


TEACHING MULTILINGUAL STUDENTS

This job aid describes the instructional strategies for leveraging the diversity in your classes to promote students' academic and future professional success. This job aid will help you to:

- foster positive classroom dynamics
- make lessons accessible and effective for all students
- facilitate group learning
- give effective feedback
- choose visuals that enhance teaching and learning

Multilingual students refers to students whose primary language is not English and who may face challenges in their studies that are distinct from those that native English-speaking students face. Sometimes they are called English as a Second Language students or English as an Additional Language students.

 Everything in this job aid can be applied to all learning environments, including online learning.

Who are multilingual learners?

Multilingual students aren't always who you expect. Our learners are diverse. Did you know that our students could be immigrants, international students, refugees, or second-generation Canadians? They may have completed high school in Canada. They may be temporary foreign workers who have become permanent. Or they may be international students who are applying for permanent residency.

What challenges do multilingual learners face?

Multilingual students face all the challenges that native English-speaking students face in their studies: rigorous course demands, money pressure, stress, and more. They also face some distinct challenges, such as adjusting to communicating in English (especially at an appropriate academic and professional level) and navigating an unfamiliar national, academic, and institutional culture.

Thinking about culture and language

A wise old fish swims by two young fish.

As he goes by, he says, "How's the water, boys?"

As he swims away, the younger fish look at each other and one asks, "What's water?"

Before diving into the topic of culture, it is worth noting this disclaimer: culture is not the only or even the most important predictor of a person's behaviour in any given situation. Individual differences, gender, and situational factors all come into play to influence what we do. And yet, we all grow up immersed in at least one culture, wherein certain behaviours are expected largely unconsciously. Awareness of your own cultural norms might be the most important starting point for successful intercultural communication and instruction.

When we think of culture, many of us think of aspects of ethnic or national culture—the language, history, values, and practices that develop among a group of people over time based on their shared experience. National cultures have also evolved unique norms and values around education. A well-known metaphor here is that of the cultural iceberg, wherein much of what trips us up in intercultural communication is that which lies below the surface.

Another important concept in intercultural communication is that of high-context versus low-context culture. In high-context cultures, much of the meaning of a given message is embedded in non-linguistic factors such as the relationship between the speakers, gesture, and tone. Low-context cultures tend to rely more explicitly on language to communicate. For example, Canada is considered to have cultural norms that are low-context. A course outline in a Canadian teaching environment is considered a final product, communicating important information that has been decided about the course. It is not considered the starting point for negotiation between instructor and student, which can be the interpretation by students coming from high-context cultures.

Which brings us to language, perhaps the defining component of national culture. If intercultural communication could be solved by mere translation, the whole matter would be simple. However, cultural differences can be expressed through differences in communication patterns. For example, an instructor might assume that a quiet student is not participating or not understanding, when, in fact, that student might actually be processing the material.

Typical areas where differences in communication patterns can be found are in:

- eye contact
- smiling when uncomfortable
- the meaning of silence and conversation pace
- display of emotion and expression of feelings
- expression of appreciation
- privacy
- gestures, facial expressions and body movements
- touching
- interpersonal space
- taboo topics in conversation
- styles of persuasion and explanations

Here are three tips to think about culture in the context of your teaching:

1. Be aware of cultural differences and how they might inform students' behaviours and perceptions.

For example, a student with a strong respect for authority might not see it as his or her place to ask the instructor a question in class. Check your own assumptions about what a particular behavior signifies.

2. Be aware of your own comfort level with cultural differences and how you react.

Cross-cultural communication and its potential for ambiguity can make us feel uncomfortable. How do you react when you feel uncomfortable? Do you use sarcasm? Do you withdraw? Do you get angry? Be aware of your own reactions and consider how others might interpret them.

3. Be aware of your own values around certain aspects of academic culture.

For example, what constitutes acceptable use of other people's work varies among academic cultures. At BCIT quoting without citing is viewed as dishonesty, but some students may have prior experience that it is acceptable. How can you make your students aware of academic integrity expectations at BCIT? Do you tap into resources available such as the library?

Thinking about your teaching

Lesson structure

Here are some easy strategies you can use to maximize the learning opportunities for your multilingual students and all of your other students as well.

Break up lessons with time for student questions

Plan breaks within your lectures for student participation. Ensure that there is time for questions and for interaction. Try to make these breaks frequent. For example, for every eight minutes of lecture, plan for at least two minutes of questions and interaction. Doing so gives students the opportunity to process what they have learned by checking their understanding. It also helps you as an instructor to informally assess and gauge your class and their understanding before pressing on.

Break up lessons with questions to introduce topics

Divide a single lecture into topics and add a question, rather than a statement, to introduce each topic. For example, if your lecture is about cheese, and the first topic is ingredients for cheese, you could add an additional slide with just the question, "What are the ingredients for cheese?" You can then give your students an opportunity to respond before you launch into the next slide, which has the answers. This technique facilitates the activation of students' prior knowledge about a topic.

Use advance organizers to introduce topics

Create an outline of your lectures and make it available to your students beforehand. Don't include the content. Focus on the titles and headings so that students are compelled to listen for the content during your lecture. Providing students with the structure and framework in advance helps them focus during the lecture. These are called advance organizers, and their purpose is to help students prepare to learn. They also help students to access background knowledge to learn new information.

Use graphic organizers to facilitate focus

You can also provide a graphic organizer, an illustrative frame that both organizes knowledge and shows relationships between ideas, for students to use during the class. Tables, flow charts, and Venn diagrams are examples of graphic organizers. For example, for your lecture about cheese, you could create and hand out to your students an incomplete table, such as the one below, in advance and have them complete it during your lecture.

Cheese Lecture	Ingredients	How it is made	Its origin	Its taste
Cheddar				
Brie				
Gouda				

Get off the “stage”

Take the time to walk around amongst your students. They will take the opportunity to literally grab you and ask you questions. There are many students who won't ask those questions in front of the entire class or come to your office to ask the question. Approaching students makes you more approachable.

Assessment

In general, when planning your course's assessment, consider the following:

- Make your assignments and expectations clear to students.
- Create marking schemes such as checklists and rubrics, and give your marking schemes to students before the assignment is due. Use your marking scheme to mark the assignment.
- Provide grading criteria in advance.
- Provide an example of a good assignment, if appropriate. Also providing examples of bad assignments can demonstrate to students what to avoid. You could also get students to give your permission to use their work as examples in class and/or future courses.
- Provide opportunities for practice exams, if appropriate.

Exams

There is rarely enough time to complete an exam, but for students who are still improving their English, it might take even longer.

Consider the quality of your exams and tests. How readable are they? Are the intentions and meaning of your questions clear?

Think about how long it would take for the average student to complete your exam. Have you given enough time? Long exam questions take longer to read for all students, and for multilingual students, sometimes 10 minutes longer.

Allow for reasonable access to resources for all students, if appropriate. Consider making your exam open book. Allow students to bring English dictionaries, or at least bring your own to the exam for students to use.

Assignments and presentations

Design assignments with multiple iterations for processes and products. For example, give marks for completing stages of the assignment. Make a first draft due earlier and part of the overall mark. Consider filming presentations for review and further learning afterwards.

If you are marking grammar and language mechanics, explain how and why so that students can take your feedback and apply it next time.

For assignments, get students started on the work with plenty of lead time and then schedule frequent check-ins with them in order to give formative and face-to-face feedback.

Giving feedback

Feedback is important for all learners. Multilingual students learn best when feedback is clear, direct, and immediate. If what you want to say is negative, be direct. Don't "sandwich" it with positive feedback first. Multilingual students who are struggling in a course may be misled by phrases like "You have some great ideas" or "You're working really hard," especially if the instructor is smiling at the time.

Make your feedback constructive. Don't just say, "That was good," but also say why it was good, such as "your organization was logical but using transitions would make it clearer to me as a reader." Be direct with the weaknesses and be direct with the strengths.

Keep the following in mind when providing feedback to multilingual students:

- Be clear, timely, and direct with feedback.
- Make your feedback an observation, not a judgment.
- Make feedback actionable. Instead of saying "good," say why it is good (example: "Steps two and three of the process need to be differentiated more because they read like one step").
- Avoid hedging or softening terms such as "might," "kind of," "could possibly" unless necessary.
- Try to understand why a student holds a misconception before clearing it up.
- Ask specific clarifying questions, such as "Does your recommendation apply to a particular franchise or does it apply to the company as a whole?"
- Start giving informal feedback early on and continue providing it on an ongoing basis throughout the semester.
- Incorporate peer feedback and self-assessment checklists.

Language that clarifies and describes is key in communicating effectively with multilingual students. To increase learner comprehension:

- Avoid idioms. For example, instead of “ahead of the pack,” use “ahead of the competition.” Better yet, rephrase or contextualize idioms in more literal language. For example, say something like “Apple has dominated the market.”
- Use transitions such as “one cause,” “the second reason,” “a different viewpoint,” and “for example.”
- Be concise when providing explanations.
- Be descriptive with examples.

Group work strategies

Group work benefits learners in many ways, including strengthening academic achievement, critical reasoning, teamwork, and interpersonal skills. Be deliberate and intentional about how you plan and manage group work in your class.

Organizing group discussions

Instructors use group discussions for many different teaching situations, from break-out discussions within a larger lecture to assigned group discussions on key topics in an online course. As you direct your students to discuss in groups, think about the following to enable everybody’s participation:

- Vary group configurations (pairs, small groups, whole class).
- State clearly the objectives and expectations of a task.
- Ensure that students understand their roles.
- Particularly for online learning, ensure that the guidelines for objectives, expectations, and roles are communicated in advance of the task.
- Monitor group interactions thoughtfully.
- Allow sufficient time for groups to report out.
- Provide concise, actionable feedback.
- Make direct observations about roles in group work.
- Consider teaching directly an orientation to teamwork and collaboration skills in advance of the task.

Organizing project work

When you assign project-based learning activities, the need for successful communication between students within groups becomes very important. The stakes are higher compared to informal class discussions as it is necessary for groups to successfully share and complete tasks, and feel a sense of fairness that work distribution is equitable. When you plan and direct your students to proceed with their project work:

- Consider assigning students to groups instead of letting students create groups themselves.
- Balance project team participants based on a diversity of abilities when assigning teams, including ethnic and linguistic diversity.
- Have groups negotiate, determine, and delegate individual roles, tasks, and schedules for project work to ensure that multilingual students are clear about the work required of them within the group.
- Limit group size to three or four to enable multilingual students to interact more constructively.
- Equip students with tools to help them succeed in socially interactive projects and tasks.
- State objectives and expectations explicitly and in simple wording.
- Provide assessment rubrics and include the value of participation as part of the assessment.
- Provide examples where appropriate.

What about the situation where it appears that some students within a group are not pulling their weight? You may need to teach students directly how to do teamwork, as teamwork is not necessarily a skill we can assume that everybody has. Additionally, in your role as instructor, you may need to be setting clear expectations in advance and consistently monitoring how groups are working.

Maintaining student attention

Use visuals

Choose visuals that enhance teaching and learning. In addition to sparking interest, visuals often communicate meaning more quickly than words. In planning your teaching, find ways to depict information visually, whether with photos, cartoons, tables, or diagrams. And in considering the learning process, find visual ways for students to communicate what they've learned. Here are a few ways to do that:

- Insert graphics into handouts and lectures.
- Use tables, diagrams, and graphs to convey information.
- Find ways for students to communicate their learning visually, including creating their own visual elements such as: diagrams, tables, and charts; concept maps; or storyboards in place of outlines.
- Have students create their own visuals to communicate their learning in place of having them write text-based assignments.

Planning for thinking time

Build processing time for your students into your delivery by:

- Posting lectures slides, outlines, technical vocabulary, recommended readings, website links, and videos to D2L ahead of class.
- Anticipating and providing access to terminology; using activities that incorporate terminology beforehand.
- Using a variety of participation strategies such as individual, pair, and group work.
- Being conscious of "wait time"

Wait time refers to the time between posing and answering questions between speakers. English-speaking North American instructors typically wait less than one second after posing a question before speaking again. This means that if a student has not made a noise within one second, the instructor typically jumps in with either the answer, a prompt, or reassigns the question to someone else. Further, after a student replies to a question, instructors generally wait less than one second before commenting or asking another question. Wait time is specific to language and culture and is therefore not universal. Even among the various English-speakers in the world, there are differences in wait time. Therefore, consider deliberately pausing after you ask a question and practice being comfortable with a few more seconds of silence.

Tips for the beginning of your course

The beginning of the course is the most uncertain time because that is when both students and teachers negotiate the “rules” of classroom participation. Because classroom dysfunction is easier to prevent than to fix, it’s important to set the tone within the first few sessions.

- Find out your students’ names and how to pronounce them.
- Help students establish and share a goal for the course that supports their career and educational goals.
- Be explicit about your expectations around classroom participation and student/instructor interaction (office hours, criteria for outside help, etc.).
- Discuss the sort of help that students can expect from you and what sort of help they can give each other.
- Early on, present an activity that allows students to interact by sharing their prior knowledge, experience, and any views on course-related topics.
- Explain your course and how it works.
- Make sure your course outline is up to date and reflects what you are going to do in the class.

Creating a safe learning space

And finally, creating a safe environment benefits all students. Here are some strategies and ideas:

- Make sure that quieter students have a chance to speak up and make sure more forthcoming students do not monopolize the time.
- Create a study-buddy system.
- Mix study groups and classroom seating arrangements regularly.
- Give students the opportunity to personalize topics, reflecting on their experiences.
- For groups working together on major topics, do regular check-ins with different members.
- Hold group members accountable to each other.
- Have students defend the side of an issue that they are least comfortable with.
- When presenting new materials, build in time for reflection and questions (written or spoken).
- At the end of a lecture-type class, break students into small groups to have them share the main points.
- Anticipate controversial topics and help students devise strategies for disagreeing without attacking.
- Use a brief course evaluation check-in mid-way through your course to get anonymous feedback from students about how they are experiencing your class.

