

Communicating Effectively with Your Students

Teaching in the U.S. university classroom can be a rewarding yet challenging experience. If you have never taught before to people from a different cultural or language background, you may fear that you won't understand them or they won't understand you.

While your concerns are natural and legitimate, most students and international TAs find that working together they can minimize most communication problems and create an enriching learning environment, in which both the TAs and students learn valuable cross-cultural communication skills and the students master the course concepts while the TAs learn to effectively teach and communicate.

This brochure is intended to introduce you to some simple, effective communication strategies that you can use when interacting with your students in class and during office hours. We encourage you to try them out and see which ones work best for you and your students.

When speaking to your students...

- Speak at a little slower than “normal American” pace (but still naturally) and articulate your words clearly.
- Ask direct statements and questions and avoid complicated sentence structures.
- Use simple vocabulary and avoid technical language that your students may not know.
- Write down key words if your student doesn't seem to understand you.
- Use nonverbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions, and nodding to help convey meaning.
- If your students don't seem to understand you, repeat what you said again. If that still doesn't work, repeat what you said in a slightly different way. Work with the students until you understand each other.
- Give your students time to understand what you've said before expecting a response. Don't immediately start repeating what you just said.
- Confirm that your students really understood you by using questions such as “Did that answer your question?” and “Can you tell me what I just told you?” or by watching to make sure that you followed your instructions.

When listening to your students...

- Focus on what your students are saying instead of on the difference in accent and pronunciation.
- Look at your students and pay attention to both verbal and nonverbal cues, which help convey meaning.

- Ask your students to write down words that you don't understand.
- Tell your students when you don't understand, but try to be specific about what you don't understand instead of saying, "I don't understand you at all."
- Ask your students to repeat what they said if you don't understand.
- Paraphrase what you think the students said if you are unsure that you understood them. You can say something like, "So you want me to..." or "Let me see if I understood you. You said that..."

Be persistent and patient. Don't just walk away from your students or refer them to a native speaker when you experience communication problems. Give your students a chance and teach them how to communicate with you!

Additional Suggestions for Communicating with Your Students

- Get to know your students and help your students get to know you. Learn to pronounce each other's names and share where you're from and about your cultures.
- Share your expertise. You are an expert in the area you are studying and have likely experienced and overcome the same problems your students may have in the course. Trust that you can help your students.
- Prepare for class and learn the course materials well. If you don't prepare for class and learn the course materials well, you will likely have problems teaching your students, regardless of your language or cultural background.
- Offer to help your students but when appropriate refer them to other Campus Services. Encourage your students to visit you during office hours or to e-mail or call you if they need additional help. If they need more help than you can give, ask them to visit Student Educational Services for individual or group tutoring.

For further information or for a list of ESL courses offered at Marquette, please contact:

Marquette University
 English as a Second Language Program
 Office of International Education
 Holthusen Hall, 4th Floor
 (414)288-7289
world@marquette.edu