

# Thoughts (and practical tips) on Teaching to a Diverse Student Body

by the 2010 ELL Action Committee

Language and culture affect all students' learning. But you will probably find at least one student in your class whose ability to respond to academic challenges is dramatically affected by linguistic and cultural issues. To help you reach these students (although, they are most likely helpful for all students!), please consider:

## Appearance ≠ Speaking ≠ Writing ≠ Sociality

The students who look “different” may not have learning issues at all, and they can be more academically literate than students who look the “same.” Students who speak well may have little formal knowledge of grammar and written composition. Writing or speaking may be affected by family demands on a student's time more than scholastic ability. Find out before assuming (and possibly offending). Survey your students: ask for a practice paragraph; consider assigning a brief literacy narrative; survey their interests, background, previous reading experience in the topic; find out the number of languages spoken at home; ask if there are issues that they think you should know about. You'd be amazed at how easy it is to read through such papers when not expected to grade them!

## There is more to life than college.

While true for everyone (except faculty?!?), this is especially true for students whose family structure is not focused on the individual. Many students work or otherwise support their families outside of your class time. Provide alternative options to an out-of-class activity (e.g., a DVD copy of the movie being shown at night, summarize an article by the speaker if they can't attend the speaker's talk).

## Be student-centered in your approach.

Teaching to students who utilize learning styles in a faster-paced, perhaps self-centered, American culture has faculty striving to be more engaging for students with seemingly ever-shrinking attention spans. As we shake up the pace and style of our classes, we need to remember to take time to enunciate clearly (especially when excited about a topic). This is especially true for the most important points you wish to make that day. All students should pick up on the verbal cue that this sentence is *so important* that you are going to say it *quite* deliberately. Remember that the ELL student may have trouble distinguishing between terminology and the vernacular. Reinforce what terms and concepts are important by supplying lecture notes, lists of key terms or allowing students to record class lectures.

## Be direct and literal: beware of cultural “givens.”

Faculty who grew up in the U.S. (with parents who also grew up here) share a cultural “common knowledge.” But imagine how a conversation full of allusions to biblical references sounds to somebody who grew up in a non-Christian community. Likewise, think about what you assume “all students” have read, listened to, viewed, or experienced before coming to college. Odds are that all of your students—not just the multilingual ones—arrive with very different cultural frames of reference. Think, too, about students who come from countries with different political structures. On exams and in assignment prompts, ask for exactly what you want, avoiding the use of idioms and cultural references.

## College is for the courageous.

College is about choices: choosing an advisor, a major, a vocation, one's faith system, one's self-expression. Not all cultures promote the individual's right to choose for themselves without regard to larger social obligations. Empower your students so they can strive to develop their individuality without feeling like traitors to their traditions or falling short of their obligations to others. For instance, think of how students' work in all of our classes will help them earn a good income and provide for their families when they graduate. Making good individual choices now benefits students and their communities later. It may be as simple as extending an invitation to talk with you in your office, or sending an email to check in. For many of our linguistically diverse students, there may be some resistance to seeking help this way...don't give up!

# Handy Tips

Recent Teachers Talking discussions yielded some suggestions to help ELL students be successful.

## Productive Class time

- Reduce the cultural load in your classroom (e.g., don't assume they know about American football).
- Include students' cultures in the class, but avoid over-generalizing about students' backgrounds .
- Conduct a survey at the beginning of the semester asking students "Is there anything I need to know or can do to support your learning?". Provide examples: ADHD, non-native speaker, diabetes, etc.
- Vary instructional methods (lecture, small group work, etc.).
- Be aware that oral and written skills may differ.
- Create lists of key terms to distinguish American English from discipline-specific vocabulary.
- Consider supplying resources to the class that support learning. You could supply handouts or lecture outlines, or allow students to record classroom activities.

## Effective Assessment

- Remember that student difficulties can be hidden, whether due to language skill or cultural pressures.
- Distinguish reading comprehension skills from the skills needed to respond to assignment prompts.
- Avoid idioms.
- Have students submit a writing sample at the beginning of the semester.
- Consider multiple methods of assessment (offer oral exam alternatives).
- Consider providing extra time on tests or revision opportunities for writing assignments.

## There is Help for You and Your Students.

- Seek help from our ELL advisor (*ell-advisor@gustavus.edu*) for tutoring.
- If possible, ask student departmental assistants to tutor and/or provide clarification.
- Learn more about ELL students from on-campus resources such as the ELL committee.

# Resources on Campus

## ELL Action Committee

Committee Co-Chairs: Sidonia Alenuma-Nimoh and Rebecca Fremo  
*ELL-COM@gustavus.edu*

## ELL Advisor

The Writing Center staff includes an ELL specialist; *ell-advisor@gustavus.edu*, who provides individualized writing and assignment organization help to ELL students.

## Writing Center

Vickner 232 (507-933-6327). You may also contact Rebecca Fremo  
(933-7392; *rtfremo@gustavus.edu*) for more information.

Note: For comments or corrections on this document, please contact *jcarlin@gustavus.edu*.