

5. Teaching international students

International students account for approximately 25 per cent of the total student population at the University and they come from more than 100 countries including South Korea, Botswana, Canada, Nepal, and Germany. For the majority of these students, English is a second or additional language.

This section offers advice and strategies for teaching international students and is taken from a larger guide, *Teaching International Students*, developed by Sophie Arkoudis (2006).

Creating opportunities for small group participation

It has been widely observed that international students may appear hesitant in contributing to group discussions. This is not necessarily because this is their preferred learning style. International students often report that they would like to participate but lack the confidence to do so. This could be in part due to their lack of familiarity with how to contribute to an academic discussion or their perceived lack of English language skills. Contributing to discussions can be seen as a risky undertaking if the students are not comfortable with their English language ability or are unfamiliar with the cultural conventions for 'breaking into' the conversation. Academics may need to create 'safe' learning environments where students feel that they can make a contribution. Creating opportunities for participation in class where students feel supported can be achieved by incorporating some of the following strategies:

Preparation for small group discussion

- As second language learners of English, students need to be given adequate time to prepare responses. One strategy that can be used is to ask students to prepare some responses for the next tutorial or seminar. Set key questions with the reading material so that students can prepare their answer before the class. This will give them greater confidence in contributing to any discussion.
- It is important to make expectations about student participation clear to international students. As we know, this is an effective strategy for all students, but it is particularly useful for international students because research indicates that they are often not aware of what participation in class actually means in an Australian tertiary context. Making academic expectations clear can help to clarify this to students.
- Create a teaching atmosphere early in the semester in which students interact with each other. This allows the opportunity for international and domestic students to talk and get to know each other.

Encouraging contributions in class

- We know that one way of increasing participation is to memorise students' names and invite them to speak. This can be a successful strategy if the lecturer has already established a 'safe environment' and if the international students feel that the group values their contributions.
- Ask international students how the issue would be considered from their experiences, keeping in mind that they do not represent the views of their culture or country.
- Briefly summarise the discussion from time to time, highlighting the key points, so that the students can follow the discussion.
- Pose questions or issues that students can discuss in pairs and then report back to the class.
- Remember to wait before moving on to another student, as it can take time for international students to understand the question, consider their response and communicate that in English.

- Structure group tasks so that international and domestic students are grouped together. Assign roles for each member of the small group, including discussion leader, timekeeper, note-taker, and person to report back. This allows everyone to have a role in the group.
- As is acknowledged in strategies for effective small group teaching, quizzes and pair work encourage interaction among students.
- Organise group activities so that diversity of experience and knowledge are necessary for successfully completing the task.
- Where possible, develop tasks that increase opportunities for domestic and international students to interact.

Supporting students in developing critical thinking skills

(Taken from Arkoudis, 2006)

It is often suggested that students from Confucian heritage cultures find it difficult to think critically. However, like most stereotypes, this is unlikely to be true. Research has found that students from CHC are capable of high-level critical thinking (Biggs, 2003). It is not the international students' cognitive skills that are in question but their English language ability that influences their reading, understanding, interpretation and evaluation of the material that is demonstrated in either written or oral expression. As we know, developing critical thinking skills is equally challenging for domestic students.

Teaching critical thinking skills can be useful in assisting students to develop learning strategies to avoid plagiarism. Classroom activities that model critical thinking skills in our discussions, create learning opportunities for students to develop their skills and offer feedback can guide students' development of critical thinking skills. These may include:

- Explain and demonstrate what critical thinking skills are required in your disciplinary area. Different disciplines define it in slightly different ways.
- Clearly the reading process can be difficult for students who have English as a second language. It may be useful to highlight the importance of the reading material to the content of the course. This will assist students to access the main ideas presented in the text.
- When setting required reading, offer questions for students to guide their reading of the text. Stage the questions to include literal meaning (describe, define, explain), interpretive meaning (analyse, test, calculate, apply, demonstrate) and applied meaning (evaluate, compare assess). This will help the students to think beyond the literal understanding and develop their skills as strategic and critical readers.
- Develop students' critical thinking skills through classroom discussions. Questions such as 'In what situations would this work?' 'Can you think of any situation in which this would not apply?' "How does this relate to other theories/concepts we have discussed?" can be used as prompts for students to present different points of view.