

## Center for Instructional Development and Research

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Information for People who Teach  
at the University of Washington



## Teaching Non-Native Speakers of English

This Bulletin provides principles for teaching students who are not native speakers of English. Non-native English speakers at UW are a diverse group – including international students, immigrants, and students born and raised in the U.S. – and few generalizations broadly apply. Although strategies identified here are particularly relevant for students whose previous education was not conducted primarily in English, students from any background will benefit from these efforts to support their learning.

### COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY WITH STUDENTS

Many non-native speakers understand English well, but some may be unsure they have heard everything accurately; some also may want time to formulate a comment carefully before speaking. To provide support for learners in this situation, you can:

- Use supporting visual materials, handouts, or powerpoint. Write down or highlight key words as you lecture.
- Give students time to write or talk with a classmate before talking in a whole class discussion. Consider crediting work written in class as participation.
- Use various methods to check student understanding; for example, ask students to respond to questions in writing, by using “clickers”, or by working with a classmate.
- Allow students to audio-record lectures, or podcast them.

### INTEGRATING STUDENTS INTO YOUR CLASS

Students may have much to contribute to your class based on their diverse backgrounds and experiences. To create opportunities for students to integrate fully into your class, you can:

- Incorporate multicultural content and examples.
- Acknowledge the value of cross-cultural perspectives and experiences that students bring to the class. (But avoid asking students to speak on behalf of their entire country, culture, or ethnic group.)
- When giving U.S. examples, provide a few words of context: “KCTS, the Seattle television station”
- For team projects or group work, take deliberate steps to integrate non-native English speakers into groups with native English speaking students:
  - Assign students to groups and make them diverse in background.
  - Keep groups small.
  - Clearly delineate tasks.
  - Assign tasks to particular group members.
  - Precede group activities with written reflection.
  - Circulate among groups and ask questions that will prompt all students to contribute.

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## FAMILIARIZE STUDENTS WITH U.S. ACADEMIC CONVENTIONS

Students who completed their previous education in another country may find U.S. classroom practices culturally unfamiliar. To make your expectations clear, you can:

- Clarify expectations for student participation; for example, “I expect students to interrupt/not interrupt with questions,” or “I expect you to come to office hours.”
- Give models of what an effective answer to an essay question looks like and what you expect when you use verbs like “discuss” or “analyze” in assignments.
- Since cultures differ in how they define plagiarism, explain and give examples of plagiarism.

## ASSESSING STUDENT WORK AND GIVING FEEDBACK

Students’ language proficiency can impact their ability to communicate what they know. To provide meaningful assessment of both content and the communication of content, consider the following:

- Simplify grammar and vocabulary on exam questions and invite students to ask about unfamiliar words on tests.
- Extend time for exams so that students who write more slowly are still able to show what they have learned.
- When responding to drafts, focus on content issues first. If the content is not written clearly, ask the student to explain it to you orally.
- Rather than correcting every error in drafts, note recurring errors, circle examples and ask students to address additional instances. Note that surface level error patterns are difficult for students to change quickly.
- On papers, give separate grades for content and for style.



## Center for Instructional Development and Research

CIDR promotes excellence in teaching and learning at the University of Washington through its work with individual faculty and TAs, departments, campus-wide initiatives, and University leaders. CIDR staff are available year-round to collaborate on the design, implementation, and assessment of ways to advance teaching and learning for all students in the diverse UW community. Consultations are confidential and offered at no charge to UW faculty, TAs, and departments.

If you have questions about teaching and learning, or you would like to find out more about working with CIDR, you can call us at 543-6588, send a message to [cidr@u.washington.edu](mailto:cidr@u.washington.edu), or visit our web site:

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