Managing Communication and Language Issues

Students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALDB) backgrounds commonly have problems with clearly communicating and correctly understanding English. In particular, first year international students who are still developing their language skills and becoming acquainted with the Australian university environment and adjusting to listening to a range of accents may experience difficulties. This section provides some best practice strategies for tackling communication and language barriers in the classroom environment

Strategies, Tips and Good Practice Examples

1. Ensure Lecture Content is Comprehensible and Accessible

- Outline the main points, key questions or issues that will be covered in each lecture. Flowcharts and concept maps are useful techniques to visually represent lecture content and how it links with other topics in the course.

- Provide lecture notes (downloadable via the web) to supplement your PowerPoint slides and assist students with their note taking.

- Define any new words, unfamiliar phrases and technical concepts that are related the subject matter, and provide opportunities for further clarification and explanation. Some lecturers have developed glossaries of terms for their course that students (from all backgrounds) have found to be very helpful for their learning.

- Avoid using slang, jargon, idioms, colloquiums and culturally-specific humour. Not only can this lead to confusion and ambiguity, but such language may also be misconstrued in an offensive or harmful manner by certain individuals/groups.

- Summarise important concepts and pieces of information at regular intervals during your lectures, particularly at the end (e.g., provide a summary of the "take home" messages)

2. Provide Education about Plagiarism

- Explain why referencing of others' intellectual property is important and give students clear examples of correct referencing styles for the discipline (http://www.griffith.edu.au/academic-integrity). Referring students to where they can access a citation handbook or referencing style guide is also recommended.

- Detail Griffith University's policy in relation to plagiarism and the consequences of academic misconduct.

- Model the correct use of referencing in your own work (e.g., lecture slides, course handouts, tutorial worksheets) so students have examples of how to summarise and reference concepts appropriately.

- As a teacher, realise that international students may experience misunderstandings about plagiarism due to cultural and language issues (e.g., poor English language skills to paraphrase information).

3. Explain Assessment Requirements and Criteria

- Clarify expectations by providing students with a hard-copy of the assessment criteria and explain how marks will be allocated and how an overall grade will be awarded.

- Clearly state whether English communication skills will be assessed and, if so, detail what form of skills will be tested (oral or written) and the number of marks allocated for this criterion.

- Where possible, provide models to demonstrate the standard of work required.

- Explain the aims/objectives of the assessment task and how it links with the course content

- Use assessment results collected early in the semester to identify students who may require extra tutoring or support with English language skills. Refer such students to staff from Griffith English Language Services (GELS) (http://www.griffith.edu.au/international/english-enhancement-course/strategy-policies)

- Use a range of different assessment tasks (e.g., individual assignments, multiple choice quizzes, exams, critical essays, group projects, oral presentations) to cater for different learning styles.

- For examinations, provide specific information about the nature and requirements of the assessment (e.g., who, when, what, where, why, how long). If time permits, consider providing sample questions or a practice exam so that students become familiar with the assessment style, format, structure, etc.

4. Provide Timely, Detailed and Constructive Feedback

- Provide comprehensive written feedback that explicitly outlines the students' strengths and areas for improvements. Ensure written feedback is legible or, if possible, prepare typed feedback sheets.

- Ensure assessments are marked and returned to students in a timely manner so they can strengthen any weaknesses and/or access extra assistance before future assessments are due.

- Avoid highly critical and disparaging remarks (e.g., "this is completely illogical and unclear"), as this provides little guidance for future improvement and may deflate students' self-esteem.

- Offer opportunities for verbal feedback on assignments (e.g., private consultations before/after class)

Common difficulties faced by international students, and strategies for teachers

Difficulty Area ➜	Recommended Strategies
Difficulty understanding lecture content ➜	- Adapt the pace of your teaching to accommodate different learning and comprehension styles, while maintaining rigour and standards - Speak slowly, clearly and calmly, as students may be struggling to understand your accent, word usage and meaning. - Avoid using humour, as it may be construed as condescending or offensive to people of a certain nationality, culture, religion or minority group. - Break information into manageable but meaningful chunks - Present information in a number of ways (verbally and visually) and, if appropriate, use drawings, graphs, maps or visual flowcharts to provide extra non-verbal information - Maintain a patient and friendly approach as students try to translate language and foreign concepts into terms they understand - Use concept-checking devices (e.g., verbal questions, self-assessment worksheets) to assess students' understanding and clarify information when necessary
Lack of confidence interacting with staff and students ➜	- Model respectful, inclusive and culturally competent interactions with students - Create group-based opportunities to learn about your students' backgrounds through such tools as student surveys, 'getting to know you' ice-breaker activities, and 'meet-and-greet' activities with students after class - Learn and correctly pronounce the names of international students - Explicitly acknowledge the cultural heritage and home languages of local and international students (migrants, indigenous, bilingual, etc.) - Offer verbal encouragement and praise when students actively participate in class discussions - Use one-minute written papers give shy students an opportunity to communicate with you anonymously
Difficulty communicating ideas/questions clearly ➜	- Remain patient by giving students adequate time to formulate their words and sentences - Encourage students to express themselves fully, even if they feel like "giving up". For example, if a student says "it doesn't matter" after being misinterpreted several times, ask him/her to write the problem or concern down on paper. - Include a peer-mentoring system to assisting international and local students with intercultural communication - Use regular paraphrasing and perception checking to ensure that you understand students' needs and requirements accurately (e.g., asking "is this what you mean?")
Reluctance to participate in ➜	- Early in the semester, schedule formal and informal time for students to develop personal relationships and gain trust, comfort and safety around their peers

group work and class discussions	- Establish clear ground rules for group discussions and apply prompt action in the case of any discriminatory, racist or ethnocentric student behaviour - When first forming groups, encourage students to negotiate clear group-member roles and responsibilities, timelines by when goals must be met, and a step-by-step procedure for task accomplishment. - Build "intercultural communication skills" into one of the assessment criteria for group tasks to encourage students to participate, negotiate and communicate with others effectively - Provide regular feedback to assist students to work effectively and efficiently as a team.
Problems with plagiarism and paraphrasing ➜	- Clearly explain the difference between paraphrasing and plagiarism when outlining assessment tasks - Clarify the exact rules for acknowledgement of authorship required in your discipline - Promote "Learning Services" workshops to students at the start of each semester as a source of extra help. - Use "Safe Assign" to educate students about plagiarism and the importance of proper attribution of any borrowed content, and to allow students to self-assess written drafts for unintended plagiarism prior to assignment submission.
Difficulty "unpacking" and understanding assessment requirements ➜	- At the start of each semester, promote EnglishHELP as a support service to assist students with the initial "planning" phase of assignments - Clearly specify assessment requirements, such as the aims, desired word length, style/format, specific marking criteria, and weighting for overall course grade. - Provide students with models, templates or examplars of exactly what is expected of them. - Ensure assessments tasks are explained in simple, clear and concise terms, accompanied by specific marking criteria. - Repeat key information and details about assessment tasks, both verbally and via written text (e.g., handouts, lecture slides, course outline).
Difficulty structuring arguments logically ➜	- Provide 'scaffolding' by designing learning tasks that require students to follow a simple step-wise process (i.e., planning, drafting, editing, and final production). - Encourage students to use a 'process' rather than 'product' approach to tasks by offering regular feedback on errors or areas for improvement, and by referring students to appropriate support services when necessary.
Difficulty with written grammar and sentence structure ➜	- Refer students to EnglishHELP workshops to obtain a useful grammar handbook and take responsibility for ongoing English language development outside the classroom. - Encourage students to read as much English material as possible, including newspapers, magazines, academic texts and journal papers. - Speaking and listening helps to develop English skills, so encourage students to listen to the radio/television and participate in conversations around campus to become familiar with how English is used correctly.
Difficulty understanding lecturer feedback ➜	- Provide clear and direct feedback that specifies exactly what students must do to improve future performance. - Identify specific areas for improvement (e.g., offer solutions). - Give detailed and descriptive qualitative feedback, rather than a simple numeric mark. - Ensure any handwritten feedback is legible. - Ensure negative feedback is framed constructively so that students feel encouraged, motivated and confident to improve in the future. - Clearly explain the grading policy/procedure for your course so that students understand assessment marks. - Ensure feedback is focused on course and topic learning outcomes. - Encourage students gain more detailed feedback by making an 'after-lecture' appointment or by contacting EnglishHELP for extra advice.
Unfamiliarity with university culture and academic expectations ➜	- Refer students to Student Support or Learning Services workshops. - Provide appropriate models and examples of classroom rules/expectations on Learning@Griffith. - Introduce peer mentoring schemes that pair local students with international students in order to increase multicultural interactions and socialisation. - Involve later-year international students in lectures, tutorials or transition support programs to

	assist new international students who have recently arrived to develop a sense of belonging to the university and academic community. - Encourage students to become involved in extra-curricular activities, such as university clubs, societies, sporting teams, etc.

5.1 Self-Development Checklist

10 Questions to Guide Self-Reflection: Managing Communication & Language Issues

1. To what extent do you use visual stimuli (e.g., drawings, graphs, concept maps, flowcharts) to compliment the verbal or written information you present in lectures/tutorials?

2. How often do you use concept-checking devices – such as verbal probing questions – to gauge students' level of understanding and comprehension?

3. To what extent do you use slang, idioms, colloquiums, culture-specific humour in the classroom? What steps can you undertake to reduce or eliminate this 'colourful language' in your interactions with students?

4. What type/s of positive reinforcement (if any) do you give to students in return for participating in class discussions?

5. How frequently do you summarise key concepts and important 'take home messages' during your lectures/tutorials?

6. How much time do you spend explaining the University's plagiarism policies to students? Do you provide specific examples of the correct referencing style/s relevant to your academic discipline?

7. When explaining assessment tasks, do you clearly state whether English communication skills will be assessed and the number of marks allocated to this criteria?

8. How often do you use assessment results gathered early in the semester to identify students who may require extra assistance, tutoring or support?

9. How often do you refer linguistically-challenged students to support services (e.g., EnglishHelp or Learning Services workshops) to encourage ongoing academic development outside the classroom?

10. To what extent do you give students detailed and descriptive written feedback on assignments, rather than a simple grade or numeric mark?

References and Further Resources

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