

Internationalizing the Curriculum: Research-Based Practices

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Most professors are already overburdened with large numbers of students, declining administrative support, and increasing demands by academic support groups advocating for student needs with respect to disabilities, different learning styles, academic advising, specialized needs, mark justifications, etc. The last thing professors are looking for is more advice on what they should be doing.

So think of this article as not “more things you should do to accommodate yet another group of students” but as a list of principles and practical ideas about improving everyone’s learning experience, including yours.

A recent review of “internationalizing the curriculum” literature gives the following current thinking on the topic: The changes in approach that benefit international students benefit everyone—students in general, as well as those with disabilities, and differing learning styles and interests. Reaching international students involves using the fundamental principles of good instructional design, such as getting to know your audience, being thoughtful and deliberate about the language you use, making implicit assessment expectations explicit and unambiguous, and involving students as partners in course design.

Getting to know your (international) students:

Talk to international students, survey them if you teach large classes, and build on their experiences. It’s really a matter of knowing your audience, validating their experience, and using methods and examples that resonate with them. Don’t assume that all international students have experienced a monolithic approach to university education (e.g., that they all come from school systems where the instructor is king, they are expected to listen and not ask questions, that they just memorize vast amount of information and regurgitate it on exams and never learn to think critically).

Show Statistics Canada ethnic diversity statistics to your classes at the beginning of the term to impress on locals that to be successful in whatever field they enter, they will need to work well with peers and superiors with diverse backgrounds.

Name pronunciation is important for all students, and may be more of a challenge for international ones. Ask for help in pronouncing their names; determine which are family and given names, and the name you should use. Explain how you wish to be addressed, and how and when students may ask for your help with course-related matters. Your interest indicates respect. Take a bit more initiative in connecting with international students because they may hesitate to address you, fearful of mispronouncing your name or using the wrong honorific. As much as possible, given the number of

students, memorize student names and invite them to speak, and validate their contributions by paraphrasing to ensure you “got” their point.

Being thoughtful and deliberate about words:

Speak in a straightforward manner, avoiding puns, jokes, slang and figurative expressions where possible, explaining them where not. Explain subject-specific jargon, new or unfamiliar words or concepts, and allusions to popular culture. Take time to pronounce final consonants when you speak. This will slow you down a bit, which will benefit everyone. Allow silences: people need time to think and understand what you are saying. Be prepared to repeat what you said when asked, and invite people to ask.

Tip	Rationale
Discuss and decode assignment and essay instructions. Explain how “evaluate” is different from “justify” or “analyze.”	Nuance of meaning is challenging for ESL speakers, and also lots of local students as well.
Make a point of calling on female and underrepresented minority students. Learn their names.	They may not be used to participating, and may want to just blend in, but that is detrimental to their learning experience.
Have female and underrepresented minority students assume the role of group reporter.	This gives an automatic talking role to help them become comfortable contributing, easing their way to less structured future participation.
Create concept maps for key content topics.	The visual connections take the pressure off language as sole representation form.
Record lectures and make them available online.	Students can review and replay parts until understood clearly, time not available in class.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask “Who doesn’t agree with what’s being said?” “Would someone like to express an opposing viewpoint?” • Play the role of “devil’s advocate” so that no one is “on the spot” for unpopular views or ideas. • Incorporate comparison and contrast questions into lectures, quizzes, and assignments. • Have students research and prepare both sides of an issue, flipping a coin before they present to see which side to take. • Have students play a person/take a position with which they strongly disagree. 	Many students need to be given permission to say what they think rather than defer to the higher-status, expert instructor. Instructors need to model these incipient steps towards independent thinking. Individualist academic practices may be seen as rude and threatening for people from cultures where cooperation and politeness are paramount. Conflict and disagreement may be seen as demeaning to those being argued against and result in “loss of face.” Students will need structured assistance in doing assignments in which they are asked to critique others’ points of view.
Provide lecture outlines with topics, key questions or issues available online in note taking format before the lecture.	This reduces the volume of note taking required, letting students focus and think more, while still providing opportunity for note writing that “processes” content in working memory for later retrieval from long-term memory.
Summarize, connect and state the relevance of the	Thoughtful repetition helps everyone, including

Tip	Rationale
key lecture concepts at the end of the lecture.	those struggling with English proficiency, not all of whom are ESL speakers.

Test question wording:

Both students and faculty rated taking multiple-choice tests as the most difficult task out of 74 language and culture-related skills and tasks that students perform (Lampe). See the table below for tips and examples.

Issue	Original wording	Revision	Explanation
1: Wordiness, passive construction	“Which of the following treatments for AIDS has been found to be most effective?”	“Which treatment for AIDS is the <u>MOST</u> effective?”	With the revision, it’s easier to see that students need to choose the best answer from more than one correct answer.
2. Embedded and/or reduced clause reduces clarity	“Nursing interventions Shannon may use with clients in the clinical which reflect a focus on primary prevention include:”	“Shannon is planning nursing interventions with clients in the clinical setting. Which of the following interventions reflects a focus on primary prevention?”	Sentences with reduced and embedded clauses need extra time to decode. Better to use shorter, simpler sentences.
3. Unnecessary use of passive voice	“Mr. R. is scheduled for lithotripsy. The nurse develops a teaching plan in which the procedure is described as the:” A. Surgical removal of stones B. Capture of stones via scope C. Fragmentation of stones by electrical charge D. Dissolution of stones with medication	“Mr. R. is scheduled for lithotripsy. The nurse develops a teaching plan for Mr. R. How should the nurse describe this procedure in the nurse’s teaching plan?”	Generally, it is easier to decode active voice sentences. The use of the active voice in the revision also eliminates the embedded clause in the lead-in.
4. Unclear subject and term	“In teaching cancer prevention, one of the following should be identified as the best documented carcinogen. Select the number one culprit.”	“The nurse is teaching cancer prevention. Which of the following should the nurse identify as the <u>MOST</u> documented carcinogen?”	The implied subject of “in teaching cancer prevention” is the nurse; the stated subject of the main clause, “one of the following” refers to the carcinogen. “Culprit” may be too obscure for ESL students, and “best documented” is

Issue	Original wording	Revision	Explanation
			ambiguous.
5: Unclear wording	“In which of the following situations should the nurse have a high index of suspicion for water intoxication?”	“In which situation does the nurse suspect water intoxication?”	“Index of suspicion” is uncommon terminology and a convoluted way to say “suspect.”
6: Use of cultural content that many would not understand	“When Sotheby’s auctioned off items from the Jackie Kennedy Onassis estate, those who paid “top dollar” for items were most likely using the behavioral mechanism of: A. Projection B. Identification C. Rationalization D. Reaction formation”		There is culturally specific information that not everyone would know: a celebrity, a cultural event, and the idiom: “top dollar.” Also, psychological identification with a celebrity may not be universally understood.

The best way to craft effective test questions is trial and error and feedback. Try out draft question wording with students from the various backgrounds represented in your class and ask them to explain the question and suggest wording changes.

Making implicit expectations explicit:

“High context” cultures have a strong sense of social identity, traditions, and stable expectations. Common experiences eliminate the need for much spoken or written detail. What those with higher status (e.g., older, better dressed, higher credentials) say is accorded more weight than what others who may be more knowledgeable say. Students are less likely to state things explicitly and in detail, assuming shared inference, and less likely to offer opinions or ask questions, thus seeming less knowledgeable to instructors from low context cultures. When required to present an idea with supporting evidence, they may tend to present a variety of points of view without showing a preference for any.

In contrast, “low context” cultures are constantly changing and record knowledge explicitly and in detail so that it is not lost. People are expected to keep abreast of new developments in their area through formal and informal networks, and authority comes from the defense of evidence-based ideas.

Tip	Rationale
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specify clearly your policies for attendance, late assignment submission, and missing tests in terms of fairness for everyone. Explain assessment criteria, including the format you expect and how much grammar and vocabulary “count.” Be specific about length of written submissions and explain why more is not better. Coach students on how best to use their time, and state clearly when/where you may be contacted in person, and expected 	<p>North Americans have a linear concept of time: we do one thing at a time, work time is separate from personal time, and it is inconsiderate to be late. Other cultures (e.g., Latin American and Middle Eastern) don’t make these distinctions—things start when people are ready, are finished when everyone is done. Personal commitments may be considered more important than “work” ones. If family members are visiting, it may be considered an acceptable reason for missing class,</p>

Tip	Rationale
response time for email requests.	assignments and tests.
Use an educative approach to plagiarism. Explain why referencing is necessary, provide examples, model in your lectures the required referencing style. Show how the authors of assigned readings have incorporated and properly referenced the ideas of others. Provide properly referenced sample work from previous years' students.	Intellectual property is more of a Western concept. Many international students consider it disrespectful to change an author's authoritative words, and may consider it pointless to try stating an idea "better" than the way the original author did. Some students may feel obliged to help family and friends by providing answers to assignment questions and tests.

Involve (international) students in course design:

Connect with international students. Use examples that resonate with the different cultures represented in the class. Ask minority students privately for help in creating these examples.

Ask international students how an issue would be considered from their experience, keeping in mind that an individual is not a representative of their culture's or country's views.

Use questions and comments posed in class and posted in online discussions as basis for diverse examples. Ask students to apply concepts in the contexts of their experience.

Ask international students what instructional strategies best meet their needs.

Provide a variety of assessment and evaluation options. Let students choose from tests, written assignments, individual oral reports or presentations, group projects, visual presentations, dramatic vignettes—live or taped.

Provide options for course mark weighting, letting students choose options that play to their strengths, such as testing and writing counting more in one weighting scheme, oral presentations in another.

The references below all have helpful, practical ideas.

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