Teaching Methods For Effective Communication

There are many teaching methods that can help increase communication effectiveness. Clearly organizing ideas and writing an outline on the chalkboard that lists the main points to be covered during the class helps students follow along with the organization of ideas. It is also very helpful for students when TAs write technical terms or theoretical concepts on the board as they are mentioned. Students need and appreciate this effort. A sophomore student majoring in the biological sciences makes this point clear.

"This year I have an Asian TA and he's very good but sometimes you can't understand some of his words--but he's good, you know. He writes everything on the board. One of my TAs last year was very hard to understand but she wrote everything on the board so it was all right."

When a TA is unsure about the pronunciation of certain words, those words should also be written on the board. The importance of writing words on the board is illustrated in the following experience of an undergraduate student.

"I had a biology professor from Latin America. He gave a lecture on hung trees. I had never heard about that kind of tree before... After class a bunch of us students were talking about the hung trees. The American TA heard us and asked us what we were talking about. It was really funny. He said the lecture was about young trees, not hung trees!"

This example of miscommunication points out the necessity for student participation in the international TA's classroom. By setting aside class time for students to explain and discuss their understanding of the course material and the TA's lecture or explanations, many communication errors can be corrected before they interfere with student learning.

Of course, some difficulties may be assumed to result from language problems when in fact the problem lies elsewhere.

"For the foreign TA, we have a problem with the language. When students don't understand, it could be a language problem, but it also could be that the TA doesn't have good teaching skills. It also could be a personality problem. So it's important to communicate with students to find out what the problem is." (TA, China)

Using effective teaching methods does facilitate classroom communication. As TAs with teaching experience in their native countries already know, when lecturing, it is important to clearly state each point before speaking about it, make the point, and then summarize what has been said. Before beginning another idea or point, it's necessary to inform students of this change or transition. (See "Useful Phrases for Classroom Communication" at the end of this section.)

Students are reluctant to continually ask TAs to repeat what they've said, even when they haven't completely understood the TA. Thus, it is important for TAs to frequently stop to ask if students have any questions. An even better method is to ask questions of the students in order to check their understanding before going on to another topic. Another method often used by both international and American TAs is presenting the same idea in more than one way.

"As a foreigner and since I don't speak the language as well as an American, I repeat very often the same thing in different ways. So they may pick it up the way they want during the many times I say it in different ways. It's a technique I am spontaneously using. I guess it helps them to understand me as a foreigner speaking. And certainly it's useful for understanding certain things that are very hard to understand...if you say it one time, it's not enough, so repeating it several ways from different aspects - even making some language mistakes - will help them to pick up the idea." (TA, France)

When giving multiple explanations or examples of the same idea, the TA should preface each explanation to indicate that the same idea is being explained, only in a different way. Common phrases used to indicate that a different explanation of the same idea is about to be given are:

* "Stated another way..."
* "A simpler explanation of the same idea is..."
* "Said another way..."
* "Let me present another way of understanding this..."
* "The same idea can be explained in this way..."
* "Another example of this is..."
* "I'll repeat that in a different way..."

Although TAs who have had extensive lecture experience in their home countries may already use the lecture techniques described here, it may be necessary to exaggerate these methods to ensure adequate communication.

Many effective TAs learn to elicit the help of their students. If the TA and students have a friendly relationship, students usually are more willing to help facilitate communication in the classroom. In the following statement a TA from Iran described how he uses certain teaching methods to be sure his students understand him.

"I've been trying hard to be clear, to say the words separate so that students can understand. Once in a while I stop and ask, 'Do you follow?', or 'Am I clear?', and pretty much make them feel that any time they can stop me. Anytime they want they can stop me and say, 'I didn't get that point'. Then I explain. You have to encourage their questions... say, 'Good question', 'Interesting', or 'Who else has a question?'. You have to make them feel comfortable in the class..."

International TAs often find out that seemingly innocuous critical comments they make in class have a devastating effect on their students' morale. In many countries, negative criticism is viewed as a tool helping the student to reach perfection. On the contrary, American students expect praise when they do well, and encouragement when they do not.

Getting students to participate in the class by being friendly and supportive of their comments, ideas, and questions can help both the TA and the students feel more comfortable in the classroom. When students feel comfortable enough to participate in class, they may be more tolerant of the TA's language difficulties and be willing to cooperate with the TA in solving communication problems. For instance, students can often be helpful in restating another student's poorly formed question that the TA is having difficulty understanding.
Each TA will discover ways to enhance communication in the classroom that fit the particular TA, students and situation. The suggestions in this booklet are offered as a starting point. By endeavoring to understand communication problems that can occur in the international TA’s classroom, the TA can take action to minimize these problems.