Teaching Multilingual Students:
An Overview for Course Instructors and TAs

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You will find that many of your students use English as a second or additional language.Many first-year international students are just starting this new segment of their education that is entirely in English.You will also have students who were educated in Toronto but still need to develop greater proficiency in English.How do these conditions affect your teaching duties?

- You may have to mark papers that are difficult for you to follow due to language errors.Other papers may be understandable but still contain many language errors.How will you mark papers in which the student's conceptual grasp of the material is very good but the writing is quite faulty?

- Some students in your classes or tutorials may avoid oral participation because they fear others will not understand them due to language errors or faulty pronunciation.In some cases this is just anxiety, but in other cases the student may be difficult for you and others to understand.How can you encourage these students to participate?How will you make sure you understand what they're trying to say?

- Some of your students may have difficulty finishing the course readings or comprehending them.They may also find it difficult to understand the material you present in the tutorials or lectures.What will you do if it becomes clear that some students are not following the discussion?

All of this raises the larger question of how to help these students to succeed without imposing a heavy burden on yourself.Your time is limited, so it is useful to be acquainted with methods that can simultaneously help your multilingual students AND reduce your own workload. Many of these approaches prevent the development of problems that would take a great deal of time to solve.

1. **Keep in mind the valid process of high-level language acquisition that occurs while a student is engaged in the regular curriculum.**Much research points away from the usefulness of separate courses for language "preparation" at this stage and supports the effectiveness of language learning that is "embedded" within the usual curriculum.Just by modeling good usage of English in your field, you are teaching these students a great deal.They are progressing each day, whether or not you notice the difference.Zamel and Spack's *Crossing the Curriculum:Multilingual Learners in College Classrooms*gives a convincing description of this process.

2. **Remember that many students—not just multilingual ones—will learn concepts faster and retain them better if you provide some form of visual aid to accompany the lesson.**This may be a handout, overhead, "map" or list of key words on the board, PowerPoint slides, etc.Don't feel obligated to reproduce every word you plan to speak, but do give students an outline of the key terms or concepts.As you're speaking, draw visual representations on the board to show relationships.It sometimes seems that preparing these visual aids in advance adds to your teaching time, but in reality this preparation prevents misunderstandings that can take more time to clarify.

3. **Encourage all students to use effective reading strategies.**Many students benefit from a brief "preview" of a text or its key terms.Point out the larger structure of the reading, focusing on headings, definitions of terms, and important moves in the argument.Students often get lost in the details.If a multilingual student asks you for advice about getting through the reading, encourage him/her not to look up every word but to manage the available time so as to reach the end.Reassure the student that reading speed and comprehension improve with time, etc.You can often best help someone learn a language simply by providing encouragement.

4. **Try to give students the opportunity to write frequently and not necessarily for a grade.**You can devise exercises that involve responding briefly to a critical question or summarizing the reading—short pieces that you can go around and read/comment on as part of the session.Alternatively, students can share what they've written with a small group.All students benefit from having to express themselves like this, even if you don't collect or mark the papers.(You could also collect them and check them off as a participation mark, or just use a simple rubric as a response).Exercises like these may also alert you to students who should be advised to take their longer assignments to their Writing Centre for further targeted instruction on specific aspects of writing.

5. **If your course has a policy allowing students to show you a rough draft of a longer paper, encourage them to do so.**Do not spend a great deal of time on a rough draft; look carefully at the first 2-3 paragraphs, which will tell you whether the student has understood the assignment and has some sense of the necessary structure.Tell them the purpose of the meeting is simply to determine whether they're on the right track.If they're not, give an explanation but do not start actually helping them revise the paper. If there are serious language errors, circle just some examples.For more individualized instruction in language use, students can visit their writing centre. Writing centres do not "edit" the entire paper, but can be asked to provide instruction in specific elements of organization, development, grammar, sentence structure, diction, etc.Keep your own discussions with students focused on how effectively they've communicated course concepts

6. **Refer students who are having difficulty reading, writing, or speaking to the network of support for English Language Learners.**Undergraduate students in Arts and Science can participate in the Reading eWriting projectonline or the Communication Cafes, which are drop-in sessions focusing on academic English.Similar programs are available in other divisions (including one for graduate students): see http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/faqs/english-as-second-language. (These programs don't provide individual consultation on papers, though—that's the mandate of the writing centres.)

7. **Remember that educational backgrounds vary widely.**A student may not understand a reading or an assignment for cultural reasons (i.e. a lack of background knowledge, or a variance in assumptions).Many educational systems do not emphasize critical thinking, so this may be a new skill for some of your students.In tutorials, it is helpful if you model the kind of analysis you want students to do and give them a chance to practice it orally before they have to write.Remember that many students are coming to English as a third or fourth language, which is harder for many people than a second language.

8. **Students are more likely to speak in smaller groups.**To maximize participation, you can divide your class into smaller groups of 2-6 students, depending on the task, and have them discuss an issue with each other.One person can be designated to "report" back to the class as a whole.You'll be amazed at how many more people will speak if you use this method.

9. **Model effective English.**Make sure your own expression is very clear and precise, both orally and in writing.Use large, clear handwriting on papers and on the board.

10. **If you receive a paper that would fail due to language issues, consider giving the student a second chance. (TAs should follow course policy on this issue.)**Particularly at the beginning of their studies, students may not be aware of the resources available to them or the gap between their level and the university's expectations.It can be difficult and time-consuming for you to mark a paper that is disorganized and contains many errors.If course policy permits, you may be able to tell the student that a paper is not acceptable and that he/she must turn in a revised version after working with an instructor at a writing centre.

11. **If you see plagiarism, remain cool and objective.**Your student may indeed have taken the work of another student or copied an essay from the Internet.However, most plagiarism cases are not as clear-cut as these.Many of our multilingual students come from educational backgrounds that have not provided instruction in how to use research sources according to a North American protocol.These students have no sense of the concept of "ownership" that we attach to published sources and have often learned English through memorizing texts.Try to prevent plagiarism by letting students know that proper referencing is essential.For further advice and explanation, refer them to relevant files on the Writing at U of T website (www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources), and the group workshops and individual instruction offered by their writing centres. For an enlightening discussion of plagiarism and multilingual students, see Belcher and Hirvela's *Linking Literacies:Perspectives on L2 Reading-Writing Connections.*

12. **In your marking, it may be helpful to make a distinction between errors that obscure meaning and those that simply distract the reader.**You don't need to apologize for the fact that English is the language of instruction at U of T and that students must write very well in English in order to get an "A."However, you can also mark holistically, taking into account the degree of depth, complexity, and sophistication in the analysis; overall organization; and use of research.Sometimes these attributes may outweigh language errors to the point where you feel justified in giving a good mark. Even if a paper deserves a low mark for serious language errors, it is validating for the student if you respond to the ideas in the paper and acknowledge the attempt to communicate.In any case, you can simply circle or underline errors rather than correcting them or rewriting sections of the paper; this saves time and is often just as helpful in the long run.

Useful Links:

- The Faculty section of the website *Writing at the University of Toronto* at www.writing.utoronto.ca/faculty contains many other valuable advice files on aspects of teaching writing, including assignment design and commenting on student work. See the ELL tab in that section for more detailed advice files on specific issues around reading and grading, including one on helping students with reading comprehension.
- The Resources for Students section of the ELL website at http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/current/advising/ell offers downloadable student handouts outlining specific strategies for listening, reading, and interpreting texts and visuals. Undergraduates in Arts and Science can also find information about the ELL summer course, Communication Cafés, and online Reading e-Writing activities.
- All students can consult the page http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/faqs/english-as-second-language for annotated lists of other campus programs (including longstanding ones at UTSC, SGS and the Centre for International Experience) and links to relevant books and online learning activities.

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