

## INTRODUCTION TO COLLEGE TEACHING IN THE UNITED STATES

*The roles of teaching assistant and graduate student are very demanding. When the person fulfilling both roles has the added burdens of speaking a foreign language, learning the ins and outs of a new educational system and living in a foreign culture, the dual responsibility of being both teacher and student becomes even more demanding.*

### INTERNATIONAL GRADUATES STUDENTS AS TAs

#### TA duties and responsibilities

- As a TA, you are in many ways an intermediary between faculty and students.
- Each course will have guidelines for the number of hours a TA is expected to spend on teaching duties including class preparation, in class teaching and office hours for students.
- The nature of each academic discipline is such that duties for TAs within departments vary.
- Each professor has specific expectations of TAs. For example, lecture to students, hold discussions, prepare and give weekly quizzes, grade exams, and writing examination questions for the midterms and finals.
- It is important for TAs to talk with the professor they are assisting in order to clearly understand the professor 's expectations.
- It is helpful to talk with TAs who had previously taught a particular course with a particular professor.

#### TA role perspectives

- TAs have a variety of perspectives on their role. TAs with experience might feel comfortable with the authority position; other TAs might feel uncomfortable with being too much of an authority figure.
- TAs can choose to be friendly with students; as long as they keep social distance in order to maintain student respect.
- TAs can choose his or her own style (formal or informal), and define his or her own role according to personal preferences, the requirements of the course, and instructions given by the professor.
- Students respond in a comfortable and trusting manner to TAs who are comfortable with themselves and with the way they carry out their role.
- Each TA must work out a suitable and comfortable perspective of the TA role that takes into account the TA's individual personality as well as the expectations of students and professors.

### TEACHING UNDERGRADUATES

The purpose of this section is to provide information about undergraduate students in the United States. It is our belief that the more TAs know about the cultural environment and academic background of their students, the more they will be able to effectively meet their students' needs.

#### Student Diversity and the Educational System

There are two major ways in which the educational system in the United States differs from those in most other countries:

First, in many countries, students who plan to enter vocational careers go to one type of high school while students who plan to attend college enter a different type of high school. In the United States, all students go to the same high school and have the option of taking the same courses, making the high schools less specialized than those of many other countries. Students with diverse ability levels and types of abilities, all attend the same types of schools but with widely varying curriculums.

A second way in which the educational system in the United States differs from many others has to do with the way the system is organized. Each individual state determines the high school curriculum. As a result of this local control of education, the student population has a diverse academic background. In addition, students also differ in regard to ethnic background, cultural background, international citizenship, age, sex and socio-economic levels. International TAs may apply their own experiences in a foreign culture to help understand and appreciate the different ways students may choose to or expect to participate in the classroom. The learning styles and needs of students will vary with their academic backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, and individual personalities.

### Student Attitudes

Understanding student attitudes can be difficult at times. TAs from many diverse cultures have expressed surprise about the informality of American students. The degree of student informality varies from university to university and from one part of the country to another. On the whole, American students dress and act more casually than students in most other countries. Such informality may feel disrespectful to many international TAs, and it may take time for the TA to understand and tolerate some of the more casual behavior of Americans. In some universities it is not uncommon to see students eating or drinking in the classroom. Attendance and promptness may also be lax in some universities. One international TA explained that he was very upset when students came to his class late or left early. At first, he thought students left class because of something he was doing or saying. Later he found out that, many students have other responsibilities or have other commitments that make it necessary for them to leave class early or arrive late.

Student attitudes toward faculty and TAs can also be very informal or casual. Students do not usually show formal signs of respect for the teacher, such as standing up when the teacher enters the classroom. At some colleges and universities, students are accustomed to calling TAs and sometimes even faculty by their first names. From one perspective, this informality can be viewed as a sign of respect in the American culture. It can imply that the individuals who are respected for their work and position can also be respected for their ability to remain humble in light of their accomplishments. In other words, they are seen as less egotistical than if they insisted on being referred to by title.

A student attitude that can be disconcerting to both American and international TAs is student apathy or lack of interest in course material. Commonly, TAs expect undergraduate students to be highly motivated in their studies but they often experience many of the undergraduate students as being apathetic in the classroom. One way of explaining this TA perception is that TAs often teach lower division, survey courses. Many students must take these courses to fulfill requirements needed for graduation. Such courses are often out of the students' area of emphasis and also out of their area of interest. As a result, these students may show little motivation for the course other than the motivation to receive a passing grade.

Another factor which may affect student motivation is the degree to which students have clear future goals. The majority of undergraduates enter into higher education directly after high school. Many of them have not yet defined an academic area of interest and many have not yet declared an academic major. In fact, for some, a liberal arts education or a technical/scientific education may not be a lasting choice. Consequently, some of these students lack motivation and appear apathetic in the classroom. However, for many other students, the subject area of required courses may become a newfound interest. Such students can be strongly influenced by the TA's enthusiasm for an academic subject. Thus, in lower division courses, it is not uncommon to find a wide range of student interest levels.

### Student Expectations of TAs

It is probably safe to say that there are two expectations that all students hold. **They expect TAs to be knowledgeable in the course material and they expect TAs to present the material in a clear, easy to understand, systematic way.** Students are exposed to a number of teaching approaches and tend to adjust to the various teaching styles of their TAs and professors. Students also have personal expectations in regard to their instructors. These expectations will, of course, vary from student to student. Often a particular type of student will be more difficult for a particular TA to deal with this will depend on the match between the TA's teaching style and the students' individual needs, expectations and learning style.

The following student typologies reflect not only student expectations of instructors based on individual adaption styles, but also behaviors that may accompany their adaption process.

In a research study, eight student types or student adaptation styles were identified in American college classrooms. Descriptions of these eight types of students are provided here to help the TA gain insight into the motivations and expectations of particular students whose behavior may at first seem difficult to understand:

**ANXIOUS-DEPENDENT STUDENTS:** They have little self-confidence and are very dependent on the teacher for knowledge and support.

**SILENT STUDENTS:** These students are quiet out of a feeling of personal insecurity; they judge their own personal worth on the quality of their intellectual ability.

**COMPLIANT STUDENTS:** Compliant students are quiet, non-critical, and trusting of authority.

**INDEPENDENT STUDENTS:** They are confident of their abilities and do not feel threatened by the teacher, classwork or the other students, tend to be sophomores or juniors.

**DISCOURAGED WORKERS:** The discouraged workers are students who are dissatisfied with themselves. The best way a TA can help a discouraged student is to be patient and encouraging.

**SNIPERS:** Snipers are typically underachievers who tend to be rebellious and defensive.

**HEROES:** The "heroes" are very involved with the coursework and may feel superior to their classmates. Hero students are very intelligent and resent being told what to do.

**ATTENTION-SEEKERS:** Attention-seekers are the most social and extroverted students in the class. Being approved of and reassured by their teachers is very important to them, even though their behavior is sometimes inappropriate or extreme.

Student types are not static and a particular student may display behaviors of various student types in various courses, depending on his or her relationship with the TA and the subject matter of the course. While a TA cannot hope to meet the expectations of every student, knowing about different types of students can provide a basis for understanding student behavior, facilitating student learning, and developing productive TA-student relationships.

### Developing TA-student Relationships

By being aware of the characteristics and needs of the different student types found in American classrooms, the international TA can better appreciate the multiple dimensions of the TA-student relationship. Perhaps in some cultures the instructor-student relationship is more clearly defined so that both students and teachers have clear and stable expectations of one another. The student-TA relationship in American classrooms is one that is continually being negotiated and redefined.

Important aspects of the TA-student relationship include the following:

- Many students need to feel that above all else, their instructors care about them.
- Conflicts and frustrations are part of any relationship. Working through frustrations can develop and enrich the quality of TA-student relationships.
- Patience and acceptance are vital to the TA-student relationship. Just as it can be difficult for international TAs to accept certain American values, it is sometimes difficult for students to adjust to and accept certain values of the international TA.
- Communicating honestly to students and encouraging students to express their needs and attitudes is often necessary in avoiding or clearing up misunderstandings in the classroom.
- International TAs and their American students may not realize when cultural miscommunication is occurring. For this reason, it is important for international TAs to continually check their perceptions and expectations with those of their students.
- A positive attitude can avoid troublesome situations. When a TA approaches students with a positive attitude, many misunderstandings can be avoided.
- The TA-student relationship extends beyond the classroom to TA office hours. For many students, the relationship they develop with the TA during this one-to-one communication time can greatly affect their academic performance as well as their feelings about themselves in relation to the course and the TA.

- The TA-student relationship should be kept on a professional basis at all times (in class, during office hours, on campus and off campus).
- Language difficulties and cultural differences can cause problems for both students and international TAs. Discussing rather than avoiding problems when they arise can lead to creative solutions and new realizations.
- Students want a positive relationship with their TAs, and when given the opportunity, are willing to participate in developing a comfortable classroom atmosphere. Of course, what may be comfortable for one person is not necessarily comfortable for another. By learning about one another through classroom and office hour interactions, international TAs and American students transcend cultural boundaries and develop a cross-cultural, teacher-student relationship.

## LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR THE CLASSROOM

International TAs often express concern about their language and communication skills not only in their positions as TAs but also in their academic coursework.

Although many international TAs have studied the English language extensively, they are often surprised by some of the communication difficulties they experience in their American classrooms.

### Understanding Students

It is often difficult for new international TAs to understand what students mean when students use shortened (or collapsed) phrases or idiomatic expressions. Instead of saying *would you*, *could you*, or *did you*, students and Americans in general tend to use a short form that sounds like /dju/. Other frequently shortened words include *gotta* (got to), *hafta* (have to), *gonna* (going to), and *wanna* (want to).

Students also use many idiomatic expressions and slang expressions in their speech. Two useful books on idioms are the *Handbook of American Idioms and Idiomatic Usage* by Whitford and Dixson (1973) and *English Idioms and How to Use Them* by Seidl and McMordie.

A different kind of comprehension problem can occur when American students use humor. It may not always be easy for the international person to understand American humor or to tell when students are actually making a joke. When in doubt, ask the students if they are joking. Humor can also be used by the international TA to improve communication.

### Checking Student Understanding

For a variety of reasons, situations will undoubtedly occur in which the TA will not understand what a student is saying. In such situations it is, of course, necessary to ask the student for clarification. An effective way to check one's understanding of what was said or, more importantly what was meant, is to restate the comment or question, and ask the student if this is what s/he meant.

International TAs also need to check whether or not their responses to students' questions have been understood correctly. There are a variety of ways to do this. The most effective method is to have students apply the information they gained from the explanation. This can be done by asking students a few questions about the material that requires them to demonstrate their understanding.

Miscommunication also occurs when students phrase their questions poorly or in an ambiguous manner. Unless the TA helps the student state the question clearly or checks with the student to be sure the question has been properly understood.

Some TAs prefer that students not interrupt in order to clarify their questions and others prefer to be interrupted anytime during the session. Such differences in TA preferences and TA expectations of students points to the importance of TAs communicating their expectations to their students.

### Communicating Effectively

Concern about speaking and communicating effectively is frequently expressed by many international TAs. Trying to clearly express complex ideas in a foreign language is indeed difficult.

It may be helpful to remember that students may also experience difficulties when they listen to their international TAs. To the international TA, errors in pronunciation and grammar are the most obvious; however, a less obvious communication problem, (often commented on by students), is the TA's rate of speech, often referred to as "pace".

Frequently, international TAs speak too quickly for American students to understand what has been said. Although some TAs believe that speaking quickly is evidence of their language mastery or fluency, rapid speech interferes with students' understanding.

International TAs may find that communication is enhanced by giving students time to think about new or difficult information. This is especially necessary after the TA has explained a difficult concept or problem and then asks the students a question about it. The amount of time the TA gives students to think and respond to a question is referred to as "wait time". At least 5-10 seconds of wait-time should be given after asking students a question. This allows students time to think about the question and formulate a response.

When listening to a non-native speaker, students need extra time to "translate" mispronounced words or words that are spoken with an unfamiliar accent.

The problem of students not understanding the TA's pronunciation may be complicated by the fact that students are unable to differentiate between a situation in which the TA is mispronouncing a word and a situation in which the TA is using a word unfamiliar to the student.

American students and international TAs need to work together to communicate effectively. In fact, they may experience similar problems in understanding one another. The TA may have difficulty understanding some of the idioms used by American students while students may have difficulty understanding the international TA's sentence structure and use of the language. In the following section, teaching strategies to enhance classroom communication are discussed.

## TEACHING METHODS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

There are many teaching methods that can help increase communication effectiveness. Clearly organizing ideas and writing an outline on the chalkboard that lists the main points to be covered during the class helps students follow along with the organization of ideas. It is also very helpful for students when TAs write technical terms or theoretical concepts on the board as they are mentioned. Students need and appreciate this effort. When a TA is unsure about the pronunciation of certain words, those words should also be written on the board.

Since there could be miscommunication, the student participation in the international TA's classroom is an absolute necessity. By setting aside class time for students to explain and discuss their understanding of the course material and the TA's lecture or explanations, many communication errors can be corrected before they interfere with student learning. Of course, some difficulties may be assumed to result from language problems when in fact the problem lies elsewhere.

Using effective teaching methods does facilitate classroom communication. As TAs with teaching experience in their native countries already know, when lecturing, it is important to clearly state each point before speaking about it, make the point and then summarize what has been said.

Before beginning another idea or point, it's necessary to inform students of this change or transition. Students are reluctant to continually ask TAs to repeat what they've said, even when they haven't completely understood the TA. Thus, it is important for TAs to frequently stop to ask if students have any questions. An even better method is to ask questions of the students in order to check their understanding before going on to another topic. Another method often used by both international and American TAs is presenting the same idea in more than one way.

When giving multiple explanations or examples of the same idea, the TA should preface each explanation to indicate that the same idea is being explained, only in a different way.

International TAs often find out that seemingly innocuous critical comments they make in class have a devastating effect on their students' morale. In many countries, negative criticism is viewed as a tool helping the student to reach perfection. On the contrary, American students expect praise when they do well, and encouragement when they do not.

Getting students to participate in the class by being friendly and supportive of their comments, ideas, and questions can help both the TA and the students feel more comfortable in the classroom. When students feel comfortable enough to participate in class, they may be more tolerant of the TA's language difficulties and

be willing to cooperate with the TA in solving communication problems. For instance, students can often be helpful in restating another student's poorly formed question that the TA is having difficulty understanding.

Each TA will discover ways to enhance communication in the classroom that fit the particular TA, students and situation. By endeavoring to understand communication problems that can occur in the international TA's classroom, the TA can take action to minimize these problems.