

Awareness Points for Interacting with International Students

(by Dr. Helaine Minkus, Geography/Anthropology, UWEC)

International students come from a great many countries, which differ culturally from each other as well as from the United States. Some points can be generalized, however.

1. Speak in a way that is appropriate to the student's level of competence in English. New students, especially those on an ESL program, may have problems understanding rapid conversational English and will need you to speak slowly and very clearly. Don't shout but pronounce words clearly and avoid slang expressions. To speak in the same slow way to a student whose English is fluent may be perceived as an insult. However, even if students are fluent, they may not be familiar with slang, acronyms, etc.

It is a good idea to write down any information that it is critical that the student have: names of people to see, phone numbers, etc. Pay attention to signs that the student may not be understanding what you are saying. As a check, ask them to explain to you what you have said. If you simply ask, "do you understand?" they are likely to answer "yes" to avoid embarrassment.

2. In some countries, the family name is given first and then the personal name so it is less confusing if you ask a student for their "family" name than for their second name.
3. Americans place great importance on being independent and self-reliant and expect people to show initiative. In much of the world, young people are raised to be part of a group and expect that those in a superior position will take the initiative and tell them what courses to take, what to write a paper on, etc. Americans may regard a person who can't seem to make their own decisions as weak. The international student may view advisors and professors as uncaring if they are told they have to do things on their own.
4. Americans generally expect that a person who needs help will ask for it but in many countries people expect that others will be sensitive and will offer help.
5. Talking to strangers about problems is not common in many countries and students may find it difficult to talk about their emotions to someone who is not a friend or family member.
6. People in some countries (parts of Western Europe) speak more directly than Americans from the upper Midwest and people in other countries (much of Asia) speak much less directly.
7. Americans may expect that a person who disagrees will say no and make their objection clear although even Americans often find it difficult. Concern for the other person's face makes it very difficult for people from some countries to say no, especially if they are dealing with a superior.
8. The American emphasis on punctuality and scheduling, efficiency and hard work is regarded as obsessive by people in many other countries. It seems that all Americans think about is work and that they don't know how to enjoy life. To succeed in the U.S., students will probably have to adapt to a large extent but it may take some time.
9. Americans regard someone who doesn't maintain eye contact as lacking in self-confidence, uninterested or suspicious. Direct eye contact is regarded as threatening in some areas and politeness calls for only brief eye contact or looking away from the speaker.
10. Americans often think that one should present a strong self-image but the same behavior may be regarded as arrogant in other countries where one is expected to be humble.

11. Especially in the upper Midwest, Americans expect the bureaucracy to work. In many countries, the bureaucracy must be manipulated by calling upon personal connections or bribes. Students raised in such societies may seem manipulative to Americans and may cause resentment if they try to go over the head of someone lower in the hierarchy to make connections with a more important person higher up.

Awareness Points for Educators with International Students in the Classroom

(by Phil Huelsbeck, International Education, UWEC)

1. Without an audience, ask (repeatedly if necessary) how to pronounce the international student's name and make a note of the proper pronunciation. Some international students take on an "American name" but it is often appreciated if the instructor takes the time to learn the student's native name, as well.
2. An international student may choose not to tell the instructor that he or she doesn't understand something because the student may erroneously perceive this as being tantamount to telling the U.S. instructor that he or she is doing a poor job of teaching.
3. An international student may hastily judge an instructor who allows students to eat and drink in class, wear sweat pants or "pajamas," hats, put their feet on furniture, talk during class, come to class late, etc. as an instructor who is lax, unconcerned about academic discipline, and indifferent to his or her student's intellectual and personal growth.
4. Some international students may find their U.S. counterparts to be completely "disrespectful" of their U.S. instructors because of how they dress and behave in class. However, the international students may not understand that U.S. students may show their instructors respect differently. For example, by making thoughtful comments in class, having good attendance, completing assignments well and on time, etc.
5. Students from different countries often have different appropriate "pause times" for responding to verbal questions. For instance, some international students may be accustomed to pausing for up to 30 seconds before responding to an instructor's question (to indicate to the instructor that the student is not taking the question lightly and giving it proper consideration). However, many U.S. instructors will often feel compelled to "rescue" an international student after about 15 seconds by politely excusing the international student from having to respond and calling on another student. Naturally, the international student can be left feeling confused (and embarrassed) as to why the professor did not allow him or her to answer.
6. Many international students come from countries where "class participation" or verbal exchanges between classmates and the instructor may not be the norm; and, such action would likely be perceived as disrespectful of the instructor's authority.
7. For some international students, the act of getting "called on" in class to answer an instructor's question may be completely alien to them and quite unnerving. It may be their first experience with this common U.S. practice if they come from a primarily lecture-based educational system. It may simply take international students longer to grow accustomed to this teaching practice. It would be a mistake to assume that the student is incapable of responding and decide simply not to call on the international student.

8. Students from many countries are taught the British variant of English. Words and phrases that at first glance may seem awkward or incorrect to a U.S. instructor may simply be the British variant in action. For instance, it may not be uncommon for a U.S. instructor to indicate that certain words like “Aeroplane” are misspelled on an international student’s paper.
9. Many international students are completely unaccustomed to being able to have access to their instructors outside of classroom. The idea of seeing their professors during appointment times or “office hours” may be a new concept for them.
10. In some countries, if a student misses a class, it is the instructor’s responsibility to see that the student has the appropriate information for the missed class.
11. In some countries, if a student does poorly on a test or exam, it is the instructor’s responsibility to seek the student out and ask why he or she is experiencing difficulties.
12. Some international students may be very accustomed to asking for the instructor’s permission to leave the class to use the bathroom, etc. If this occurs, the instructor could simply explain in private that the student need not ask permission.
13. Many international students are completely unaccustomed to receiving regular assignments, quizzes, and tests. In their countries it may be customary for their entire course grade to depend on one final exam at the end of the semester. As a result, many international students find themselves overwhelmed by the flurry of assignments, quizzes, and tests that characterize many courses in the U.S.
14. Some international students come from educational systems where “sharing” information and “helping” fellow students during a test or quiz is not only allowed but actively encouraged. This is in stark contrast to the U.S. classroom where students need to be concerned about even the *appearance* of “cheating” during a test or quiz.
15. In some cases, international students often erroneously recognize instructor “due dates” as guidelines rather than dates set in stone because this is how academic deadlines are treated in their home countries. International students will need to understand quickly that due dates listed in the course syllabus are firm, and handing something in a day or two late may not be acceptable at all; or, if it is acceptable, the grade for the assignment may be lowered for being late.
16. If you are the kind of instructor who informs your class that it is appropriate for the students to call you by your first name, this will often be difficult for many international students. Even when told to use a first name, an international student will likely insist on using your full title. The student is not callously disregarding your request; rather, he or she likely comes from a culture where using an instructor’s first name would be considered highly disrespectful.
17. Some international students come from educational backgrounds where citing information borrowed from another source isn’t always necessary “because, of course, it’s *obvious* that the sentence or paragraph is taken from another work.” The international student may not intentionally be trying to pass an author’s work off as his or her own. He or she may be accustomed to interjecting supportive comments from other sources into his or her work. Because of this view, some international students become unwitting plagiarists—a serious offense in the U.S. classroom.
18. If you should have ANY questions or concerns about an international student in your class, you can always contact the Center for International Education at (715) 836-4411.