

US Classroom Culture: What to Expect as an International Student and Teaching Assistant

Classroom Culture in the United States is influenced by a number of cultural values. These may include:

- The rights of individuals
- Personal responsibility
- Freedom of choice
- Interactive thinking
- Democratic principles

These values often mean that college classes in the U.S. are structured differently than in many other university systems: students play an active role in choosing their course of study, and are encouraged to have a voice in class, participate in discussions and hands-on learning activities, and take advantage of opportunities to further learning outside of the classroom.

The challenges faced by international TAs involve adjusting both to these cultural differences and to using a kind of English that is very different from what they may have learned in their home countries (for more, see the video about the Derek Bok's Center Oral Communications course, linked in this blog post).

Some features of academic English:

- Rich detail and description
- Combine and link sentences: paragraph-length discourse
- Narrate and describe using all major time frames
- Handle challenges presented by complications
- Paraphrase complex ideas and arguments
- Use of multiple examples
- Consistent accuracy, clarity, and precision with grammar
- Does not misrepresent or confuse
- Can be understood by people unaccustomed to dealing with non-native speakers
- Perform a variety of communicative tasks

Classroom Language Tips:

- Be prepared for class
 - Look up words for pronunciation
 - Practice saying key terms and phrases
 - Prepare and practice lesson plans, but **don't** try to memorize your lesson
 - **Record yourself**
- Be honest about your language but *never apologize*
 - Tell them if they do not understand something, they should ask for clarification
- Speak Slowly in class
 - Write key questions, ideas, and terms on the board
- Practice your English informally
 - Talk with other graduate students in your program
 - Try to learn about and understand cultural practices, ideas, and humor
- Use listening cues and signal words

- Transition words and phrases will help students follow the thread of the lesson
- Pay attention to not only what words you use to signal a transition, but to *how* you say it as well—changes in pitch, even body language and eye contact can express meaning
- Check in with students to verify their understanding
- Act confident and enthusiastic about what you are teaching
 - Monitor the pace of your delivery
 - Pick two or three people in various places in the room and make eye contact

Your rapport with your students and professors can impact your performances in class, and the minutes before and after class can contribute to students' individual involvement in class, their interactions with their peers, and their comfort discussing course material with their professors. Luckily, it can be as enjoyable as it is rewarding to develop a rapport with your students.

Some effective strategies for building rapport in your classes:

- Find out information about your students (ask them to fill out an information card)
- Learn students' names and ask them to learn each others' names
- Give students the opportunity to meet each other
- Provide nonverbal encouragement
- Avoid judging students
- Relate to students on a personal level
- Provide positive reinforcement
- Treat your students as adults
- Make yourself available
- Refer students to help services on campus
- Read inattentive behaviors
- Devote energy to a positive learning environment