Improving Communication In The Class Room

Although many international TAs have studied the English language extensively, they are often surprised by some of the communication difficulties they experience in their American classrooms. In this section, communication issues are discussed in order to help the international TA identify language difficulties and improve communication in the classroom.

UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS:
It is often difficult for new international TAs to understand what students mean when students use shortened (or collapsed) phrases or idiomatic expressions. Instead of saying would you, could you, or did you, students and Americans in general tend to use a short form that sounds like /dju/. Other frequently shortened words include gotta (got to), hafta (have to), gonna (going to), and wanna (want to) (Bailey, 1982).

Students also use many idiomatic expressions and slang expressions in their speech. Two useful books on idioms are the Handbook of American Idioms and Idiomatic Usage by Whitford and Dixson (1973) and English Idioms and How to Use Them by Seidl and McMordie.

A different kind of comprehension problem can occur when American students use humor. It may not always be easy for the international person to understand American humor or to tell when students are actually making a joke. When in doubt, ask the students if they are joking. It's a question that one Engineering TA from India might have asked in the following experience.

"I often used to get offended when students would openly say in class, 'I will give you $500, why don't you tell me one of the questions on the final exam'. But now I just laugh. Now I know that this was just an expression of American humor. Students make this joke with all the TAs in the department."

Humor can also be used by the international TA to improve communication as the following international TA from France suggests:

"If you have problems with your language... you can really have some humor. You can ask students how to pronounce a word in your language. You can do funny things with the language and they can laugh a little bit. I tell them in the beginning that I'm not upset if they correct me and not to hesitate to correct me. I think you can use that as a tool to break a little bit the rigorousness of the lecture."

CHECKING STUDENT UNDERSTANDING:
For a variety of reasons, situations will undoubtedly occur in which the TA will not understand what a student is saying. In such situations it is, of course, necessary to ask the student for clarification. An effective way to check one's understanding of what was said or, more importantly what was meant, is to restate the comment or question, and ask the student if this is what s/he meant.

Some common phrases in checking one's understanding of what has been said or asked are:

* "What you seem to be saying is that... Have I understood you correctly?"
* "Let me restate what I think you are saying. You're suggesting that..."
* "Are you saying that...?"
* "Am I correct in my understanding that what you want to know is...?"
* "Are you asking...?"
* "If I understand you correctly, you are asking..."

International TAs also need to check whether or not their responses to students' questions have been understood correctly. There are a variety of ways to do this. The most effective method is to have students apply the information they gained from the explanation. This can be done by asking students a few questions about the material that requires them to demonstrate their understanding.

Miscommunication also occurs when students phrase their questions poorly or in an ambiguous manner. Unless the TA helps the student state the question clearly or checks with the student to be sure the question has been properly understood, the following type of incident, described by a senior student in Computer Science, can occur.

"A lot of times the TA won't really understand what the student is asking and so he'll go off on a tangent and the rest of the students will sit there thinking, 'Well, that's really not what was asked'. But they don't want to say anything because they don't want to embarrass the TA."

In a survey of TAs at the University of California, Santa Barbara, we asked international and American TAs what they thought students should do if a TA misunderstands their question. TAs responded as follows:

Survey question:
If the TA has misunderstood the student's question, the student should:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>American TAs</th>
<th>International TAs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stop the TA at once</td>
<td>52.5% 63.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let the TA continue</td>
<td>22.2% 25.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both of the above</td>
<td>25.3% 9.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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(depending on the situation)
Students will have experienced these different TA preferences and will behave accordingly. TAs who prefer that students not interrupt in order to clarify their questions can benefit by being aware of the fact that the majority of TAs responding to our questionnaire preferred that students interrupt them if they have misunderstood the student’s question. Thus, students who interrupt the TA may be responding to what they have learned is expected of them by other TAs and not out of rudeness or impatience. Such differences in TA preferences and TA expectations of students points to the importance of TAs communicating their expectations to their students. Doing so can enhance communication and the TA-student relationship.

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY:
Concern about speaking and communicating effectively is frequently expressed by many international TAs. A Korean TA noted that when he first began teaching, students couldn’t understand what he was saying. A Chinese TA stated, “I could not clearly express my meanings to students.” Trying to clearly express complex ideas in a foreign language is indeed difficult.

“A TA can become very tired speaking a new language. In the beginning I used to get headaches. The first week I didn’t really feel it. The second week I had a headache every night from speaking English. Then it went away. If I speak in my mother tongue for a few days, I can organize my thoughts properly. My way of thinking is in my own mother tongue, and there is another way of thinking in English. I’m in the process of changing so that I can easily think in each language.” (TA, India)

It may be helpful to remember that students may also experience difficulties and become fatigued when they listen to their international TAs. To the international TA, errors in pronunciation and grammar are the most obvious; however, a less obvious communication problem, (often commented on by students), is the TA’s rate of speech, often referred to as “pace”. Frequently, international TAs speak too quickly for American students to understand what has been said. Although some TAs believe that speaking quickly is evidence of their language mastery or fluency, rapid speech interferes with students' understanding.

International TAs may find that communication is enhanced by giving students time to think about new or difficult information. This is especially necessary after the TA has explained a difficult concept or problem and then asks the students a question about it. The amount of time the TA gives students to think and respond to a question is referred to as “wait time”. At least 5-10 seconds of wait-time should be given after asking students a question. This allows students time to think about the question and formulate a response.

When listening to a non-native speaker, students need extra time to “translate” mispronounced words or words that are spoken with an unfamiliar accent. The following is a comment made by an undergraduate student:

“Sometimes I have trouble understanding foreign TAs—especially when they speak fast. If I listen carefully I understand, but usually it takes a few seconds for me to really know what they’ve said. So it’s really helpful when they speak slowly or leave a little time for me to think about what it is they’ve said. Lots of times I miss a few words here and there, but if I understand most of what they’ve said I get the message.”

An international TA describes the problem this way:

“What happens is—when you are explaining something, suddenly your mind becomes full of ideas. You want to just spit out all the ideas on the students and of course there is the problem of casting those ideas in a way easily understandable to students, and there is the additional problem of understanding my accent.

First they have to understand the word, then understand its meaning—with a native speaker, they only have to understand the meaning. At the beginning of class I consciously speak slowly but sometimes it happens that I get fast and many students ask exciting questions and I want to fill their minds with the exciting ideas racing through my mind. So I start speaking too fast. I have to remind myself to go slow.”

The problem of students not understanding the TA’s pronunciation may be complicated by the fact that students are unable to differentiate between a situation in which the TA is mispronouncing a word and a situation in which the student is making an error in pronunciation. An international TA described it this way.

“Some students claim that they are unable to understand some words which I use and they are very quick to ascribe it to the pronunciation issue. But I realized that above the pronunciation issue there is another aspect.

Suppose I use the word ‘explicit’. Now, this is a perfectly valid English word, and my pronunciation is good enough. Now suppose a student hasn’t heard of this word. Given the state of affairs in the high school system and the fact that many students spend more time watching TV than reading books, quite a few students will not have heard of the word ‘explicit’. Then his or her gut reaction will be, ‘My gosh, this guy doesn’t know how to pronounce it.’ Whereas if an American TA were to use the word ‘explicit’, the student’s reaction would be, ‘Well, probably I don’t know the word’. My advice is to try to avoid bookish words or words that are too bookish. Try to use down to earth or slang words.” (TA, Turkey)

American students and international TAs need to work together to communicate effectively. In fact, they may experience similar problems in understanding one another. The TA may have difficulty understanding some of the idioms used by American students while students may have difficulty understanding the international TA’s sentence structure and use of the language. In the following section, teaching strategies to enhance classroom communication are discussed.