



Teaching in the U.S. Classroom

This issue of *Speaking of Teaching* is devoted to the international members of Stanford's academic teaching community, particularly to international graduate students and TAs. In this issue we highlight some of the resources for international TAs (ITAs) available through the English for Foreign Students Program (EFS), as well as the voices of many ITAs and international faculty discussing their experiences in the U.S. classroom. The Center for Teaching and Learning collaborated with EFS on a survey distributed to members of Stanford's international teaching community and the responses recount challenges, surprises, and differences encountered here, as well as considerable admiration for many of the qualities of academic life in the U.S. that those who were raised in the U.S. education system may take for granted.

For instance, across the range of nationalities and experiences represented on the Stanford campus, international faculty and TAs are generally surprised by the level of teacher-student interaction expected by U.S. students, as well as by the relative informality of this interaction and classroom decorum in general. Calling professors and TAs by their first names, questioning professors' views in class, and expecting that their own views will be respected are only a few of the ways that U.S. students challenge the more traditional expectations of their international teachers.

While students in the U.S. are taught as early as elementary school that "there is no such thing as a stupid question," many ITAs and international faculty are stunned by the boldness and occasional naïveté of their students' questions. One ITA said that in the U.S., "students can feel free to ask their questions, and will be encouraged no matter what kind of questions they've asked. In my country, there are barely any questions raised by students in class. Sometimes teachers will ask some questions. But in most cases, there is no interaction between teachers and students." Another ITA enjoys this quality of U.S. classroom culture; he wrote that in his country, "teaching is more like lecturing than discussing. Less interactive and fewer questions from students. Here

students are encouraged to participate actively, to ask questions, to criticize orthodox ideas, and these are pretty good aspects."

Similarly, adjusting to the function of office hours as a time when U.S. students can ask questions and receive helpful advice on their assignments is often a challenge. The U.S. model differs from more traditional uses of the office hour as a tutorial in which the instructor takes more of an authoritative role, lecturing and guiding the conversation, rather than letting the student's needs set the pace for the interaction.

Even so, something that ITAs repeatedly emphasized in their survey responses is the fact that they perceive teachers in the U.S. making a genuine effort to help their students understand difficult concepts. As one ITA wrote, "In my country...they just teach, and don't care whether students understand." In contrast, "teachers here are trying very hard to help the students learn something." And another: "In my country, teachers try to throw a bunch of theories at you regardless of whether you understand or not."

Significantly, several ITAs commented that the most rewarding experiences they'd had in the U.S. classroom were when "students appreciate [their] help" and when they see that their students are "learning and improving." They note that the relationship between teachers and students is "more equal and more friendly" and that the "learning environment" is "more active and open minded" and in one case, simply "more free."

In their obvious appreciation for qualities of U.S. classroom culture that are often overlooked by students in the U.S., international TAs have a great deal to offer their colleagues. There is always something new to be learned about teaching, and the open perspective offered by ITAs can serve as a catalyst and reminder to U.S. instructors that progressive pedagogy is not something to take for granted, but to be cultivated, appreciated, and continually renewed throughout one's teaching career. ♦

International Teachers Speak Out

The Center for Teaching and Learning asked international instructors in several different kinds of positions—teaching assistants, lecturers, and assistant professors—to respond to a set of questions about their experience teaching in the U.S., and they provided us with the following responses:

1. What were some of the initial surprises you faced when you first taught in the U.S. classroom? What were some of the most important cultural differences and challenges?

The most challenging thing for me (and for other non-native English speakers) is probably that I had to conquer the “fear” of teaching in English. It was not until later, after I taught several language courses, that I realized that language is not the most important issue. American students express their feelings and thoughts about the class more directly than students from Asian countries.

My surprise came when [I realized that] I did not know how important it was to set expectations from the start as to the difficulty and requirements [of the course]. Later I was shocked that it is not expected that 10-20% of a class can fail. People expect high grades, even when their performance is not all that impressive. After my first experience I learned to set expectations very clearly at the beginning, including performance and grades. Even if it means trying to frighten them a bit—it is better being left with a smaller group that wants to stay and knows what they’re getting into. I did not sacrifice the difficulty of the material but rather made sure that people know what they’re in for.

Everything was new to me because I never TA’d before. However, I did find some things that kind of surprised me. Students in my sections were ranging from first year through fourth year although Chemistry 33 is an introductory organic course; I didn’t have to blame students if they didn’t pay any attention to my lecture; and I could feel free to say “I don’t know” to the students.

The most important cultural differences and challenges I faced were: (a) that I had to encourage students every time when they asked me a question. It was a big problem for me because I never did that before and I knew few ways to encourage students; (b) some students were eating during the sections. Eating in class is basically not allowed in China. However, I didn’t feel uncomfortable with that; (c) sometimes some students laughed when I was writing on the board which made me a little bit nervous.

2. What are the best parts of teaching in the U.S. classroom?

Generally speaking, U.S. students participate in the class activities more actively. This helps to create a kind of dynamic atmosphere in the classroom, which facilitates teaching.

There are some extremely bright and curious students at Stanford that make the classroom experience wonderful. Even though I teach a very rigorous and formal course, I try hard to get student interaction by posing questions and challenging students for their ideas. Sometimes it is difficult, but it is always worth the effort. This sometimes leads to me getting to know the brighter students better, and sometimes this can develop into an advising relationship that I enjoy.

Students feel free to communicate with me. So I can easily see what they don’t understand. Also, students write evaluations of TAs and this can help TAs know what they are doing well and what they need to improve.

3. What do you feel you have contributed to Stanford as an international teacher?

I have helped students develop the awareness of cultural differences.

I think I am a bit more “aggressive” in class in the sense of asking questions, and challenging students in real time. I think I allow myself to be more opinionated, even though I try hard to make it clear when this happens.

The only special contribution I have made is that I, a TA from China, showed great concern to my students and did my best to help them understand what they wanted to.

4. How could the university support you better in your cultural transition as a teacher?

I think the courses, workshops and other resources (like teaching consultations) provided by ESL and CTL really help a lot! It would be even better if we can have workshops especially for international teachers and TAs for exchanging experiences in teaching.

The class “Teaching and Speaking in English” helped me a lot. I learned how to perform as a TA in the U.S. If there were some more classes which taught foreign students about American culture, that would be great!



Frequently-asked Questions about International TA Screening

English for Foreign Students (Department of Linguistics) administers two kinds of tests. The English Placement Examination is for newly arriving international graduate students and is administered primarily at the beginning of Autumn quarter. The other test is English Screening for Readiness to Serve as a Teaching Assistant, which is administered throughout the year. The guidelines for these screenings have been established by the university at large. Here are questions students frequently ask about TA screening.

1) Do I need to be screened?

Non-native-English-speaking graduate students who have been in the United States five years or fewer need to be screened. Those students who have two spoken English requirements from the English Placement Examination are not allowed to take TA screening until they have worked on their existing requirements.

2) When should I be screened?

You must be screened at least one quarter before you are appointed as a TA. If you begin a TAship without being screened, you cannot be paid until you are cleared.

3) What kind of test is it?

The screening is a thirty-minute simulation of an office hour in which the applicant plays the TA and the examiner plays a student. "The student" asks the TA for help understanding a field-specific concept. The applicant is also evaluated for accuracy in English pronunciation.

4) Do I need to bring anything?

The only thing you need to bring is a textbook from the course you intend to work in; a passage in this book will be the basis of the simulation.

5) What should I prepare?

You do not need to prepare anything. If you wish, you might review the pronunciation of frequently-used terms in your field.

6) When do I get the results?

Immediately. As soon as the examiner and you have reviewed an audiotape recording of your reading and your explanation, the examiner will tell you whether or not you are being cleared for TA readiness.

7) What happens if I don't pass?

Students who need more English improvement before serving as TAs will be required to take a course, usually either Linguistics 692, "Speaking and Teaching in English" or Linguistics 695A, "Pronunciation and Intonation." Both courses are offered every quarter.

8) How do I arrange for screening?

Send email to Tracey Fowler in EFS at tafowler@stanford.edu. You need to give at least two times that you are available for a half hour in the week after you send the message.

9) Who are the examiners?

The examiners are full-time, experienced instructors in English for Foreign Students.

10) Is my department involved in the screening?

The department is not involved in the screening itself; some departments arrange for a group of students to be tested on the same day. Check with your departmental TA coordinator. Your administrator can check your screening status in your online student file.

11) Where is the English for Foreign Students office?

Building 460, Margaret Jacks Hall, in the Main Quad. From the Oval, as you enter the Main Quad, Building 460 is the first building on your right. Go downstairs and to the back of the building, following signs to English for Foreign Students. The offices are in 30A-E.

If you have other questions, please send them to Tracey Fowler, tafowler@stanford.edu. ♦

English for Foreign Students: Summer 2002

Many excellent courses will be offered this summer through the EFS program, including: "Speaking and Teaching in English," "Living and Working with Americans," "Intensive English and Academic Orientation for Foreign Graduate Students," and the ever popular "American Humor."

In order to enroll in "Speaking and Teaching in English" (Linguistics 692) students must bring their schedules to the EFS office by Monday, June 24.

See the Summer Bulletin (page 19) for course descriptions.

Tips for International TAs in the U.S. Classroom

Connie Rylance and Beverley McChesney of Stanford's English for Foreign Students program have developed many handouts filled with "tips" for international TAs. Here is their advice for holding office hours and navigating some of the characteristics of U.S. Classroom Culture.

Office Hours

Attending office hours is another aspect of learning the material for U.S. students, one which is often as important to them as attending class or reading the textbook.

It is important to remember that TAs and professors serve different needs in office hours.

Students visit TAs for:

- Homework explanation
- Exam preparation
- Advice on project assignments
- Makeup quizzes or exams
- Procedural questions

Students visit professors for:

- Information on courses
- Completion of requirements
- Advice on project assignments
- Waivers and exemptions
- Professorial mentoring

Teaching in office hours often involves the following skills:

Guiding students' learning, by encouraging them to be self-directed; this is accomplished through observation and commentary.

Encouraging and reinforcing their efforts, which is accomplished by praise and support.

Correcting and reminding them of the right procedures, which involves referring to lectures, textbooks, and other readings.

Giving study advice, but always being sure to control the extent of information you give about the exam.

Responding primarily to the students' needs, questions, or concerns, rather than initiating topics of conversation.



U.S. Classroom Culture

The TA is a bridge between the professor and the students. The TA is expected to meet the students' needs by interacting with them rather than by merely transmitting information.

TAs are expected to act informally because formality creates distance while informality leads to interaction and approachability.

Teachers in the U.S. are expected to accommodate students and to help make learning difficult concepts easier. There are expressions for this effort made by teachers to help their students: "meet them half way" and "bend over backwards." Both of these idioms express the willingness on the part of teachers to respond to students' questions and concerns.

The concept of instructor fairness is central to the U.S. classroom. This extends to giving advice before an exam. No student should have "insider information" or more information than any other student. Students should all be told the same things.

TAs should be very careful to avoid making extreme statements or absolute claims; try instead to be open to multiple perspectives.

TAs should also avoid representing their own advice or views as the professor's.

Discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, or sexual orientation has no place in the U.S. classroom. A fundamental sense of respect for all students, regardless of their backgrounds or socioeconomic status is essential.

For information on how to avoid gender-biased language see the online American Psychological Association Guidelines on Sexist Language:

<http://www.apa.udel.edu/apa/publications/texts/nonsexist.html>

A Russian Teacher in the U.S. University Classroom: A Comparative Perspective

by Serafima Gettys, Professor of Slavic Languages and Literature

Apart from the general pedagogical preparation that is now offered by most university departments in specific disciplines, foreign teachers of American students need to spend some time on the study of the educational tradition of their own country, to become the students of their own country's educational tradition. Such inner exploration can help explain to foreign teachers what formed their own views on education, teaching, and learning and can help make their transition into the U.S. classroom significantly easier.

The first part of my teaching career was spent in Russia, the country where I was born, educated, and where I taught English to Russian university students. The second part has extended from 1990 to the present, throughout which I have been teaching Russian to American university students. On the whole, the transition was smooth. The experience of teaching the same discipline—foreign language—in such different educational environments has enriched me immensely. It has provided me with a bifocal perspective both on my past and the present, a kind of cultural lens through which I now see in a completely different light many things that I took for granted in the first part of my teaching career.

Although the daily challenges of teaching in the U.S. and Russia are almost the same, differences abound. Most conspicuous is the difference in the way learning is organized. In U.S. universities, students take relatively short courses from which they learn the basic concepts, methodology, and principles of the subject and the emphasis is put on active independent work. Russian students take year-long courses in which each subject is studied in depth with a mass of detail, often with equal attention both to less and more essential issues. These dissimilarities, however, are only outward expressions of the deeper fundamental differences emerging from distinct intellectual traditions with their own internally coherent set of priorities and assumptions about learning and the social role of education.

One of the most striking revelations for a Russian teacher in a U.S. university is the academic preparation of American freshmen. Simply speaking, American undergraduates seem to *know less* about the history of the world or the *past* experience of humanity than their Russian peers. This phenomenon is easily explained by the fact that in comparison to American public schools, Russian schools offer incomparably more rigorous curricula for their students at both elementary and secondary levels. By the time young people finish high school, their general education is deemed to be complete. That is why, in contrast to the American system of higher education, Russian university students can start immediately with the course work required by their major. Whatever courses are taken from another area of knowledge are completely subordinated to the major field. Thus, for example, foreign languages are taught almost entirely in the context of the future profession (a feature comparable to today's trend of content-based foreign language instruction in the U.S.).

The extent of teachers' involvement in the learning process is another indication of the essential differences between the educational traditions in Russia and America. In the U.S., the teacher *supervises* and *directs* learning, but is hardly ever expected to participate in it *from within*, so to speak, and learning remains the responsibility of a learner, i.e. students are supposed to learn on their own. In contrast, Russians tend to think about learning and teaching more in terms of an indivisible or monolithic process, a teaching-learning process, rather than to separate teaching from learning.

This difference in views on the role of a teacher in the classroom has far-reaching consequences in many aspects of education. The notion of supervision and direction primarily implies emphasis on control and evaluation rather than on learning as a process. That is why in the eyes of a Russian teacher American teachers seem to overuse assessment and evaluation. (*continued on page 6*)

Continued...A Russian Teacher in the U.S. University Classroom: A Comparative Perspective

The role of a teacher as evaluator partly explains the special interest of American pedagogical sciences in the development of testing and evaluation techniques—another area where the two countries show significant divergence.

Without a conscious effort to understand the obvious divergences between one's home and foreign educational systems, one may easily and mistakenly perceive these differences as idiosyncrasies or quirks of the other society. Seen in the

light of careful comparison however, it becomes clear that the educational system of a country is a direct reflection of its culture and is deeply rooted in the nation's mentality. With careful analysis of the cultural and historical roots of one's own educational traditions, dissimilarities may soon become much more comprehensible to those born and raised in another country, and their transition into teaching in the U.S. classroom will be much more successful. ♦

CTL Welcomes Jeremy Sabol, Academic Technology Specialist

The Center for Teaching and Learning is pleased to announce that Jeremy Sabol is ready to serve you as our new Academic Technology Specialist. Jeremy works with faculty, teaching fellows and teaching assistants in all disciplines, helping them to integrate technology effectively into their teaching. Jeremy will be offering workshops and individual consultations in this area, as well as developing projects to help faculty showcase their use of technology in their teaching.

Jeremy joined the CTL staff in March 2002. He is currently completing his doctorate in French Literature at Yale University. His research focuses on the relationship between knowledge and fiction the early modern period. In his dissertation, Jeremy explores how philosophical knowledge is conveyed in literary form during the seventeenth century in France, especially in the writings of Descartes and Cyrano de Bergerac.

Jeremy has taught French at all levels (and introductory calculus too!), often making use of his own custom-designed online interactive class exercises. He believes that simple technological solutions can often be more effective than complicated, fancy ones, and he looks forward to helping you strategize and streamline your own creative visions for technology in your teaching. Jeremy will be offering a workshop this summer that focuses on using a course management system (like CourseWork) to achieve your own pedagogical goals.

Please feel free to contact Jeremy about building an effective website for your course, or about incorporating other kinds of technology into your teaching. Jeremy can be reached through email at jsabol@stanford.edu or by phone at 725-4164. Better yet, come by and greet him in his office on the fourth floor of Sweet Hall, room 433.

Speaking of Teaching is compiled and edited by CTL Associate Director Valerie Ross. Please feel free to contact Dr. Ross at varlet@stanford.edu with any questions, suggestions, or comments; thank you!

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