Reflections on International Students' Experiences . . .

. . . Strategies that Support Academic Success

Vander Tavares, York University, Toronto, Canada

This essay is a reflection based on the author's extensive experience supporting and assisting international students in contexts of academic transition. This author pays particular attention to international students' language-related challenges in the host academic community and provides strategies for all those individuals who work in roles which support international students' achievement of academic success.

The number of international students studying on English-speaking campuses worldwide is increasing rapidly each year. Although many of these students have passed an internationally recognised English-language proficiency exam in order to be accepted into an academic program or have taken formal language lessons in their home countries, my experience as a member of academic support services staff has continuously shown me that international students still encounter significant linguistic difficulties when attempting to meet the demands and expectations of their new universities. In addition to language-related difficulties, I have identified that international students may also encounter social, psychological and educational challenges while living in the new environment.

Universities have responded to the increase in the number of international students, especially focusing on their language-related challenges; many of them have also situated their academic support in the context of internalisation of higher education. Unfortunately, both objectives stem largely from a focus on international student recruitment rather than academic engagement. It is no secret that international students contribute immensely to their universities financially, given the high cost of tuition and living expenses attached to their experience. When international students' contribution to their host communities is examined primarily through monetary lenses, there is a risk that these students may then be treated as statistics and other contributions they make – linguistic, intellectual, cultural and professional to the host university – may receive less attention and importance.

To add to this issue, international students are often viewed as a homogeneous group by recruitment agencies and campus support services – a perspective which generates misinformed assumptions that all international students will experience life in the new academic environment in identical manner and consequently, their needs and challenges will be the same. However, while international students belonging to the same nationality can encounter similar linguistic difficulties, they also do face very individual challenges that occur intra- and inter-personally. The following strategies originate from personal reflections based on my experience in providing language support to international students who speak English as a second language, and are intended for all who work with international students in academic contexts.

- Providing more structured conversational peer in-class activities

International students often feel satisfied when they have opportunities to interact conversationally with their peers in the academic classroom. However, not all interactions are meaningful or beneficial to international students because they can sometimes be minimised and excluded from these interactions by their native-speaker peers. The instructor plays an important role in developing activities which invite and support international students to participate equally to their peers. For instance, an activity which requires and values the insight from an international perspective can help empower non-native international students and provide them with an opening to participate in conversations.

- Making course material available well in advance

For international students who encounter listening comprehension difficulties in particular, as in understanding their lectures and classmates, instructors and teaching assistants can help support students in these difficulties by posting the documents, slides and media links on the course online platform some time prior to the lecture. This strategy allows international students to familiarise themselves with the content of the lecture before-hand and provides them with an opportunity to better prepare themselves for the discussions. International students have much to contribute but language-related difficulties can become an impediment to their contribution in class.

- Maintaining eye-contact and gestural communication with international students

When international students do have an opportunity to contribute to the conversations that take place in class, their contributions should be acknowledged by their instructors and peers, and not silenced. Simple gestural responses, such as nodding in confirmation, maintaining eye-contact with international students when they are speaking and briefly acknowledging students' contribution, can make these students feel appreciated and respected. Brushing off an international student's comment can easily de-motivate and discourage the same student to participate in future class discussions and negatively impact the remaining learning experience of the student.

- Internationalising the course content

Course learning materials that reflect the countries of international students solely from a Western-based perspective have the potential to misrepresent the students' identity and background to their peers. Some international students may experience discrimination and racism in the new environment, and Western-centric materials can play a part in erroneously stereotyping some groups of students, further perpetuating these negative experiences. For these reasons, more international content in the course can help international students feel more integrated in their classroom communities, especially when they are able to comment on and relate to the international content, giving them a sense of expertise in topics which are familiar to them.

- Providing constructive feedback

Writing in academic English is a major challenge for most international students who do not speak English as a first language. Moreover, each discipline may have their own writing convention and style, adding a second layer of complexity to the academic writing process for international students. Therefore, it is helpful for international students to receive constructive feedback on their academic papers from instructors and teaching assistants so that they can continue to work on their academic writing skills as the course progresses. Superficial feedback does not support international students' achievement of academic success and can leave the students feeling confused about their papers. Nor does feedback that focuses on language itself before the student writer has been able to develop and organize the idea, or if he or she hasn't understood the topic and context—in which case the "writing support" needs to shift from language and basic writing skills to the strength of ideas, awareness of audience, and the like.

- Grouping similar students for class presentations

Because language-related issues are more prominent for ESL international students, they must put extra effort into their work in order to be on par linguistically with their native-speaker peers. When working in group presentations, these students will often comment that some native speaker peers can be uninterested, unhelpful and lazy toward collective work, creating a frustrating experience for international students. Whenever possible, students could be grouped with other like-minded peers who value hard-work and dedication. This is not always possible, however, so another strategy to support international students in group presentations is to evaluate their work individually rather than assigning one single grade to all group members.

- Communicating expectations clearly and consistently

In busy times throughout the academic term, the most helpful source of information concerning coursework and deadlines for international students is the course syllabus. Ensuring that the course syllabus is well-organised and that it presents information accurately can help avoid much frustration and ambiguity when international students are planning, preparing or submitting their work to their instructors. When the course syllabus lacks important information, international students end up having to rely on their peers for guidance and clarification, which may not always be provided correctly. Another communicative strategy that helps international students with coursework and deadlines is having announcements posted on the online course platform on a frequent basis, particularly when there are changes to an assignment or date.

- Silence does not mean disengagement

Certain groups of international students are often labelled as quiet and passive when it comes to their behaviour in class. However, silence can mean that a student is listening attentively and considering the information being delivered in a reflective manner. While our classroom participation standards forefront active oral participation, international students who struggle with oral language may not be able to contribute to a discussion as rapidly as his or her native-speaker peers, but may still be engaged through listening and considering the content of the discussion carefully prior to offering quick responses.

- Native-speaker peers can be dominating in class discussions

Native-speaker students are sometimes unaware of the linguistic challenges of their international student peers – especially challenges related to oral language – and can end up dominating discussions and conversations that initiate in the classroom. When discussions are graded and evaluated by instructors, international students can experience even more stress and anxiety for not being able to contribute as eloquently or quickly as their native-speaker peers. Instructors can ensure international students have equal opportunities to contribute by allocating specific time for those who may need more time to construct their opinions in English and by reminding native-speaker students that they should work in a collaborative manner that invites international students to speak up.

Through continuous support work with dozens of international students – most to whom English is a second language – I have come to understand their various struggles which can disempower them in their attempt to succeed academically and negatively impact their educational journey in the host university. The strategies I put forward in this piece may not be feasible in all learning contexts and for all instructors, given the time-constraint in particular. However, they can be generally useful for supporting international students' achievement of success. International students are likely to feel more satisfied with their learning experience when their needs, challenges and successes are understood more closely and integrated into the teaching context. We can begin with small steps like the above.