s sentences; however, an overall societal norm is to avoid interruptions. Americans do not tend to have long pauses between speakers (more than approximately one second would be considered long), and if people pause too long in conversations with an American, the American might think the other person has nothing to say and continue to speak. Conversely, if somebody interrupts an American, it will create the impression of not being interested in what the person is saying.

International teaching assistants need to be careful when responding to students’ questions. They need to wait for the student to complete a question before responding to it, even if they are sure they know where the student is heading

with the question. All graduate students need to be careful not to interrupt their supervisors and professors when they are speaking, as interruptions can give the impression that they are not listening to what their supervisor or professor is saying or that they are unwilling to accept the comments.

Importance of time: Are people punctual or are appointment times flexible? Do people do more than one thing at a time? Do they attend to more than one person at a time? Do people engage in conversation before getting 'down to business' or do people 'get straight to business?'

While in some countries, there is an expression that "When God created time, He made lots of it," in English-speaking countries, the overall metaphor regarding time is that it is a scarce resource (Hall, 1959, Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Time is money; we budget time; we save time; we waste time; we run out of time; we carve out some time; make time, we are on time or out of time, something is time consuming; etc. The result of this is, generally speaking, Americans have a fairly strict relationship with time and for the most part, Americans take punctuality seriously. If a meeting is scheduled for 2:00, the expectation will be that people are there at 2:00 – perhaps even at 1:55, and if you are going to be late, a phone call stating so is appropriate. If people are late for meetings, it can create the impression that they are not respecting the time of the other person, so an apology is appropriate. In addition, an excuse such as, 'I was having coffee with a friend' or 'I was checking books out of the library' does not convey respect for the other person's time. (Generally speaking, events that are outside of one's control are considered legitimate reasons for being late.) People tend to get down to business right away without a lot of exchanges of pleasantries. Time permitting, such conversation will take place after the main purpose for the visit.

Americans tend to consider their time to be *their* time; therefore it is advisable to make an appointment if you wish to meet with anybody. If you drop by somebody's office unannounced and the person whom you are visiting is already meeting with another person, they will expect not to be interrupted unless it is an emergency. Moreover, if you drop by somebody's office unannounced, it is possible that they will not make themselves available for you at that time but will ask you to make an appointment. Americans can appear to be ruled by time and, compared to people in many other cultures, can seem to lack spontaneity. Americans also tend to plan relatively far ahead, making many appointments – even to see their friends. If international graduate students are unaccustomed to

making appointments far ahead of time, they need to make special efforts to remember the dates, because *not showing up for an appointment is considered extremely disrespectful*.

Concept of personal space: How close do people stand to each other when speaking? What is acceptable within personal space? Is it acceptable to be able to smell another person's personal scent, or does it feel like a violation of one's space if another person's scent 'intrudes?' How does it feel if somebody keeps greater distance than is the custom?

Personal space is like a bubble or circle around your body. As the United States is a large country, Americans enjoy the luxury of space and tend to have a clear concept of 'their' space. Americans will feel uncomfortable if somebody is standing too close to them — but standing too far away from them will also negatively impact communication. A general rule would be to stand far enough away to be able to shake hands with a slight bend in the elbow.

Touching behavior: Who touches whom in your society? Is same-sex touching appropriate?

Americans generally avoid touching people other than their close friends or family members. A common way for good friends to greet both men and women is with a hug. Giving somebody a hug does not mean that they like that person or that they are attracted to them. Very little same-sex touching occurs outside of greetings between men, and American men will feel uncomfortable if another man touches them even on the shoulder for more than a second or two.

Your first instinct might be to touch a student on the shoulder to get their attention; however, getting their attention by addressing them by name or by saying, "Excuse me" would be more appropriate.

Line ups: Do people line up for buses, in stores, etc? Do people respect the sequence in a line up?

Americans can take line ups very seriously and will object to somebody 'cutting in,' which means jumping ahead of them in

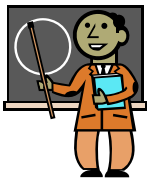
the line. As line ups require people to stand close to each other, international students need to observe American patterns of personal space. Do not stand too close to other people in line — an arm's length away is a safe distance. If there is any doubt about whether somebody is in line or not, it is appropriate to ask, "Excuse me, are you in line?"

When dealing with undergraduate students in class, international teaching assistants need to try to be mindful to speak with whoever was first in line waiting, as the students' sense of fairness will object to others being addressed before them.

Door opening behavior : Do people hold doors open for others who they do not know?

Americans tend to be mindful of holding doors open for others: if somebody goes through a door, they will quickly look over their shoulder to see if anybody is behind them. If so, they will pause to hold the door for that person. The rules surrounding who opens the door — men or women — will vary depending on the age of the individual and the occasion. For example, men of a certain age or men on dates might be more mindful of opening doors for women. In America, it is acceptable for anybody to hold a door open for another person. Not holding a door open for somebody behind you or walking through a door before the person who has opened the door (without their invitation) is not considered appropriate behavior. In addition, most people will say a quiet "thanks" if somebody has extended them this courtesy. Moreover, many people will find it impolite if you do not say thank you.

The teacher's role: What is the relationship between the teacher and the students in your country? Does the teacher encourage informality or insist on formality? Are teachers all-knowing authorities or are they facilitators of learning? Is the role of the teacher to give students answers or to ask questions?



In America, the relationship between teachers and students is much less formal than it is in many other countries. Professors will sometimes ask that their students call them by their first names. It is advisable to wait for permission from professors to call them by their first names, and until you receive this permission,

addressing them as Professor is safe behavior. Professors are not considered to be all-knowing, and they generally do not consider themselves to be absolute authorities in their disciplines. Rather, they tend to see teaching as a vocation in which they encourage the students to fulfill their potential as individuals and open their minds to learning.

American students will resist international teaching assistants who try to use too much authority. In addition, ITAs need to find a balance when they are teaching undergraduates between giving the answers too readily to students and offering the students just enough support so that the students can find the answers themselves.

Concept of leadership: Does a good leader give people freedom to make decisions or does a good leader make decisions on one's behalf? Does a good leader closely follow one's progress or trust people to be accountable for their own progress? Does a good leader give directions to people to find answers or does the leader give the answers themselves? Does a good leader expect people to take initiative or to obey?

Americans will respect a leader who gives them a task to do and the freedom to then do it. While in more collectivist cultures, discussing a task or working on a task as a group might be more of a norm, Americans have more of a tendency to want to work on a task alone. Generally speaking, Americans will not appreciate being given too many directions or being told exactly how to do something, and they may consider this to be 'micro-managing.' American leaders will expect those whom they are supervising to take initiative (see the unit on Developing a Productive Relationship with a Supervisor for more details about how this will affect a graduate student.)

Work ethic: Is it appropriate to take initiative with work, or is it more appropriate to wait for direction from a superior? What impression does it create if people take initiative? Does it make them appear aggressive or ambitious? Are those adjectives positive or negative?

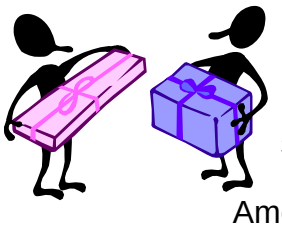
Taking initiative is generally considered to be a good quality in America, and supervisors and employers will expect people to take initiative. If you are

uncertain about whether what you are thinking of doing would be appropriate, you can ask your supervisor a question such as, “Would it be useful to …” Americans will generally not appreciate people who are aggressive but will respect those who are assertive. Distinguishing where the line is between these two behaviors varies greatly between individuals, academic disciplines, and geographic regions. Generally speaking, being politely assertive and ambitious are considered good qualities in a American work environment.

Concept of self: Do people derive their sense of worth from accomplishing personal goals or from membership in a community? Is it appropriate to want to be alone? Is being alone a good thing or something to be avoided? Do people prefer to be in a larger group or in a smaller group? Do people solve their problems alone or do they talk to friends, family, or community leaders?

America is an individualistic society, and people tend to derive their sense of themselves from their own accomplishments. While being a member of a community is important, it is entirely appropriate for people to want to spend time alone. Whether people prefer being part of a larger or smaller group varies depending on the personalities of the individuals. Whether people solve their problems alone or through talking with their friends varies depending on the family background, the age, the gender of the individual, etc. Sometimes people will want to be able to solve their problems alone, but this is not meant to be offensive to those around them. What is especially important to realize is that just because somebody mentions a problem, it does not mean that you are expected to solve their problem or even to suggest a solution. If you are uncertain about whether or not to offer help, you can ask, “Is this something that I can help you with?” or “Is there anything I can do to help?” Sometimes the person just needs somebody to listen to them.

Nature of friendship: Are friends available night and day, or does access to friends depend on their busy schedules? Do friends use each other’s belongings without asking, or do they need to ask permission to borrow something? Do friends drop by someone’s home unannounced, or do they call first?



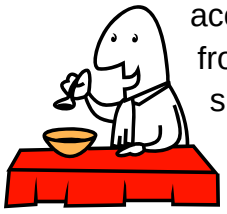
Americans can appear to be very private and possibly unapproachable to international graduate students. Generally speaking, the lives

of friends in America tend to be less intertwined than they are in many other countries. Friends may not be available night and day unless there is an emergency. Americans tend not to borrow other people's belongings without asking — but are usually happy to share when asked. Friends tend not to drop by unannounced but to call first. Making friends with Americans will require effort on the part of international students, as the Americans might not take the first step. It will generally be easier to make friends with American students if you live in university dormitories.

Foods: What relationship do people have with their food? What foods are cooked, and which foods are served raw? Do people avoid foods with strong after-odors such as garlic, or is it acceptable to have such smells on the breath?

One of the most important things that international students need to realize about food in America is that, contrary to what is visible on campus, not everybody eats a constant diet of junk food. In fact, many Americans are very knowledgeable about nutrition and are very careful about what they eat. Vegetables are sometimes served raw in America, and salads are frequently on the menu. If you are invited to somebody's home, you may be asked about foods that you do not eat, at which point it is wholly appropriate to state that you do not eat meat or pork, etc. Americans have a tendency to be cautious about the smell of their breath and many avoid foods with strong scents (such as garlic) before participating in social events. They also tend to chew breath mints or brush their teeth after meals to have "fresh" breath. International teaching assistants who work closely with students will do well to be mindful of this, as students will have difficulty working with somebody whose breath is not fresh.

Eating habits: Is it acceptable to make noise when eating or not? Is it acceptable to burp after eating or not? Is it appropriate to eat in front of somebody who is not eating? When do people offer to share what they are eating? What is the major meal of the day? Do people eat while working or walking?



Americans tend to avoid making noise when eating, and it is not acceptable to burp in public at all. Americans also tend to find the sound of somebody chewing gum to be unpleasant and distracting. (It is especially

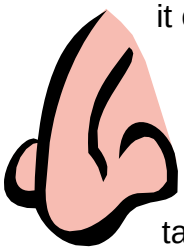
important not to chew gum while giving presentations or teaching.) Whether Americans offer to share what they are eating depends on many factors such as what they are eating, where they are eating, and how easily what they are eating can be shared. The major meal of the day is usually dinner, which for many is eaten at approximately 6:00 p.m. People do have the tendency to eat while they are working or walking; however, some people actively try to avoid both.

Personal scents: Do people wear perfumes and colognes? Do they prevent personal body odour?

Americans tend to be sensitive to personal scent and will not appreciate the smell of somebody's personal body odour or strong perfume or cologne.

International teaching assistants who come from countries where deodorants or antiperspirants are not common are strongly advised to conform to this norm in the States. In addition, many Americans will find strong colognes or perfumes to be equally offensive, and again international teaching assistants are advised to refrain from wearing a lot of personal fragrances when they teach or take workshops.

This business about noses: Is it appropriate to sniff or to blow one's nose? Is it common to see people with their fingers in their nostrils?



In America, it is considered rude to sniff if one has a cold: it is more appropriate to blow one's nose. People do not generally make efforts to blow their noses quietly; however, if one is sitting with people who are eating, it is more appropriate to step away from the table to blow one's nose. In addition, putting one's fingers in the nose in public is considered highly inappropriate in America.

Political discussions: Do people often engage in political discussions, and if so, with whom do they discuss politics? With friends? With strangers?

A common belief in America is that one should not discuss religion, politics, or money with people one does not know. Once people are more acquainted with each other, they tend to be more forthcoming

with their private viewpoints. However, until friends know each other *very* well, they might still preface questions about beliefs with phrases such as, “Do you mind if I ask …” or “You don’t have to tell me, but …” Many students who come from countries where political discussions are heated and commonplace may find American students to be apathetic. This may be a reflection of the relative political stability in America, as many Americans believe that whoever is in power makes little difference to their lives. The truth of the matter is that some Americans simply do not care about politics as much as people from many other cultures do.

Child raising beliefs: Do parents give their children lots of freedom, or do they hover near their children? If children fall when they are playing, do parents run to comfort them, or do they wait to see if the children are actually hurt? Do they give their children everything they want, or do they begin to discipline children at a young age? Do they allow their children to talk back or not?

American parenting varies greatly depending on the age of the parents, their cultural heritage, their experience as children themselves, and many other factors. On the whole, however, American children have the freedom to make many choices on their own. Even at three or four years of age, children will choose their own clothes, etc. American children can seem to be overprotected and to have little freedom, as their parents tend to be ever present. One rarely sees young children playing by themselves without a parent nearby. American children can appear to be a bit rude to individuals from other countries, as they answer back to their parents. International graduate students who are parents have the opportunity to meet Americans while their children are playing in parks.

General worldview: Do people have control in their lives, does fate dictate what will happen, or is everything in God’s hands? Do people believe in God or not? How does society view people who are religious or non-religious? If people believe in God, do they believe the mandates of their religion are literally from the hand of God, or do people have a less literal interpretation of religion?

Freedom to practice the religion of one’s choice is guaranteed in the First Amendment of the American Constitution. However, the divide between the ‘church´ and the state is very clearly observed in America. (The term “church

and state" is frequently heard; however, it is more accurate to think in terms of a division between any religious institution — whether it is a church, a synagogue or a mosque — and the state to be more accurate.) Unless international graduate students attend religious institutions, it is best to keep all discussions surrounding religion outside of their classrooms.

If international teaching assistants wish to say a blessing before beginning teaching, it would be appropriate to do so in private.

Notions of modesty: How do men and women behave with each other? How do men and women dress? Is it appropriate to have physical contact with a member of the opposite sex in public, or is it inappropriate to do so? Is it acceptable to shake the hand of someone of the opposite sex when meeting or not?

America tends to be a gender neutral country, which means that the roles considered to be appropriate for men and women are less distinct than they are in other countries. In addition, it is acceptable for men and women to walk arm-in-arm with each other in America, and it is common to see people kissing in public. Shaking hands with men and women is common in America, and international students whose religions prohibit them from shaking the hands of members of the opposite sex will need to employ a strategy so as not to offend someone who wishes to shake their hands such as bowing, smiling, and saying, "It's a pleasure to meet you." Lastly, many international graduate students may be shocked by how young people dress in America, as many people wear clothing that would be considered to be too revealing or inappropriate in other cultures. As an international teaching assistant, treating male and female students equally is especially important. Equally important is being able to recognize that the way the students dress is usually acceptable in America and does not in any way reflect on their intellectual abilities or on their dedication to their studies.

Concept of fairness: Do rules exist with the idea that they can be bent to accommodate different situations, or are rules universally applied to everybody with no concept of exceptions? Is it appropriate to negotiate about rules?

How people perceive rules has great cultural variations. In some cultures, it is the expectation that people will follow rules closely. Other cultures have the historical experience of having lived with excessive rules under despotic

or corrupt governments, and so a tendency is to view rules as things to be broken.

Americans tend to be a fairly rule-abiding nation and tend to consider rules to be fair if they are applied equally to everybody. Nisbett (2003) articulated the difficulty of this particular cultural difference well: “To set aside universal rules in order to accommodate particular cases seems immoral to the Westerner. To insist on the same rules for every case can seem at best obtuse and rigid to the Easterner and at worst cruel” (p. 64-65).

Undergraduate students may try to negotiate ‘rules’ such as when assignments are due; however, international teaching assistants need to be mindful that barring extenuating circumstances (such as a death in the family), other students will expect the same treatment.

International students who come from countries where negotiating rules is a cultural norm need to exercise caution when trying to negotiate rules in America, as they risk appearing as if they are trying to ‘cheat the system’ or that they are not respecting the wishes of the person with whom they are trying to negotiate. For example, if a student is trying to register for a workshop and is told that the workshop is full, it is *in*advisable to say something such as, “Oh, please, there is always room for just one more.” It would be more appropriate to ask, “Would it be possible to put my name on a waiting list?” When in doubt as to whether something is negotiable or not, an appropriate question would be: “Is there room for negotiation about this?”

The following e-mail exchange between a student and his instructor depicts the kind of difficulty an international student can encounter if he does not follow the rules of an assignment. The student and the instructor are communicating about an assignment that was given in class. The students have been asked to teach their classmates for 10 minutes on something related to their disciplines, and this student has e-mailed the instructor his PowerPoint presentation.

Student: Attached you may find the microteaching file for communication class for Friday. However I had other special materials about engineering, but I preferred to change my topic to a special topic in Art “Digital Photography”.

I spent more than 6 hr. on preparation of the file with the most important information and in the least volume. I really appreciate if you let me to cover materials and let the students to have a lab in the class to do their best in shooting pictures for least 15 min.

Instructor: While I appreciate the amount of time that you have taken to prepare the slide show, I specifically stated that I wanted people to teach their classmates something from their disciplines for 10 minutes. You have too many slides here to teach in 10 minutes, and the subject matter is not academic.

An appropriate microteaching would be about something in Mechanical and Materials. Engineering. As a specialist in your field, you need to be able to teach to the level of your audience. This is the challenge of teaching. You would not be creating this challenge for yourself by teaching about photography, and this is why I request that students teach something in their disciplines. I can understand that this might be a disappointment for you; however, that is the task that you were assigned.

Student: While I appreciate your encouraging remarks about my extra-curricular activities, I would like to mention some point about my presentation:

1) I will cover materials less than 10 min and I think there is no need to extra time.

2) I purposely ask you let me to run the presentation on the photography. I want let you (and other students) know that how much my presentation is scientific, in contrast with your remark that it is not academic, I will show that photography is much different with what popular people think about it. Before I read several books about this topic, I would think like you, "Photography is a funny nonacademic activity for wasting the time by pressing the button to shot pictures", But reality is much different.

3)I would be happy if you let me know that why you think an appropriate topic for a mechanical engineer is something in Mechanics and he/she can not do any other activities or even can not talk about them. I have read some materials about mechanic sciences, but it does not mean that I should be prohibited from other activities. Maybe after your class, I change my program and leave mechanics and its stresses and deformations for itself and enter to the world of the photography and maybe I become one of the most famous photographers who have been born on the world!!! do you want to deprive the humanity from new talented guys?

4) I am in apposite side with your view point that "As a specialist in your field, you need to be able to teach to the level of your audience. This is the challenge of teaching." I think if you are specialist in one field, its your ordinary duty to talk about your field. The actual art is that talk about something that you don't know much about it and let other people know as you know...

I can understand that this might be a disappointment for you; however, that is the task that I will do.

Instructor: I have made the expectation of this assignment clear to you. I specifically articulated the fact that you are required to teach something in your field. This is not negotiable. Your choice is to do a microteaching on something in your discipline or not to do a presentation. Furthermore, it is not appropriate for you to be negotiating this with the instructor of the course, nor is it appropriate for you to write, "that is the task that I will do." This does not show appropriate respect to your instructor's authority.

This student was unaware that he was giving the impression that he was challenging his instructor's authority. In addition, he had used her initial e-mail as a template for his response. He had hoped that this would contribute to the effectiveness of his communication; however, it actually made the e-mail sound rather cheeky due to pragmatics (see unit on Meanings in Context). Everything was resolved after a conversation, and ultimately the miscommunication was transformed into a good learning moment for both the student ***and*** the instructor.

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CULTURE SHOCK!!

Moving to a new country and experiencing a new culture is a deeply enriching experience on multiple levels. It opens us to new experiences, beliefs, and ways of being. It is, however, not an experience that is only positive: experiencing another culture can also involve moments of difficulty and pain. Frequently, individuals will experience many negative feelings such as confusion, anxiety, loneliness, homesickness, frustration, etc. when they go to a new country. These feelings are symptomatic of culture shock.

Kohls (1984) defines two features of culture shock:

1. It does not result from a specific event or series of events. It comes instead from the experience of encountering ways of doing, organizing, perceiving or valuing things which are different from yours and which *threaten* your basic, unconscious belief that your enculturated customs, assumptions, values and behaviors are 'right'

2. It does not strike suddenly or have a single principal cause. Instead it is cumulative. It builds up slowly, from a series of small events which are difficult to identify (p.64).

An extensive body of literature exists about culture shock. Scholars suggest many different models of culture shock, with varying stages depending on whether the individuals were immigrants, refugees, sojourning employees, etc. A common thread in the literature on culture shock is that it is a predictable experience for people who are new to foreign countries. The degree to which individuals experience culture shock varies greatly depending on their personalities, their past life experiences, the distance between their culture of origin and the new culture, their motivation for being in a new country, etc. Culture shock will be a minor annoyance for some, while for others it could pose a serious threat to their ability to succeed and to their identities. Being aware of what culture shock is can help manage it.

Stages of Culture Shock

Kohls (1984) describes five stages of culture shock: initial euphoria stage, hostility stage, gradual adjustment, adaptation, and reverse culture shock.

Initial euphoria stage has also been referred to as the **Honeymoon phase** by Berry (1985). It can be a time of great excitement and happiness. People are happy to be in the new culture, everything is new, and life is full of promise. During this state, people are excited by everything new in the country and might find differences charming, exotic, or 'cool.' It is a time when you are realizing your dreams and life is filled with possibility. Unfortunately, honeymoons by their very nature are short-lived. It is difficult to caution against euphoria; however, it is important not to set your expectations too high or to expect too much from yourself. For example, you will not be 'like the locals' in six months. You may not find a complete circle of friends like those you had back home in six months. Your first assignment in school may not receive an 'A.'

When individuals encounter difficulty that is more than they can manage, they might enter the **hostility phase.** At this stage, you might start to reject elements of the new culture, perhaps experiencing feelings of irritation and hostility. You might find yourself feeling frustrated with seemingly small things such as public telephones which seem like machines from another planet; you might get frustrated by how the bus system differs from the efficient train service at home; or you might have difficulty with the banking system which does not allow you to transfer money as easily as you could in your country. You might find the local people rude, inefficient, or indifferent.

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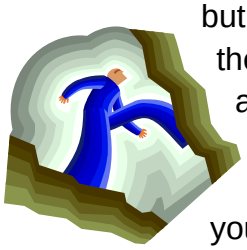
During this time, you might not feel like socializing with anybody outside your culture of origin. You might feel like isolating and protecting yourself by eating familiar foods, watching movies in your mother tongue, etc. Sometimes it is a good idea to be self-indulgent and take a mental holiday by allowing yourself to spend time doing this. However, if you isolate yourself completely, you will not learn about positive aspects of America and you could stay in the hostility phase for a long time, which would limit your overall success.

The most important two things to remember are: 1) you are *not* going crazy; and 2) the new culture is *not* terrible. You are experiencing a predictable phase. It is important to tread carefully during this phase and to realize that 'this too shall

pass' — but it will require an effort to learn about the new culture. This is a time when you need to become your own best friend, being both gentle with yourself but also looking for logical explanations. Feelings are not facts — they are just feelings, which can change into different feelings with a good night's sleep, a good meal, or some time with a loved one. Try to find an American who is sympathetic and who will understand your frustration. Perhaps sit back and think about your own expectations — are you expecting too much of yourself?



The **general adjustment phase** is characterized by feeling more comfortable within the new culture and feeling less anxious about differences. Individuals may have learned enough about the new country to start to feel they can manage the differences. This is a time when things start to feel familiar.

The **adaptation phase** (Kohls, 1984) is when you truly begin to enjoy elements of the new culture and find yourself capable of functioning quite well. You might find that you even prefer aspects of the new culture. You might feel more free than you felt in your home culture. For example, if you come from a culture that uses indirectness, you might come to value more direct communication.

Perhaps the most surprising stage of all in culture shock is **reverse culture shock or re-entry shock**, which happens when individuals return to their countries of origin and discover that certain elements of the original culture are no longer enjoyable or tolerable. Sometimes people will romanticize their home culture while they are away, forgetting the negative things that they never liked, or building up great expectations of what life will be like when they return. They might then find that they have changed during the time they have been away while those at home have not, or they will be surprised that their friends and family are less interested in hearing about their experiences than they might have anticipated. Once again, it is important to remember: this *too* shall pass!

Culture shock can be experienced in everyday life and also in the academic environment, which is replete with moments that lend themselves to cultural misunderstandings. Some of these might include differences in the relationship between supervisor and graduate student, the type of feedback offered on assignments, grading criteria, the amount of responsibility placed on students, the concepts of what constitutes learning and teaching, what constitutes knowledge, etc. (see units on Academic Assumptions and Developing a

Productive Relationship with a Supervisor.) Below is a testimonial from a PhD student in the History Department about her own experience with one element of academic culture shock.

Academic Culture Shock

A problem encountered here was regarding the comments made on my papers. As a result of my previous experience — most of the exams which I passed in my country were oral examinations — I was not accustomed to getting comments on my writing. My supervisor at my work place usually commented on my work but I perceived her more as a friend of mine than a real supervisor. Here, … I was quite depressed when reading the comments of the professor. Even though there was nothing harsh or brutal there — from my today's perspective — I felt many times exactly like an idiot. I have improved to some extent that feeling only after talking to my Chinese colleague who told me she got very bad comments on her paper but a good grade. I took all the comments very personally and I have suffered from my inability of expressing what I intended. Moreover, I did not know what was a thesis or an argument. I experienced the academic life as a cultural gap. After being appreciated in my home country for my work I have usually felt here as being underestimated.

Another issue that depressed me concerned the grades that I've got here. In [my country] I have often got 10 or over 9 which is the correspondent of A. Getting an 80 or 82 here was for me an expression of mediocrity. I did not have the courage to ask my colleagues or professors about the grading system even though as a TA I knew that I have to grade students' paper. But I wanted to enter the PhD programme and I felt I did not know whether my grades were good or not. I clearly remember that while I've been [at a] conference, I dared to ask a student from [another university] what is the average grade as a graduate student [there] and if 80 is a mediocre grade. It was about 7 months after starting my MA and I was not sure whether 80 was a good grade!

I don't know how many international students have faced this issue regarding the feedback received from professors and the grades received but in my case they represented a constant cause for feeling depressed. Nobody took time to explain me what is the highest grade one can actually get as a MA in History or the average one. Later I have heard that a 90 is almost impossible to get. I could have asked someone but by then I felt intimidated and very depressed. So, maybe it will not be a bad idea to explain to an international student what s/he could expect here regarding grades and feedback before actually starting the term.

(Read article from University Affairs on Surviving Academic Culture Shock.)

Coping Strategies

Taking the following steps can help overcome culture shock.

1. Pinpoint the specific time when you felt different or uncomfortable
2. Define the situation
3. List the behaviors of the other person(s)
4. List your own behavior
5. List your feelings in the situation
6. List the behaviors you expect from people in your own culture in that same situation
7. Reflect on the underlying value in your culture that prompts that behavior expectation
8. Reflect on the values in the ***other*** culture
9. Reflect on the differences between the two cultures

(Adapted from Archer, 1986)

The following is an example of how to utilize the nine steps:

When I was 27, I went to Japan to teach English for two years. Before going to Japan, I had a friend from Japan named Keiko. I moved to Japan and had been living there for approximately six months when Keiko returned to her home in Tokyo after living overseas.

Keiko invited me to visit her family's home one weekend. I very easily negotiated my way to Keiko's home on the train system, as I had learned to read *Hiragana*, one of the Japanese writing systems, and I had been living alone in Japan for six months. When it came time for me to leave on Monday morning, Keiko told me that she would accompany me part of the way home. I really didn't want or need her to do this. She would not accept 'no' for an answer and insisted on coming with me. In the train station, Keiko completely took charge, telling me where to go and what to do. I was very irritated by this.

The application of the nine steps to the scenario described above:

1. The specific time when I felt uncomfortable: Keiko was not accepting my saying that I didn't need her to escort me.

2. The situation: I had easily and successfully negotiated my way to Keiko's home. I was a 27-year-old who had been functioning just fine on my own in Japan for six months.

3. The behaviors of the other person: Keiko was not listening to my wishes, and she was directing me and telling me what and how to do what I already knew how to do.

4. My behavior: I was trying to say no and trying to tell her that I didn't need her help, but finally I gave in and let her have her way.

5. My feelings: I was extremely frustrated. I felt disrespected. I felt Keiko was treating me like a child.

6. The behaviors I expect from people in my culture in the same situation: I would expect my friends to listen to me if I said I didn't need their help. I would expect a friend to help me if I asked for help but not to interfere in my ability to make decisions for myself. I would expect a friend to say, "Call me if you need any help" or "Call me when you get home."

7. The underlying value in my culture: friends treat friends like equals — not like children. Friends listen to their friends' wishes and know when to respect the other person's individuality and personal ability. Friends don't make decisions for friends unless invited to do so.

8. Some values from the other culture: the Japanese tend to think that their language is too difficult for foreigners to learn and tend to be surprised when foreigners take the time to learn any Japanese. Perhaps Keiko did not realize how functional her friend was in Japanese.

9. The differences between friends in North America and friends in Japan: in a collectivistic society, friends tend to take more responsibility for their friends than people do in individualistic societies. Keiko did what a good host is expected to do in Japan; she was assuming responsibility for my well being, and she wanted to be helpful. Keiko had no intention of insulting me. I was insisting on independence, while Keiko was wanting to be helpful. Moreover, while in some cultures, escorting a guest to a car or a destination is the norm; however, in North America, even asking for somebody to wait for you at a bus stop is a favor.

What we see in any culture depends entirely on how we look at things and what we are expecting or not expecting to see. **The Kanizsa Triangle** is an optical illusion through which we might consider how our own mind creates a cultural lens through which we look at the world. Is there a triangle in the graphic?

"…people in different cultures can see the same event very differently, depending on their belief systems and orientation. They are seeing through different mind lenses and therefore seeing different realities. None are entirely true. Most are only true to a degree"

(Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 45)

Being unable to communicate is a core aspect of experiencing culture shock. Therefore, a road out of culture shock involves increasing one's awareness of cultural differences, being able to engage in discussions about the differences, and becoming aware of one's own expectations and values. Some of this might entail a new awareness of one's self.

You *will* become a citizen of the world through your experience as an international graduate student. But the road is long, and there might be a few bumps along the way.

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Surviving Academic Culture Shock

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Intercultural communication scholar Milton Bennett likes to say that when we talk about "another culture" it is usually an "island." Academia is one of these islands, with a language and culture of its own. Each year, thousands of new graduate students land in Academia. They study, they do research, and eventually decide whether or not they want to settle in Academia for good. When grad students arrive in Academia, the environment and the activities of the culture seem familiar to them, but they don't quite understand the local language and don't know the laws that govern this new place yet.

The norms and values of Academia are implicit, and difficult to decipher for new graduate students. Academia's permanent residents - Canada Research Chairs, postdoctoral fellows, deans and tenured faculty - use words like "epistemological assumptions" "multivariate analysis" and "construct validity." They all know that one may submit a book manuscript to multiple publishers but only send a research article to one journal. They have a sense of which research proposals are likely to get major funding and which ones do not. And they all agree that last candidate who interviewed for a tenure track position in the department did not get the job because he failed dinner.

After a few months of trying to decipher expectations in Academia, graduate students may begin to feel disoriented and irritable, and may become depressed. No matter how many times they revise their research proposal, their advisor still says that it is a "good start" and recommends yet another revision. They get discouraged, and consider quitting. They are experiencing *academic culture shock*.

Everyone who has lived overseas is familiar with the symptoms of culture shock, defined by intercultural scholar Robert Kohls as an emotional response to ambiguity in an environment where one encounters new ways of doing, organizing and perceiving things. Culture shock is cumulative, and results in part from having to function in a situation where one does not know the rules. While culture shock happens to everyone, the good news is that it passes with time, and there are a number of skills and coping strategies that reduce its intensity.

Academic culture shock typically has five main stages:

The ***pre-departure stage***, during which the new student prepares to embark on the graduate journey.

The ***honeymoon stage***, characterized by initial excitement about being in graduate school. During this stage, new Ph.D. students often come up with enthusiastic and innovative - but overambitious - research plans and try to attend every event offered on campus.

The ***participation stage*** begins when graduate students submit their first research proposal to Research Ethics and need to revise it, when their first paper is accepted at a conference, or when the undergraduates in their tutorial finally understand a concept they have tried to explain for weeks. This stage is characterized by trial and error, by learning from mistakes. Students participate, but there isn't much at stake yet.

The ***shock stage*** may set in any time after the end of the first term, sometimes as late as the end of the second year, as grad students become more and more active participants in the discipline. It often coincides with revisions on the first major research paper, difficulty preparing for comprehensive exams, rejected articles or doubts about pursuing an academic career. Those who are tolerant of uncertainty pass through this stage with relatively mild culture shock symptoms, while those who do not can face insomnia, depression, compulsive eating or conflict with their research supervisor.

The stage of **successful adaptation** begins as the graduate students become fluent in the language of economics or biochemistry and are able to decipher the expectations for presenting conference papers and publishing articles. At this point they are beginning to talk the talk of historians and walk the walk of microbiologists.

Research in cross-cultural psychology has identified several factors that may facilitate cultural adaptation. They include tolerance for ambiguity, flexibility, self-reliance, curiosity, and warmth in human relationships. The top five below will help you make the most of the first year on your graduate journey to Academia.

Sense of humor

Approaching culture learning with a sense of humor has been shown to facilitate learning and lessen stress associated with culture shock. Robert Kohls refers to it as "the ultimate weapon against despair" during cultural transitions. So if you ask a young-looking academic at the department party about his dissertation and he turns out to be a tenured professor in your department, do not be too embarrassed. Laugh, apologize and hope that you will finish your thesis before grey hair arrives.

The ability to make mistakes

While learning a new culture, we all make mistakes. Look for opportunities to fail in a safe environment. Everyone's articles get rejected from journals at some point. So submit them, and get rejected. Reviewers will provide constructive feedback in the process and help you improve your writing. Join a TA training session and safely experiment with your teaching in front of a group of peers. Ask your advisor to let you give short, ten-minute lectures in class to prepare for longer presentations in front of larger audiences later in your academic career.

Ability to learn from "cultural informants"

Find several mentors and ask them to articulate the norms to live by in your discipline. Mentors may be senior grad students, faculty members or someone from another university you meet at a conference. Think of them as your tour guide to Academia.

Your department secretary will also know a lot about the norms of social interaction in the department. Ask your mentors to explain the unwritten rules of networking with scholars at academic conferences, to model acceptable ways of critiquing the work of major theorists and to tell you of their expectations for collaborating on research in the lab.

Low goal orientation

Do not try to achieve too much during your first term or first year. Those who set fewer, more realistic goals during cultural adaptation are more likely to achieve them than those who are overly ambitious. Setting fewer goals during your first year will allow you to get to know the discipline and help you tackle major tasks such as your thesis or comprehensive exams much better in the second and third year of your program.

Learn to speak the language of your discipline

From the beginning, pay attention to **how** scholars in your discipline write and talk to each other – not only to what they are talking about. The sooner you learn to communicate like an engineer or computer scientist, the sooner you will be regarded as a junior scholar who can contribute to the discipline. During the first year in graduate school you are like an ethnographer conducting participant observation of your discipline's culture. Watch what types of research senior scholars praise, and what types of work they critique and how. Observe how faculty react when someone inadvertently violates the discipline's norms about collegiality, collaboration or presentation style.

So welcome to Academia, enjoy your stay!

Recommended readings:

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The ***honeymoon stage***, characterized by initial excitement about being in graduate school. During this stage, new Ph.D. students often come up with enthusiastic and innovative - but overambitious - research plans and try to attend every event offered on campus.

The ***participation stage*** begins when graduate students submit their first research proposal to Research Ethics and need to revise it, when their first paper is accepted at a conference, or when the undergraduates in their tutorial finally understand a concept they have tried to explain for weeks. This stage is characterized by trial and error, by learning from mistakes. Students participate, but there isn't much at stake yet.

The ***shock stage*** may set in any time after the end of the first term, sometimes as late as the end of the second year, as grad students become more and more active participants in the discipline. It often coincides with revisions on the first major research paper, difficulty preparing for comprehensive exams, rejected articles or doubts about pursuing an academic career. Those who are tolerant of uncertainty pass through this stage with relatively mild culture shock symptoms, while those who do not can face insomnia, depression, compulsive eating or conflict with their research supervisor.

The stage of **successful adaptation** begins as the graduate students become fluent in the language of economics or biochemistry and are able to decipher the expectations for presenting conference papers and publishing articles. At this point they are beginning to talk the talk of historians and walk the walk of microbiologists.

Research in cross-cultural psychology has identified several factors that may facilitate cultural adaptation. They include tolerance for ambiguity, flexibility, self-reliance, curiosity, and warmth in human relationships. The top five below will help you make the most of the first year on your graduate journey to Academia.

Sense of humor

Approaching culture learning with a sense of humor has been shown to facilitate learning and lessen stress associated with culture shock. Robert Kohls refers to it as "the ultimate weapon against despair" during cultural transitions. So if you ask a young-looking academic at the department party about his dissertation and he turns out to be a tenured professor in your department, do not be too embarrassed. Laugh, apologize and hope that you will finish your thesis before grey hair arrives.

The ability to make mistakes

While learning a new culture, we all make mistakes. Look for opportunities to fail in a safe environment. Everyone's articles get rejected from journals at some point. So submit them, and get rejected. Reviewers will provide constructive feedback in the process and help you improve your writing. Join a TA training session and safely experiment with your teaching in front of a group of peers. Ask your advisor to let you give short, ten-minute lectures in class to prepare for longer presentations in front of larger audiences later in your academic career.

Ability to learn from "cultural informants"

Find several mentors and ask them to articulate the norms to live by in your discipline. Mentors may be senior grad students, faculty members or someone from another university you meet at a conference. Think of them as your tour guide to Academia.

Your department secretary will also know a lot about the norms of social interaction in the department. Ask your mentors to explain the unwritten rules of networking with scholars at academic conferences, to model acceptable ways of critiquing the work of major theorists and to tell you of their expectations for collaborating on research in the lab.

Low goal orientation

Do not try to achieve too much during your first term or first year. Those who set fewer, more realistic goals during cultural adaptation are more likely to achieve them than those who are overly ambitious. Setting fewer goals during your first year will allow you to get to know the discipline and help you tackle major tasks such as your thesis or comprehensive exams much better in the second and third year of your program.

Learn to speak the language of your discipline

From the beginning, pay attention to **how** scholars in your discipline write and talk to each other – not only to what they are talking about. The sooner you learn to communicate like an engineer or computer scientist, the sooner you will be regarded as a junior scholar who can contribute to the discipline. During the first year in graduate school you are like an ethnographer conducting participant observation of your discipline's culture. Watch what types of research senior scholars praise, and what types of work they critique and how. Observe how faculty react when someone inadvertently violates the discipline's norms about collegiality, collaboration or presentation style.

So welcome to Academia, enjoy your stay!

Recommended readings:

Boyle, P. and Boice, B. (1998). Best Practices for Enculturation: Collegiality, Mentoring, and Structure. In M. S. Anderson (Ed.), *New Directions For Higher Education, 101, (pp. 87-94)*. San Francisco: Jossey- Bass.

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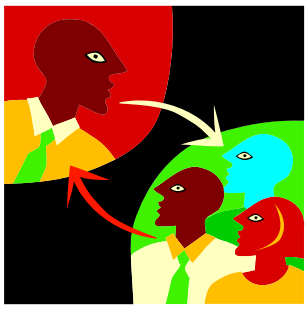
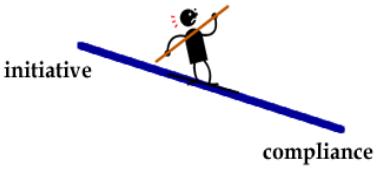
DEVELOPING A PRODUCTIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH A SUPERVISOR





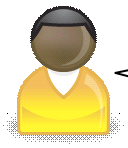
The supervisor/student relationship is central to a graduate student's success at university. Platt (1989) maintains that the interpersonal relationships resulting from communication strategies are often equally important as the messages that are transmitted. One of the elements that contributes to successful communication and successful relationship building between an international graduate student and his/her advisor is the student's linguistic ability. The challenge is not one of having correct grammar or pronunciation: the challenge is ***finding the balance between being and sounding appropriately polite and compliant while simultaneously showing an appropriate amount of initiative.*** The pragmatic competence (see the unit Meanings in Context) of a student is especially critical in these situations. This unit will demonstrate how aspects of communication such as different concepts of politeness, pausing, and responding to questions can interfere with productivity. It will also provide appropriate linguistic structures and techniques to help achieve the balance between being compliant and showing initiative.

Although the United States has lower power distance (see the unit on Power Distance) than many other countries, advisors *do* have higher status than students "by virtue of their rank as faculty members, their expertise in the field, and their institutional familiarity" (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford 1990, p. 476). Advisors merit a great deal of respect; however, different cultural notions of what constitutes respect and different ways of showing respect can result in misunderstandings and miscommunications. An additional element that requires consideration is the fact that the relationship between a supervisor and a student may involve American faculty and international students, or the faculty member may be from a third country. While students must clearly defer to their supervisors at times; research has shown that supervisors find that too much politeness on the part of international graduate students makes faculty feel uncomfortable and interferes with getting work done (Cargill 1998).

TAKING INITIATIVE

The relationship between a supervisor and a graduate student is different in America than it is in many other countries. In America, the supervisor is a combination of boss/mentor/ colleague/ consultant. Much more responsibility may be placed on the shoulders of the international graduate student than they might have experienced with their professors in their homelands. Students are expected to take initiative and not just to follow directions. The following comment illustrates one student's experience with this.

A West African student made the following comment to articulate his disappointment at how much responsibility students shoulder in the United States. Based on his experience in his country, he had been expecting more guidance:

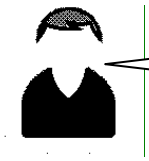


"The teachers … were not there for me, as I expected when I was in [my country]. Because the teacher back home will give you all the information you need. Here, they give you directions to go and look for the information" (Eland, 2001, p 102).

What constitutes taking initiative will vary from discipline to discipline depending on how intertwined the work of the graduate student is with that of the supervisor. In the arts and humanities, initiative might involve the student investigating the work of different scholars before asking a supervisor for suggestions. In the sciences or engineering, taking initiative might involve speaking one's mind during meetings or making suggestions about the direction of the work being undertaken.

The following interaction illustrates the importance of speaking one's mind

An engineering supervisor gives instructions to his graduate student:



I want the damping of the model to be determined using half power band and auto correlation methods.

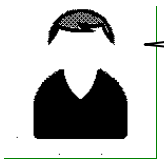
The student says:

I'll get it done by Monday.

The student thinks:

But that will result in an overestimation …we've had this discussion before.

Monday morning, the student arrives at his supervisor's office and shows the professor the numbers he requested, which did in fact result in an overestimation. The professor responds:



Don't show me anything that uses half power band, because it overestimates damping.

[the student is quiet for a few moments…]

The student thinks:

????? ,,, but you asked me to …

The student says:

Okay, I'm sorry, I won't show you anything using half power band …

Result

The graduate student has wasted two days, and the professor might have the impression that he and the student are not working together productively. The student was being overly polite and not direct enough. To have shown initiative, the student should have mentioned that he and the supervisor had already discussed the one approach and possibly suggested an alternative approach.

The importance of pause times and responding to questions directly

Pause times — the amount of time that lapses between when one speaker finishes speaking and another may begin speaking — vary greatly from culture to culture (see unit on Culture). International graduate students who come from cultures where interruptions are acceptable need to be especially careful *not* to interrupt their supervisors or they risk being told, 'You have to listen to me first' or 'Let me finish.' Equally important is not letting too much time lapse between when a supervisor asks a question and when a student responds to the question. Furthermore, responding to the question *directly* is critical to successful communication (see unit on Being Direct).

The following exchange between a female supervisor and a male PhD student demonstrates how unsuccessful communication results in a lack of productivity. The student had been working on research about seed germination and had to replant one type of seeds. The student waits at least two seconds after the supervisor speaks to respond (see yellow highlights). While in some countries, this might reflect that the person who is about to speak is giving serious thought to what he is about to say, two seconds would be considered to be too long in America and could be interpreted as hesitation, reluctance, or indecision. In addition, the supervisor clearly asks the student questions in three separate places **(see blue)** to which the student does *not* respond.

Su	…so that we MIGHT not need to do … a huge amount of statistical analysis anyway … the results I would hope would be clear cut … one way or the other … and identify …um the causes of .. of ah a lack of infection of (cultivar) … and the poor health of (cultivar)… (3 secs) **how does that sound to you**… (2 secs)
St	well (laugh) since it's a concern I mean I was really thinking as far as …the time goes … you know … but it's all right … I should just … ah … let it … let this … ah
Su	mm
St	… much … go ahead …
Su	well
St	… and see …
Su	…what…
St	the difference…
Su	uh huh … **what do you see as the alternatives** … to doing this
St	ah alternatives as far as … ah …
Su	the experimental alternatives …
St	ah I see …
Su	caus we talked about … um … what … YOU think would be a good thing to do … but you obviously have reservations about it … so … **what would you see as the possible alternatives** to … dealing with this problem (2 secs)
St	well I … really hope … in a way that ah one of the factors that is going to be … the isolates … mm…

(Adapted from Cargill, 1998, p. 179-180)

Cargille (1998) offers three possible reasons for the apparent reluctance of the student to respond to the supervisor's questions: "he did have reservations but … they did not involve having ideas about alternative solutions; … he did not have reservations; or … he did not know the meaning of the word 'reservations' and did not want to admit it" (p. 180).

While scholars who study intercultural communication have the ability to consider alternate interpretations of behavior, supervisors may not know enough about the student's culture (or about their own expectations) to be able to do so. In the above example, all the supervisor knows for certain is that the student has not responded to his questions, and this could result in the supervisor having a negative impression of the student or the student's abilities. Jenkins (2000) reports that faculty can incorrectly interpret different cultural patterns of communication as "lack of motivation … and unwillingness to cooperate" (p. 477).

HAVING SUCCESSFUL SESSIONS WITH ADVISORS

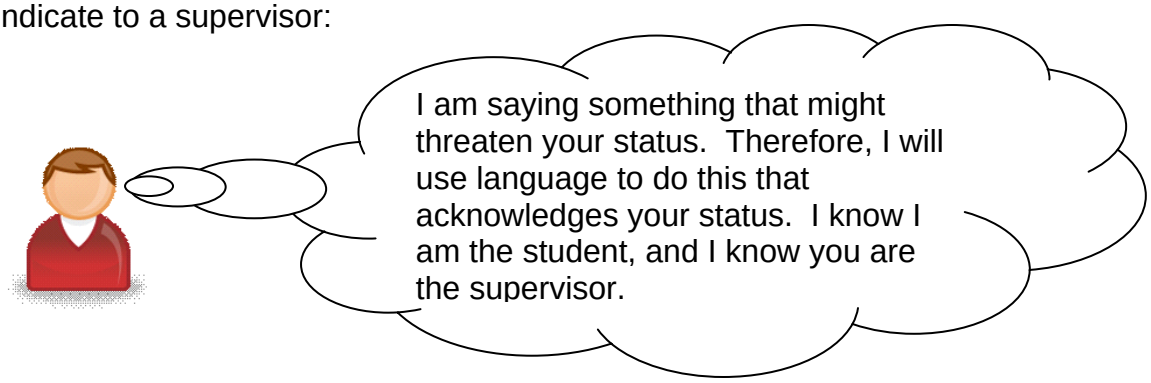
Successful outcomes of advising sessions depend to a great degree upon a student's ability to use appropriate language structures both to take initiative and to be compliant, which would mean that the student had achieved speech congruence. **Speech congruence is "the match of a speaker's status and the appropriateness of speech … given that status"** (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, p.473). The following chart illustrates what comments, statements, questions, etc. would be congruent for both advisors and students during their ***initial*** **academic advising session.**

Congruence of Comments with Respect to Status

	Congruent	**Not congruent**
Advisors	Give advice Provide information Solicit information Provide advance warning	Express lack of knowledge
Student	Provide history Request information Request permission Request advice	Make suggestions Correct advisors Offer evaluations/ compliments Reject advice

(Adapted from Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford,1990, p. 476)

From the above chart, we can see that giving advice etc. is a congruent (appropriate) thing for an advisor to say, whereas expressing a lack of knowledge is not. Conversely, rejecting advice, etc. are *not* congruent things for students to do. ***This does not mean that these do not happen.*** What it does mean is that *when* incongruent things are said — or even when they *must* be said —' status-preserving strategies' (see next page) must be employed, which essentially indicate to a supervisor:



In one study, native speakers engaged in status-preserving strategies in non-congruent speech with supervisors 100% of the time, whereas nonnative speakers only did so 58% of the time (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990).

Two areas where speech congruence would be most apparent would be when a student was offering suggestions or making requests. The following two examples involve the advisor discussing what courses the students need to take.

(Notice how the student in Example One uses "I think I'll take…," which is much more congruent (appropriate) than the student in Example Two, who uses "I want to take.")

Example One - the advisor (A) has just explained the core requirements of the PhD: program to the student (S).

"A	… then you work on your specialty.
S	I see, okay [pause 3 seconds] *Now, as for the summer courses, uh, language testing is one of the required*
A	courses, yes Mmmkay.
S	**I think I'll take that.** *The other course that I'm interested in is not in the Department of Linguistics, it's kind of a pragmatic aspects of language use,*
A	uh huh"

Example Two – the advisor is verifying which semester they are discussing:

A	okay. This for fall? Yes? Okay.
S	***I want to take*** L511 – L511 and L532.
A	Okay, and now

S	***I want to take*** *another course which is elective. Uh,* ***I want to choose*** *a course which teaches me how to use the library well. I know, and there is a course in the Library Science Department*."

(Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990, p. 489)

Six status-preserving strategies to show respect:

1. **Appear congruent**. One might phrase something in the form of a question rather than a statement. E.g. 'Is it necessary to take that course? I have already taken ….' instead of 'I don't have to take that course, because …'

2. **Mark your contribution linguistically.** Use downgraders such as 'I was wondering,' 'I think,' 'I guess,' etc. (see next page for downgraders). E.g. 'I was wondering if it would be possible to take course x instead of course y.'

3. **Timing.** Do not begin with a noncongruent contribution. Do not begin by telling the professor what you want to take or by stating what courses you do not want to take. Begin the discussion by acknowledging that you have some suggestions to make but that you are not sure whether they are appropriate and that you are interested in your advisor's feedback.

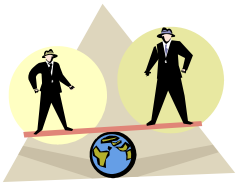
4. **Frequency.** Avoid frequent noncongruent turns. If you interrupted the professor a lot while he/she was speaking and repeatedly used language that did not reflect an awareness of your status as a student, this could create a negative first impression.

5. **Be brief.** (See the unit on Presenting an Argument) Do not speak for extended periods of time. If your supervisor tries to interrupt you saying something such as, 'Alright then …,' stop speaking.

6. **Use appropriate content.** What would be considered 'appropriate content' would vary depending on the nature of the meeting. E.g. if you are meeting to discuss the courses to take for the program, it would be best not to be discussing what kind of teaching assistant duties you do or do not wish to do. Such a conversation might be best broached in another meeting.

(Adapted from Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990, p. 479)

USING DOWNGRADERS TO SOUND POLITE



House & Kasper (1981) define downgraders as: "markers which play down [diminish] the impact X's [statement] is likely to have on Y" (p. 166). The following are some of their suggested

downgraders. The following examples of downgraders would be used in conversations or written communication with supervisors to demonstrate politeness, but caution needs to be exercised not to generalize the use of them to contexts where they would be inappropriate. For example, they would not be used in research statements, etc. (It is also a good idea to acknowledge that you are taking up their time with a phrase such as, "Thank you for taking time to see me.")

---

1. **Politeness marker** –
   Please …
   'Excuse me, but if I could interrupt you for a moment …'
   'Excuse me, may I interrupt …'

2. **Play-down** –
   I wondered if …
   I was wondering if …
   'Might it not be a good idea to … '

3. **Consultative device** –
   Would you mind if …
   Would it be possible to …
   'Would it be possible for you to repeat that just so I'm clear …'

4. **Hedge** –
   kind of, sort of, somehow, and so on, and what have you, more or less, rather …
   'I was hoping that would not be necessary … '

5. **Understater** –
   a little bit, a second, not very much, just a trifle …
   'I have a little bit of concern about using that approach, because …'

6. **Downtowner** –
   just, simply, possibly, perhaps, rather …
   'Could we perhaps consider doing the research with a different …'

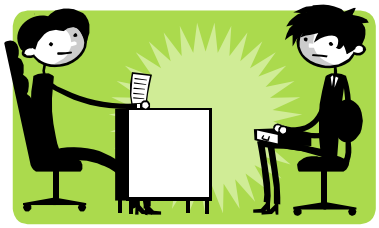
7. **("minus") Committer** –
   I think, I guess, I believe, I suppose, in my opinion …
   'I believe I would be eligible to take this course' sounds much more polite than 'I'm sure I can take this course'

8. **Forewarn – (to forewarn Y and to forestall his possible negative reactions)** –
   'I'm not certain about how strict the requirements are regarding taking this course or whether it's possible to get the course waived, so could I perhaps tell you about a course I took in my own country …'

Some research has shown that women have a tendency to use more tentative language than men do (Palomares, 2008). What is critical for international

graduate students to understand is that use of these markers by female supervisors does not in any way diminish the force of what they are saying.

BEING PREPARED FOR THE FIRST SESSION



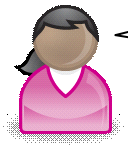
You want to create a favorable impression in the first session, so when you go to your first meeting with your supervisor, be as prepared as you possibly can.

- ✓ Read the website of the department beforehand.
- ✓ Familiarize yourself with the requirements of your degree.
- ✓ Read as much as possible about the courses that are offered. Make tentative selections.
- ✓ Try to learn as much as possible about your supervisor's research and non-research interests so as to have a better sense of who your supervisor is during the first meeting.

MAKE EXPLICIT REQUESTS FOR ADVICE

Sometimes international graduate students might not be comfortable making a direct request of their supervisors, as they might view doing so to be "reminding the advisors to do their jobs" (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990, p. 495). However, in America, people tend to anticipate what other people need less than people in other countries do: the assumption exists that if you need help, you will ask for it. The following comments from international graduate students illustrate their experience with this aspect of their relationships with their supervisors.

An East Asian student made the following comment regarding asking for help in her academic department.



"But the important thing is, they don't come to me. ... We need to go there to ask for help. But if we do, they can help us" (Eland, 2001, p. 95).

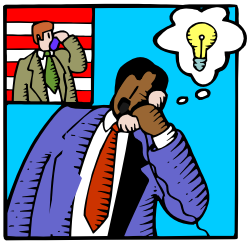
A West African student commented:

"Students … are not given much guidance. In the American system, they say you can do everything that you want. So if you don't know, it's your responsibility to go and ask questions." (Eland, 2001, p. 100).

A Mexican student learned the hard way that he needed to inform his adviser that he did not have an adequate background in their field of study:

"[I] was afraid that [my] adviser might see it as a weakness and not want to work with [me]. However, by not enlisting [my] adviser's assistance early on, [I] believe… that [my] program took longer than necessary" (Eland, 2001, p. 153).

DETERMINING AVAILABILITY & SCHEDULING MEETINGS



How frequently graduate students meet with their supervisors varies greatly from discipline to discipline. In the arts and humanities, students may have very little contact with their supervisors, whereas students might have more frequent contact in the sciences or engineering if the students' research is directly linked to that of their supervisors. One element that is universal to all supervisor/ graduate student relationships is that both parties are extremely busy; however, meeting with one's supervisor regularly can be critical to a student's success. Therefore, steps must be taken to make meetings as productive as possible. Something that will help enormously is being clear with each other about the purpose of the meeting so that all parties are prepared when they arrive. In addition, if you have not been in contact with your supervisor in a long time, it is best to take the initiative and contact them in order to avoid unpleasant surprises. If the supervisor is unable to meet, he/she will say so, and the student will then need to ask for an alternate meeting time.

[I] needed to prepare for [my] meetings with [my] adviser and other faculty. At appointments, U.S. professors expected [me] to be concise and clear about what [I]needed, which took preparation on [my] part" (Eland, 2001, p. 102).

The relationship with a supervisor is one which can last a lifetime, and taking appropriate steps to be clear with each other about expectations and responsibilities can contribute greatly to this very rich learning experience. The supervisor's role is to help the graduate student … and the graduate student needs to help the supervisor help him/her. Much of this can be accomplished by seeking to find balance between taking initiative and being compliant — and by asking for help when it is required.

MEETING SENTENCE STARTERS

If you *must* interrupt somebody, because you have not understood something important:
Sorry to interrupt you.
I'm sorry, could you elaborate further?
Sorry — could you please explain that?
Could you pause there for a moment …
I'm having trouble following you …
I didn't catch that …
What do you mean by …
Sorry to interrupt you — could you please rephrase that for me?

Your supervisor wants you to do something that does not make sense:
I'm really sorry, but …
I'm sorry, I'm not following you.
Could you please go through that one more time with me?
Could you please draw that for me?
Could you please explain how that works?
Could you please explain that in easier language?
Do you have an example to help me understand?
I don't understand how x would increase, because of y … could you please explain that further?
I'm sorry, I'm a bit confused …. My understanding is that …

To show understanding:
That makes sense.
I get it now.
I understand.

To make sure you understand:
Could I repeat to you what I understand you to have said?
Please let me tell you what I understand from what you have said.
What I hear you saying is …

Transitions: (to illustrate that you need to change the direction of the conversation – this should only be done if you are sure you have finished discussing the previous topic)
Could we talk about/discuss x now?
I was wondering if I could get some direction from you regarding …
I was wondering if you could suggest something regarding …
I have been working on …. And I've got some good results — would this be a good time to discuss that?
Do you have a few more minutes to talk about ….

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BEING DIRECT

One of the ways that communication patterns can differ is in our use of context. Context is basically the background information surrounding an event, a sentence, or an experience. People who come from areas of the world where there has been little movement from or into their communities historically have a tendency to be **high context**. In these communities, it is safe to assume that people have similar values, experiences, and definitions of events. People who live in places where there is a lot of movement into or traffic through the community cannot assume a lot of shared experience, assumptions, or beliefs, and therefore they tend to be **low context**. This means that their basic communication will contain more detailed information and instructions, and that it will be more specific in how you are meant to understand it.

As the United States is a nation of immigrants, they usually express ourselves in a low context manner. This does not mean that they never use high context communication; they will sometimes be high context with family members, close friends, and close colleagues. Academically, however, they communicate with a low context style.

 **Low Context**	 **High Context**
Very direct communication.	Very indirect communication.
No assumption that other people know what you are talking about or that they share your ideas or definitions of things.	Unconscious assumption that other people know what you are talking about and that they will understand what you mean.
It is the speaker's responsibility to make himself understood.	It is the listener's responsibility to understand the speaker.
The logic is very linear and step-by-step.	The logic might be 'circular,' and make use of repetition, implication, stories, etc.
The speaker goes straight to the point.	The speaker leads the listener near the point and expects the listener to arrive at the point by himself.
Only approximately 5% of the world uses low context communication. (J. Bennett, 2006, personal communication.)	Most of the world is high context, making use of different elements of the above-mentioned logic.

EXAMPLE OF A HIGH/LOW CONTEXT MISCOMMUNICATION

It looks like we're going to need some people to come in on Saturday.

I see.

Can you come in on Saturday?

Yes, I think so

That'll be a great help.

Yes. Saturday's a special day, did you know?

How do you mean?

It's my son's birthday.

How nice. I hope you all enjoy it very much.

Thank you. I appreciate your understanding.

Adapted from Figuring Foreigners Out

Did the man show up for work on Saturday?
No.

Was the woman expecting him to show up for work on Saturday?
Yes.

IMPLICATIONS

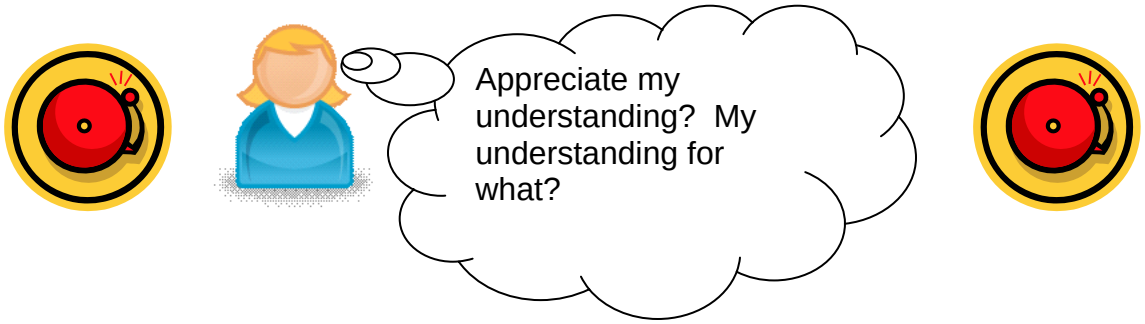
The manager comes from a culture where direct communication is appropriate, and where it is appropriate to negotiate (mildly) the requests of a superior (see the unit on Power Distance). She would expect her employee to tell her directly if he were unable to go to work on Saturday. The employee did try to convey to her that he would rather not work on Saturday, but she did not recognize the intention behind his words because of her cultural expectations of direct speech. As a result of this, the manager will feel that she has not been told the truth and may not trust the employee in the future.

The employee comes from a culture where more indirect communication is appropriate, and where it is inappropriate for him to say no to the request of a supervisor. He would expect his employer to understand the implication of what he is saying — namely that he would rather not have to work on his son's birthday.

If the above situation transpired in America, the expectations of direct communication would prevail. As a result of this, the employee would likely be reprimanded on Monday for not having shown up for work on Saturday. Without an awareness of intercultural communication, the working relationship between the manager and the employee would suffer as a result of this misunderstanding.

Whose fault was this misunderstanding?

It is nobody's fault completely. The employee needs to be aware of the communication patterns around him, but the manager also needs to pay closer attention to what her employee has said or is trying to imply. His words, "Thank you. I appreciate your understanding" are not an appropriate response to her words (according to her understanding of the situation). The alarm bells in her head should be ringing, and she should be thinking:



POLITE WAYS TO SAY NO OR NEGOTIATE A REQUEST

1. I wonder if you can possibly do without me …
2. I don't usually have a problem with…, but …
3. Is there anybody else who can … this time… I'll … next time.
4. I'd love to …., but I can't because ….
5. I'm terribly sorry, but …. I've already made other plans …
6. I have family obligations that day, ….. could I possibly be excused from …
7. Would it be possible to work half the day because …
8. Could I possibly … or … because ….

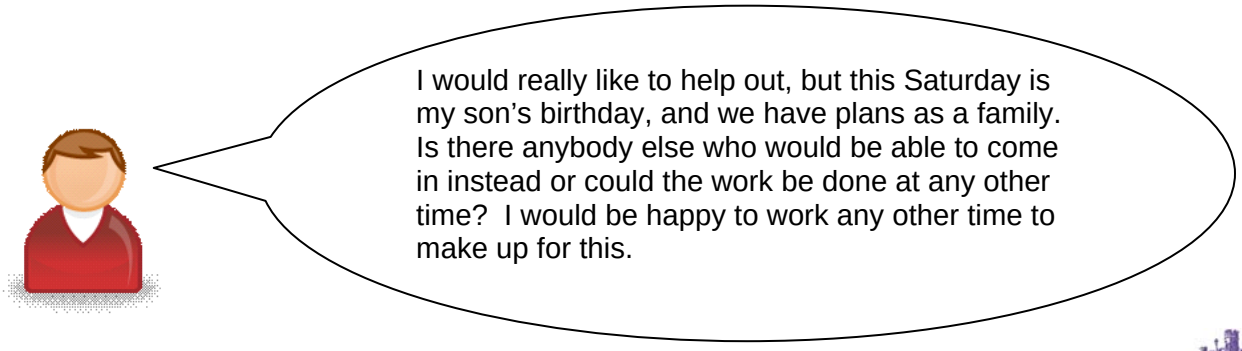
BODY LANGUAGE

- Face the person to whom you are speaking.
- Smile and maintain eye contact.
- Do not cross your arms. While in some countries, this gesture may indicate, "I am at your service," in America, it indicates that a person is closed — not open to what the other person is saying.

OTHER DETAILS

- Have such a conversation in private if possible.
- Give the person time to think about your request. Arrange another time to follow up if necessary.
- If the person says no, keep your emotions under control. Thank them anyway for considering your request. If the boss does say 'no,' the employee would have no choice but to go to work on Saturday.
- The employee could take initiative and ask a colleague to work instead of him and present the solution to the supervisor as an option. For example, 'Katie has offered that she could work — would this be okay?'

To conclude, in a situation such as that in the example, the employee would tell the employer directly that it was his son's birthday, and he would ask if there were somebody else who could come in on Saturday.



Depending on what the situation was — whether anybody else could do the work, how urgent the work was, whether the work could be done on Friday night or Sunday instead — the supervisor would happily let the man spend Saturday with his son. If, however, it was critical that the work be done on Saturday by this man, there would be no avoiding postponing the plans he had with his son.

LINKS

Online Quiz About High Context and Low Context Communication
The Cultural Detective
http://www.quia.com/quiz/1335937.html

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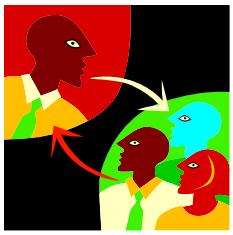
POWER DISTANCE



A social characteristic that scholars who study intercultural communication consider when they are looking at relationships between people from different countries is power distance. Countries have either low power distance or high power distance; the United States is a low power distance country.

High power distance: People in countries with high power distance are comfortable with relationships in which people hold different levels of power. How people treat each other is dictated in large part by status—whether one person is senior or junior to the other person. For example, in a country such as China, older brothers or sisters are not called by their names by their younger brothers or sisters: they are called by the title, "Older brother" or "Older Sister."

Low power distance: People in countries with low power distance are more comfortable with relationships that are based on equality. How people behave with other people is determined less by the person's status than in other countries. For example, bosses in America are generally called by their first names by everyone in the company. The president has the power to hire or fire employees, so clearly not everybody is fully equal. The receptionist in the company is not considered to be an 'equal' of the president's in many regards. However, the president and the receptionist are equal in the sense of their humanity, and both will expect to be respected.

How does power distance affect the professor/student relationship?

In America, people show respect to their bosses, their professors, their parents, etc.; however, they do not necessarily do this in an unquestioning way. What this means is that it is sometimes acceptable to refuse a request, but it must be done *politely*. Most importantly, it is a social expectation that people will be respectful of *everybody* in an organization. For example, international graduate students must be careful to be as respectful of the graduate assistant in their department as they are of their professors.

Low Power Distance Cultures	Medium Power Distance Cultures	High Power Distance Cultures
Austria	Colombia	Arab Cultures
Denmark	Eastern European Cultures	Brazil
Canada	Iran	China
Israel	Italy	India
Norway	Japan	France
New Zealand	Greece	Mexico
Switzerland	Pakistan	The Philippines
United States	South Korea	Venezuela
		West Africa

**Based on Hofstede (1991): Cultures and Organizations; Software of the Mind. Hague: Mouton. Power Distance Index data available on the web at www.geert-hofstede.com*

If international graduate students from **high power distance** countries work with supervisors from **low power distance** cultures, the following table illustrates some of the expectations and behaviors that might exist in their relationships with their supervisors.

Low Power Distance Supervisor	High Power Distance Student
Expects relatively informal communication with students	Expects formal communication with supervisor (use of titles, formal language in e-mails)
Expects students to ask for help when needed	Reluctant to impose on the supervisor's time to ask for help
Expects initiative from students	Asking questions may imply that the "professor didn't do his/her job properly" so the student may ask for help from peers instead
Sees student questions as a sign of interest	Tends to agree with the professor as a sign of respect
Open to ideas, critique of the research group's project from the student	Expects research direction to be set by the professor
Expects contribution of original ideas from the student	Expects to follow what he/she is told to do by a supervisor
Willing to admit if he does not know the answer to a question	Goes out of his/her way to save face for the professor
Consults students about the direction of the research group	Is not used to professors saying, "I don't know."
	Will ask frequent open-ended questions such as "What approach would you recommend?"

If international graduate students from **low power distance** cultures work with supervisors from **high power distance** cultures, the following table illustrates some of the expectations and behaviors that might exist in their relationships with their supervisors.

High Power Distance Supervisor	Low Power Distance Student
Expects deference from students	Takes initiative in class
Does not expect students to take much initiative in class — students are expected to listen and learn	Expects direction from the supervisor through discussion
Expects to tell students what to do	Expects relative independence in his/her work
Expects students to follow instructions closely	Expects to be consulted about decisions that impact his/her research or progress
Expects privileges as a supervisor	Sees questions as a sign of interest and involvement
Expects students to depend on him/her	Expects faculty to admit if they do not know the answer
May see student questions as a challenge to his/her authority	Expects to contribute to research direction of the lab or research group
Believes that faculty should not show it if they do not know the answer to a question	Prefers to work with faculty who downplay their status and power

(Dimitrov, 2009)

Switching into low power distance relationships is not easily done for individuals who come from high distance cultures. Students who have been in America for several years will still report that they are uncomfortable calling their professors by their first names and so do not do it. Nonetheless, when it comes to meeting the expectations of supervisors relative to the work that students do, it is strongly recommended that students make efforts to:

- ✓ take initiative;
- ✓ ask for help when they need it;
- ✓ offer ideas regarding the direction of their research; and
- ✓ offer diplomatically stated critiques when invited to do so.

While not being able to call one's supervisor by his or her first name might keep an element of formality in the relationship, it may not necessarily affect the quality of work the student produces. Successfully making efforts to incorporate the above-noted behaviors will result in favorable outcomes for the students.

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Dimitrov, Nanda. 2009. *Western Guide to Mentoring Graduate Students Across Cultures.* London: The University of Western Ontario Teaching Support Centre.

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GIVING & RECEIVING FEEDBACK

Feedback involves receiving comments from or giving comments to another person about your or their performance. A university environment is rife with situations where people give and receive feedback. Supervisors give feedback to graduate students in a group setting about research presentations or privately about the progress on their thesis. Teaching assistants give feedback to students about their assignments or behaviour in class, and students give feedback to their instructors about their teaching. In addition, at an interpersonal level, people give what could be considered informal feedback to each other when they clarify the meaning behind comments another person has said. Feedback is a highly delicate matter even when both parties share the same culture; therefore it is an area of intercultural communication that can cause enormous misunderstandings. The purpose of this unit is to help you:

- ✓ recognize the cultural variations in feedback
- ✓ challenge your perceptions of feedback
- ✓ recognize negative feedback so that you can incorporate it
- ✓ inquire about feedback if you are uncertain about how it was intended
- ✓ deliver negative feedback in a way that it will be accepted
- ✓ deliver positive feedback to students to encourage learning and build relationships

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN FEEDBACK

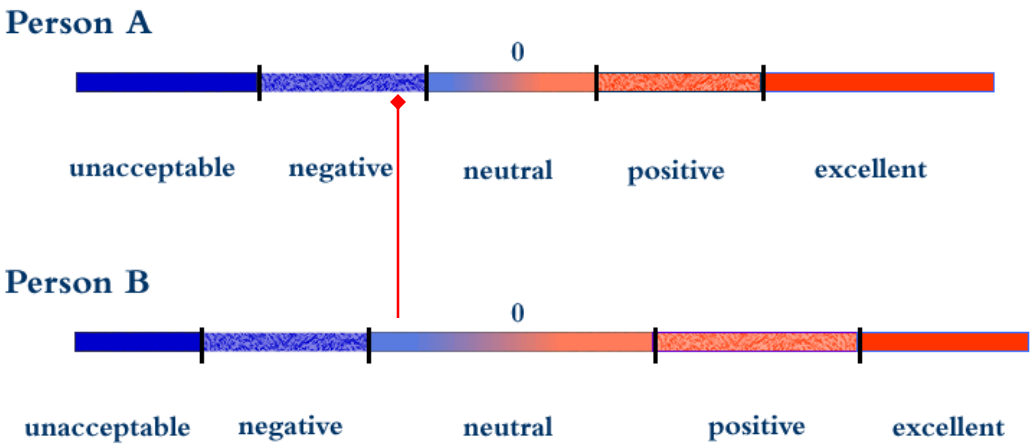
It must be noted that how people respond to feedback within any culture will be determined to a large degree by a number of factors including: their personalities; their life experiences; their ages; the circumstances of the situation requiring feedback; and a myriad of other unknowable factors such as what other stressors they are experiencing at the moment they receive the feedback.

Cultural variations exist in how both positive and negative feedback are delivered. One would not necessarily consider receiving positive feedback to be problematic. However, if people come from cultures where positive feedback is given sparingly and then they go to a culture where the feedback is given easily

and generously, at best, they may view the feedback with skepticism. At worst, they may view the feedback as sarcasm (Tannen, 1998). In either case, they may not recognize the intention of the positive feedback and could miss out on much needed encouragement.

Of greater concern to newcomers to a culture is the difference in how people from different cultures perceive and deliver negative feedback or constructive criticism. Examples of the differences that exist include how directly feedback is delivered, how much emotion is expressed (Hammer, 2003) and what constitutes an acceptable range of negativity (Laroche, 2007). It is critical to be informed about potential cultural differences in negative feedback as the inability to manage such misunderstandings can be a "major determinant of intercultural adjustment success or failure" (Yoo, Matsumoto, & Leroux, 2006, p. 345).

We all have different scales of what we find to be acceptable feedback. Our individual scales will be influenced by a myriad of factors such as our cultures, personalities, ages, life experiences, etc. In the following graphic, we can see that Person A has a much narrower range of what this person considers neutral feedback than Person B does, and that what falls within Person's B's neutral range falls into Person A's negative zone.



(Adapted from Laroche, 2007)

The result of this is that Person B might say something that for him is neutral (indicated by the red arrow), but Person A might perceive the comment to be negative. In this type of situation, a comment that is completely innocuous or even meant to be positive could cause offense. Such offense could even occur if an individual from a collectivist society said something which was just intended to be helpful to somebody from an individualistic society (see unit on American Norms). An example of this could be something as simple as telling a lab mate, "Oh, you better clean up the lab." If the student already had the intention of

cleaning up the lab, he might perceive such a comment as being unnecessary and possibly intrusive.

One strategy that effective communicators use to avoid misunderstandings is to consider what the speaker intended in a message by considering alternate meanings of words. In the following example, a student from Nigeria is first offended by the greeting in an e-mail.

> Somebody sent out an email to a group of us the other day, and he addressed us as "Hi Gang." At first, when I saw the opening, I was enraged because prior to that time, I had never referred to people as gang as it connotes *association of criminals and nothing else*. However, to my surprise, I checked my dictionary to find out that he had used the word 'gang' with good intention of referring to us as '*informal group of friends' or 'an organized group of workmen*'- which came out from the contents of the email.
>
> (Personal communication, August 12, 2009)

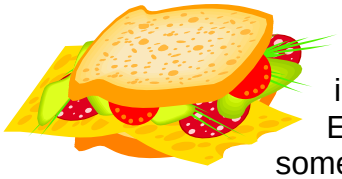
As is evident by the quality of language in the above quote, the student had very high level language skills. Proficiency in a language does not prevent misunderstandings from happening. In fact, they can sometimes contribute to them if a person is convinced they know the complete definition of words. Therefore, the ability to think of possible alternative intentions to comments or to look for possible alternative meanings to language is critical.

RECOGNIZING & ACCEPTING POSITIVE FEEDBACK

Praise in North America is frequently used as a motivator, and instructors/ supervisors might use it more freely than is the norm in many other cultures. They will use expressions such as, “Good effort!” or “Nice work!” to acknowledge creativity and effort—even if the effort did not necessarily result in success. This can be confusing to students from many countries who will find the free-flowing use of positive comments to sound exaggerated at best and insincere at worst. International students need to recognize that they have done something right when they are receiving such comments. However, they also need to realize that the comments may ***not*** be intended to communicate, ‘This is good enough—you don’t need to try any harder.’ That is definitely not the meaning of the words, and a graduate student would still need to continue working hard and aspiring towards excellence.

In addition, many ITAs will need to work to incorporate positive feedback into their own teaching language. Undergraduate students look to their instructors to encourage them. For a sample of phrases to use, please see: 50 Ways to Praise Students. Choose the ones that feel sincere to you and considering asking a native speaker to coach you on your intonation of these phrases.

RECOGNIZING & ACCEPTING NEGATIVE FEEDBACK



Another misunderstanding that sometimes results during the transmission of feedback is not recognizing the importance of a comment. A common feedback pattern in English is the feedback sandwich, which involves stating something good, then stating what the problem is, and then finishing with something good.

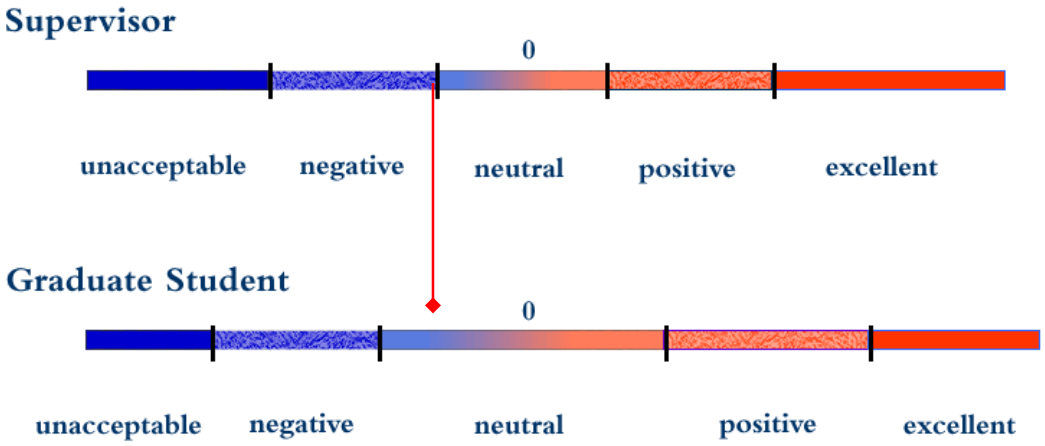
The intention of this is to: 1) soften the impact of a negative comment and reduce resistance to the comment; 2) deliver the content; 3) make sure the person receiving the feedback does not feel destroyed. If somebody were unfamiliar with this pattern, they might only hear the positive beginning and closing without hearing the 'meat' of the matter. The following diagrams illustrate the danger of not recognizing the seriousness of negative feedback from a supervisor.

Time One

The supervisor says something which falls within her mildly negative range. The student does not hear the criticism both because it falls within his neutral range and because he focuses on the positive comments. He therefore does nothing.

Supervisor

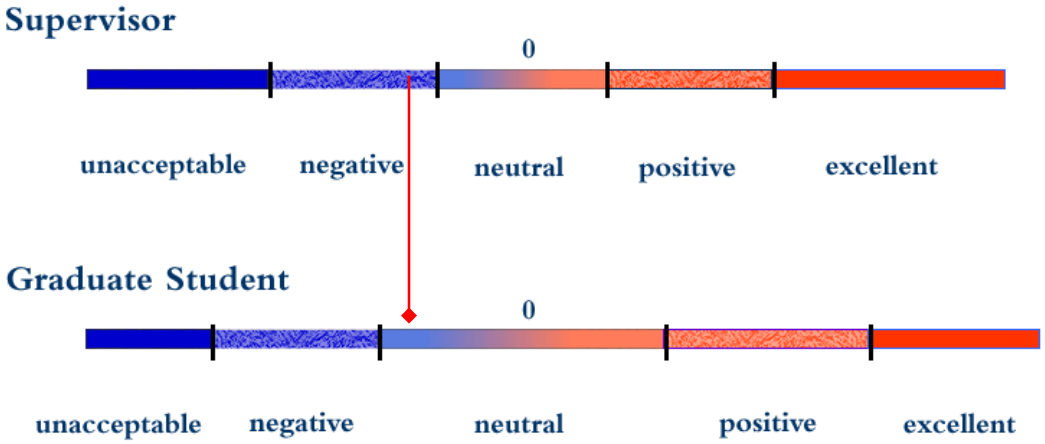
You've clearly done a very extensive literature review, which is good; however, I'm a bit concerned about the absence of detail in your methodology section. On the whole, you're on the right track.



Time Two

Misunderstanding the intention of the above feedback, the student does not do what the supervisor has suggested. The supervisor is now mildly annoyed, and so she repeats the comment, which has become slightly more negative for her. It still falls within the student's neutral range and is still embedded in positive words and prefaced by the words, "I think," and so again, the student takes no action.

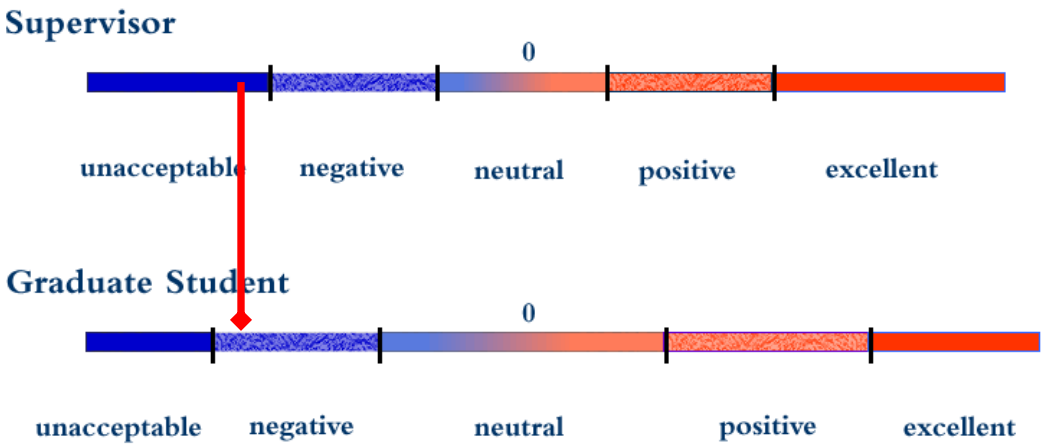
As I mentioned before, your literature review is sound, but I think you need to go into greater detail about your methodology. I know this is within your range because you're a bright student.



Time Three

Once again, the supervisor's words have gone unheeded. The supervisor is now feeling disrespected because she has twice given the student feedback and twice the student has done nothing. At this point, she is angry. She now says something that falls within her unacceptable range to the student.

How many times do I have to tell you to put more effort into your methodology!?!? I can't do the work for you, but this will never get past your examiners. How do you expect to complete your research? Do not come back to see me until you have resolved this!!



The student is now shocked at the comment, as he feels it has come out of nowhere. Laroche (2007) cites an engineer from France who recounts the effect of such a feedback pattern and the consequences that he faced.

> "I almost got fired because I did not understand the feedback that my manager was giving me. It was worded so softly that I totally missed the point. In France, when you want to tell people not to walk on a patch of grass, you put a sign that says, "It is strictly forbidden to walk on the grass." In [North America], they put a sign that says, "Please keep off the grass." To me, "Please keep off the grass" means that I have a choice; yet the message is actually the same as when French people say, "It is strictly forbidden to walk on the grass. By the time I realized my manager was not happy with my behaviour, he was ready to write me up."
>
> (p. 205)

Something that the student could done to have avoided this uncomfortable situation with his supervisor would have been to ask his supervisor for ***clarification about the feedback***. Closing a meeting with a supervisor by paraphrasing/summarizing what has been decided upon is good practice. In this particular situation, the following question would have been appropriate:

So, just to clarify what the next steps are that you would like me to take in the thesis … It seems like the lit review is in pretty good shape, but I am not sure how I could add more detail to the methodology section. Can you give me an example of what else you would like to see in it?

INQUIRING ABOUT THE NATURE OF FEEDBACK

Sometimes situations arise where comments about performance are made in an offhand way. Little—if any—thought might be given to their delivery, resulting in especially unintended consequences. It is of paramount importance to be able to discuss such situations in ways that foster understanding and avoid creating conflict. The following experience involving a male student from Egypt exemplifies this need:

> When I started work, my supervisor asked a female colleague to help me during the first days. As a person I can say that I am so enthusiastic to learn, to improve myself and my skills. And so, I started to work with her and to write everything she telling me. Once … while working with her in the lab, a Mexican guy in the group commented on my way of writing everything and [my female colleague] responded, "He is so eager to learn." The Mexican guy answered, "Just from you" and laughed. She laughed also. I really felt sad and embarrassed because this means that I am showing interest toward a foreign female which in my culture mean that I am bad person. I took this situation seriously and kept thinking how to solve this problem.
>
> (Personal communication, June 6, 2007)

In order to resolve this kind of situation, more perspective is required. We only have access to our interpretation of what happened, and we can never know what somebody means by a comment. Therefore, we need the benefit of another perspective to determine if an alternate interpretation might be possible.

The first decision to make is about who can discuss the situation with you. If you are new to an environment, it is advisable to find somebody who is completely removed from the situation and who does not know anybody involved. This person can be somebody from your own country who has been in the country longer than you or it might be somebody from the host culture. If you have been in the environment and know the people better, another option would be to speak directly to the person. **The *worst* thing to do would be to take the issue to a person in authority before speaking to the individual.** Such an action could offend the person who made (what in his mind was) an innocent comment.

The graduate student in the above-noted incident sought out the advice of a person from the host culture who had an awareness of intercultural communication and a familiarity with both Egyptian and Mexican students. In the above-noted situation, the Egyptian student felt humiliated by a comment that was in all likelihood not intended to offend, and if anything, was intended as friendly teasing. The Mexican student had not meant to imply at all that the Egyptian student was a bad person or was behaving inappropriately. Fortunately, the Egyptian student was able to accept the explanation and did not feel the need to discuss anything with the other student.

If it is not possible to find a third party with whom to get some counsel about cultural differences, the situation may require having a conversation directly with the person involved.

Enormous cultural variation exists in terms of how conflict is perceived and handled (Hammer, 2003). An in-depth discussion of this exceeds the boundaries of this manual; however, it is strongly recommended to read Patterson, Grenny, McMillan & Switzler's (2002) book *Crucial Conversations* for excellent strategies about how to approach difficult conversations in English-speaking environments.

In the case where a direct conversation takes place, the Describe-Interpret-Evaluate (D.I.E.) model (Gudykunst, 2003) can help make the conversation productive.

Description - **What you saw, heard.**
Begin with what is objectively observable. Think about this in terms of 'if five people were in the room, what would they all agree about what they saw/heard happen?' It is critical here to use the most neutral language possible. When describing something, only talk about the situation in terms of Person A said or did x, and Person B said or did x. Do not include any interpretation of the action or comment.

Interpretation - **What you think.**
Here, it is important to use tentative language—language that shows that more than one interpretation of events is possible or which is at least demonstrates curiosity. It is possible also to phrase this in terms of a question. The use of modals (see unit on Woulda, Coula, Shoulda for more about modals) also makes phrases sound less absolute.

Evaluation - **What you feel.**
It is important to *end* by talking about our emotions. Frequently, when we are upset, we tend to *begin* with our emotions, which are a very subjective experience. In an English-speaking environment, by beginning with facts and withholding emotions, we will be less inclined to offend another

person (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, Switzler, 2002). While extreme emotion might be felt, *speaking about it* with a minimum of emotion would be advisable in a North American setting.

The following would illustrate what the D.I.E. model would look like if used in the previously mentioned situation.

Egyptian student

Hi, I was wondering if we could speak for a moment about something you said earlier. You mentioned that I was eager to learn just from our colleague. **[This is the description in very neutral terms.]** Did you mean to suggest that I was showing an inordinate amount of interest in her? **[Here the interpretation is phrased as a question.]**

At this point, the Mexican student might step in to reassure him that he was only joking. If this happened, the Egyptian student could take this opportunity to share something about his own culture and continue as follows:

In my culture, showing interest toward a female from a foreign culture is not considered to be a good thing, **[this is the evaluation, but again, it is in very neutral terms]** so I was concerned **[this is the emotion in neutral terms]** about your impressions. I just needed to clarify this situation, so thanks for talking with me about it.

DELIVERING NEGATIVE FEEDBACK TO STUDENTS

Equally as important as successful communication with supervisors and colleagues is the relationship between international teaching assistants (ITAs) and undergraduate students. This one aspect of delivering feedback is especially challenging both because of variations in feedback delivery and because undergraduate students may not be as deferential to teaching assistants as ITAs might expect them to be (see unit on Power Distance). Generally speaking, North American students will be sensitive to the use of authority by instructors (Roach, Cornett-Devito and Devito, 2005). Therefore,

ITAs need to be very careful about the language they use when they are discussing difficult situations with their undergraduate students.

Practice

Imagine the following situation: One of your students has high expectations of the amount of help you can give him and wants more of your time and more help than is appropriate. This student comes to your office three times a week and expects you to help with every question in the homework assignment. You have many other students, and you are only expected to work as a TA for an average of 10 hours a week. Last week you spent two hours with this student alone. Clearly the situation cannot continue.

Use the D.I.E. model to speak to the student. Before you read the solution, think about what you would say and read the list of dos and don'ts below. (An example of what to say is offered on the next page.)

General Tips for Giving Feedback to Undergraduates

Dos

- ✓ Ask for the student's perspective on the situation. When using the D.I.E. model, you could do this after the description by asking the student, "What is your perception of this situation?"
- ✓ Asserting appropriate boundaries in terms of what students can or cannot ask of you is reasonable. For example, a student might ask you for extra marks on an assignment; however, you are not obligated to give the student the marks. You will want to look at the assignment again; however, it is appropriate to tell a student that marks are awarded for correct responses and that the student's response was incorrect.
- ✓ If a student's behavior is affecting the ability of other students in the class to learn, it is reasonable to speak with that student about the behavior.
- ✓ If you have a student whose marks are suffering when they are usually very good, it is your job to approach the student to see if there is something wrong. Such a conversation might involve your making suggestions about what services on campus the student might need.
- ✓ If you are not certain whether a behavior is acceptable in the host culture, speak to your professor or another TA before approaching a student. For example, eating is not permitted in many classrooms in the world; however, it is frequently tolerated in North American classrooms.

Don'ts

- ✗ Do not invade the privacy of your students' personal lives. Counsel them about academic matters—not about their futures.
- ✗ Do not use any negative adjectives at all to describe them (for example, never tell a student that he/she is lazy).

- ✗ Do not have conversations about the student's behavior or performance in front of classmates.
- ✗ Do not force your view on the student. Sometimes students may offer resistance to feedback or seem as if they are not accepting it, but they will go away and think about it afterwards.

Possible Solution

In the situation described above regarding the student who was monopolizing a TA's time, the following conversation would exemplify what would be appropriate using the D.I.E. model.

1. Ask the student to meet for an appointment (unless the student is already there.)

2. Take a few moments to have a friendly chat with the student.

3. Say something such as the following:

> "I've noticed that you've been coming to see me very regularly for extra help with your assignments. Last week, we met for two hours **[description].** I'm not sure that you're putting in enough time on your own trying to figure out the assignments before you come to see me **[interpretation using tentative language—'I think']** What's your perspective on this? **[Listen to the student's perspective.]** I have a couple of concerns. First of all, I have a lot of other students who need my support, and I have a limited amount of time that I am available to my students. I'm also worried that if you don't learn how to figure out how to do the work on your own, you will have difficulty with the exams. So, we need to work out some strategies to help you become a more independent learner."

In this unit, we have examined strategies for incorporating positive and negative comments, clarifying comments to overcome misunderstandings, and delivering feedback. Perhaps the most useful strategy to employ when dealing with negative feedback is to realize that feedback is not necessarily intended the way we have perceived it. The most successful people are those who can manage these difficult moments to both preserve relationships and work productively (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, Switzler, 2002). These are skills that can be developed with attention.

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LETTER WRITING CONVENTIONS

When individuals communicate face-to-face, much is communicated in tone of voice, facial expression, eye contact, and gestures. Communicating in writing can be complicated in the absence of these features which add meaning. Therefore, certain rules must be observed in written communication in order to convey what we intend and in order not to convey that which we do not intend. If a letter needs to be written in a formal tone, but the author adopts an informal tone, it might communicate a flippant attitude. Conversely, if a letter needs to be written in an informal tone and a formal tone is taken, it can communicate irony, coldness or even anger. Therefore, careful attention needs to be paid to the language used in written communication. The following features can contribute to achieving the correct tone. (See the unit on Letter of Admission for excellent examples of everything in this unit.)

Formal	Informal
More common in written English	More common in spoken English
No contractions: 'I am, you are, he is'	Use of contractions: 'I'm, you're, he's'
More (but not exclusively) passive sentences: 'you will be told'	Active sentences: 'I'll tell you'
Use of less common words: 'to inform'	Use of common words: 'to let you know about'
Precise vocabulary: 'to dispense'	Phrasal verbs: 'to hand out'
More complex sentences: 'I would like to be able to go; however, I regret that I will be unable to do so.'	Simple sentences: 'I want to go, but I can't – sorry.'
Extremely objective and emotionless.	More personal and subjective.
More noun phrases: 'That you are capable of completing your PhD is not in doubt.'	Verb phrases: 'Nobody doubts that you have the ability to complete your PhD.'
Strict punctuation rules.	No strict use of punctuation rules.

BASIC RULES FOR WRITING A FORMAL LETTER:

1) Assume your reader knows nothing. Even if you have had previous communication with this person, you must be very specific so that the reader will have all the necessary information about you in the document (see the unit on E-mail). Moreover, there are times when a letter might need to be shared with other individuals who do not have the background knowledge (such as an admissions committee).

2) Begin with a salutation: 'Dear Mr. + last name,' 'Dear Mrs. + last name,' 'Dear Ms. + last name' or 'Dear + first name.' 'Dear' is just a letter writing convention in English and does not signify friendliness or closeness of relationship. N.B.: We only use 'Mrs.' if we know that a woman is married and if this woman has used this word herself. The safest word to use when addressing a woman is 'Ms.,' as it avoids the issue of marital status.

3) After the Mr./Mrs./Ms., we ***only*** use the person's last name. We do ***not*** use the first and last name after these words. E.g. Ms. Jones not Ms. Jane Jones.

4) A formal letter should also contain your contact information and the date.

5) An appropriate closing would include an individual's typed name with space above it for the person's signature. For example:

   Yours truly,

   John Smith

   John Smith

Closings are very personal expressions, and very few of the rules applying to closings are absolute. The following is a list of some closings with an attempt to list them in **descending order from *most* to *least* formal.** This list is by no means exhaustive, and it does not include any intimate closings, such as 'Love,' 'Love always,' etc.

- Yours faithfully, (in strict adherence to British letter writing protocol, this is used when beginning a letter with 'Dear Sir or Madam'; however, this closing is rarely used in North America, and it sounds *very* formal.)

- Cordially, (somewhat old-fashioned, but still lovely)

- Yours truly, (Very commonly used – sometimes this is seen as Yours very truly,)
- Yours sincerely, / Sincerely yours, (also very commonly used)
- Thank you for your consideration,
- Sincerely,
- Best regards,
- Truly,
- Best,
- Regards, (this can be used to close (when *not* making a request) with a bit less formally than 'Truly' or 'Sincerely')
- Warm regards,
- Yours,
- Take care,
- Thanks, (casual – used when somebody has done something for you)
- Ciao, (very casual – it means goodbye and hello in Italian, but it is used in English only to mean goodbye)

(NB: the second word in a closing is never capitalized).

E-MAIL

E-mail is the main medium of communication on the university campus. Your professors, your students, and individuals associated with the university will use e-mail to communicate with you. Graduate students may have two e-mail addresses — one in their capacity as students, and one in their capacity as employees of the university (teaching assistants). If you have two e-mail addresses, it is critical to check them both on a regular basis (several times a day if possible) to avoid missing important communication and opportunities. E-mail accounts may be synchronized so that you only need to check one address.

WARNING! Never give any information about your university e-mail or banks accounts to anybody who contacts you via e-mail. If anybody contacts you for this information, they are doing so for illegitimate purposes.

Communicating via e-mail is quick and effective; however, it is also a medium that has many potential problems. Without being able to see a person's face when writing e-mail, it is possible to misunderstand what the other person is trying to communicate. The elements of rhetorical context must be considered so that writing is complete, appropriate, and successful.

Rhetorical context

Any time you write, you need to consider rhetorical context. Rhetorical context is the situation surrounding your writing task, which consists of three components:

> **Audience** — the person/people who are going to read your writing. Your audience will affect the style, tone, and vocabulary in your document.
>
> **Purpose** — what you are trying to accomplish by writing your document. Are you informing somebody of something? Are you explaining, requesting, evaluating, relaying or registering for something?
>
> **Occasion** — the external situation surrounding your writing. Are you writing an e-mail to inform somebody that you will be late for a class, an e-mail for a quick note, or in application for a job?

Consider the following e-mails — have the authors given appropriate consideration to who will be reading the e-mails? Will the authors accomplish their purposes?

EXAMPLE A – a graduate student writing to an instructor

Hi. I guess we haven't met yet. Just let you know that I have an appointment with the student health center for tomorrow from [time]. That's one of the two only spots with my doctor for the whole week. The other spot is [time]. I figured that taking the first spot probably makes more sense. So I'll be late for your class due to this reason. But hey, I'll be there (eventually)!

This student identifies the e-mail recipient as somebody whom she has not yet met. Therefore, her "But hey, I'll be there (eventually)!" is entirely inappropriate. This is an international student who is trying to be casual and friendly, but who does not know when it is ***not*** appropriate to be so. In addition, she is furnishing far more personal information than is necessary for somebody whom she does not know. Her purpose was to be polite and not offend the instructor by arriving late. If her instructor understands the difficulties in communication that international students face, she will be understanding. If, however, the instructor is unfamiliar with the potential miscommunications that international students experience, she may be offended by the informal tone, thinking the student is not being respectful. In that case, the student will not have achieved her aim. The example below would be far more appropriate.

Hello,
I will be attending your Future Professor series on [date]. I am writing to inform you that I will unfortunately be a few minutes late due to an unavoidable time conflict. I apologize in advance for this disturbance, and I look forward to attending your session.
Yours truly, [Name]

EXAMPLE B – a student writing to a former instructor

"I took your communication course in [date]. I would like to have a copy of the final certificate I got in that course. I actually need it as soon as possible. However, [name] told me that you will not be back until Tuesday. I hope I can get it Tuesday afternoon. I will drop by at 1:00 p.m.
Best regards, [Name]

From an American perspective, this student needs to be *requesting* a favor, not dictating the terms under which he is ordering his instructor to do him a favor. If a person offends the person from whom he needs a favor, he is far less likely to achieve his intended outcome. In this situation, as the instructor knows that she has covered the 'rules' for this kind of an exchange with the student on previous occasions, she will be especially disinclined to grant the student the favor. The following examples would both be appropriate, but the first one is far more formal in tone than the second.

Formal tone

Dear + Name,
I took your communicatin course in [dates]. I find myself in a situation where I need an additional copy of the certificate that was issued for that course. Unfortunately, I am somewhat pressed for time, as I need to be able to include it in an application package that I am mailing on Wednesday. I understand that you are out of the office, and that you will not be returning until Tuesday. I was wondering if there might be any way that you would be able to accommodate this request on such short notice. I will contact you on Tuesday to discuss this further should I not hear from you beforehand. I thank you in advance for your consideration, and I apologize for the inconvenience.
Best regards,
(Name)

Informal tone (but still appropriate)

Dear + Name,
I took your communication course in [dates]. I've got a small problem — I need an extra copy of the certificate that I got for that course. Unfortunately, I'm in a hurry, as I've got to include it in an application package that I'm mailing on Wednesday. I understand that you're out of the office, and that you won't be back until Tuesday. I was wondering if there might be any way that you'd be able to help me on such short notice. I'll call you Tuesday to talk about this if I don't hear from you before. Thanks —I really appreciate this — and I'm sorry to cause you any trouble.
Best regards,
(Name)

EXAMPLE C – a visiting graduate student writing to an instructor

Hi
I'm visiting graduate student. My wife and me want to register in your program, we selected
SECTION [number]
(Name)

This student is clearly from another university, and he is requesting that he and his wife be allowed to attend courses that are available to students at the university. He needs to ask first whether or not he would be eligible to attend. The example below would be far more appropriate.

Dear Sir or Madam,
I am a visiting graduate student at [university]. My wife and I would be very interested in participating in your communication course, and I am writing to find out whether, as visiting students, we would be eligible to do so. If we are eligible, we would be interested in participating in the section that meets on Tuesdays and Thursdays.
Thank you very much,
(Name)

EXAMPLE D – a graduate student writing to an instructor

Hi, there,
I would like to sign-up for the "communication class"
for TAs. I'll send you the TA contract form later.
Thank you.
(Name)

This student is responding to an advertisement for a workshop on communication, which stipulated that students must include their names, their choice of sessions, and the departments for which they were teaching assistants. This student begins his e-mail in too casual a manner with "Hi, there;" however, that is understandable and forgivable. He is merely demonstrating that he does, indeed, need to take the class. He has not, however, included the requested information, which will result in the instructor having to e-mail the student back to request the additional information. The delay in this exchange of information could jeopardize the student's place in the

class, as the instructor has no way of even reserving a place for him. The example below would be far more appropriate.

Dear Sir or Madam, I would like to sign up for [name of workshop] on Mondays and Wednesdays. I am a Master's student in Engineering. Thank you very much, (Name)

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT E-MAIL

1. Make your subject line meaningful. Avoid ambiguous or meaningless lines such as 'e-mail from Chen.' Consider the subject line a hint about what is contained in the e-mail, such as 'Request regarding Wednesday's class.'
2. Treat all e-mail correspondence in a serious manner.
3. E-mail is not the best medium for difficult conversations, as the content of e-mails can easily be misunderstood without the presence of a voice and a face.
4. Be as polite in e-mail as you would be in person — in fact, even more so. Your e-mail might be the first impression that you make on somebody.
5. Observe full letter writing conventions (see the unit on Letter Writing Conventions) even with the electronic e-mail medium.
6. Joking in e-mail can be dangerous, as it is very easy to misunderstand tone, intention, and wording. Only joke with people whom you know extremely well.
7. If you write all of your message in capital letters, you will create the impression that you are yelling.
8. Consider what kind of message you communicate if you use a personal account with an account name such as hotgirl@hotmail.com or sexyboy@hotmail.com. This would be inappropriate for academic communication.
9. Undergraduate students will frequently be very casual in their e-mail correspondence. Do not model your e-mail behavior on theirs. They may also utilize a lot of text messaging protocol such as 'lol' for 'laughing out loud' or 'cu later' for 'see you later.' How you communicate with your friends is your decision; however, it is best to communicate in a more formal manner with your students.
10. Many Americans forego letter writing conventions when they write e-mails. For example, they might begin their e-mails without any kind of header or

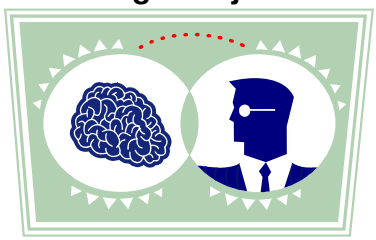
salutation, or they might begin with just the person's name: e.g. "John, …." Students might begin e-mail communication with the word 'hey' instead of 'hi' or 'dear.' The word 'hey' can have many different meanings depending on the tone used when saying it. When used in writing, 'hey' can be considered to be synonymous with 'hi,' and it can actually be meant in a very friendly tone. None of this behavior is considered to be rude in America depending on the context; however, as electronic communication is so easily misunderstood, the safest course of action for international graduate students is to err on the side of formality.

EDUCATIONAL ASSUMPTIONS

Educational cultures differ greatly from country to country. Differences exist in terms of the numbers of students in classes, the behaviours that students and teachers demonstrate, the types of discipline that teachers use in class, the type of learning that is emphasized, and more. In order for international teaching assistants to understand their undergraduate students, it is important to know about their students' backgrounds.

High Schools in America: High school classes in America do not usually have more than approximately 30 students in them, whereas classes in some countries can have as many as 60 students. Therefore, high school classes in America involve a great deal of interaction on the part of the students. Depending on the university where international graduate students teach, their students could come from vastly different backgrounds. Some may come from very privileged backgrounds where the schools and families had a lot of money; however, some students on scholarships may come from underprivileged backgrounds. International graduate students need to be careful not to assume that all their students come from privileged backgrounds.

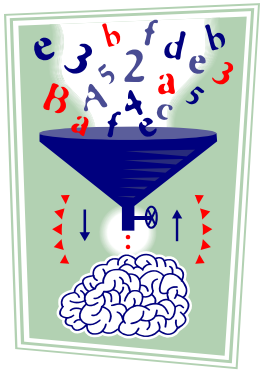
Choosing a Major: Students in America choose their majors themselves. Sometimes parents might want to influence their children to follow certain paths (doctor, lawyer, dentist, etc.); however, this is not the norm. Students ultimately choose the paths they take for differing reasons: some just want to be happy in their jobs, so they want a job they will enjoy for 40 years; some want to earn lots of money; and some will finish their undergraduate degrees and still not know what they want to do "when they grow up." Not all students in America go directly from high school to university; some work for a few years, some travel, and others only return to university when they are more mature.



Financing School: Undergraduate university education is not free in America, and not all American students' educations are financed the same way. Some American parents finance their children's education; however, this is not the case for many students. Many American students finance their educations

themselves. These students do so by holding part-time jobs while they are in school, working full-time during the summers, getting scholarships when possible, and obtaining student loans. Students can work as many as 20 or 30 hours per week in jobs such as waiting tables in restaurants, babysitting, working in the library, etc. Some undergraduates will graduate with over $100,000 owing in student loans. All this will greatly affect many aspects of their studies. It will mean they may not have as much time to dedicate to their studies as international teaching assistants might expect, and the students may be tired in class, late for class, or even absent from class.

Differing Types of Knowledge: Eland (2001) found that 93% of the international graduate students in her qualitative study "indicated that knowledge is conceptualized differently in their countries than in the U.S." (p. 82). International students frequently expect their American students to have greater depth of and quicker access to knowledge than they actually do. It is possible that some international teaching assistants will have thoughts of, "What on earth DO these students know!?" American students will have *different* kinds of knowledge and *different* kinds of thinking skills than international students have. In American high schools, emphasis is placed on analytical, problem solving, and communication skills. Much less emphasis is placed on memorization. International graduate students might find that American students have better presentation skills and may be more competent on computers.



Student-Teacher Relationships: Relationships in American classrooms can be more informal than you might expect. Americans view a lack of formality as an indication of warmth in relationships. Students can be casual — do not interpret this as lack of respect. Teachers are supposed to encourage students to 'be all they can be.' Students will challenge you: they will talk about things that oppose what you have said. This is not disrespectful — they are showing you that they are engaged in the discussion.

Some Surprises: The American university classroom is a relatively informal environment where students expect to feel comfortable. Students might eat in class, walk in late or leave in the middle of class. Some students might put their feet up on chairs. Students talk in class. Some students do not always come to class. Some students come to class but spend their time text messaging each other or doing work on their laptops that is unrelated to the class. Some of this behaviour is negotiable; however, some of it

is just a fact of life in American universities, and many professors struggle with it. International graduate students need to remember that bad student behavior is not directed at them —it is not meant as a direct insult to them.

Student Expectations of Grades: Some students will be content getting 'C's, as all they may want to do is complete their degrees. Other students will take their grades very seriously for many reasons: some students may want to go to medical school, law school, or graduate school. Both groups of students may be equally confusing for international teaching assistants. The ITAs may not understand how the students who only want 'C's can be so 'careless.' The students who want only 'A's might be equally as confusing, because some may seem to think that they are entitled to 'A's regardless of whether or not their work is of 'A' quality.

Differing General Behavior of Students:

American Students	Students in Many Other Countries
Will frequently tell their instructors that they do not understand, because they want to show they are eager to learn	Might never tell their professors that they do not understand, because they do not want their professors to lose face or to lose face themselves
Will sometimes disagree with their instructors, especially on matters of opinion	Might not consider disagreeing with a professor, as the professor is the authority
Will sometimes challenge the accuracy of what their instructors have said with information they have read or heard elsewhere	Might not consider presenting their professors with contradictory information, as doing so might be viewed as a challenge to the professor's authority
Will sometimes interrupt their instructors to ask a question in the middle of their lecture if they do not understand	Might save all questions until after the professor has finished the lecture, as they might not want to interrupt the learning environment of the classroom

It is very important for international teaching assistants to realize that MOST of the behaviour their students demonstrate in class is culturally appropriate — meaning it is appropriate for the environment. Some students will *occasionally* demonstrate inappropriate behaviour. The best way to determine whether something is appropriate or not is to describe and discuss the situation carefully with an American teaching assistant or an American professor.

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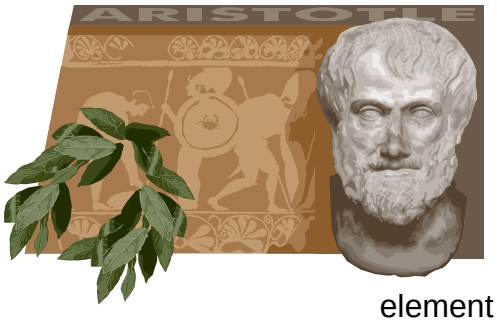
PRESENTING AN ARGUMENT

INTELLECTUAL HERITAGE & SPEAKING CONVENTIONS



The roots of Western patterns of reasoning date back to ancient Greece, when a man's ability to debate was equally as important as his skills as a warrior. In 500 BCE, Greek governments were democratic, and matters of public importance were openly debated. Discussions/debates are a very important element of education in America.

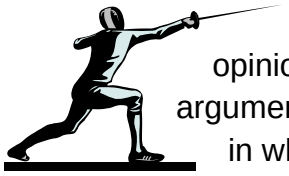
THE ROLE OF DISCUSSIONS/DEBATES IN CLASSROOMS

Students are asked to formulate their opinions from a very early age in American schools. Class discussions about topics important to the students are very common, and the discussion is considered to be a valuable learning tool. When students talk, they have to articulate their ideas and their arguments. When faced with opposing ideas, students have the opportunity to refine, defend, or change their ideas. High school classes give students opportunities to debate topics such as whether or not abortion, euthanasia, or capital punishment should be permitted. These debates are designed to give the students an opportunity to wrestle with moral issues and to present their arguments in logical ways. In addition, being able to think critically about society is considered important for participation in a democratic society. In classroom discussions, it is not important that the student present ideas with which the teacher agrees; it is more important to present the ideas logically and convincingly.

Arguments are defined as:

> "1) a statement or set of statements that you use in order to try to convince people that your opinion about something is correct ... 2) a

discussion or debate in which a number of people put forward different or opposing opinions ... 3) a conversation in which people disagree with each other angrily or noisily"
(Sinclair, 2006, p. 63).



When a person is trying to convince somebody that his/her opinion is correct, the implication is that the other person's argument is incorrect. This dynamic has been likened to that of a war, in which there are winners and losers. Sometimes, when somebody has made a very effective argument, the person who hears it will say, "touché," a fencing term which means someone has been hit. Further examples of battle terminology in the formation of arguments include:

Your claims are *indefensible*.
He *attacked* every weak point in my argument.
His criticisms were *right on target*.
I *demolished* his arguments.
I've never *won* an argument with him.
You disagree? Okay, *shoot*!
If you use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe you out*.
He *shot down* all my arguments. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980)

The important thing to remember is that this 'war' is not between people: it is between ideas.

IDEA FOCUSED VERSUS PERSON FOCUSED

If societies are idea focused, a distinction exists between the idea and the person. This means that open disagreement is acceptable, and that disagreeing with a person's ideas does not represent a personal attack — it is an attack on the *ideas.* If societies are person focused, the ideas are not separate from the person, and disagreement must be handled very delicately, as it can be seen as an attack on the person.

American academic culture is idea focused, which means that disagreement is acceptable. In class discussions, sometimes instructors explicitly look for their students to disagree with them. They might even 'play the devil's advocate,' which entails stating a position that deliberately opposes the position of another person simply for the sake of argument — to see how people will argue against

the position. Students *will* disagree with professors, and it is not considered to be disrespectful — it shows that the students are engaged and are trying to understand the professor's ideas. The exchange can almost be considered a learning game.

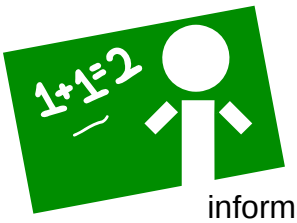
EVIDENCE IN ARGUMENTS

Cultures differ in terms of ***what*** they regard as acceptable evidence to support arguments, ***how*** the evidence is delivered in order to be persuasive, and ***why*** they are engaged in the discussion. These differences are significant to international students, as they will affect how they interact in classes and how they hear the words of American students, other international students, and their professors.

Three Strategies of Persuasion	Features Used to Persuade
Quasilogical	• use of statistics • testimony from experts • objective witnesses
Presentational	• appeals to emotions • emphasis on artful delivery of words
Analogical	• provision of story to demonstrate point

People in America will use all of the above strategies of persuasion depending on who they are, who their audience is, and what they are discussing. For example, somebody might use a very analogical style to complain about something that a friend did, a presentation style to convince a life partner to take a vacation, and a quasilogical style to convince a boss of the value of a proposal. In American academia, however, the preference is distinctly quasilogical. Facts, figures, and illustrations are convincing to English speakers in academia.

DELIVERY OF ARGUMENTS



English speakers are taught to begin with their main point and then offer examples to demonstrate what they mean. This is important, because if somebody is expecting information to be delivered in a quasilogical way, and the information is delivered in either a presentation or an analogical way, the point of the speaker may be lost on the audience, and the speaker may lose credibility.

The following are excerpts from *A Different Place: The Intercultural Classroom*, a film by Dr. Jaime Wurzel. The film depicts an American classroom on international relations in which communication styles and patterns of reasoning interfere with the success of a lesson. The class is discussing what the American policy should be regarding the exploitation of the resources in the Antarctic.

In the following segment, Esteban, a student from El Salvador, is trying to present his point using a very presentational style, but his professor does not understand it.

Esteban: Well, historically, we have seen that internationalization hasn't really worked in the past, but it more sense in, in . . . well, we are living now with so much hatred and so much wars between people because of oil. I think it's really important that we keep in mind that we must find a new way to solve our problems instead of doing it the same as we have done in the past with wars and killings. Um, I . . .

Professor Ford: Go on.

Esteban: Well, I come from a country that is also in war and I don't want my children to grow up in a country where people will be just killed because of the necessities of other people of powerful nations. I think it's important that we find ways to solve our problems in a more . . . in a better way, let's say. I think we have to find a way to, ummm . . .to solve those road jumps

Professor Ford: Obstacles.

Esteban: Exactly. I think it's important that we find a better way to do things instead of um, um . . . just finding a way of killing each other, you know? I don't want my children to grow up in a country, in a nation that is killing each other.

Professor Ford: Okay, so I understand, Esteban, but what specifically about Antarctica . . .? The real question is . . .

Esteban: Exactly. I think that the problem . . . no, the problem is that there's still people . . .

Joanna, an American student, later poses the following question, which is the point that Esteban was trying to arrive at through implication.

Joanna: I don't think anyone answered the fundamental question yet. If the US doesn't support international control of Antarctica, won't that lead to a larger conflict?

In the following segment, Simon, a student from South Africa, illustrates his point using an analogical style, beginning with a story from his village. Unfortunately, he is not understood by his classmates, either, because he loses their attention before he arrives at his point.

Simon: Excuse me, Professor, if I may. Some years ago, some Western Engineers came to my village to build a bridge there for us. They showed us where we should build a bridge according to their maps. They had figured out where to build a bridge for us. We did not want to offend them, but we wanted to tell them that it would disrupt centuries of life in our community. This history has shaped our people. So many people have been brought up with a sense of inferiority because of this. We see this attitude in all of the Western, industrialized countries. I see this attitude in the 1961 treaty. These attitudes have been a destructive force in this world.

Simon *finishes* with his main argument, whereas his audience would have expected him to *begin* with his idea that the attitudes in the treaty had been a destructive force in the world. If Simon had begun with his main point, he could have then offered the example of what happened in his village to illustrate his point. His story would have been effective had he offered facts about the numbers of residents who were displaced, any other quantifiable information about how the engineers disrupted the lives of the villagers, etc.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Differing cultural values are evident in academic discussions. English-speaking societies tend to value objective facts, logic, and restrained emotions, which can be in stark contrast with argument patterns in other cultures. For example, societies influenced by Confucianism tend to value harmony and balance. Chinese reasoning may reflect the Confucian concept of the "Golden Mean," which states that between two people with two different views, there is truth on both sides. Arabic societies tend to value the verbal artistry of the speaker. In Arabic discussions, being eloquent and flowery is a sign of "education and refinement" (Nydell, 2002, p. 119), and being emotional "connotes deep and sincere concern for the substance of the discussion" (Nydell, 2002, p.48). Each rhetorical pattern has its own beauty and its own effectiveness. The challenge for individuals who interact with people from other cultures is being able to speak in a way that is convincing and culturally appropriate for different listeners in different contexts.

When international students arrive in America, many are unfamiliar with student-centered classes and the concept of class discussions. A student-centered class is one where students are actively talking in the class, contrasted against a teacher-centered class, where the teacher does most of the talking, and where the students are mostly passively listening. Some difficulties that the international students face could include:

1) not recognizing the academic value of the discussions — they might wonder why they should listen to a peer talking about something when the professor is the one who knows the most about the topic;
2) being shocked to see students disagreeing with the professor;
3) having difficulty understanding the other students' comments;
4) feeling intimidated about participating; and
5) having difficulty formulating their opinions in 'culturally appropriate' ways, as their previous academic discussions might have been less confrontational — or possibly even more confrontational — in style.

Class discussions are a wonderful opportunity for international students to improve their English and get to know their classmates. Successful participation takes a bit of advanced planning and a measure of courage.

STRATEGIES FOR GETTING INVOLVED

1) Set yourself a goal of how many times a day/week you are going to participate in class. You may begin by telling yourself, "Today, I am going to make one contribution during class." The next week, increase your goal to making two contributions.
2) Ask your professor for information ahead of the class about what is going to be discussed in class so that you can prepare some ideas, look up vocabulary in advance, etc.
3) Think about how you will structure your arguments. Begin with your main point, and then offer your supporting ideas/illustrations, etc.
4) Be prepared for the fact that others will openly disagree with you, and remember: it is ***not*** a personal attack, and it is not their intention to be rude.

There are socially appropriate ways to disagree, and disagreeing must be done 'politely.' At the end of this unit is a list of sentence starters that could be employed during discussions.

How students respond to the concept of confrontation during discussions depends partially on what their counties of origin are. The spectrum of confrontational /non-confrontational is vast, and North American rhetorical patterns would seem highly confrontational to some while not at all confrontational to others.

An East Asian student stated "that he had to get used to confrontation in academic discussions in the U.S.:

First it sounds to me like somebody is trying to attack [me]. In [my country], it is considered rude, but here it is common practice. [Here] you have to defend yourself when you have a discussion or a presentation. You have to defend yourself and people will raise questions" (Eland, 2001, p. 97).

A West African student "found that conflict and confrontation were avoided in the American classroom but encouraged in his country, and throughout francophone countries. He was surprised by the attitude he found in America:

> People weren't that patient of contradicting, of expressing really what is your point of view. It was maybe to avoid conflict. ... That was not something I noticed before I came here, in the French system" (Eland, 2001, p. 97).

PRESENTATION OF ARGUMENTS IN WRITING

The preceding section illustrates some of the conventions of academic discourse. The academic norms governing writing are much the same regarding what constitutes credible support for arguments, the value placed on objectivity, and the placement of the main argument in oral communication — only stricter. Unfortunately, an extensive discussion of contrastive rhetoric (the body of research which addresses cultural and linguistic differences in writing) is beyond the scope of this manual. The following student comments indicate how English conventions run counter to the rhetorical patterns in many countries and pose a challenge for international students.

A student from East Asia stated,

"What should be included in the introduction or conclusion is different. Like here, introduction, the writer has to show where the paper is going. Of course, it is the same as a paper [in my country]. But the academic paper in the U.S. is more organized. Like in the introduction, the writer has to put the overall summary of the paper, and detail and restatement of the introduction ...But a paper [in my country] is more unsure of where the paper is going. And I think writers [in my country] think that is more interesting" (Eland, 2001, p. 97).

A West African student stated:

"In the French system [used in my country], you pose a challenge to the reader. You don't spoon-feed the reader in the sense that 'the purpose of my dissertation is this. This is what I am going to do.' No. They say that's too crude, not classy. You kind of drag a little bit. You go here, you talk about the moon and the sky. And then you come to the subject matter" (Eland, 2001, p. 97).

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Learning about and adapting to the rhetorical conventions of a different culture can be both personally and academically challenging, and the difficulty is compounded by the fact that failure to adapt to the conventions has academic repercussions. If professors, supervisors, and students cannot understand somebody, that person will have difficulty communicating about his/her work. And being able to communicate about one's work is central to success in academia.

DEBATING LANGUAGE SENTENCE STARTERS

To state your position

I think …
I maintain …
I believe …
I assert …
I profess (to state openly that one has a belief, feeling, etc.) * be careful with this – you don't profess a fact*

To agree strongly with an opinion

I couldn't agree more.
That's absolutely true.
I agree with your point.
That's precisely what I was thinking.
That's an excellent point.
That's a salient (most noticeable & important) point.
That's a cogent (convincing, strong) point.
That's a valid point.
That's a crucial point.
I concur with what you say about …

To admit that something is true

I concede that …
I admit that …
I grant you (agree to give or allow) that …
I accept that …
I acknowledge that ….
I recognize that …
I hadn't thought about that …

To agree in part with an opinion

I agree up to a point; however …
That's worth thinking about; however …
I suppose there's some truth in what you're saying; however, ..
That might be so; however …
That may well be true; however ….

To disagree politely with an opinion

Do you think so? I'm not so certain.
I'm not sure you're right.
I am afraid that I don't agree.
I'm inclined to disagree with that.
It is possible that you are mistaken about that.
My classmate professes (to claim falsely) …
That's a moot point/question (there is much uncertainly about – i.e. whether women or men are better teachers).
(Casual) I don't know about that. I'm not so sure about that. You think so?

To disagree strongly with an opinion

I don't accept that for a minute.
I can't accept ..
I reject …
I refute ….
I deny …
I categorically (absolutely) reject/deny …..
I absolutely do not accept that …
I do not acknowledge the veracity (truth) of your statement.
(Casual) I don't buy that. No way.

To repeat/restate

To summarize, …
I would like to reiterate that …
To recapitulate …. (summarize, state again) …. Let me just recapitulate (casual = to recap)

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TEACHING METHODS

The concept of lecturing as a form of teaching has existed for centuries; lessons were read from a single book before an audience, as only the teacher had the book. However, more and more, educators have come to see the limitations of lecturing and have embraced what is called active learning.

Active Learning

Bonwell and Eison (1991) define active learning as that which "involves students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing" (p. 2). What this means is that frequently students in America do not just sit passively in class; they are expected to get involved. What 'getting involved' entails will vary from discipline to discipline: in the social sciences and the humanities, classes may include a lot of discussions; whereas groups discussions may not feature prominently in engineering or the sciences. International students may sometimes be confused by this approach initially, as they may not recognize what the professor is doing as *teaching* and what the students are doing in the class as *learning*.

As students are more active in the classes, both the students and the professors will behave differently. The professors might engage the students in discussions more or ask questions to elicit participation and foster thinking, and the students might engage in more 'thinking out loud.' It can be a challenge for international students to understand what their classmates are saying, to be able to participate, and to recognize that a discussion amongst peers constitutes learning. In addition, as the whole lesson is less scripted, the professor has less control over what occurs in class. This might make the professor look somehow 'less prepared' or like less of an 'authority' compared to what international students might be expecting.

Common international students' perceptions of active learning
'The professor is not teaching.'
'The students are just talking.'
'Why should I listen to what the students say? I want to learn what to hear what the professor has to say.'
'What am I supposed to be learning from this class? What is the right answer?'
'I'm not learning anything… I'm wasting my time.'

Rest assured that what is transpiring is a culturally different approach to teaching and learning. While initially international students might be confused by the differences in American classes, they can and do adapt to the different styles of teaching and learning, and many come to prefer the focus on student

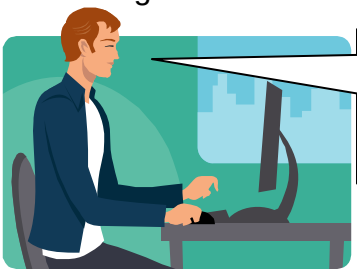
involvement. In addition, the coverage of material in a class might differ from how lessons were taught in the international student's home country. An international student made the following comment about being in an American classroom: "In the U.S. classroom several topics may be covered in a one-hour lecture. While in another country, a single lecture may be for a longer time period and cover only one topic, but in great detail" (Eland, 2001, p.83).

Benefits of active learning
Students have the opportunity to interact with the knowledge they are learning and test what they do and do not know.
Students have the opportunity to integrate what they are learning into their prior knowledge, which leads to deeper learning and greater retention.
Students enjoy being active participants in the learning process, and positive attitudes lead to greater learning.
Student motivation to learn is increased.

Strategies International Students Have Used

The following quotes from international graduate students demonstrate experiences and strategies used to adapt to new styles of teaching and learning.

Being in such a class where one is learning new content in a new style can be exhausting. A South American student said,



"[I] had a headache at the end of every class from straining to understand and be understood" (Eland, 2001. p. 145).

Being allowed to ask questions during a class helps students.

" being able to ask 'stupid' questions in class facilitated [my] learning" (Eland, 2001, p. 121 -122).

International graduate students report professors anticipating their needs more in their home countries. However, students in North America need to make their requests for help very explicit.

"I had to make my effort. It wasn't that they realized that I didn't know anything. Like I had to go and make sure that I met with them and went and told them that I need feedback and was persistent enough to keep asking them questions and discussing my papers with them and finding out" (Eland, 2001, p. 136).

Other students in class can serve as a model for what language to use:

"I started dictating what other people said to the professor ... Just imitate what the other students say to get the attention of the professor and speak what I want to say" (Eland, 2001, p.137).

A Southeast Asian student was hesitant to participate in class discussions, because she was not used to speaking up in class. However, once she understood that the act of participating is more important than the content of what is said, she was able to participate:

"When I first got here, I am silent [in class] ... When you listen to [your classmates] and sometimes you understand and sometimes you don't. And you just think, 'Wow, they are really good.' But to be honest, after a awhile in here, I think about the way of the culture, that they are just talking or making comments, even though they are not really that great. I am not insulting them, I just say, like in general, it is a cultural difference... And they just talk, and well, I kinda get used to it. So now I am just talking, too. Even though I know a little, I just talk whenever I know and that's good" (Eland, 2001, p.137-138).

Additional Strategies to Employ

1) Make yourself known to your professor. You may do this after class or during office hours. Your introduction might be something like this, "Hello Professor …, my name is …, and I have just moved from … to study here. I'm really excited about being here and taking your class. English isn't my first language, but I will study hard to try to follow everything in class. I

was wondering, do you have any suggestions about what I can do to be successful in your course?"

2) Set yourself mini goals for your class. 'Today, I am going to make one contribution. Next week, I am going to ask one question during class.'

3) Find a friendly classmate in your class, and make a point of asking that person out for coffee/tea. It is not advisable to frame the invitation from the perspective of your needing them to help you with your English. A more favorable impression would be created just by expressing interest in getting to know the other student.

4) Do not be shy about asking the professor about how good a mark is. If you receive an 80, and you are unsure about whether that is a good mark or not, ask the professor.

5) Students can be confused by feedback on assignments: for example, a professor might write many seemingly negative comments but then give a student a good mark. If you do not understand the feedback that you have received on an assignment, ask the professor about it.

6) If you have any academic situation that is difficult for you, do not just suffer in silence. Such situations might include having difficulty adapting to being in America, having trouble concentrating, feeling anxious, having difficulty following in class, having difficulty coping with the amount of work because of second language issues, etc. Speak to your professor, other students, and/or somebody in the centers that support learning on campus. Many services are available without cost to support students on campus, and there is absolutely no shame in seeking out these services. In fact, seeking out support during times of difficulty is highly commendable, and it can make all the difference in the world.

LINKS

Common Student Questions
University of Minnesota
http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/graduate/itap/nonnative/questions/index.html

Pronunciation of Technical Terms
Michigan State University
http://tap.msu.edu/team/resources/

Scenes from a Classroom: Managing Conflict
University of Minnesota
Center for Teaching and Learning
http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/tutorials/conflict/index.html

Teaching Labs
Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning
http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k1985&pageid=icb.page415031&pageContentId=icb.pagecontent788782&view=watch.do&viewParam_entry=35885

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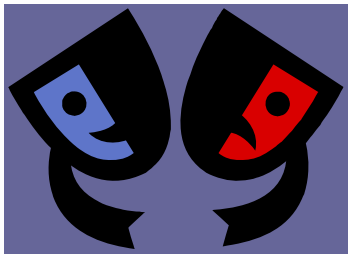
THE LANGUAGE OF TEACHING

The purpose of this unit is to help you to enhance your teaching communication by incorporating specific elements into your speech. In this section you will learn: strategies to make your classroom communication more clear for students and strategies for asking good questions and including more questions in your teaching. In this unit, I include examples of both successful and unsuccessful international teaching assistants' (ITA) teaching communication. The ITAs have consented to have transcripts and/or the video of their teacher talk used for the benefit of all who read this book. The teaching took place during microteaching segments in a course on communication and teaching. (Microteaching involves the students teaching their interdisciplinary classmates about a topic from their own disciplines for 10 to 15 minutes and then fielding questions from the audience.) I am very grateful to and respectful of these ITAs for their willingness to have us all learn from them.

It must be noted that each of the topics discussed in this unit could be an entire book. Therefore, please view this unit as one step on the journey to developing good teaching communication.

CULTURE AND TEACHING COMMUNICATION



ITAs report being both excited and scared when they begin teaching undergraduates from different cultures. Many ITAs might initially be worried about teaching because they speak with an accent or have imperfect grammar, and they fear this will interfere with their students' ability to understand them. While accented speech *is* quickly noticed by undergraduates, students can adjust to differences in pronunciation and imperfect grammar over the course of a term (Williams, 1992). (Moreover, a lot of native speakers have imperfect grammar and are highly comprehensible!) It is not solely grammar and pronunciation that affect how North American students understand foreign instructors — student comprehension has more to do with the specific language instructors use, how they organize their speech, and what strategies they use while they are teaching. While ITAs' previous academic success and their ability to speak English will

help them teach in North American classrooms, even an ITA who is proficient in English will still need to learn the language required to teach.

Teacher communication involves more than relaying facts to students; it reflects the cultural values surrounding teaching and learning in the community in which it takes place. Therefore, what constitutes effective teaching communication varies greatly from country to country (Crabtree & Sapp, 2004; Neuliep, 1997; Roach, Cornett-Devito & Devito, 2005). Learning more about the language of teaching benefits ITAs in their communication with their students *and* with their supervisors. In addition, effective teaching communication also contributes to the long-term success of ITAs in their careers. ITAs who have taken the above-mentioned course on communication and teaching have gone on to win teaching assistant awards and research awards in their departments and at conferences.

CULTURE AND TEACHER COMMUNICATION

What ITAs consider to be good teaching behavior or teacher communication will be influenced by what they have experienced in their countries of origin. Our cultural background will influence how we explain concepts and how we expect to have concepts explained to us (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). In the following example, an ITA reflects on teacher communication in China:

> … in my memory a good teacher in China does not answer student questions or encourage students' questions. Rarely does the teacher in China ask the students if they understand the lecture fully before he moves on to another topic. He usually prepares the content of one lecture and then talks from the beginning to the end and maybe he asks a few questions--but very little. And usually he does not check to see if the student has understood or not. This is how it has been in my own experience (Bates Holland, 2008, p. 139).

While some instructors in North America might demonstrate the above-noted behavior, they would definitely not be considered good instructors, which would affect their credibility with their students, their student evaluations, and possibility their careers.

NORTH AMERICAN EXPECTATIONS OF TEACHER COMMUNICATION

In North America, the relationship that students expect to have with their instructors is different that what might be expected between instructors and students in other countries. Teaching in North America is student centered, meaning it focuses on engaging and involving students in learning (see unit on Educational Assumptions.) Undergraduate students do not expect their instructors to be extended family members who will take care of them. They do not expect their instructors to have absolutely perfect knowledge of all aspects of their subject. They do, however, expect them to help them learn — some

instructors might even argue that undergraduates expect their instructors to make learning easy. In fact, to ITAs, it might appear that North American students assume too little responsibility for their own learning. An illustrative example of this perception is as follows: "Students here want to be given information with little effort on their part. In China you must learn on your own and push yourself very hard" (Bates Holland, 2008, p. 133).

Central to being a good teacher in North America and helping students learn is being able to:

- ✓ explain complex concepts effectively (Smith & Simpson, 1995);
- ✓ answer students' questions without making answers confusing (Raths & Lyman, 2003); and
- ✓ give examples to demonstrate principles (Raths & Lyman, 2003).

While ITAs might worry about their ability to explain concepts and answer questions well because of language, they can easily use a lot of other verbal and non-verbal behaviors so that their students perceive them to be effective teachers.

- ✓ Show your students that you care about their learning. This means that if you answer a student question but see that the student has not understood, follow up afterwards—if not in that class, then during the next class. Undergraduates are very impressed when ITAs try to resolve misunderstandings (Fitch & Morgan, 2003).
- ✓ Show your students that you care about them. Make efforts to be friendly. Remembering students' names and smiling impresses students and actually increases the amount of credibility that you have with students (Teven & Hanson, 2004).
- ✓ Be careful with your use of authority. North American students are much more sensitive to instructors' use of power than students in other countries and will find instructors to be authoritarian more readily than students from other countries (Roach, Cornett-Devito & Devito, 2005; Teven & Hanson, 2004). A basic example of this is that students will find instructors who say, "Would you please sit down" or "Have a seat please" to be friendlier and more approachable than one who says, "Sit down."
- ✓ Encourage your students. Phrases such as 'good try,' 'good work,' 'well done,' etc. will increase the amount of credibility that you have with your students (Teven & Hanson, 2004).

DEALING WITH SECOND LANGUAGE ISSUES

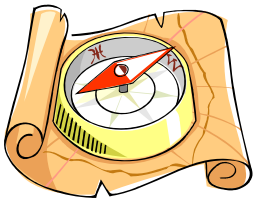
- Do ***NOT*** apologize for the fact that English is your second language. First of all, students will not see this as humility on your part — they will see it as a weakness. Moreover, a lot of native speakers find accents very attractive. In

addition, that you are teaching in a second language is a strength: therefore, do not apologize for it.

- Before you go to class for the first time, practice your introduction in front of a mirror and in front of friends. As you speak, look around the room and make eye contact with the students and smile. A good introduction would include the following as minimum information:

  Hello, my name is _____, and I'm from (country of origin). I'm (delighted/really happy/excited, etc) to be your TA this term. I'm here working on my (master's/PhD) degree in (subject), and I'm in my (first/second, etc) year. As you can hear, English isn't my first language — my first language is _____— but I'm going to do my best to make sure you can understand me. I'm really (passionate about/fascinated by/interested in) the material in this course, and I look forward to helping you do well in this course.
- Make outlines of your lesson and have them visible while teaching so your students can follow where you are.
- Write any new vocabulary on the board, especially words which are challenging for you to pronounce or which are new to the students.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING YOUR CLARITY WHEN TEACHING



Communication in North America is low context (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1980) (see unit on Being Direct), which manifests itself in a classroom in the expectation that it is the speaker's—the *instructor's*—responsibility to ensure that students understand.

ITAs need to think of their speech as a guide in a classroom. They need to make sure that students understand what the map of a lesson will be, and they need to offer students verbal cues throughout the class that announce, "You are here." Critical to orienting your students to where you are in your teaching is the use of language which announces what you are talking about to your students. The language of teaching involves the use of words and phrases that help students understand how ideas relate to each other and how what they are learning makes sense given what they already know. Students in low context cultures have been educated to expect and listen for these phrases, and teacher communication that does not include them will be confusing (Tyler, 1992). Such phrases announce definitions, examples, restatements, identification, the introduction of new topics and summaries (Williams, 1992). Examples of the categories of phrases that instructors can use include the following:

Definition	What is the Goldilocks principle? The Goldilocks principle is …
Example	For example, Mars is too cold, and Venus is too hot.
Restatement	So what that means is that Earth's atmosphere is just right for …

Identification	This is what a rhizome looks like.
Introduction/new topic	Now, I'd like to talk to you about ...
List/overview	The three main issues we're going to discuss today are …
Summary	So, the reason this is important is…

(Adapted from Williams, 1992)

One of the most important things to remember when you are preparing to teach is that ***you must plan what you are going to say***. Research has demonstrated a marked increase in the use of teaching phrases between ITA planned speech and ITA unplanned speech (Williams, 1992). You might know everything there is to know about a topic in your own language, but you must still plan what you are going to say in terms of what words you will use, what examples you will give, in what order you will present information, and how you will check for understanding. In addition, sometimes you may need to use more than one strategy to explain an idea.

Transcript from a High Context Microteaching

The following is a partial transcript of a microteaching on ions by a master's student in Chemical and Biochemical Engineering. As you read the transcript, look for areas where the ITA has gone high context — where he has assumed knowledge or where he needs to be explaining something more. (The feedback he received from the course instructor and his classmates follows the exercise.)

Exercise

ITA: Hi, good evening everyone. Today I am going to talk about …uh … the effects of air ions on human health … So does anybody know what is meant by an ion?

Student: Ions, we've got positive or negative ions and they are in the air

ITA: Yeah, that's right. So they can be present either in the air or in water. So in the air it is difficult to judge what types of ions are there but in water we have plenty of ions that depends on the composition of the water. So we'll discuss about that very shortly.

So normally clean air will contain around 1,500 to 4,000 ions per centimeter cube, these ions are either … it can be positive or negative but the ratio between the positive and negative ions should be 1:2, and we know that negative ions are more mobile and also we know that earth is having a negative charge.

So the negative charge of the earth's surface and the negative ions in the atmosphere they repel each other so the atmosphere should always have a ratio of between 1 ion to 2.

So that's how we can balance others. So there were some investigations carried out which shows that any changes in the ratio or the concentration between the positive and negative ions will show not only an effect on humans but it will show effect on plants and animals.

So where do we find this impact? Today we will deal mostly with human health, how it impacts human health. So human health mostly it is having an effect on in the offices, in the industries, any crowded places and cities. There are some scientists like MacKenzie and Beckert who have carried out studies on these ions and they found that in San Francisco when they did some study in industry … they found very less varies 1,500 and 80 ions per centimeters cube.

These small ions are very less so the people who are working in the industry they suffer a lot, so they found that how this will ….how direct this small number was, because these ions … they combine with dust and pollutants … they form large ions and that's how due to gravity. They settle to the bottom of the ground.

Now coming to how these ions affect us, so breathing in ion depleted air leads to discomfort, enervation, lassitude, loss of physical and mental efficiency. So in order to restore this we are to introduce more negative ions or in order to keep it balanced, we are to introduce positive ions in order to have comfort of physiological normalcy.

Feedback on the Microteaching

The feedback from this student's classmates and the course instructor addressed both structure and content. It is located below the transcript, preceded by the letters FB and highlighted using superscripts ([1], [2], [3]).

The microteaching is a good example of high context communication in that the student has presumed a lot of shared knowledge and utilized a circular approach to framing the microteaching. A circular approach is contrasted against a linear approach. In a linear approach to speech, attention is paid to making sure that content is sequenced so that ideas are presented step by step. This involves thinking about what an audience needs to know in order to understand the new information that is presented. In the microteaching, the students had to wait almost four minutes into a ten minute microteach to hear that balancing ions was important to human health. This information was critical to understanding why what the instructor was speaking about was important, and it should have come much earlier than almost half way through his instruction. In terms of content, many concerns in the feedback would have been resolved by beginning with a comprehensive definition of what an ion is.

ITA: Hi, good evening everyone. Today I am going to talk about …uh … the effects of air ions[1] on human health … So does anybody know what is meant by an ion?

Student: Ions, we've got positive or negative ions and they are in the air

ITA: Yeah, that's right. So they can be present either in the air or in water. So in the air it is difficult to <u>judge what types of ions are there</u>[2] but in water we have plenty of ions that <u>depends on the composition of the water</u>[3] So we'll discuss about that very shortly.

FB: *1) What is an ion? It is good that he asked the question, but he has not actually defined what an ion is.*
2) Why is it difficult to judge what types are ions are in the air?
3) It would be good to state that ions are in the air and water but that today's class will focus solely on those in the air.

ITA: So normally clean air will contain around 1,500 to 4,000 ions per centimeter cube, these ions are either … it can be <u>positive or negative</u>[4] but the ratio between the positive and negative ions should be 1:2, and <u>we know</u> [5] that <u>negative ions are more mobile</u> [6] and also <u>we know</u>[7] that <u>earth is having a negative charge.</u>[8]

So the negative charge of the earth's surface and the negative ions in the atmosphere they repel each other[9] so the atmosphere should always have a ratio of between 1 ion to 2.

> ***FB:***
> *4) What makes an ion positive or negative?*
> *5) Perhaps we don't know this*
> *6) How are ions mobile?*
> *7) Perhaps we don't know this*
> *8) What's the significance of this?*
> *9) How do they repel each other and what is the significance of this?*

[a portion was deleted due to highly technical nature of content]

ITA: So that's how we can balance others[10]. So there were some investigations carried out which shows that **any changes in the ratio or the concentration between the positive and negative ions will show not only an effect on humans but it will show effect on plants and animals.**

> ***FB:***
> *10) How do we balance ions? Why is balancing ions important? To what does 'others' refer?*

ITA: So where do we find this impact? **Today we will deal mostly with human health, how it impacts human health[11].** So human health mostly it is having an effect on in the offices, in the industries, any crowded places and cities[12]. There are some scientists like MacKenzie and Beckert who have carried out studies on these ions and they found that in San Francisco when they did some study in industry … they found very less varies 1,500 and 80 ions per centimeters cube[13].

> ***FB:***
> *11) This comes at 3:50 into the 10 minute microteaching.* ***The material highlighted in blue above belongs in the introduction.***
> *12) Why? What's the significance?*
> *13)What's the significance of this number? Remind your audience of what is optimal.*

ITA: These small ions are very less so the people who are working in the industry they suffer a lot, so they found that how this will ….how direct this small number was, because these ions … they combine with dust and pollutants … they form large ions and that's how due to gravity. They settle to the bottom of the ground.

> ***FB:*** *This might support what you are discussing above in 12.*

ITA: Now coming to how these ions affect us, so breathing in ion depleted air leads to discomfort, enervation, lassitude, loss of physical and mental efficiency. So in order to restore this we are to introduce more negative ions or in order to keep it balanced, we are to introduce positive ions in order to have comfort of physiological normalcy.

> ***FB:*** ***This came at 4:57 into a 10-minute microteaching. This should have been in the introduction, as it is the main focus of the microteaching.***
> *Does the audience understand the terms enervation and lassitude?*

Clearly if the ITA addressed all of the above-noted concerns, he would have far too much for a 10-minute microteaching. It would have been better to have taught in greater detail, which would have necessitated covering far less material.

Transcript from a Low-Context Microteaching

The video and transcript of the following microteaching are also from an international student's microteaching (see video entitled CSIGS Microteaching). This student has succeeded in teaching using low context communication. This student did an exceptionally good job of introducing a term, defining the term, and then giving an example of it to make sure the audience understood the context.

To facilitate your understanding of each of the stages, they have been color coded: introduction/new topic **(INTRO) ,** definitions **(D),** example/ illustration **(E/I)**, identification/naming (**I/N**), list/overview (L/O), and summary/review (**S/R**) .

Today we're talking about …… **INTRO** design perspectives of robots. (L/O), Uh … these perspectives are mobility, dimensionality, intelligence, autonomy, cooperation, and emotion.

INTRO Before we discuss mobility, we have to go through some concepts of mobility. The first is localization, and by **I/N** localization, **D** I mean the position of the robot in certain environment, and the **INTRO** second is mapping - and **I/N** mapping **D** is whether the robot knows the map of the surrounding environment or not. Uh … in these pictures, we can see **E/I** two models of localization – a robot arm that tries to move and know the location of the fingers to grab – and here is a robot that tries to know the location using certain sensors, and here is a map that a robot can use to define its environment.

INTRO So for mobility, we have two types of robots – stationary robots and mobile robots. **I/N** For stationary robots, we're basically talking about something we call a robot arm. **D** A robot arm is an actuator – a mechanical device – that has a stationary platform and it acts upon. **E/I** It can be in an assembly line or whatever or a building – as long as the platform is stationary, then it's a stationary robot. And the characteristics of this platform – the stationary platform – **INTRO** is it's an easy odometry – **D** which is motion calculations – **E/I** so it's easy because it doesn't move and the error for positioning is very low.

INTRO The second type, however, is mobile robots, and it has more complex odometric system, so it – **E/I** the motion of the robot is more complex – the calculation of error is more complex process, and actually all of … I mean … **S/R** almost all real life applications for robots would need sensors and some kind of intelligence.

INTRO Intelligence. **I/N** By intelligence, **D** I mean the robot has to have a rational way of thinking – a rational way of thinking in order to get a sub-optimal solution. We can't achieve optimal solution, but we actually go for sub-optimal solution. **D** So, non-intelligent robots are robots that know the environment, and they don't have to take decisions by their own. **E/I** An example for these robots would be welding applications and assembly lines. The environment is well known – it's static. **D** Static means there's no change in the environment, and it's stationary. **S/R** So most of these robots would be non-intelligent – or intelligent robots like auto pilots in airplanes – these are robots – automatic unguided vehicles or, of course, humanoids. For any intelligent system, we need sensors and rational way of taking decisions. **INTRO** The other perspective would be autonomy. **I/N** By autonomy, **D** we mean would the robot be able to decide by its own and act upon or not. **E/I** If you're sending a robot to Mars, then the robot has to be autonomous. It has to take its decisions by its own and act upon them. However, if you have a robot in a close environment and you know the conditions and stuff then what you need is a non-autonomous robot that you probably will control by a remote control or whatever control type you can control it with.

A minor weakness of the teacher's discourse is in his introduction to new topics or slides, which he does with a single word, such as "Intelligence." To progress from talking about mobility to talking about intelligence, he could use a single sentence such as, "So now we know that robots move, so we need to consider what they need in order to move the way we want them to move. They need intelligence."

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING YOUR TEACHING COMMUNICATION

As mentioned in the unit on English Skills, key to improving your English is choosing good models. In order to improve your teacher talk, pay close attention to the speech of instructors who you find especially clear in their explanations. If possible, while you are listening to them, separate your listening into two categories: 1) student listening, where you listen to what they are teaching you; and 2) teacher listening, where you listen to what language they use to teach and how they have sequenced their material. If possible, ***ask them for permission*** to audio record their lectures so that you can listen to their lectures more than once. Take notes of their language structures. In addition, if possible, record your own teaching so that you can listen to yourself afterwards.

POSING QUESTIONS

Posing questions to students and making room for student questions during a class are very powerful strategies for improving learning in a class and for developing your relationship with your students. In addition, one of the easiest ways to get students involved in a class and to determine what they do or do not know before you begin teaching is by asking questions. Planning what you intend to say before you go to class is especially critical when posing questions both in order for the students to be able to understand what you are asking and also for the questions to be pedagogically meaningful.

Exercise

As you read the following except from a microteaching, try to determine what question the ITA is trying to ask.

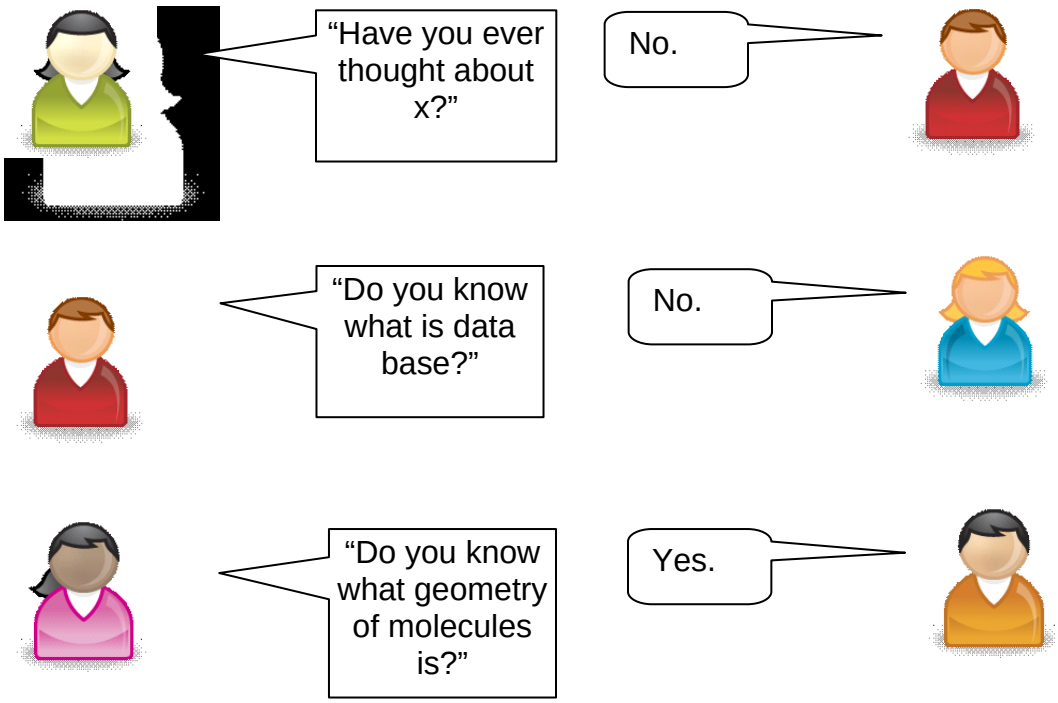
ITA: Today I want to talk about the signals and systems, it's one course in electrical engineering in department, but you can forget this name, and I want to teach you about engineering's perspective or view to the problems. Let's start with a question. It's a social network, means that there are so many peoples, people names here, and each one knows some others. For example, here Dr. Parslow knows Terry and he knows Mia, and it's a social network. To these social networks, behavior, diseases, anything else can propagate, can spread. For example, if Dr. Parslow talks about something to Terry, he might talk to Mia about that, and we can say that this talk or this idea propagate through this network. It's very useful if we can anticipate the behavior of this network, because for example, suppose that you want to have some effect on Jamey, as we are supposed to do, and I can say that if Dr. Parslow do something, after some days, Jamey will do that if we can anticipate the behavior of the network. Another question is, "How much can Dr. Parslow can affect Jamey if he does believe on some gossips? Do you have any idea about that?
Student: I'm thinking a huge effect.
ITA: But how much? We can say I don't know, it's not related to my field or anything, and it seems that this problem is not related to engineers, but anyway….
Student: I think it is related to engineers and I think that the effect that it would have on Jamie would be huge personally.
ITA: Anyway ….
Student: Is that the wrong answer?
ITA: No, it is not the wrong answer, it is not as specific as I want because it is obvious that Jamie will be affected by Dr. Parslow, but now I ask how much, I want something more specific.
[Three students simultaneously] Student: Are you looking for a number? Student: A percent? Student: 50%, you want as an answer?
ITA: Maybe, but how do you try to solve that? Give me some solutions. … Because of that I said it is not related to engineering because there is so many parameters that affect this network, but as an engineer, I won't say no I can't do that at least at the first time. I will say that I ignore all of the details of the network, and I just consider Dr. Parslow, Jamey, and something in between. I name this system. And I try to let the system can be everything. It can be …. It can be a social network, it can be everything – we can name everything a system if we can define inputs and outputs for them. And I try to define inputs and outputs for this system. But for doing that, first as an engineer, I need to measure the amount of belief – how can I measure that? It's another question, how can I … do you have any idea, how can I measure the amount of belief – for example, if I do believe on some gossip, and you do, too, how we can compare the amount of belief that … we need some measurement, some calculation for that.

Notice how long it took the ITA to clarify to the students what it is that he was asking. It took six interactions with students for him to get closer to what he wanted to ask. The above interaction took place in a small group where everybody knew each other well, so people were comfortable asking clarifying questions. In addition, the ITA was extremely warm and welcoming when he was

teaching. He was smiling and making lots of eye contact the whole time. Even those positive elements did not help the students understand what the ITA was trying to ask, and so it took a lot of time to arrive at what the ITA was looking for. What he was really trying to say/ask was something to the effect of:

> 'When we think about engineering, we may think about building roads, buildings, or electrical systems. But engineering can also be used to think of systems to measure social phenomenon such as the impact of gossip. Now imagine the following situation [and then he could explain about Dr. Parslow]. My question to you is: 'What kinds of things could we examine to measure the impact that gossip might have within a social group?'

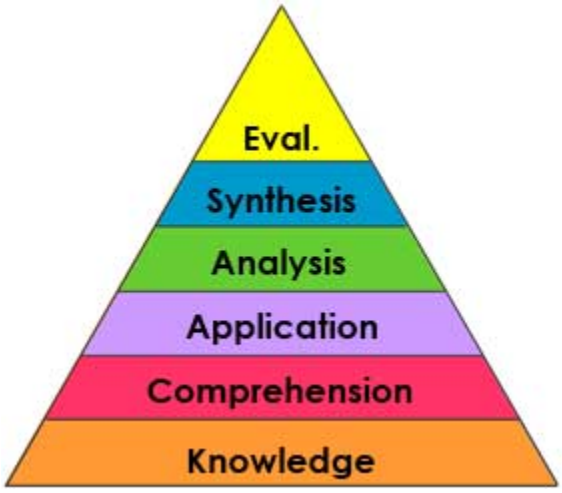
The following questions were also taken from ITA microteaching segments. Each of these questions is a closed question, meaning that the question can be answered with a single word—in this case yes or no. These questions have no pedagogical value and do not advance learning—or even gauge knowledge. That a student has responded to a question that begins with 'Do you know' does not demonstrate knowledge; the student might think he knows, but his knowledge may be incorrect or incomplete.



Levels of Questions

Bloom's Taxonomy is a classification of learning objectives that examines learning in three domains — the cognitive, the affective, and the psychomotor (Arreola & Aleamoni, 1998). The taxonomy is used by instructors to formulate educational objectives—to help instructors decide exactly what it is that they hope to teach their students in any given class. The premise of the taxonomy is that learning happens in stages and in a hierarchical order.

Skills in the cognitive domain of Bloom's Taxonomy are illustrated in the following graphic. Below the graphic is an explanation of each of the levels with illustrative questions from engineering. Notice that some of the questions would easily fit into a classroom, whereas others might only be asked in an exam situation. *The questions are not intended to be used in classes or exams, as they are general enough that the lay person could understand them but not as precise as they would actually be in an engineering class or on an exam.* (For examples of verbs to use in questions at each level, please see Arreola & Aleamoni, 1998.)



(Overbaugh & Schultz, n.d.)

1. Students begin with **knowledge** of basic facts:
   "What is force?"
2. Students **comprehend** — understand — the material enough to be able to take information and restate it in their own words:
   "Using the concept of force, explain why a car gets damaged in a collision."
3. Students **apply** the information to a different situation than that which they first learned.
   "What is the necessary force required to be applied to an object of 50 kg in order to accelerate to 3 m/s^2?
4. Students **analyze** a concept that is different from the situation in which they first learned something:
   "Based on the following information from the scene of a collision (speed, mass, position, friction), which car was going faster?"

5. Students **synthesize** information, which requires them to use it in a different way to solve a new problem:
   "A building is constructed using steel that resists a maximum load of 1000 MN (mega Newtons) of force. Each storey weighs 10 tons. Given the mass of each storey, determine the maximum height recommended if each storey measures 2 meters."
6. Students **evaluate** the application of a solution to a situation:
   "Decide which material would be optimal to build a bridge given the following factors (wind, load, vibration, tension)."

(Adapted from Arreola & Aleamoni, 1998)

The hierarchical aspect of the taxonomy illustrates that students will have difficulty engaging in the thinking of any given level without having successfully engaged with the material at the level below. For example, students cannot comprehend something without being able to recall basic facts. In addition, the shape of the pyramid illustrates that greater opportunities exist for posing knowledge questions than for posing higher level questions. A shortcoming of some teaching is that instructors only ask questions at the level of knowledge. One result of this is that students will be unable to respond to questions in exams that are different from those covered in class, and instructors will face students saying, "You didn't teach us this!"

Placing Questions in your Teaching

- ✓ Use knowledge level questions at points where you want to determine what students know about what you are about to teach
- ✓ Use knowledge level questions to review what students have learned in previous classes when you need to make sure they understand certain concepts before going any further
- ✓ Use questions before you teach a new concept to prime students to be interested in what is coming next or to challenge their assumptions
- ✓ Before you pose a question, make sure the students know that a question is coming. You can do this by saying something such as, "So, a question that I would like to ask you is …" (Make sure you wait approximately seven seconds after you ask your question to give students time to think and respond.)
- ✓ Keep your language positive and encouraging when interacting with students. For example, even if a student gives you an incorrect response, do not respond saying, "Incorrect." Instead, say, "Not quite — thanks for trying. Anybody else?"

To illustrate some of the above points, let us look at the microteaching about robots from earlier in this chapter. The following segments would lend themselves very easily to posing questions to students. Before even beginning to teach, the ITA could have accessed what students already know about robots. Everybody knows something about robots from watching the news, science

shows or even movies. He could have asked questions such as: "Where have you seen robots used?" "What kinds of tasks have you seen robots perform?" Suggestions for further questions have been included in blue text.

Uh, second perspective would be the dimensionality – whether it's a single robot system or a multiple robot system.

This would be a good place for a question. That a single robot system needs to be more complex than a multiple robot system might seem to be counterintuitive—it is not necessarily what you would expect. A possible question might be: "So, before I go any further into the description of these systems, which type of robot system do you think would be more complex—the single robot system or the multiple robot system?" After the students answered, a follow up question of "Why?" would also be effective.

For a single robot system, the robot has to be more complex, because it's going to achieve the whole process by its own. So, we can see in this picture – it has its all kinds of sensors – it will interact with the environment by its own. And the second type would be a multi-robot system – a set of simpler robots – but together they will do the task. Uh … the hard thing about multi robots is the coordination between the robots together and the interaction and for them all to have common objective.

Intelligence. By intelligence, I mean the robot has to have a rational way of thinking – a rational way of thinking in order to get a sub-optimal solution. We can't achieve optimal solution, but we actually go for sub-optimal solution. So, non-intelligent robots are robots that know the environment, and they don't have to take decisions by their own.

An example for these robots would be welding applications and assembly lines. The environment is well known – it's static. Static means there's no change in the environment, and it's stationary. So most of these robots would be non-intelligent – or intelligent robots like auto pilots in airplanes – these are robots – automatic unguided vehicles or, of course, humanoids. For any intelligent system, we need sensors and rational way of taking decisions. The other perspective would be autonomy. By autonomy, we mean would the robot be able to decide by its own and act upon or not.

This would be another good place for a question. "When might we need robots to be able to make decisions on their own?" The students might be able to suggest the example of robots on planets, which contributes both to learning and to the 'feel good' atmosphere of the class.

If you're sending a robot to Mars, then the robot has to be autonomous. It has to take its decisions by its own and act upon them. However, if you have a robot in a close environment and you know the conditions and stuff then what you need is a non-autonomous robot that you probably will control by a remote control or whatever control type you can control it with.

Sometimes Students Cannot/Do Not Answer Questions:

The following points will interfere with students being able to respond to questions:

- ✗ Phrasing questions poorly: If students do not know what you are asking, they will not be able to respond.

- ✗ Clustering questions: If you ask too many questions at the same time, students will not know what question you are asking.
- ✗ Cold calling: This refers to calling on students by name to answer a question without their having raised their hands. Most students do not like this.
- ✗ Answering your own questions too quickly: The problem with doing this is that it communicates to the students that they do not need to worry about answering the question — that you will do it. Give the students some thinking time, and allow for silence in your classes.
- ✗ Instructor knowledge: If you make assumptions about what the students do know or should know, you might be posing a question that is too challenging for the students to be able to answer. Due to differences in education systems, a common ITA error is to overestimate both student knowledge and common ground (Eland, 2001).

Strategies for Responding to Student Questions or Student Contributions

In addition to posing questions to your students while teaching, it is imperative that you allow students to ask you questions while you are teaching. How you respond to student questions or students' responses to your questions will do much to set the tone in your class — t will make the class a safe learning environment or it will communicate to students that asking and answering questions is not safe and that you are not an approachable instructor. The following list offers some suggestions of elements to include in your behavior to ensure your students feel safe enough to ask and answer questions. Watch your models for other behaviors , as much is to be learned in watching others teach.

- ✓ Rule No .1: ***there is no such thing as a stupid question*** — even if you deeply believe that a student should know the answer to the question that was asked or that you have already taught the material. You must also pay attention to your tone of voice, your facial expression, and your body language to make sure you are not communicating in ***any*** way that you find the question elementary.
- ✓ Repeat the question to make sure that everybody in class can hear it. If you are not sure that you have understood the question, rephrase the question and ask the student if you have understood their question correctly. Begin your sentence with something to the effect of, "So just to make sure I understand what you are asking, …" If you cannot understand the question, it is appropriate to say, "I'm having difficulty understanding what you are asking, can anybody else help me understand the question?" It can also be appropriate to turn the question back to the other students in the class to see if anybody else can answer it with a phrase such as, "That's a good question—does anybody know the answer?" (Use this technique when you already ***do*** understand the question; do ***not*** use this technique if you do not understand the question yourself. It may happen that nobody in the audience knows the answer, and then you **will** have to answer it.)

- ✓ Be concise: answer no more than the student has asked. In other words, if somebody asks what time it is, do not explain how to build a watch.
- ✓ Watch the student's body language. If they start nodding, breaking eye contact, and saying things such as, "Okay," "Now I get it," etc., it is safe to stop your explanation. If you want to be sure you have satisfied the student, you can ask, "Have I answered your question?"
- ✓ If you cannot answer the question because you do not have adequate time or information to do so, ask the student to come and see you after class.
- ✓ Validate students questions with words such as, "Good question," "I'm glad you asked," or some kind of comment that tells the student that you welcome questions. If you cannot bring yourself to praise a student for a question to which you really believe they should know the answer, at a minimum, try to smile or nod to appear warm.
- ✓ If you call on a student using a non-verbal gesture instead of the student's name, do so by extending your arm with the palm of your hand facing upwards, as it is inviting and creates rapport (CNS, 2010).
- ✓ When listening to student questions, hold your head on a slight angle to the side and nod a bit while the student is speaking, as this also shows friendliness and creates rapport (CNS, 2010).

PRAGMATICS WHEN TEACHING

One last element that needs to be considered when teaching is the element of pragmatics (see unit on Meanings in Context). Pragmatics is the study of the aspects of meaning and language use that are dependent on the person speaking, the person listening, and the context of any given situation. The literature contains nothing regarding the use of pragmatics and international teaching assistants while teaching, so at best, this unit can contain a cautionary note with the repeated advice to listen for models of good language use while teaching.

A few examples to avoid are as follows:

- ✗ Some ITAs begin responses to student questions with the words, "As I said before…" In English, this not a neutral statement. It implies, 'You were not listening—had you been listening, you would not ask such a question.'
- ✗ Another common phrase is "It's easy" or "It's not difficult,' both of which have a secondary message of, 'If you were smarter, you would understand what I am saying,' which is not positive or encouraging for anybody.
- ✗ Some ITAs begin questions with the words, "Do you have any idea…" This phrase can be used to ask somebody to make a wild guess about something such as, "Do you have any idea how much it would cost to fly around the world?' However, this phrase can have an especially accusatory tone in English. For example, these words might be used by an angry lab supervisor if somebody broke an instrument: 'Do you have any idea how much that

costs!?' The phrase suggests a lack of both consideration and intelligence and should therefore be avoided when teaching.

If you say something to a student, and the student responds in an unexpected or negative way to something that for you had no possible negative consequence, make a note of what was said and ask a native speaker whom you trust for their interpretation. Pragmatics is an area of language that takes a long time to develop, and not all native speakers necessarily have good command of it. Once again, watch your teaching models for phrases they use while teaching.

If you have good examples to share of situations where pragmatics played a role, please e-mail the author with your examples at nlegros2@uwo.ca.

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS

"...it is only in failure that the seeds of success lie"
- Michael Lewis

The history of language instruction, like all histories, is filled with many great tragedies. The biggest tragedy of English language instruction is how many people have been taught English by instructors who knew its grammar and vocabulary, but who could not speak the language. The problem was compounded by the fact that these instructors had 50 students in their classes. As a result, a lot of students learned English by translating sentences. If the students were really fortunate, they did somehow manage to have some discussions in English in their countries of origin. Many students, however, have the idea that the way to improve their English is to improve their grammar and study vocabulary. These students may also have the unnecessary and unrealistic expectation of speaking 'perfectly,' meaning without error. Some of these students then encounter difficulties when they come to the United States and need to be able to understand lectures and write essays, reports, and dissertations.

DO NOT BE AFRAID TO MAKE MISTAKES

One of the biggest problems that students face is the false belief that they must be accurate when they speak — that their speech needs to be error free. This is entirely untrue. It is far more important that people successfully communicate their message than it is that they communicate in correct English. Native English speakers frequently make grammatical errors and frequently cannot find the exact words they need. Native English speakers also frequently have miscommunications. ***International students need to understand that communication does not need to be 100% correct in order to be effective.*** Consistent levels of accuracy in English are features of very advanced levels of

language ability, and the only way to become advanced is to experiment with lots of English and make many mistakes.

WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR ENGLISH

- ✓ Expose yourself to as much English as possible. Listen to English, watch television, and read as extensively as possible. All of this will help you develop receptive (passive) language skills. Listening will help you improve your speaking skills; reading will help you improve your writing skills. (Be careful about speaking in the same way as characters in movies or on television, especially if they use swear words.)
- ✓ Do not stop at every single unknown word to run for a dictionary. Try to understand the word from its context. If you keep seeing or hearing the same word, then go to the dictionary and look it up.
- ✓ Do not memorize lists of words in isolation. Instead, focus on lexical phrases — chunks of language — that you read and hear. Lexical phrases are segments of language, e.g., "Something I've been wondering about..." Therefore, do not just memorize single words: work on incorporating *pieces* of sentences into your language.
- ✓ Be very mindful of the situations where you learn new language, and do not always try to translate the words into your own language. The phrases from one language do not necessarily translate directly into use in another language. For example, in Chinese, people frequently begin addressing audiences with, "As you know." We do not do this in English, because we do not assume our audiences know what we are discussing when we begin our presentations.

The more you expose yourself to new language in different situations, the better your overall language skills will become.

MODELS FOR YOUR ENGLISH

As you watch television and listen to the radio, be mindful of the fact that the people who you are watching are serving as models for your language. They will influence how you speak. When learning any new pieces of language, it is critical to be aware of ***who*** is using the language, ***with whom*** they are using the language, and in what ***situation*** the language is being used.

One day, a student in a class on communication participated in a role play in front of the class. In the role play, he was meant to be speaking to his supervisor, and he said, "And you want to do that *because* …" with a slightly rude and sarcastic tone of voice. After watching him for two minutes, his instructor asked him, "Do you watch the television sitcom Friends?" The student looked quite surprised by the question: how was it possible that somebody who knew nothing about him knew what he watched on television? He confessed that yes, he watched it every night, sometimes twice a night. His problem was that he was transferring the way the characters in Friends speak to each other to a situation where he needed to be speaking more formally to his supervisor. The characters in Friends are related, married, or have been friends for a very long period of time. The way they speak to each other is unique to them as a group of friends; it is not how anybody should be speaking to supervisors. Moreover, in his own language, this student would undoubtedly not consider speaking to a friend and a professor in the same way.

RECOMMENDED RADIO AND TELEVISION SHOWS

TELEVISION SHOWS

NAME OF SHOW	WEBSITE	SUBJECT OF SHOW
Good Morning America	http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/	News show
CBS News	http://www.cbsnews.com/	Evening news
The Daily Show	http://www.thedailyshow.com/	Political satire

The above three shows can help international graduate students be informed about what is happening both in the States and the rest of the world and make it easier for them to engage in social conversations. In addition, video segments are available online, which enables students to work on their listening skills.

RADIO SHOWS		
All Things Considered	http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=2	Comedy & music variety show
A Prairie Home Companion	http://prairiehome.publicradio.org	Narratives in a variety show
The above shows can help international graduate students develop their sense of aspects of American culture and work on their listening skills and vocabulary for situations in daily life.		
The Vinyl Café (from Canada)	http://www.cbc.ca/vinylcafe/	Variety show with music and stories
The above show can help international graduate students develop their listening skills and vocabulary for situations in daily life.		
Quirks & Quarks (from Canada)	http://www.cbc.ca/quirks/	Science
The guests on Quirks & Quarks discuss science and technology in terms that are easy to understand, as the audience of the Canadian Broadcast Corporation (CBC) consists of lay people. Examples of how discoveries can be discussed in simplified language are especially beneficial for international graduate students in the sciences and engineering, as they need to develop this skill. Previous episodes are available in podcasts.		

NB: The shows recommended represent the opinions of the author and not the university.

LINKS

Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary
http://dictionary.cambridge.org/

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Lewis, M. (1993). *The state of ELT and a way forward.* London: Language Teaching Publications.

DICTIONARY WORK

Many international students use bilingual translators as their sole dictionaries, as these dictionaries are small, easy to carry, and relatively inexpensive. Some students use English dictionaries that are actually meant for native speakers. While bilingual dictionaries are useful to a certain degree (for example to translate a word into English), an advanced learner's dictionary can be an international student's best friend. It is of utmost importance to take the time to learn how to use one to its fullest advantage.

Ideally, students would have an advanced learner's dictionary, a collocation dictionary (see unit on Do, Make, or Have Research?), and a thesaurus available for any writing occasion. Knowing how to use such materials can improve the writing of international graduate students greatly. Students need to learn how to 'read' these books. Reading language reference books does not involve actually reading the book cover-to-cover, but it does involve scanning the page on which a word is found to see other forms of the same word and to see how the word is used. Central to being able to understand the entries in a dictionary is familiarity with the dictionary's coding system. This information is found at the beginning of a dictionary, and it can help students understand whether a word is informal, taboo, or old-fashioned.

The **Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's English Dictionary** is recommended as a tool to help students build their vocabulary. To illustrate why it is important to use an advanced learners dictionary, consider the following information as it pertains to the word ***analysis***. After the word analysis, are the following word forms: analyser (analyzer in the U.S.), analyst, analytic, and analytical. Finding these additional word forms is especially important for international students, as some languages, such as Chinese, do not have the same range of word forms that English employs; as a result, sometimes students only know one or two word forms for a word. In English, nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and opposites are created by adding prefixes or suffixes to words. Such word building quickly

adds range and accuracy to the language of second language learners, and having good language skills adds to the credibility of international students.

analysis /ə'nal.ə.sis 1 **Analysis** is the process of considering something carefully or using statistical methods in order to understand it or explain it. ◊*We did an analysis of the way that government money has been spent in the past.* 2 **Analysis** is the scientific process of examining something in order to find out what it consists of. ◊*They collect blood samples for analysis at a national laboratory.* 3 An **analysis** is an explanation or description that results from considering something carefully. ◊*... coming up after the newscast, an analysis of President Bush's domestic policy.* 4 You use the expression **in the final analysis** or **in the last analysis** to indicate that the statement you are making is the most important or basic aspect of an issue. ◊*I'm on the right track and I think in the final analysis people will understand that... Violence in the last analysis produces more violence.*	◆◇◇ **N-VAR** **N-VAR** **N-COUNT** **PHRASE: PHR with cl = in the end**

The following is from the dictionary's List of Grammatical Notations and the Explanation of Grammatical Notations:

N-VAR = A **variable noun** typically combines the behaviour of both count and uncount nouns in the same sense... The singular form occurs freely both with and without determiners. Variable nouns also have a plural form, usually made by adding –s. Some variable nouns when used like uncount nouns refer to abstract things like *hardship* and *injustice*, and when used like count nouns refer to individual examples or instances of that thing, e.g. *He is not afraid to protest against injustice ... It is never too late to correct an injustice. ... the injustices of world poverty.* Others refer to objects which can be mentioned either individually or generally, like potato and salad: you can talk about a potato, potatoes, or potato.

N-COUNT = A **count noun** has a plural form, usually made by adding –s. When it is singular, it must have a determiner in front of it, such as *the, her*, or *such*, etc. My cat is getting fatter ... She's a good friend.

PHR = Phrases are groups of words which are used together with little variation and which have a meaning of their own, e.g. They are reluctant to upset the applecart.
with cl = with clause

WORD FORMS

Word form	Function	Example
noun	a person, a place, or a thing	analyst (person) / analysis (thing) / analyzer
adjective	describes a person, a place, or a thing	analytical
verb	a word to express action or occurrence	analyze
adverb	describes a verb	analytically

PRACTICE

1. The student's approach to the problem was very _____.
2. If you see a psychiatrist, you might refer to him as your _____.
3. Your _____ of the situation was very thorough.
4. She approached the problem very _____.
5. I'm trying to figure out the best way to _____ the data.
6. The _____ was uncertain about the significance of the data to his work.

When learning new words, always try to incorporate the new piece of vocabulary into a chunk of language so that you capture the words that collocate with it (see unit on Do, Make, or Have Research?)

Answer key:
1 – analytical, 2 – analyst, 3 – analysis, 4 – analytically, 5 – analyze, 6 – analyzer

ACADEMIC WORD LIST

The Academic Word List, created by Averil Coxhead of Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand, is a list of the 2,000 most frequently occurring words in academic texts. http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist/. The list of words is a good beginning for international students' studies, provided

they do not merely translate the word into their own language and memorize the word in isolation (see unit on English Language Skills).

Also included in this manual is a list of university vocabulary terms (see unit on University Vocabulary) to help students understand the terms specific to life at university.

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Sinclair, J. (2006). *Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's English Dictionary* (New Edition). Glasgow: HarperCollins.

Do, Make, or Have Research?

Collocation is a term used to refer to words that can appropriately be used with other words. You do not need to remember the word collocation (and very few native speakers know what this word means), but you need to remember the idea of it. Collocation refers to what is appropriate usage of adjoining words.

What is important about collocations?

- ✓ Collocations are essential to good writing
- ✓ Nouns, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, and adjectives can collocate
- ✓ Native speakers learn collocations as they learn to speak
- ✓ Collocations make you sound natural
- ✓ Collocations add precision to your speech and writing. Compare the following sentences:
  'She is a famous researcher whose research is good.'
  'She is an eminent researcher who does cutting edge research.'
- ✓ Frequently no logic is involved at all in determining which words do or do not collocate: if you ask "Why?" the response is, "Just because."

WE SAY	WE DO NOT SAY
a devoted friend	a devoted smoker
a heavy smoker	a heavy friend (unless they are overweight)
a golden opportunity	a golden chance
slightly annoyed	slightly interesting
first language / mother tongue	mother language / first tongue
change one's mind	change one's thoughts

(Adapted from Swan)

How can you improve your use of collocations?

- ✓ Read. The best way to improve your overall English is to read material that is outside of your discipline. Read novels, newspapers, children's books, etc.
- ✓ Pay attention to the words that come before and follow other words.
- ✓ Buy an Oxford Collocations dictionary for students of English (excerpt below) ISBN: 0-19-431243-7 **OR** Oxford Phrasebuilder Genie (collocations & dictionary on CD) ISBN: 0-19-431483-9

Oxford Collocations dictionary for students of English

	Analysis *noun*
adjectives that collocate with analysis	• ADJ. **careful, close, comprehensive, detailed, in-depth, systematic, thorough | brief | objective, subjective | comparative, critical, qualitative, quantitative, statistical, theoretical | cost-benefit, discourse, economic, financial, historical, linguistic, strategic, structural, stylistic**
verbs that come before analysis	• VERB + ANALYSIS **carry out, do, make, perform** *They carried out an in-depth analysis of the results.* **| give** *He gave a brief analysis of the present economic situation.*
verbs that come after analysis	• ANALYSIS + VERB **indicate sth, show sth** Analysis of the wine showed that it contained dangerous additives.
prepositions that come before analysis	• PREP. **in/ an/the ~***In his analysis of the novel he discusses various aspect of the author's own life.*
common phrases that include analysis	• PHRASES **in the final/last analysis** *In the final analysis, the king's power was greater than the bishop's.*

NB: A collocation dictionary does not include definitions: it only shows what words collocate with each other. A student would still need a dictionary to look up unknown words.

Practice your use of collocations:

CONNECT THE VERBS ON THE LEFT TO THE NOUNS WITH WHICH THEY COLLOCATE ON THE RIGHT (answer key at the bottom of the page)			
1.	to address	a.	a conclusion
2.	to advance	b.	an application
3.	to assign	c.	books
4.	to attend	d.	an argument
5.	to come to	e.	a deadline
6.	to conduct	f.	a hypothesis
7.	to consider	g.	class
8.	to do	h.	office hours
9.	to hold	i.	topics
10.	to form	j.	concerns
11.	to make	k.	options
12.	to meet	l.	a presentation
13.	to research	m.	research
14.	to submit	n.	an experiment
15.	to sign out	o.	a grade

REFERENCES

Swan, M. (1995). *Practical English usage* (New Edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Deuter, M., J. Greenan, J. Noble, J. Phillips [Eds.] (2002). *Oxford collocations: Dictionary for students of English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Answer key:
1-j, 2-d, 3-o, 4-g. 5-a, 6-m, 7-k, 8-n, 9-h, 10-f, 11-l, 12-e, 13-I, 14-b, 15-c.

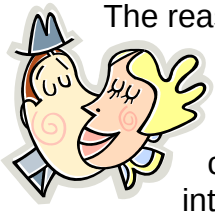
Meanings in Context

Many people who speak English as a second language believe that their grammar, pronunciation, or range of vocabulary is what makes them less effective communicators than native speakers. This may be because they do not know what pragmatic competence is. **Pragmatics** is the study of the aspects of meaning and language use that are dependent on the person speaking, the person listening, and the context of any given situation. Bardovi-Harlig & Harford (1990) maintain that it is pragmatic competence which distinguishes second language speakers from native speakers. If a person knows what to say, when to say it, and uses appropriate language to communicate, such an individual can be considered to be pragmatically competent.

What's wrong with the following example?

Person A: "Excuse me, do you have the time?"
Person B: "Yes."

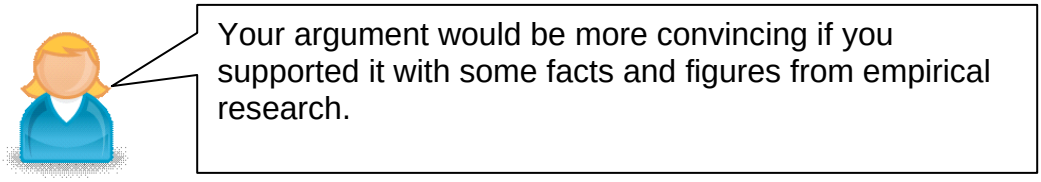
In this example, Person B has taken the question literally: he has understood the sentence meaning, but not the speaker's meaning. Person A is not really asking whether or not Person B *knows* what time it is. What Person A really means is, "Could you please tell me what the time is." An appropriate response would be, "It's 4:45."



The reason pragmatics is so important in communicating in a second language is that when somebody speaks very little of our language, we consider them to be "outsiders" and judge their behavior depending on how we generally feel about their culture (Platt 1989). For example, in France, when people are introduced in social situations, they will kiss each other on the cheek two or four times. If you met somebody from France who spoke very little English, and this person kissed you when introduced, you might either think, "What a charming custom," if you generally liked France, or you might think, "How rude!! I hardly know this person, and now he's kissing me!" if you had negative feelings about France.

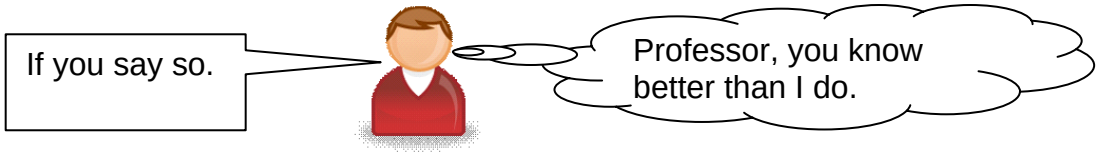
However, when somebody speaks our language really well, Platt (1989) maintains we tend to consider the person to be part of our group and interpret their behavior according to OUR rules. For example:

An instructor is giving feedback to a student on his performance:



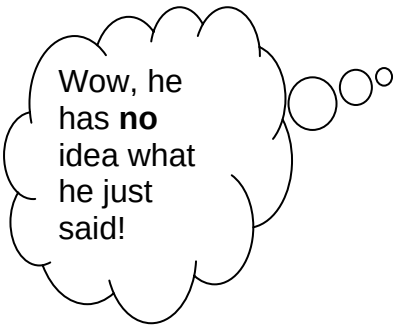
The student says:

The student thinks and means:



"If you say so" has *very* negative connotations in English. The meaning of this phrase is closer to, 'Well, I don't really agree with what you have said, but I'm going to pretend that I agree just so that you stop talking.'

If a student had very weak English, the professor might think,

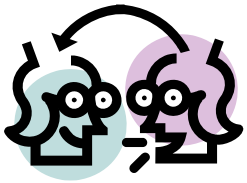


If the student were very fluent in English, the professor might think,

Such a thought could then be very damaging to the relationship.

SIX AREAS WHERE PRAGMATICS AFFECT EXCHANGES

(NB: This is not meant to be a comprehensive list of areas where pragmatics affect exchanges; it is meant as a small sample of some of the many ways where pragmatics affect interactions.)



One:
Engaging – starting a verbal exchange

Frequently when Americans see each other, they will say, "Hi, how are you?" What frequently bothers newcomers to the States is that they notice that many times the Americans don't wait for an answer to the question. In fact, for some Americans the expression could almost be considered synonymous for 'Hello.' This does not mean that this is so for *all* Americans. Sometimes people will be truly asking the question and will genuinely want to know how the other person is. Practice and observation will assist newcomers in differentiating the two. A good clue, however, is to watch the individual's eyes: if the person continues to maintain eye contact after asking the question, chances are the person is waiting for a longer or more specific response.

Americans tend to get straight to business in professional situations. International students might misinterpret this as being rude, as illustrated in an example where a graduate assistant says to a student, "Hi, how can I help you?" when the student first enters the office. Some international students might expect more of an exchange of pleasantries first. Americans have a sense of "time is money," and they tend to operate with the idea that they will get to business first, and while they are doing business or when they are done — time permitting — they will exchange pleasantries. Having said that, it is important to know that it is not appropriate to walk into someone's office even if one has an appointment, saying "I've had a problem with my experiment…" There must be *some* exchange of pleasantries in such a situation, even if it is just a couple of brief sentences. E.g.

Person A: "Good morning, Paul, how are you doing today?"
Person B: "I'm fine — what a beautiful day it is today! How are you?"
Person A: "I'm alright — yeah, the weather is gorgeous. But you know, I'm having a problem with my experiment, and I was wondering if you had a minute to talk about it."

Two:
Disengaging – ending a verbal exchange

The rules surrounding ending a conversation vary from culture to culture. Sometimes students will wait for their professors or supervisors to dismiss them, and they might feel that taking leave on their own initiative would be rude. In other cases, students might disengage by saying something such as, "I'm sorry to have wasted your time." Such a statement might be meant to express humility, but it would not be appropriate in America. In America, it is entirely appropriate for a student to take leave from an instructor; moreover, it is also entirely appropriate to cite personal reasons for doing so. Possible phrases might include:

Person A: "Well, thank you for your time. I really must leave now, because …" or 'I've got to go — I have a million things to do, but thanks very much for taking time to see me."

Person B: "Oh, sure, no problem!"

Three:
Requesting something from someone or requesting someone to do something

In some countries, when people need others to do favours for them, they may not ask the person directly to help: they might imply what the problem is, hoping that the other individual will infer what the difficulty is and offer to help. This might be because in some countries, it is considered impolite to refuse a request, and therefore people do not make direct requests, thus not putting the other person in the uncomfortable position of possibly having to say no. The following shows how North Americans, who are more direct in their language of requests, may not recognize that the other person is hinting at a favour. In fact, some Americans might even become irritated at too much indirectness, as they might consider it to be longwinded or somehow not honest. Consider the following conversation that took place in a hallway while a professor was on her way to class:

Japanese student: "Now that my dissertation is almost complete, I'm going to be applying for teaching jobs at universities."

American supervisor: "That's great. I'm really glad to hear that you have decided to become a professor rather than enter industry. You are a very gifted teacher. Look, I've got to run now — I'll talk to you later, okay?"

The Japanese student might have been hoping that his professor would immediately offer to write a letter of recommendation upon hearing his statement about making applications. In the above situation, many factors might have impacted how the professor responded to the student. The conversation took place on the way to class, and the professor was probably thinking about the class more than her student's career. More than anything, most American professors would simply not recognize the statement as a hint that the student wanted a letter of reference.

In America, an appropriate way for the Japanese student to have made the request would have been: "I am going to be applying for teaching positions in the next while, and I was wondering if I could ask you to write a letter of reference for me." At that point, barring any exceptional doubts that the professor had about the student's abilities, she would agree to do so.

Four:
Agreeing to a request

In some countries, when Person A asks Person B to do something, there is no expectation that Person B will respond verbally. For example:

Person A: "I'd like some of these pages photocopied, please." …
Person B: (Takes the pages, walks away, and returns later with the copies.)

In this exchange, Person B might think that the nonverbal actions are an adequate response. However, such an exchange might not be viewed favorably by an American. An American might expect *verbal* acknowledgement of Person B's willingness to do the activity ("Certainly") and possibly a reference to how long it would take ("I'll have those for you in five minutes.") If Person B does not do so, he might appear sullen. (If a student says something in class, a teaching assistant needs to acknowledge it verbally before continuing the class or the student who contributed might feel ignored.)

In addition, as it is permissible in America for people to refuse a request if they absolutely cannot fulfill it, it is highly inadvisable to agree to a request that one cannot fulfill. For example, if a supervisor asks a graduate student to have three chapters of her thesis written by a certain date, but she knows she cannot possibly have that amount written, she needs to say so. Her supervisor might be angry with her if she did not meet the deadline upon which they agreed.

Five:
Accepting an offer/invitation

In some cultures, a person might not give a positive response to an invitation immediately for fear of appearing overly eager or greedy. In such cultures, people might feel they needed to say 'no' a couple of times or use an expression of modesty before accepting. In America, it is appropriate to accept an invitation immediately. For example:

Person A: "Would you like to come to dinner with us?"
Person B: "That would be lovely, thank you!" **or** "Sure!" **or** "I'd love to!"

If expressions of modesty were used or if there were any hesitation in accepting, the person who had extended the invitation might interpret the hesitation as a lack of interest or enthusiasm.

Six:
Declining an offer/invitation

In cultures where people are deeply concerned about not embarrassing or saying 'No' to other people directly, responding negatively to an invitation is not appropriate, and doing so would be too direct. What people from such cultures might do instead is give a response that would allude to not being able to go, but they might not say 'no.' In America, it is expected that if you cannot accept an offer or an invitation, you will say so directly. For example:

Person A: "Would you like to come to dinner with us?"
Person B: "I would like to, but unfortunately, I can't because… (one might offer a reason) **or** "Perhaps we could do it another time. I can't now, because …"

As America is a country where communication patterns permit a person to say 'no' directly to an invitation or an offer, it is vital that a non-native speaker of English accept the negative response and not try to persuade the individual.

The above are just some of the many ways that pragmatics can affect communication. As this is an area that is very much neglected in the instruction of English as a second language, students whose first language is not English need to watch exchanges with native speakers very carefully to examine what words are used when and to what effect. In addition, if communication does

break down, it is critical to consider whether pragmatics might have contributed to the break-down. It is also very useful to explain this difficulty to anybody with whom one has experienced a break-down in communication so the other individual might be understanding and patient in future circumstances.

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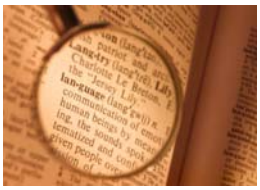
Platt, J. (1989). Some types of communicative strategies across cultures: Sense and sensitivity. In O.G. & R. Otheguy (Eds). *English across cultures, cultures across English: a reader in cross-cultural communication*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

THE POWER OF PASSIVES



The passive is found more often in academic writing because of the rhetorical context (see unit on E-mail) which requires formal writing and because findings which are reported in research are more important than who is reporting new findings. In addition, if different parts of research have been conducted by different members of a reporting team, the use of "I" or "we" could become confusing or cumbersome. Passives represent 25% of all finite verbs (verbs conjugated for subject and tense) in academic writing, used 18,500 times per 1,000,000 words (Biber, 1999).

BRIEF REVIEW

The passive voice is made by using the verb to be + the past participle of another verb.

ACTIVE VOICE		
SUBJECT	VERB	OBJECT
Einstein	discovered	the theory of relativity.

PASSIVE VOICE		
SUBJECT	VERB	AGENT
The theory of relativity	was	discovered by Einstein
The agent can also be omitted altogether: The theory of relativity was discovered in the early 1900's.		

A COUPLE OF RULES TO REMEMBER

- ✓ To create the passive voice, the object of an active sentence begins the new sentence, and the original subject can then be used as an agent (as noted above, the agent can be omitted altogether).
- ✓ The passive can only be employed with **transitive** verbs (i.e. verbs which take objects). To find the subject of a verb, ask 'who' or 'what' *before* the verb. To find the object of a verb, ask 'who' or 'what' *after* the subject.

For example: The scientists euthanized the animals. **Who** euthanized the animals? The scientists = the subject. The scientists euthanized **what**? The scientists euthanized the animals – the animals = the object.) You might then have the phrase, "the animals were euthanized" in a paper.

- ✓ The passive cannot be used with **intransitive** verbs (verbs which do not take an object). For example, 'died' is an intransitive verb, and therefore it cannot be used in the passive voice. The animal ~~was died.~~
- ✓ The construction of <u>get + past participle</u> is a form of passive used primarily in *informal* English (e.g. The letter got sent.)

The passive voice is used in English for many purposes. The following is not intended to be a comprehensive list of ALL the uses of the passive voice; it contains the uses that would be common for a graduate student.

SOME USES OF THE PASSIVE	
put emphasis on an activity rather than a person • THAT something is done is more important than WHO did it • you might not want to reveal who did it • or you might not know who did it	A cure for Aids has been discovered. The window has been broken. The lab was robbed.
make an official report	The experiment was aborted.
describe something	The experiment is finished.
add objectivity and credibility to a statement	It is often said by scholars in the field ...
describe something that happens to a person/thing	He was accepted into the programme.

✓ **CAUTION:** When second language students learn that the use of the passive voice can contribute to writing sounding more formal, they tend to over-generalize and think that ALL the verbs must then be used in the

passive. This is not so, especially if you are writing about yourself, in which case you need to include yourself as the subject. For example, the following description was used by an international graduate student to describe his *own* work in a one-minute speech about his research: "Statistic characterizations of roof responses subjecting dynamic wind loading *were evaluated* using analytic method and finite element method. Numerical results *were also compared* with the experiment from Boundary Layer Wind Tunnel." As it was the student who was using the analytic method and comparing the numerical results, he needed to be using the active voice to include himself: 'I evaluated ….' and 'I compared…'

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Biber, D., S. Johansson, G. Leech, S. Conrad, E. Finegan [Eds.] 1999. *Longman grammar of spoken and written English.* Essex: Pearson Education Limited.

Woulda, Coulda, Shoulda

This unit is not meant to be a comprehensive lesson on the use of modals. It is merely intended to offer some guidelines as to their usage and to illustrate the importance of proper usage of modals in academia and in relationships within academia.

Modals are words such as *can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will*, and *would*. Borderline modals are considered to be: *dare to, need to, ought to, used to, have to, had better, have got to*, and *be supposed to*.

How to use modals with verbs:

MODAL + BARE INFINITIVE (i.e. 'to go' minus 'to') NB: Borderline modals keep the word 'to'		
must	go	You must **go** to see your supervisor.
	have gone (past)	He must **have gone** to see his supervisor.

What is important about modals?

Modals are used to express a person's attitude or opinion regarding certainty or uncertainty, or to infuse permission, obligation, or necessity into a statement. If no modal is used with a verb, such as in the statement, 'It is correct,' the person who has made the statement does so with 100% conviction about the validity of the statement. Modals indicate to listeners how speakers feel or think about what they are saying.

Modals are problematic for nonnative speakers of English, as modals can have multiple meanings, and the meanings can be somewhat ambiguous. In addition, correct use of modals depends largely on context. A waiter might say to a customer in a restaurant,

"Oh, you *must* try the dessert!"

In such a situation, clearly the waiter is not using the modal 'must' in the same way as a supervisor would be if he said,

"You must have your research proposal completed by Friday."

In the first statement, the waiter is being dramatic and saying that the dessert is really delicious and should not be missed. In the second statement, the supervisor is insisting on a deadline which the student *cannot* miss.

International graduate students must be very careful with their use of modals, as inappropriate use of modals can very easily cause misunderstandings, miscommunications, and conflict within relationships. For example:

- If international teaching assistants use 'must' with their undergraduate students, they risk sounding brusque or overly authoritarian, which could alienate their students. E.g. "You must come to class on time."

- Some students will use the modals 'might' or 'may' when discussing their own work to sound humble. E.g. "Our findings might indicate that the bridge is not reinforced enough." In academic writing, 'could,' 'may,' and 'might' "are used almost exclusively to mark logical *possibility* [italics added]" (Biber, 1999, p. 491). Therefore, using modals in this manner will not make the student sound humble; it will make the student sound unsure and lacking in authority.

International graduate students must also pay close attention to others' use of modals, as they can easily misunderstand the force with which a supervisor might be making suggestions, as exemplified in the following chart:

A supervisor means very different things when saying the following sentences to a graduate student.	
"You **ought** to investigate other options."	Offering direction. The supervisor is suggesting that it might be desirable or advantageous for the student to investigate other options.
"You **may** investigate other options."	The advisor is giving the student permission to investigate other options.
"You **must** investigate other options."	The supervisor is stating that it is necessary for the student to investigate other options, and the student has no choice about whether to do it or not.

Some individuals use sentences such as, 'You might want to' in order to be polite or not sound overly authoritarian when they really mean, 'You DO want to …' This can be confusing for someone whose first language is not English, as they might think that they have choice in the matter when, in fact, they do not. If your supervisor has used an ambiguous modal, it is perfectly appropriate to say, 'I'm sorry, but I find English modals very confusing. When you say I might want to, are you suggesting strongly that I do it, or are you offering the comment only as a possibility for me to consider?'

MODAL QUIZ

Below is a quiz to test your use of modals. Do not be disheartened if you do not get many correct. The use of modals is a subtle element of English, and it takes conscious effort and attention to be good at using them appropriately.

For each modal in the sentences below, choose the appropriate meaning (use) from the list on the right. You may use the numbers as often as you wish, but each number must be used at least once. (Answer key at end of unit.)

A.	Samantha should do well in the program.	1.	Preference
B.	Can I borrow your office key?	2.	Suggestion
C.	Stefan must be a workaholic!	3.	Advisability
D.	Would you mind if I went with you?	4.	Formal permission
E.	I'll stay late if you like.	5.	Predictions (90% certain)
F.	Susan should finish marking these papers.	6.	Expectation
G.	Will you please ask the professor?	7.	100% certainty
H.	You must come to the lecture today.	8.	Informal permission
I.	That can't be correct!	9.	Impossibility
J.	John would often skip breakfast.	10.	Informal request (for permission)
K.	Paul would rather do more homework than take another test.	11.	Formal request
L.	Mohammed used to live in Tehran.	12.	Necessity
M.	Chen could be in the lab.	13.	Prohibition
N.	Fred could take 580 next term.	14.	Past habit
O.	Gaston will be there tonight.	15.	Past ability
P.	Twenty years ago, I could speak more fluently.	16.	Deduction (95% certain)
Q.	Elmer was supposed to be in the lab at 6:30 this morning.	17.	Willingness
R.	Jun used to study six hours a day.	18.	Strong necessity
S.	Charles has to quit smoking.	19.	50% (or less) certain
T.	You may leave the room.	20.	Repeated past actions
U.	You must not open the container.	21.	Reprimand
V.	Jacob might have been with his supervisor.		
W.	You can borrow my DVD.		
X.	I had to go to the doctor's yesterday.		
Y.	You ought to speak English more often.		

ANSWER KEY:
A6, B10, C16/17, D11, E17, F3, G11, H18, I9, J20, K1, L14, M19, N2, O5, P15, Q21, R14, S12, T4, U13, V19, W8, X18, Y3

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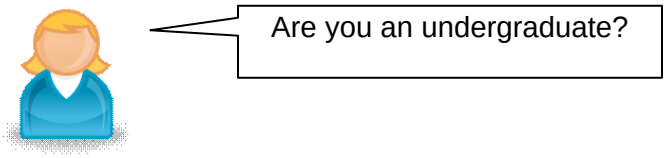
Biber, D., S. Johansson, G. Leech, S. Conrad, E. Finegan [Eds.] (1999). *Longman grammar of spoken and written English.* Essex: Pearson Education Limited.

When 'No' Means 'Yes'

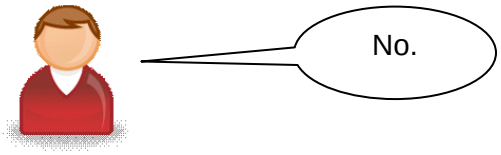
The way that people from different cultural groups agree or disagree with information presented to them varies, as is illustrated in the following dialogue.

A common mistake

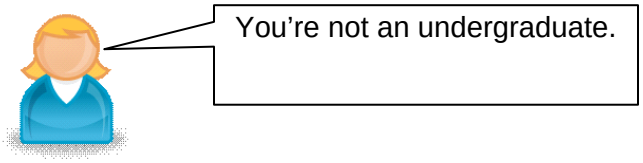
An American asks a question:



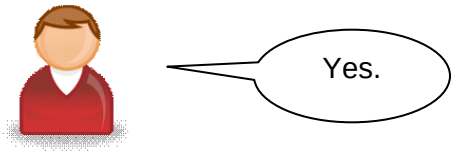
An international student responds:



The American confirms the information by phrasing it as a statement:



The international student responds to the rephrased statement:



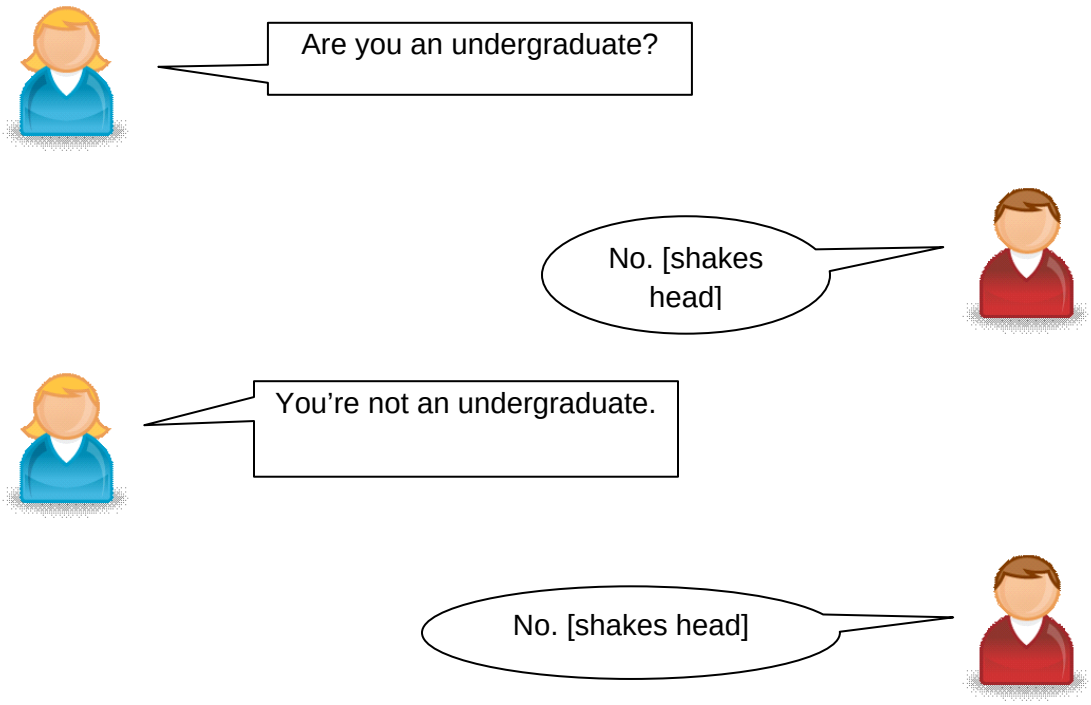
The American is now confused, because she has received two different responses to what she feels is the same question. She might then ask the original question again, or she might ask, "Are you an undergraduate or not?" The international student might then feel somehow deficient in language skills

and might be embarrassed. The situation is remedied by understanding the cultural component of agreeing/disagreeing.

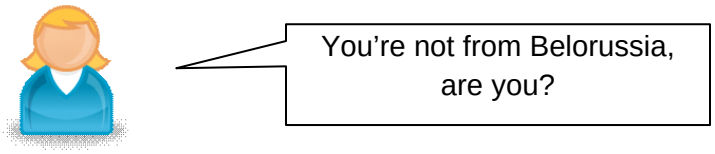
EXPLANATION

In this situation, the international student's "yes" actually means, "That is correct." As communication in America is idea-focused (see unit on Presenting an Argument), it is not rude to disagree with a statement that is clearly incorrect. An important component here is that English speakers nod their heads to show agreement, and shake their heads to show disagreement.

In English, the conversation would proceed as follows:



Negative agreement is applied to tag questions, as well.



No, I'm not. I'm from the Czech Republic.

Be careful about words with a seemingly negative meaning!

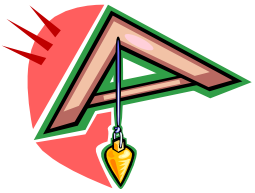
Studying in a foreign country is an **in**valuable experience.

[this means it's a **very** valuable experience]

Yes, it is!

A few words in English seem to have negative meaning but do not. Invaluable means that something is extremely useful; however, the 'in' prefix makes it appear to mean 'not valuable.' Fortunately, not very many words in English are this confusing.

Formality of Words



Register refers to the level of formality of a word: a word can be extremely formal or archaic, formal, neutral, informal, or very informal. While people need to be cognizant of register both when speaking and writing, it is easier and especially important to do so when writing. It is also important to be aware of differing levels of register to understand fully what is read or heard.

When writing, it is very important to consider the register of the words used, as choice of words greatly affects how readers respond to a document. If a very informal word is used when a formal word ought to be used, disrespect could be conveyed to a person or about a subject. For example, if someone is speaking about one friend to another friend, she might say, 'I know this guy who…;' however, when presenting at a conference or writing a journal article, it would be inappropriate to use the word 'guy.' If too formal a word is used when an informal word ought to be used, distance or 'stiffness' might be conveyed. In addition, many emotions, humor, and subtleties are communicated through choice of words. For example, very formal language could be used between friends in an attempt at ironic humor.

DIFFERENT REGISTERS FOR SYNONYMS OF THE VERB 'TO TALK'	
Synonym	**Register**
to orate	extremely formal
to converse	formal
to talk	neutral
to chat	informal
to gab/to shoot the breeze	very informal (even slang)

Not all words have synonyms within the full range of formality. One way to check the register of a word is to look in an advanced learners' dictionary: the code in the dictionary will indicate whether the word is formal, informal, or archaic. Some words, however, may not be found

in dictionaries. Another way to determine register is to ask a native speaker about the word. It can be especially important to do this in order to capture the 'feeling' of a word from a native speaker's perspective. For example, a non-native speaker might find a certain phrase to be 'questionable' language (meaning it is not entirely appropriate), while a native speaker might find the phrase to be extremely harmless. The best way to improve one's overall grasp of English register is to read books outside one's discipline and to start noticing what words people use in what settings and to what effect.

VOCABULARY LIST

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

A

abstract: A paragraph at the beginning of a paper, a journal, an article, a thesis or a grant proposal that summarizes your research and gives the reader only the most important facts or arguments. Graduate students and researchers read your abstract to decide whether they want to read the whole paper.

academic: A teacher or scholar in a university or college.

academic calendar: A publication sent out by the registrar's office that lists academic programs, regulations, and other important information about the university. It contains a glossary that defines unfamiliar terms used in the calendar.

academic counselor: A person who helps undergraduate students with academic concerns as well as personal problems that are affecting their academic work (e.g., choice of courses, balancing workload, permission to defer a final examination, etc).

academic misconduct: Any action such as cheating, plagiarism, falsifying records, etc. that results in or is an attempt to increase a student's marks or give a student an advantage over other students.

academic penalty: This is something that happens when a student has been found guilty of academic misconduct. Examples of penalties can include receiving a low grade, having to redo an assignment, or even being forced to leave the university. The penalty depends on the offence. Some of them will be part of the student's transcript, while others will be on record at the university.

academic staff: This may refer to professors depending on where you are. In Europe, people do not refer to professors as faculty; in Europe, Faculty (with a capital 'F') refers to departments of study.

academia/academy: All activities that are associated with higher education and universities such as research and teaching. It includes the university as an institution, including its policies, etc.

advisory committee: A committee that typically comprises faculty members who direct graduate students in their thesis research.

alumna/alumnae/alumnus/alumni: Terms to refer to former students of an academic institution. *Alumna* is for a female student; *alumnae* is the plural of alumna. *Alumnus* is for a male student; *alumni* is the plural of alumnus.

antirequisite(s): Courses that overlap sufficiently in course content that you cannot take both for credit.

assignment: Work given to students to do.

assistant professor: A full-time, tenure-track faculty member who does not have tenure yet, which means that their position is probationary or temporary (usually for a period of six years).

associate professor: A faculty member at university who has tenure but who is not yet a "full professor."

authority: An expert in a field.

award: A prize—money or recognition—for a job well done or for some sort of achievement.

B

bias: If you support something based on your personal opinions, life experience, etc. rather than objective facts, you have a bias. People may be biased without realizing it. Professors and TAs are not allowed to be influenced by their biases when grading; therefore, if you do not share the same opinion as your teacher on the topic of your assignment, you cannot be penalized as long as you can support your argument with evidence.

brainstorm: A way of creating ideas to gather as many as possible without judging them in any way while you are collecting them—done individually or in groups.

bursary: Money that is given to a person to help with university expenses. If you receive a bursary of $500, you do not have to pay it back, whereas if you receive a loan of $500, you do have to pay it back.

C

challenge: To challenge: is when you examine something to see if it is true or accurate—to question something. A challenge: something that is difficult.

cheat sheet: A list of terms, concepts or formulas that the professor gives students for studying and to help them prepare for an exam at home. Using the sheet during an exam would be considered cheating if the professor did not give you permission to do so. *Sometimes* professors allow students to take these into exams.

cheating: Any scholastic offence or act of academic dishonesty (i.e. plagiarism, unauthorized peer collaboration on assignments, etc.)

circulation desk: The place where you go in the library to borrow books or pick up recalled books and books on reserve.

closed-book test: When you take a closed-book test, you cannot take any books or notes into the examination room with you (see open-book test).

collaborate: When you work with somebody on a specific task or project. For example, you do research and publish an article together with another graduate student or faculty member.

colloquium: An academic seminar.

comprehensive (or preliminary) exam: A series of exams taken by doctoral students usually after they have completed all their course work (also called "comps"). You need to pass comprehensive exams before you may continue to the dissertation. Students who do not pass the exams cannot complete their degrees.

conference/convention: A meeting of scholars in a specific field that might last several days during which the scholars present the results of their research to colleagues.

constructive feedback: Comments on someone's work to help the student improve performance. You may give constructive feedback on someone's essay, research design, or performance in class. Constructive feedback emphasizes elements of the work that somebody needs to improve. This feedback should be given in a polite and helpful way.

convocation: The graduation ceremony at a university.

counseling: advising or recommending, giving professional help

counselor: A person trained to give advice (At universities, this includes academic counselors, personal counselors trained to give help with personal or psychological issues, and learning skills counselors.)

course credit: When you are studying towards a degree, you need a certain amount of credits which you earn with every course that you pass.

course load: The number of courses that you take at university.

course outline: A document that an instructor gives students describing what will be covered in a course and what the course requirements are (how many assignments there will be, etc.) It includes the list of readings, class dates and assignments. See syllabus.

credit: See course credit.

culture shock: The feelings (such as confusion, anxiety, loneliness, homesickness, etc.) a person experiences when he/she goes to a new country and learns about new ways of doing things and new value systems.

D

database: A collection of information stored on a computer in a systematic way. Databases can be searched using queries (questions) or keywords.

deadline: This is the date by which an assignment must be finished and given to the professor or teaching assistant. See due date.

dean: A person of high rank in a university who is responsible for a whole faculty, for example the Dean of Science, the Dean of Arts, etc.

department chair: A faculty member who is charge of the day-to-day running of a specific department in the university.

dental coverage: an insurance plan that helps pay for the cost of visits to the dentist for basic procedures (e.g. teeth cleaning, x-rays, fillings, etc).

dissertation: A long document that advances a new point of view resulting from research that is usually required in advanced academic degrees. It is also known as a thesis. (definition found at: http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=dissertation)

draft: The early versions of a document (e.g. essay, lab assignment, thesis) that are revised until the completed document is submitted in its final form. It may have just rough ideas, and it may still contain errors. You should always keep copies of your rough/first drafts as a professor can ask to see them if plagiarism is suspected.

drop a course: When you are taking a course and decide to withdraw from it for any reason, you drop the course. The dates by which you must do this so as not to suffer any academic penalty are listed in the academic calendar issued by the Registrar's Office.

due date: This is the date by which an assignment must be finished and given to the professor or teaching assistant. Same as deadline.

E

emergency loan: This is money that a person or a university's financial department lends a student in emergency situations.

essay: A piece of writing done as part of the work for a course.

essay test: A test which requires the student to write an essay in the examination room.

exam proctoring: One of the duties assigned to TAs throughout the term but more often at the end of each semester. TAs are expected to help the course instructors to set up the exam rooms, walk around the exam room, and answer students' questions while the exam is being held. The TAs also help ensure nobody is cheating. At the end of the exam, they collect, sort, and return the exam material to the instructor. They often also have to check student cards and are in charge of the nominal roll.

examining committee: See thesis examination board.

examiner: The person who judges and marks an exam (TAs often help the examiner mark the exams).

exemption: Sometimes you may not need to fulfill all the prerequisites for a course or a program. If you do not have to do so, you are granted an exemption. This normally applies only when you have specific expertise in the subject, e.g. previous university courses elsewhere.

extension: When additional time (e.g. hours or days) is added to the deadline or due date of an assignment.

extra credit: You can get extra credit on an assignment or in a course for additional assignments you do or activities in which you are involved. For example: filling out a survey or doing some community work, participating in a workshop, or writing more in an essay, etc. Extra credit assignments are optional and must be offered by the faculty member before the assignment is due.

extracurricular activities: These are activities that are available to students outside of their academic life to help them relax, meet people, and gain experience that might help them professionally or academically. Examples of this would be student clubs, volunteer work, etc.

F

faculty: (NB: lower case 'f') The part of a university that specializes in one major field of study such as science, arts and humanities or engineering. Faculties consist of several departments.

faculty member: This term is also used in short form as “faculty” – e.g. this workshop is open to all faculty (professors) and graduate students. Faculty members include assistant, associate, and full professors, and lecturers, but does not include staff, graduate students, or research and teaching assistants.

field: a) An area of work or study. b) If you get experience in the “field,” you leave the academic environment to gain experience in a setting where the skills you learn are applied. c) Research in a “real world” environment, rather than in a laboratory (field research). E.g. – when anthropologists go to Peru to visit an ancient site, they do field research.

feedback form: Instructors will ask their students for their opinions about what was covered in the class and how the instructor taught. The form on which the responses are written is called a feedback form or an evaluation form.

final examination: The exam you take at the end of a course.

financial aid: This is money a student receives from the government or from a university to help with school expenses.

finding: A piece of information that is discovered during research.

full credit: Full credit for a course can be achieved in one semester or over the course of one year, which is two semesters. See credit.

funding: The money given by an organization, a school, or a government to help pay for school, research, etc.

G

grade: Your mark (on individual assignments or for a course).

grading on a curve: A grading schema in which a predetermined number of exams will achieve an A, a B, or a C.

graduate chair: This is the person who is a faculty member in a department who is in charge of all the graduate student issues. They guide and run the curriculum and report to the department chair and dean of the faculty.

graduate secretary or graduate assistant: A staff member/administrative assistant to the graduate chair who deals with all graduate student issues.

group work: Sometimes rather than doing work independently, students will work together on a project. Sometimes the work is marked as a whole, and each student will receive the same grade, and sometimes aspects of the work will be marked individually.

guessing penalty: a deduction of marks applied in test situations to discourage guessing. Most often applied to multiple choice questions. The guessing penalty could be a whole mark or a part mark. Therefore if you get a question wrong you will not just get zero—you will receive a grade deduction.

H

help center: A location on campus where you can obtain additional help and information related to courses.

human resources: The human resources department within an organization is the department that takes care of hiring employees, answering questions about salaries, benefits, etc.

hypothesis: An idea about something that has not been proven. Hypotheses are posed as statements in research and tested to determine whether or not the data supports the hypothesis.

I

incomplete: An incomplete is a mark that appears on a student's transcript instead of a letter grade when the student has not completed course requirements by the end of the term. There is usually a grace period, which varies by department, during which a student can finish the course and have the "incomplete" changed to a letter grade. If the student fails to finish the requirements by the end of the grace period, the "incomplete" will become an "F."

interlibrary loan: This is when you borrow library resources, collections, books, articles, photocopies, etc. from a library of a different university through a library on campus.

internship: A supervised course of study in the field (i.e.,"real world") that an advanced graduate student takes in order to gain additional practical experience in his or her discipline.

J

jargon: Words that are specific to a field, a group of people, or a specific activity. These words can be difficult or impossible for people outside the specific field or group to understand.

journal: Magazine or publication that is about a specific subject and that is published on a regular basis.

K

keyword: a significant word or phrase in the title, subject heading, abstract, or text of an entry in an online catalogue which can be used as a search term to find all the sources containing the term. The library catalogue can be searched using a keyword about the topic you are seeking resources about.

L

lab: A laboratory or a class session in a laboratory, which allows students to practice their knowledge of theory while conducting experiments. Labs are interactive, and people work in groups or alone. They are mainly technical and they supplement what has been learned during lectures.

lab report: A document that you write to summarize what you did in the lab.

lab partner: The person with whom you work during a lab.

lab session: The period of time during which you are in the lab.

late penalty: The deduction of marks when an assignment is late or incomplete or when a student has failed to do all the requirements of an assignment.

lecture notes: A summary of the class—the notes either given by the instructor or generated during the time of the class by the students.

lecture room: the place where a professor delivers a lecture.

library catalogue: Contains a record of all the items found in a library, including books, journals, and other bibliographic resources. The catalogue can be searched by keyword, author, title, subject, or call number.

literature review: An overview of a topic in a field based on an analysis of published scholarly research on the topic. The purpose of a literature review is to summarize and analyze the ideas, knowledge or information in a larger body of research. It focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of the body of work and it usually details concepts of thought.

lose points: If you have handed in an assignment late or have not done some of the required work, the instructor will take marks/points off your final score.

M

major: The word used by undergraduates to describe the academic area that they are studying and in which they will earn your degree. Graduate students do not use the word major to describe their disciplines.

make-up policy: This is the set of rules that determines when/if students can take make-up tests or even hand in assignments after the due date.

make-up test: A test that is given after or before (depending on the situation) the original test for students who missed or will miss the first officially scheduled test because they were ill or had another acceptable reason for missing it. The instructor determines whether a make-up test will be given.

marking: This is what instructors do when they read students' homework or tests and determine which answers are correct and which answers are incorrect and assign marks to the assignment.

marking rubric: A marking scheme or guide that a professor creates and gives a teaching assistant to help him/her grade papers. A marking scheme gives a detailed description of what students need to do for an A, a B, or a C, and how many points or credits can be deducted for grammatical errors, etc.

mentorship: This is an informal practice of one-on-one interaction with a student or a faculty that helps the student grow personally and academically.

methodology: A formalized way of doing, teaching, or studying something. It reflects the epistemology and/or ontology guiding the research. The methods used for a particular research are selected based upon the methodology selected by the researcher (e.g. positivist and phenomenological research studies will select different methods because they have different methodologies.

microteaching: A method of teaching used for evaluation in which a small portion of a class is watched or videotaped and used to generate feedback.

mid-term: See mid-term exam.

mid-term exam: Mid-terms are exams that are given half way through a course and that cover material that students have learned up to that point.

minor: The secondary academic area that you are studying but that will not appear on your degree. 'A minor' is often a student's 'second teachable' if they intend to go to teacher's college. For example, you can have a major in English and a minor in Sociology.

multiple-choice question: A question on a test with a number of answer alternatives. A student needs to decide which of the alternatives provides the correct answer to the question. Sometimes there may be several correct answers to the question.

multiple-multiples: A form of multiple choice questions that offers a series of possible answers that combine both correct and incorrect options. The student must select

the proper combination to correctly answer the question, e.g. a and b, but not c, b and e, but not a or c.

N

networking: Establishing social connections with people in your profession or community.

nominal roll: A list of students enrolled in the course. This list is used during final exams to check student attendance and to keep a record of seat numbers. At the beginning of the exam, it is the proctor's duty to take the nominal roll around and get students to sign their names and show identification.

O

objective test: Exams that include true/false, matching, fill-in the blank, and multiple choice questions. The term objective refers to the grading as only one answer is correct.

office hours: A time assigned by most TAs and faculty members when students can meet with them to ask questions about course material and assignments, and discuss issues about labs/tutorial sessions.

open-book test: When you take an open-book test, you are allowed to take specified books or personal notes from the course into an examination room and to use them when you write the test.

overhead projector: This is a piece of equipment that can be used to put an image or writing onto a screen or a wall for everybody in the class to see.

P

paraphrase: When you read something that somebody else has written or hear something that someone else has said, and then you write it or say it in your own words while keeping the same meaning the same. You must make it obvious in your references when you have paraphrased something according to avoid academic misconduct.

partial credit: When a student does not know the material well enough to deserve a full credit (i.e. mark) for the assignment and yet clearly knows enough to avoid a penalty

of no credit, an instructor may decide to assign this person a partial credit. In most cases, giving a partial credit is a courtesy of the instructor.

periodical index: A tool that locates and lists articles that have appeared in journals, magazines, or newspapers (also known as an article database). A periodical index lists the author, title, name of periodical, volume, pages and date of publication. Some indexes supply abstracts that summarize the content of articles.

plagiarism: To use another person's works or ideas in a way that you present them as being your own. This may be accidental when students don't understand the rules about citing references, or it may be deliberate. It is a serious academic offense that will go on your academic record. If you copy from a written or Internet source without referencing it, whether or not the work or idea is presented verbatim, it is plagiarism.

practicum: A required or optional component of a degree program in fields such as medicine, engineering, and clinical psychology which involves practical applications of a theory (e.g., working on an industry project, assisting a doctor in the hospital, etc.)

preliminary doctoral exam: See comprehensive exam.

prerequisite: Courses that you need to take before you can take other courses.

presentation: This is when you speak in front of a group of people in a class or a seminar to talk about a specific topic. You become the authority on the subject and you are expected to teach other people.

proctor: This is the person who supervises students while they are taking an exam to make sure that they write the exam honestly. This person also answers any questions the student might have about the exam.

project: A task or a problem on which students work individually or in groups to improve their understanding of one of the course topics.

projector: This is a piece of equipment that you use to put an image or writing onto a screen or a wall for everybody in the class to see.

proofread: This is when you read something to make sure there is no language, formatting, or factual errors in a document.

proposal: When you suggest a plan to do something, you submit it to get approval or funding. It might be part of a process of planning related to research or it might be to persuade the reader/fundraiser, etc, that you have the ability to do something. [Many grad students have to write research proposals after their comps that must be approved by their advisory and/or committee before proceeding with their research—they do not receive funding after this ordeal.]

protocol: The official rules that determine what is appropriate in formal situations. A way to set about doing and completing a task (i.e. research protocol)

publication: This is a newspaper, a book, a magazine, etc. that is available to the public in an official document.

public lecture: Before a doctoral candidate meets the Thesis Examination Board, he/she sometimes presents a lecture that is open to the whole academic community (and interested members of the public) on his/her research. This usually happens (within) 24 hours before the Thesis Examination Board meets.

Q

quiz: A small test which is given during class time and sometimes without advanced notice. It is generally worth fewer marks than a formal test or exam. When given without notice it may also be referred to as a 'pop quiz.'

R

reference desk: The place in the library where you can get help finding information - a one-stop place where you can be guided to retrieving the information you need.

reference letter: This is a letter that somebody writes about you to inform somebody else about your abilities, character, work, etc.

Registrar's Office: This is the place to go to pay student fees, collect your student card, and request transcripts.

research assistant: A person who is paid to help another person do research.

research-oriented: If a university is research-oriented, research is a major focus of the work of its professors. Other university categorizations include comprehensive and primarily undergraduate universities.

S

Scantron: Windows application for marking, analyzing, reporting, and editing multiple-choice exams—also called Scanex. A scantron sheet is the piece of paper on which the answers for a multiple-choice exam are indicated and which is then submitted to the Scantron Windows application.

scholarship: Money that is given to students with great academic abilities [and which may also involve other application criteria such as volunteer work, etc). Scholarships are granted through the university, private organizations, or by the government.

seminar: An occasion when an instructor or an expert gets together with a group of students or other people to study and discuss something.

senate defense: After a Ph.D. candidate passes departmental oral (defense), a senate defense is scheduled. This is the second and last hurdle on the way to the Ph.D. degree. The candidate has to present his or her work to the committee consisting of two members of the department, one university examiner, and one external examiner.

service-learning: A teaching and learning strategy in which students participate in community service which is coordinated by a school and a community group. Students then participate in structured opportunities to reflect on their learning. The purpose of service-learning is to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.

session: The periods of instruction into which an academic year is divided. Fall and Winter Session runs from September to April, Intersession runs from May to June, and Summer Session runs from July to August.

student health services: A medical, counseling, and educational facility that is available to all registered part-time and full-time students at a university.

subject heading: a word or phrase used to find a book or an article on a specific topic in the library catalogue or index of periodicals.

submission: When you give something to someone for his or her consideration (e.g. articles are submitted to journals to be considered for publication).

supervisor of studies: A person who advises you on your research and monitors your progress in the program. Also known as thesis supervisor or advisor.

supplementary textbook: A textbook that is not the primary book for a course, but which the instructor uses to guide the students' learning.

syllabus: A plan of what is going to be studied in a particular course usually also showing the requirements of the course as well. It tells when topics will be covered, etc. See course outline.

symposium: A meeting where specialists in a field meet to discuss issues.

T

take-home exam: An exam that a student is given which can be done at home using whatever resources the student wants to use (but are still subject to academic integrity policies). These exams have specific deadlines.

teaching assistant: A person who is involved in graduate studies of his/her own and who assists a professor doing any of a number of duties such as marking, lab demonstrations, holding office hours to answer student questions, etc.

teaching dossier: A collection of documents that can attest to your teaching ability (e.g., teaching evaluations, your teaching philosophy statement, etc).

team worker: A person who works with other people towards a common goal.

tenure: Professors who have tenure have the right to stay in their positions permanently. Tenure is designed to protect academic freedom. (This title is earned over a number of years of teaching within a department.)

term: The periods of time that are in an academic year. First term is September – December. Second term is January – April. (see also: Session – first term = Fall Session, second term = Winter session.)

thesis: A document that a student who is finishing a graduate degree writes on a particular subject. Undergraduate theses are often optional.

Thesis Examination Board: This is when a chair, an external examiner, program examiners, and a university examiner meet with a master's or doctoral candidate to examine and evaluate the content and form of a thesis, and the candidate's responses to questions about a thesis. (also known as a thesis examining committee)

thesis requirement: A requirement to conduct research (either experimental or literature review), write it up and defend it in front of the committee of experts in your field.

title: The name given to a work of music, literature, or art. The library catalogue can be searched by entering the title of the work.

tuition fees: The money that a student pays to attend university.

Turnitin.com: This is a service to which students submit their essays in order to help instructors ensure academic honesty. View Turnitin.

tutor: A person who helps students learn in either a one-on-one situation or in small groups.

tutorial: A period of study involving an instructor and a small group of students that is part of a regular course.

U

undergraduate chair: A member of faculty within a department who is in charge of all the undergraduate student issues. They guide and run the curriculum and report to the department chair and dean of the faculty.

undergraduate secretary: A staff member/administrative assistant to the undergraduate chair who deals with all undergraduate student issues.

used textbook: These are course books that have been used before by students and which can be bought at much lower prices than new ones. They can be previous editions to the current textbook.

V

visual aids: These are graphs, images, charts, etc. that help people understand what somebody is trying to communicate.

W

workshop: A discussion, meeting or practical session that is about a particular subject where you are expected to participate and do some work. See seminar.

X

Y

Z