

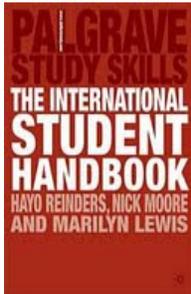
Book Review

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Palgrave Study Skills: The International Student Handbook

Reinders, H., Moore, N., & Lewis, M. (2012). *Palgrave study skills: The international student handbook* (2nd Ed.). Basingstoke, Hampshire (UK): Palgrave Macmillan. \$28.00 ISBN: 978-0-230-54519-9

Reviewed by *Karen Johnson (USA) and Lisa Wells (Saudi Arabia)*



The International Student Handbook addresses the needs of students whose first language is not English. Whether they are future or current students, as non-native English speakers who study at English-speaking universities, they will deal with issues ranging from adapting to the new academic culture to understanding the nuances of the language. This practical handbook can help prepare students adjust to the academic rigors of Western universities, understand the university culture, improve their English, and become successful university students. The three authors report a combined history of teaching at universities in 12 different countries. Since many of their students became international students studying at English-speaking universities, they were able to base the book on their experiences, along with advice gathered from other colleagues and their international students.

In the first chapter, the book highlights ten international students and the problems they encountered after matriculating to a Western university. Current students relate to their issues and find problems similar to their own. Topics range from understanding how work is graded in the Western culture to learning to speak with professors and teaching assistants regarding assignments and grades. This little book covers many of the situations that an international student might encounter. Much of the advice is good for any student.

Adjusting to a New Learning System

International students come to the university with many of the same issues as native students, but these concerns are compounded by the language differences. Some students come from a culture that instills the idea that speaking up during class is disruptive and disrespectful. These students are often shy and may find it difficult to ask questions or participate in discussion in class or tutoring sessions; yet they need to practice their English in order to become fluent. Oral presentations can be extremely difficult for them. They need to know how to interact with faculty and staff. Conversely students, who are used to studying in groups in their home country, may be confused by students rushing away after class and find themselves unmotivated when they have to study alone if no organized group activities are available.

The authors posit that international students can experience culture shock when expectations and grades differ in the new country. In their home country, students may have been accustomed to exams to test their knowledge of a subject; however, they are now expected to write papers and demonstrate higher level thinking skills. Even though students try hard to write in their second language, they may become upset or depressed when professors deduct points for grammar and writing style, especially if they received high marks in their home countries.

In one of the case studies, the student worries about how she will tell her parents that she is “failing” when she receives a B grade on a written assignment. In another case study, a student is confused by an email that mentions plagiarism. She had located an article on the assignment topic and used large parts of it in her paper because it so closely matched the subject. She doesn’t understand the meaning of the word “plagiarism,” but she is concerned by the email that says this is “serious.” Chapters in the book tell students how to deal with each of the problems presented in the case studies. Chapters on writing university-level essays do a good job of leading students through the steps of planning, researching, and writing a successful essay. Peer feedback is recommended as a final way to make sure the writing is accurate.

The one drawback of the book is perhaps that it is written in English for students of the English language. As Nelson Mandela is often quoted as saying, “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language that goes to his heart.” Many of the pieces of advice are well known to students; however, in their own country these ideas are often delivered and executed with cultural nuances that will cause problems for students when they first arrive. Perhaps teachers who are preparing students for academic life in Western universities and have had experiences in both cultures would best serve students by using the book’s advice in lesson planning.

Improving One’s English

International students, who have had formal language training, often find their reading skills are the strongest, but their writing and presentation skills are weaker. In the book, there is an extensive table to help students rate their own English reading, writing, and speaking skills. While using the table will not likely reveal any surprising results, it can help students have a clear picture of exactly where they stand, so that they know where to focus their efforts and when to ask for help. Once students know where they need to focus their efforts to improve their English, they can follow the authors’ instructions on how to set goals and choose which tools to use. Today’s young, tech-savvy students should find the suggestions of listening to music on an mp3-player, watching movies, and talking with English speakers on Skype comfortable ways to listen and practice English speaking skills.

If we accept Zhang’s (2010) premise that “the objective of foreign language teaching is not only to teach students some grammatical rules and vocabularies, but also how to use the knowledge in practice to express or narrate thoughts and ideas” (p. 83), this section is a must for international college students. While reading may be the strongest second language skill for international students, they still may find it difficult to read quickly enough to keep up with all of the reading required for college success. In a series of case studies, international students explain the reading problems that they encountered. In this hands-on activity, the reader is prompted to think critically about how the problems could be addressed and make written recommendations. Suggestions and instructions follow covering various reading strategies that could address students’ problems, including reading for gist, scan reading, reading intensively, and reading faster. While explaining these reading strategies, the authors demonstrate how to take notes, organize them, and prepare the information for future retrieval.

Overall, this seems to be a very useful, generic study skills guide for non-native English speakers who are studying or plan to study at an English-speaking university. Although ambitious in the number of topics covered, the direct, clear writing makes it easy for students to find sections that are relevant and understandable to them without reading the book cover to cover. Recommendations are given for other resources for students who need more in-depth help.

Reference

Zhang, Y. (2010). Cooperative language learning and foreign language learning and teaching. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 1(1), 81-83. doi:10.4304/jltr.1.1.81-83

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