SOME TEACHING TIPS FOR INTERNATIONAL TEACHING ASSISTANTS

Relax.
Those teaching for the first time routinely feel anxious and nervous about their teaching skills and about how their students will receive them. If you are a foreign graduate student and are also adjusting to a new culture and/or language, you may be doubly nervous. But self-confidence will come. Remember: you are very knowledgeable in your subject or you would not have been chosen to teach.

Be well prepared.
If you have been asked to lecture, organize your notes well. Prepare an outline to which you can easily refer. If you are a discussion leader, prepare some questions before coming to class. Try to anticipate student questions.

Improve your English.
Effective communication skills are important to your success as a teacher. Avoid using words you cannot readily pronounce. If your terms might be misunderstood, write them on the chalkboard.

Consult with your professor/supervisor or with other TA's
If you have difficulties with any aspect of teaching, not acknowledging your need for help will only worsen the situation and may yield poor student evaluations. Talking to others who may have encountered in similar situations alleviate the pressure you feel.

Observe successful teachers. There are many outstanding teachers at this university. Sit in on sections of successful TAs in your department, especially if they are teaching the same course.

Have students write their questions on index cards to be collected and answered the next class.
Planning for your sections, as mentioned earlier, is an important key to your success as a TA. In addition to specifying and sequencing your instructional objectives and selecting appropriate materials and strategies of accomplishing your section goals, you might want to consider the following suggestions in planning your sections:

Develop written materials (i.e., handouts) which summarize or highlight what you intend to cover in a given section. The use of handouts can serve as an effective teaching supplement for any TA, but they may be especially useful for you if there is a chance that your students will have difficulty understanding your spoken word.

You may discover that, on occasion, you have trouble understanding your students and they have trouble understanding you. The suggestions below may help with these problems:

CREATE AN ATMOSPHERE IN YOUR CLASSROOM WHICH PROMOTES OPEN DIALOGUE between you and your students. If you're willing, acknowledge that your English isn't quite perfect (but you're working on it) and encourage students to ask you to clarify what you've said or to help you out if you're mispronouncing something.

TEACH YOUR STUDENTS TO USE THE PHRASE, "I DO NOT UNDERSTAND..." The freedom for students to say this may help further promote open discussions in your sections.

WRITE NEW TERMS OR CONCEPTS ON THE BOARD as you introduce them (you should have them on the list you made when planning your section). This will serve to reinforce the new term in writing as you say it. Your students will quickly learn to associate what they see on the board with what you are saying.

AVOID TALKING WITH YOUR BACK TO YOUR STUDENTS. You will increase the probability of being understood by facing your class while speaking to them. This provides students with an opportunity to see you form your words.

TRY TO SPEAK SLOWLY AND CLEARLY so that students will have every opportunity to understand what you are saying.

IF YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND A QUESTION THAT A STUDENT HAS ASKED, you can:
a. ask the student to repeat or rephrase the question;
b. ask another student to rephrase it;
c. redirect the question back to the class (e.g., "That's a good question...can someone answer it?");
d. attempt to rephrase the question yourself and answer it only after you are sure of what the student is asking.
Teaching Tips for International Graduate Student Teaching Assistants

1. Be Prepared for class. Look up words for pronunciation. Know what you want to say and have a lesson plan set-out. You may not end up following it precisely but it will give you a guide and allow you to walk into the classroom with confidence. You can always practice any presentation you want to give beforehand too.

2. Be up-front with your students from the first class. Tell them that you might have difficulty understanding each other and that if they do not understand something, you would be happy for them to ask you for clarification. Do not dwell on this point as it may undermine your authority, causing students to perceive you as unqualified. Remember that you have been hired for your abilities in the discipline.

3. Speak slowly in class, repeat the things that you say when necessary and/or write questions, terms etc. on the board. You could also provide handouts or make overheads to provide clarity for students.

4. Be willing to accept informal behaviour (eating and talking in class, addressing one another on a first-name basis), but realize that you do not have to accept disrespectful or rude behaviour from anyone.

5. Watch TV, read the newspaper, talk with other graduate students in your programme and with your students in class about everyday affairs. This will allow you to practice your English informally, and allow you to learn and understand cultural practices, thoughts, ideas and humour.

6. If possible sit in on another graduate student TA’s class whom you respect to see how things work. Ask for advice on the grading scheme to be employed and the type and extent of comments you are generally expected to provide on student work.

7. Allow students to discuss their ideas with you and to question your own. The teacher does not know everything and is not always right. Sometimes teachers learn from students and this can be rewarding for both teacher and student. Emphasis should be on students learning to think and work independently not on memorizing and repeating your thoughts and ideas.

8. Students enjoy informal conversation with their instructors as it makes them feel the professor is interested in them and respects their thoughts and ideas. Arrive at your classroom 5 minutes early and be prepared to hang around for a few minutes after class too whenever possible to allow students to approach you with their questions. Many students find this time the best opportunity to ask questions as they feel less intimidated than they would coming to your office.

9. If you get to know your students well, learning their names and getting to know them as individuals, you will be able to ask some students informally about how they think the class is going and how it might be improved.

10. Share with your students your experiences in your home country when relevant opportunities present themselves. Students enjoy learning more about you and where you have come from and will also learn from your experiences that will be different from their own.

11. Students may query grades. Listen to their questions and offer to re-read their work and/or to explain why they received the grade they did. You are not under any obligation to change the grade, but the student does have the right to ask for further explanation and clarification.

12. Use all the resources available to you, including the professor for the course, the International Students Services, OIDT, classmates, other international students who have experience in Canadian classrooms, and your students.
Advice for Effective Use of the Blackboard in Class

- Outline the day's topics
- Remind students about assignments
- Emphasize major points of a lecture or discussion
- Summarize ideas raised in class discussion as "group memory"
- Present graphs, diagrams, charts, timelines
- Show computations, formulas, or steps in a proof or derivation
- Provide complementary or redundant representations of key ideas
- Spell out new terms

Tips

- Use the blackboard when you want to draw students' attention to comparisons between different segments of the lecture (e.g., the relationship between a diagram and a mathematical representation or between two different examples) so they are able to see the segments simultaneously.
- Plan and structure your board work. Sketch in your notes how the board for the whole lecture will look.
- Include headings, circling or other methods of emphasis to highlight important information.
- Move enough that students can see what you have written. You may want to practice writing with your arm extended rather than close to your board. Also, depending on the shape of the room, you may need to move to the side of the board to avoid blocking some students' view.
- Write legibly - both large print and moderately spaced. You may want to look at the board from the back of the room before you erase at the end of a class to monitor yourself. If your writing is difficult to read on the board, consider making handouts to supplement what you write.
- Put very important material in the most visible parts of the board-top left and center. Use the far sides for announcements, reminders and asides.
- Erase old chalk completely. Taking time to erase also gives students time to pause, reflect and ask questions.
- Acknowledge the origin of your accent and suggest to them that if they do not understand something you have said, they should let you know. At the same time it is ok for you to ask your students to repeat or clarify something they have said to you. It is much less frustrating and confusing if you and your students work together to understand each other.

Before Class

- Check in the dictionary for the pronunciation of key words, and practice them.
- Plan and write down key questions in your lesson plans, e.g., "Why is the exponential function its own derivative?" or "Which measure of central tendency might you use to describe the poverty level? Why?"
- Practice your talk out loud.
- Watch yourself speak into a mirror, and/or use a tape recorder. Even experienced teachers do this.

During Class

Use specific, local examples as often as possible, e.g., "Let's look at the case of McDonald's. Labor to work at the counter and to make hamburgers, as well as the cost of hamburger, lettuce and tomato, are examples of variable costs. These costs are variable because they go up or down depending on the number of customers McDonald's has."