International students bring great variety and new perspectives into our classrooms. As with all students, we want to ensure that our international students’ needs are met and that they meet their academic goals. Understanding these students’ different backgrounds and challenges, we can develop methods that help all students succeed.

Some Challenges…

Differing Educational and Cultural Backgrounds

Some of our students come from very different educational backgrounds and may have problems adjusting when they come to CSU. In some countries, schools emphasize rote memorization and our international students may not be used to thinking critically or expressing their own opinions. For some students, classes at CSU might be the first time they have attended school with the opposite gender.

Cultural backgrounds can also lead to misunderstandings between teachers and students. Some students may not understand the difference between “helping” and “cheating” and they may have a very different definition of plagiarism. In some cultures, appealing to teachers for grade changes is an acceptable practice. Understanding these educational and cultural backgrounds can help us teach students in an effective way while teaching them meet the standards we accept in American university settings.

Language Barrier

Non-native speakers have particular kinds of problems with language. Some students (especially those who have come through Intensive English Programs) may have only been speaking English for a year, and others may have spoken English as a second language for their whole lives. While we need to maintain high standards in student writing, we should remember that language skills are something that will develop with time.

What Kinds of International Students Attend CSU?

Non-native English speaking students defy easy categorization. In our classes we may come across several different types of non-native speakers and each individual has different needs. Here are a few examples:

- Students who have completed the Intensive English Program (IEP). At present, many of these students are from Middle Eastern countries.
- Students who come from countries where English is spoken as a second, national language (e.g. India, Malaysia).
- Students who come from countries where English is not spoken as a second language, but have a strong enough grasp of English to take the TOEFL and come to CSU without taking further language classes.
- Students who are the children of immigrants. These are known as Generation 1.5 Students.

International Students Talk About Writing

I never know how exactly I sound to native speakers... [Also] it takes longer to write in English because I turn to my dictionary a lot more frequently to look up the right usage of words and look for appropriate expressions.
- Yukari, Japan

In Spanish we use far more words to get the message across, especially since we have no auxiliaries like in English, which makes a big difference. As far as essays go, it’s different in the sense that there’s no specific order like in English (beginning, middle and end). We have to say our main idea in a different format.
- Natalia, Paraguay

I feel like being locked in the grammar box. My ideas don’t come out as they are, due to some hindrance of grammar. For example, when I say something using "to want," what I’ve learned and got used to is this form, "to want + to verb": e.g. I want to drink some water. So, I hardly come up with this "I want some water".
- Mikyong, South Korea

When I write in English I feel like a different person. The structure of English is totally different to Chinese. When I write in Chinese, I need to write lots of other information first and then get to the point of what I am going to say. In English, the first paragraph is the summary of the idea, telling the audience what you are talking about.
- Zhengli, China
Helping International Students Succeed...

There are many simple adaptations we can make to our instruction that can help all our students reach their academic goals.

At the beginning of the semester:
Find out about our students’ backgrounds and goals
This knowledge is vital for informing our instruction. Whenever we design reading activities, or a new writing assignment, we can consider our students’ backgrounds and adapt instruction according to their needs.

Make classroom expectations and assignments explicit
Making sure that students understand our policies and being consistent in their application will help prevent issues with students appealing for grade changes. Additionally, if we make our assignments explicit, with clear descriptions of what we’re looking for, students will have a strong understanding of what is expected.

Throughout the Semester:
Make sure that materials used in class are available online
We can easily use RamCT or the Writing Studio to post PowerPoint or transparency slides. Being able to review this material outside of class allows students to review concepts at their own pace.

Rhetorical Patterns
When reading non-native students’ writing, it is helpful to remember that different cultures have different rhetorical patterns. What may seem like an unorganized paper could be written according to another culture’s organizational norms.

In 1966, Robert Kaplan published an article that contrasted the rhetoric of various cultures. While this paper has received criticism for over generalizing, it does provide us with some ideas about different rhetorical structures:

- English
- Semitic
- Oriental
- Romance
- Russian

These diagrams demonstrate some of the patterns different cultures may follow in their writing. In English, we expect a linear style, connected to a central thesis (usually stated at the beginning). In Semitic languages, writers may engage in parallelism, stating the same points in various ways. In Oriental cultures it is common to find that writers provide a lot of background information and reach their main point at the end of the paper. In Romance languages or Russian, it is possible that writers will include digressions. Understanding our students’ rhetorical frameworks can help us give them guidance about what we expect at CSU.

Provide opportunities for drafting
We can encourage students to produce at least one complete draft prior to submitting a final paper. When possible, we can take a look at these drafts to see how students are progressing and provide feedback.

Encourage students to use the Writing Center
We can encourage them throughout the semester to visit the Writing Center with their drafts. Students can also sign up for a full semester one-on-one tutorial.

Allow students to use editors
For some students, writing an error-free paper is an impossible task. It may be helpful to encourage students to use editors during the final stage of their drafting process. We should require documentation so we know how the editor contributed.

When Grading:
Grade holistically
When working with non-native speakers we must remember our grading hierarchy. We should consider content and organization prior to mechanics. We can play the “believing” game to understand the writer’s point.

Read papers out loud
This strategy can help us get past grammatical errors and understand what students are actually saying.

Further Resources
- For more information about working with international students, the following publications may also be helpful: (1) Ilona Leki, *Understanding ESL Writers: A Guide for Teachers* (2) Jana Echevarria, MaryEllen Vogt and Deborah J. Short, *Making Content Comprehensible for English Learners: The SIOP Model*.
- gtPathways coordinator Sue Doe holds workshops throughout the year that help faculty with different skills. Look for these sessions and suggest topics!

About this issue’s guest editor…
Jenny Levin is a GTA in the Composition department. She is currently completing her master’s in Teaching English as a Second Language. Jenny teaches CO150 to international students and also works as an instructor at the Intensive English Program.