

Practical Tips for New Graduate Student Instructors Who Have Been Educated Internationally

Elizabeth Axelson and Pamela Bogart
English Language Institute, University of Michigan

Everyone taking on the role of a GSI for the first time is embarking on a journey into new territory, with many challenges and opportunities along the way. You may be both excited and a little apprehensive about this chance to interact intensively with American and other students in the classes you teach. Your students also may be feeling something similar about taking a class from you. In what follows, we will identify some common concerns we have heard from GSIs and students and offer some practical tips for addressing them in ways that provide opportunities for success. We are confident that by working with you, your students will develop a more sophisticated skill set for communicating with a diverse range of people throughout their lives, and will gain new ways of looking at the material in your course.

1. Communication

You may be concerned that your students will have trouble understanding you, or that you will have trouble understanding them, perhaps because

- o English is not your native language
- o you're fluent but your variety of English is different than that of most of your students
- o undergrads may speak too quickly and sound like they're mumbling and be hard to understand
- o people may not use English in the way that you've learned.

Suggestions

- Provide information in multiple modes, for example, a spoken explanation complemented by a diagram, with key words labeled, and a handout that facilitates note-taking.
- Bring up the topic of giving and getting clarification. Open conversation on this topic can generate ideas about how to ensure that two-way communication is successful. Here are some suggested phrases:
 - "If you think I've made a mistake or something isn't clear, please just ask me. If I hear that you've made a mistake or if something you've said isn't clear to me, what methods of feedback would you find most helpful?"
 - "Understanding what you say is important to me. If I don't understand you, I'll keep asking for clarification until I get it. Others can help me out, too. If you don't understand me, please ask *me* for clarification, too."
- Ask for clarification by repeating a key word in a student question with rising tone, or by paraphrasing what you think you understood. Each of these strategies should trigger the student to use new wording, which is generally more helpful than the same wording repeated again.
- Structure lessons to emphasize key content to remember, using strategies such as an agenda at the start of class that you return to at each step in the lesson or a different color font for main topics on your visuals. (See "How to Make Lectures More Effective," p. 124 and the "Laboratory Overview" section of "Strategies for Effective Teaching in the Laboratory Class," p. 110 in this *Guidebook* for additional ideas.)
- Send a survey to students after your 3rd or 4th meeting with them, asking for ideas on how to optimize communication in your section. For example, "Now that you have a sense of this class, I'd like your best ideas about how we can optimize communication. What are your suggestions for ways I can make sure that you can easily understand me and vice-versa?" Summarize suggestions and share with the class which ones you'll implement, and why.
- Be open to trying new strategies of communication, even unfamiliar ones, when you learn that students prefer them. At the same time, don't be afraid to say no to requests and suggestions that you do not agree with. When you choose not to accommodate students' preferences, be polite and explain why. For example, you could say, "I understand that you prefer to talk together to clarify your understanding when I'm explaining something, but that distracts me and other students sitting nearby. So please raise your hand if you have a question or need clarification. I will give you time to talk together when I'm not lecturing."
- Cultivate a sense of humor about misunderstandings, recognizing that they are great opportunities for learning and establishing a shared classroom community. Think of misunderstandings as opportunities, not failures.
- Do what you can to become more confident. If you do not feel fully confident to say what you want when you want and to understand what is said to you, you may find these resources helpful:
 - Meeting with your advisors and experienced GSIs
 - ELI Conversation Circles (<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/eli>)
 - ELI classes and clinics (<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/eli>)
 - Rackham workshops (<http://rackham.umich.edu>)
 - International Center workshops (<http://internationalcenter.umich.edu/>)

- Student clubs (<http://campusinvolvement.umich.edu/>)
- Coop housing (<http://www.icc.coop/>)

2. Respect

You may be concerned that your students will be disrespectful or hostile toward you

- as a teacher who speaks a different variety of English
- as a teacher who has grown up with different cultural experiences and perspectives
- as a junior member of the field and a new teacher.

Suggestions

- Share your expertise with students on the first day of class to establish that you are knowledgeable and to build credibility. You might explain your own research experiences, personal experiences learning course material, and interests. Some GSIs also talk about their experience learning the content of the course and what significance it has had for them.
 - Physics: *“So, when I was in high school, I had the most amazing Physics teacher. We did these really cool experiments which revealed to me the mysteries of the tiniest building blocks of all the things around us, and how the solid world is actually constantly in motion. Even though calculus didn’t come that easily to me, I majored in Physics in college, and it was totally worth learning the calculus. Now, I get to be here as a graduate student, doing cutting-edge work that will shape the future of sustainable energy. I’m really looking forward to working with you this semester, and sharing my love of Physics with you.”*
 - Psychology: *“I really enjoy working in the field of Psychology, in part because it touches every aspect of our lives. This semester, we’ll get to examine dozens of these impacts together as we explore all that the field tells us about our world. Right now, for example, I’m researching how people from different cultures perceive or ignore the contextual background in visual images, which relates to audience-specific marketing. You’ll be able to devise your own real research question by the time we get to the end of this course.”*
- Seek opportunities to offer an additional perspective on course material explicitly because of your global background.
- Try projecting confidence even when you may not actually be feeling confident. For example, this might mean using a louder voice, maintaining eye contact, avoiding nervous laughter, feeling free to tell students you’ll investigate the answer to a question and report back later, or practicing in advance so that you don’t have to hold and look at notes on paper. Think about other contexts in your life where you know that you look confident and imagine what you could translate into your role as an instructor.

- Demonstrate that you care about student learning by obviously being very prepared for class—having appropriate visuals and activities, arriving early to greet students & set up visuals before class starts, and providing an agenda at the start of each class (see “Strategies for Effective Lesson Planning,” p. 37).

3. Rapport

You may be concerned about the best ways to interact with students to establish a good teaching relationship or “rapport”:

- How friendly and informal or strict and distant do students expect you to be?
- How can you get to know students?
- How can you create a positive environment for learning?

Suggestions

- Make a concerted effort to maintain eye contact with all students as much as possible while teaching.
- Either smile or use other body language, such as approaching students when speaking and listening, that conveys respect and friendliness toward students.
- Learn all names early in the semester and use them in class. Learning names makes a big difference to students. But remembering lots of new names, particularly those from a different language, can be tricky. Here are some suggestions to help attach names to people:
 - Place a small sign with students’ names on their desks or tables at the start of the semester;
 - Use the Wolverine Access Picture Roster to take attendance or grade student participation;
 - Gather information from individuals about their relevant background and goals in your course (through an in-class survey or partner interview, for example).

Names have so many language origins that their pronunciation is often unpredictable; it can be useful to go over your roster with a more experienced GSI before the first or second class. It is equally important for students to learn to say and remember your name, so spending some time on this on the first day is valuable.

- Use icebreakers early in the semester to foster a positive learning community where students feel socially secure. For example, on the first day of class, you might have students interview a partner to find out and report back to the class something that the person thinks one wouldn’t guess by looking at them. If you prefer a more contextualized icebreaker, you could, for example, give students a somewhat mysterious diagram or image (from your course material) to interpret and have them write a caption for it in pairs, type these into a Google doc, and then hand-vote on the best caption. See *Departmental GSI Development: A*

Handbook for Faculty and GSMs who Work with GSIs p. 44-45 for more details or http://www.crlt.umich.edu/sites/default/files/resource_files/Chapter_3.pdf.

- Send an online survey to students in week 2 of the term, asking “What aspects of this section are most helpful to you, and why?” and “What specific suggestions do you have for improving this section?” Summarize main points to share with students, so they will see that (a) you care about their learning and (b) what you do and don’t have the power to adjust. Free online questionnaire tools available at UM include Qualtrics and Google Forms. (See “Improving Your Teaching: Obtaining Feedback,” p. 146 and the “Early Feedback Form,” p. 148.) You may also want to meet with your Graduate Student Mentor (GSM) or a CRLT consultant to gather student feedback. To request CRLT midterm student feedback sessions or consultations visit this website: <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/consultations-teaching>.
- Set up a reason for every student to come to your office hours within the first three weeks of the term. For example, you might have them come to fill out a learning goals guided questionnaire, to discuss their first quiz, exam, or paper, or to talk about ideas for an end-of-term project. Use these meetings as a chance to get to know students and show that you care about them as individuals: ask where students are from, what they are studying, what other activities they are involved in, and similar questions.

4. Engagement

You may be concerned that undergrads will have different priorities from you because you’ve heard that

- o students may be much more concerned about grades than about learning
- o students may seem indifferent to the material a GSI is helping them learn, by, for example, sleeping in class, playing with mobile devices, or even chatting while you’re teaching.

Suggestions

- Start by trying to identify and question your own assumptions about productive and unproductive behavior in the context of teaching and learning. This introspection can create a set of questions to talk over with students, providing fruitful jumping-off points for both personal and class reflection.
- Avoid disruptions by making behavioral expectations clear and by keeping students busy while making the purpose of activities clear. For example, you may want to develop a policy on the use of electronic devices in class.
- Establish and follow ground rules for class participation that encourages listening carefully, being polite and inclusive, and being honest if anyone is offended. (See “Guidelines for class participation,” p. 58.)

- Check with a diverse set of people inside and outside the classroom for possible interpretations of behavior that surprises or troubles you or your students. Find out who you can go to for guidance in your teaching department (e.g., a course coordinator, a head GSI, a GSM) and on campus (e.g., CRLT, for navigating teaching issues, or ELI, for navigating language issues as a GSI).
- Ask a GSM or a CRLT or ELI consultant to observe your class and brainstorm classroom management strategies with you. To request CRLT consultations visit this website: <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/consultations-teaching>. For links to ELI GSI consulting services, see the ELI’s GSI Resources page at <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/eli/gsiprogram>.
- Prioritize handling disruptions that actually distract you or that may distract other students, and ignore others. As for how to handle disruptions, suggestions can be found in this *Guidebook*. (See “Constructing and maintaining authority in inclusive classrooms,” p. 61, and “Dealing with troublesome behaviors in the classroom,” p. 62).
- Speak privately with students about their disruptive behaviors. When doing so, display respect and goodwill by asking their perspective on the behavior you want to talk about. Perhaps the student has an unexpected problem that would explain the behavior, and you could talk together to find a less distracting solution. Begin by stating your understanding of what is happening, and get confirmation or clarification, as in “So what you’re saying is...?” or “Do you mean that...?” or “It sounds to me like you are angry. Can you explain to me what is making you feel that way?”

5. Varied Backgrounds and Diversity

You may be concerned that your undergraduates will have very different levels of preparation from each other within the same class because

- o students have had very different types and quality of preparation in high school
- o entry-level undergraduate courses may include majors and non-majors
- o students have a wide variety of motivations for enrolling in a given class

Suggestions

- Create easy accessibility after class and in office hours (See “Learning and Teaching During Office Hours,” p. 81). You may also wish to remind students after the first few class sessions when your office hours are. When in your office hours, make sure the door is open and be prepared with a friendly welcome. Save some time, if possible, in the ten minutes after each class session for incidental questions from students.
- Conduct an early survey about course goals and prior relevant learning. It can work well to set this up as

a handout where each student interviews a partner about their experience and interests, using questions that you've scripted in advance, such as "What are your reasons for taking this class?" You may also wish to ask more specific questions about background knowledge to establish the range of background knowledge students in each section do and don't have. Such information could be self-reported in this survey, or you could give an ungraded quiz.

- Use classroom assessment techniques (p. 88) frequently in order to quickly identify how well students understand the material. These techniques allow you to quickly assess the proportion of the room that understands or can apply course material. These techniques are usually anonymous. In some fields, electronic "clickers" are an integral part of each lesson plan, giving ongoing feedback to the GSI about the degree of overall student understanding.
- Group students in order to mix ability levels, while taking care to not isolate individual students by race, gender, or language background. This way, each group has some special academic strength, and all individuals are likely to feel more confident and thus are more likely to contribute.
- Design practice and application activities using groups where stronger students can reinforce their knowledge by helping peers. These types of activities are particularly helpful when the range of background knowledge is diverse. Make sure that everyone has something to contribute to their group, and that roles in the group are clear. (See "Guidelines for Using Groups Effectively," p. 59).

6. Expectations

You may be concerned as to what students are expecting of you:

- o What is the role of a GSI in relation to a professor or lecturer?
- o Who is responsible for making sure that students learn assigned material and skills?

Suggestions

- Speak with your students on the first day about what they can expect from you. You might consider your turn-around time on responding to emails and on handing back graded assignments, your office hours availability, what kinds of help you can offer with studying or homework, how the section meetings relate to the lecture meetings for this course (if applicable) and whether you will attend the lectures (if applicable.) Students are also eager to know your role in determining their final grade for the course—what parts of the grade do you influence or control, and how? What counts as adequate attendance? What is your policy on late arrivals and early departures? If participation is graded, how will you measure partici-

pation? Finally, you might cover your policy on use of electronic devices in class: what will you permit when, and for what purposes, and what do you consider disruptive and inappropriate?

- Discuss with your faculty supervisor his or her expectations for you as a GSI. With an understanding of your role, you can more readily communicate these expectations to students. (See "Teaching Effectively with GSI-Faculty Teams," p. 13). You might want to ask what kinds of questions students might bring to GSI vs. faculty office hours, for example.
- Discuss expectations of GSIs for a particular course with other GSIs especially if they are familiar with that course or with the faculty supervisor. Your department may have a GSM specifically assigned to this role. These experienced teachers may be able to tell you where students typically have problems in the course.
- Develop a section syllabus to outline your expectations for students as well as what students may be able to expect from you as their GSI. For suggestions see "Creating a syllabus" (p. 18), and the examples for a section, course, and lab syllabus (pp. 23-36). Your faculty supervisor or an experienced GSI may also be able to give you a sample for your course.

Conclusion

A common thread unifying our suggestions is the power of demonstrating to our students that we care about them as learners and as individual people. We have witnessed dozens of very successful GSIs who are still not satisfied with their own English language fluency, but who are effective and well-liked teachers because they work hard to forge positive rapport with their students. Doing so establishes an environment of mutual respect and trust, an environment in which all parties are more likely to display patience and engage in the social risk-taking needed to ensure successful communication. In one study, Okpala & Ellis (2005) found that "caring for students and their learning" (p. 377) was the most highly valued characteristic of college teachers among students sampled, beyond even teaching skill itself.

Many instructors (including the two of us) report feeling much more confident and comfortable after the first couple of weeks of every term, after making use of those early days to get to know each new group of students and to develop a warm and productive relationship with them. We hope that you will experience the same in your first semester of teaching at the University of Michigan, and throughout your teaching career.

References

- Okpala, C. O., & Ellis, R. (2005). The perceptions of college students on teacher quality: A focus on teacher qualifications. *Education* 126(2), 374-383.