

Good Practice Principles in Practice: Teaching Across Cultures

A Quick Guide to Developing English Language Skills

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Introduction

This guide is intended for teaching staff and for those who support the learning of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Cultural diversity in the student population is now the norm rather than the exception in Australian universities. Culture is not only defined by nationality or ethnicity. The term culture is a very broad concept that encompasses the lifestyle, traditions, knowledge, skills, beliefs, norms and values shared by a group of people. Cultures are most often recognised by shared patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs and affective understandings. These are learned through a process of socialization. However, within different cultural groups, individuals are unique. Meaning is continuously constructed through human interaction and communication within and across cultural groups. Cultural learning is a dynamic, developmental and ongoing process for students and teachers. Cultural diversity in the student population has a significant impact on teaching and learning.

This guide draws on current literature on learning and teaching across cultures, on findings from relevant projects funded by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching and the Australian Learning and Teaching Council from 2006-2012. You can find full summaries of these projects in the Good Practice Report Learning and Teaching Across Cultures available at <http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-good-practice-report-learning-and-teaching-across-cultures-2011>.

This guide is one of a suite of Quick Guides on topics relevant to learning and teaching across cultures. Other guides are available from ieaa.org.au/ltac.

The Good Practice Principles: Teaching Across Cultures

This guide is organised around six principles of good practice for teaching across cultures. Each guide interprets the principles in practice.

Principle 1: Good teaching across cultures will **focus on students as learners**

Principle 2: Good teaching across cultures will **respect and adjust for diversity**

Principle 3: Good teaching across cultures will **provide context-specific information and support**

Principle 4: Good teaching across cultures will **enable meaningful intercultural dialogue and engagement**

Principle 5: Good teaching across cultures will be **adaptable, flexible and responsive to evidence**

Principle 6: Good teaching across cultures will **prepare students for life in a globalised world**

You can find a detailed description of each Principle at ieaa.org.au/ltac.

In this guide the focus is on assisting students to develop their English language skills. It may be used to check and affirm current practice and/or to identify areas for additional effort or action.

Principles into practice: developing students' English language skills

Principle 1: Focus on students as learners

Students enrol in university courses to acquire knowledge and skills in a particular subject. Many study in English for the first time. Studying in English (as opposed to studying English) requires more than a good vocabulary and the ability to apply grammatical rules. University students must use English to understand ideas, interact with others, express their thoughts orally and in writing, construct arguments and understand complex texts. An increasing number of students in Australian universities and on accredited programs delivered on and off shore are studying in English as an additional language and they do so in a new cultural context, encountering assumptions and expectations daily which are unfamiliar and often surprising. Cultural unfamiliarity is important because language learning and culture are inextricably linked; students must understand them both to make sense of either. In addition, all newly enrolled students are learning the discourse of their chosen discipline.

All students, each in their individual ways, need practise in developing discipline-specific and tertiary-level language skills. All students have responsibilities for further developing their English language proficiency during their study at university. Some will need additional support for months (and possibly years) to become confident and capable users of English for reading, writing and speaking.

Support for language development cannot be the responsibility of individual content teachers working in isolation. The ideal arrangement involves collaboration between content teachers, program designers, language support staff, universities as a whole and the students themselves. All need to work together to ensure students achieve exit-level English language capabilities. Without planned and coordinated support, some students might fail to acquire the English language skills which are necessary for communication in the discipline, for professional employment and for effective communication in a world where English is increasingly regarded as an international language.

What to look for

Students understand why ongoing English language development is important and what their responsibilities are

Students are advised of their responsibilities as language learners prior to enrolment as well as post enrolment. Teachers and other academic staff are aware of their role in the development of students' English language skills.

Teachers have a good working relationship with academic language and learning staff ([See A Quick Guide to Working With Student Learning Services](#)).

Programs are developed systematically to support students' English language development and to support language development in the discipline

Exit-level competency in English language is stated in graduate attribute descriptors. Expectations about graduates' English language competence are appropriate for the discipline, tailored to the level of the exit award and sufficient for life after graduation, either within Australia or as citizens of a world where English functions as a global language.

Programs are designed to take account of students' needs to practise and develop language skills. Designers recognise that not all language issues occur at the beginning of the program. Students use more complex language and tackle more extended tasks in reading, writing and speaking as the program progresses. Students are rewarded for improving in a range of language competencies.

The program team understands what entry-level English language scores signify and what they do not

Entry requirements are set to ensure students have the English language proficiency and academic literacy necessary to start learning in their chosen discipline. English language entry scores are a marker of threshold ability for reading, writing, speaking and listening in English. They do not indicate graduate-level competence in English.

Most language tests average all elements, giving them equal weight, thereby masking potential strengths and weaknesses in a student's language skills profile. Students may have underscored, perhaps because they were tired when tested. They will certainly be stressed by language demands on arrival at university and perhaps under-perform. In a small number of cases, entry scores are inauthentic and do not represent the named student's abilities.

Anyone who advocates for higher or lower entry scores does so from evidence

Increasingly students will enter from a pathway program, without a current test score.

Decisions to raise or lower entry requirements for English should be based on:

- tracking studies for the students admitted under current arrangements. Success and failure rates need to be inspected in detail
- presence or absence of remediation and support facilities (though in-session support should not justify lowering entry scores)
- the actual language demands of the program. Language specialist colleagues probably need to be involved in judging the course reading, writing, listening and speaking demands.

Writing reports is really difficult because sometimes we don't know how to organise our written English and how to research and how to present our ideas. That is the most challenging thing* (Student, PPS-43, p. 63).

* Quote from ALTC/OLT project. Please refer to back page of this guide for project details.

1

What to look for

Teachers teach for dual learning benefits: they teach content and devise learning activities for language learning

All students will need to develop language skills, but with different emphasis. Content teachers can work with language support staff and others to support:

- entry-level English users for language enhancement
- developing students' skills to communicate confidently and effectively with native speakers and with other multi-lingual English speakers who have unfamiliar accents or who are still developing confidence and competence in the language
- all students learning the language of the discipline.

Teachers stress the value of language and communication skills for study and for post-study employability within and outside of Australia.

The program includes multiple opportunities for students to develop and reflect upon their language skills

Language learning permeates all aspects of the students' learning experiences.

- Students encounter prompts on the importance of English language skills in, for example, course learning outcomes and as part of any post-university planning.
- Students regularly receive feedback and reflect on their language skills development which is included as part of assessment.

2

Principle 2: Respect and adjust for diversity

It can be especially difficult to decide how to manage the language needs of large groups of students. In any group of English as an additional language (EAL) speakers, there will probably be students for whom English is the only additional language they speak and who regard themselves as capable and competent users. Others in the cohort will have studied in English for many years but not used English to read, write or to discuss abstract or complex ideas. Some will have studied English to pass entry tests and examinations but never have learned in English. Within these and other groups, individual students skills sets will also vary. Some will be more able to read than speak (and vice versa) and many will lose confidence when stressed, tired or placed in unfamiliar situations. Program leaders and teachers must decide which language learning needs can and cannot be accommodated within the program and what requires referral to language specialists. Adjustments to teaching will need to change over the duration of the program as students move closer to graduation.

What to look for

Programs include activities to identify an individual student's language needs

Programs are organised to facilitate early intervention for English language gaps or problems

Activities are scheduled to avoid repetition; scheduling takes account of students enrolling late at the start of a program.

Diagnostic activities are not overly demanding on students' time and are embedded in discipline-specific tasks.

Feedback on language use is given in time for it to make a difference; it is specific to the individual and states what the student needs to do for future improvement and success.

Students are referred to language support specialists when they need more support than can be offered within the program or by an individual teacher.

A needs analysis tool is used to help students identify areas of strength and weakness and take responsibility for improving their English language skills. (CG7-453 provides a range of survey instruments focussing on different aspects of English language competence). This can also encourage students to reflect on their progress and set appropriate goals, perhaps with the assistance of learning support services staff.

*Use reflection based writing as a tool to develop students' writing skills (PPS-43, p. 88).**

What to look for

Across a program, there is clarity and consensus in setting assessment standards for English language competence

Provide a supportive environment for students by ensuring their contributions in class are valued – even if you disagree or don't completely understand what they say, thank them for having a go (CG7-453, p. 25).**

*Teachers provide support material like glossaries, definitions of key terms and annotated readings as pre-reading and support for lectures (CG7-489, p. 6).**

Reading and writing tasks are designed to be sensitive to students' varied English language skills

Examination and coursework design takes into account best practice in writing clear, accessible briefs. Where assessors are unsure of best practice, they consult language specialists.

Assessment briefs include statements on language requirements (for example: on grammar, clarity of expression, use of appropriate terminology, consistency of 'voice' etc.).

Markers discuss the difficulty of distinguishing between language capacity and an ability to communicate ideas and construct arguments. They share ideas on how to be less distracted by sentence level features such as spelling and grammar and instead, how to focus on paragraph level issues and on the overall organisation of the text.

Markers are aware of the many ways in which a text might be organised, only some of which will be in line with expected and valued organisational structures in the discipline. For example, a student may be used to using an inductive style of argument when the preferred format is deductive. Or the student may imply a view, perhaps by using a question or a proverb, rather than stating it directly. Both are acceptable approaches in many learning settings but may be inappropriate in their Australian studies.

Consensus on assessment standards increases when, across the program, markers agree when and where it is appropriate to look for underlying ideas and to accept unfamiliar organisational formats. Markers should also agree on when, on the other hand, they should reduce marks because students have used language and structure which is not valued in the discipline. See [A Quick Guide on Assessment](#) for further discussion of consensus on marking standards.

Markers hold expectations for accurate English grammar which are appropriate to the level of work and the values of the discipline. Requirements are likely to vary between disciplines.

Writing and reading tasks are reviewed for accessibility, either by teachers themselves or with the help of language specialists.

Teachers recognise the critical role of reading in helping students to develop their vocabulary, to learn discipline-specific discourse styles and to master academic writing.

Reading tasks are more accessible if teachers:

- monitor students' experiences with set texts. Where a text proves to be consistently inaccessible, a language specialist can help to analyse whether difficulties are due to the way the text is written or the complexity of content. If the former, it may be possible to identify equivalent and more accessible texts
- state which sections of reading assignments or lists are especially important for meeting learning outcomes or for completing a particular task. Inexperienced readers often appreciate being told the purpose for reading a text, how to achieve this purpose and what will be done with any insights gained
- take account of the speed at which some students will be able to read, especially in early months. If the amount of reading cannot be adjusted, then teachers can alert students who read slowly to the need to plan for sufficient reading time.

Writing tasks are more accessible if teachers:

- make requirements clear. Clear task descriptions state what the student must do and what will be assessed, including the relative importance of language
- assign word counts that are appropriate for the task rather than falling back on standard length requirements
- consider the number of sources required. Asking for fewer sources but used in more depth might achieve a similar learning result with more equitable levels of effort from students who are struggling with English and those who are fluent readers. Fewer sources can also help those mastering referencing and citation practices as some students will be unfamiliar with the idea of using ideas from texts rather than aiming for full text mastery
- state if proofreading and grammar checking services can be used.

As students progress through the program, writing tasks should become more complex and at all stages, complexity should be adjusted for level of study.

Where appropriate, teachers refer students to language specialists and writing skills specialists for generic guidance.

3

Principle 3: Provide context-specific information and support

Unless students have underpinning concepts and associations for the information they are being given, they will struggle to understand and remember it even if they know the dictionary definition of terms used. Tacit and implicit knowledge develops slowly and as it does, students' growing language competence will shape students' developing identity and language use. Teachers have a crucial role in giving information in ways that enhance the chance of it 'sticking', especially where information is crucial for success.

What to look for

Course and program documentation is explicit on language requirements and standards

Key information is provided in a range of formats: oral, written, online, through discussion, etc. Where written guidance is crucial for future success, discussion opportunities ensure students can check their understanding, know why it matters and where to find help.

Guidance on program procedures and processes is reviewed to see if it is written in as straightforward a way as possible. Where the language of the discipline is used, disciplinary terminology is included with care then explained and discussed as appropriate so that over time, students learn to use it and to understand what it means. Oral information is treated with equal care.

Teachers select text books and resources which offer global perspectives and which use accessible language.

Assignments and requirements state what essay titles mean and explain the tacit and implicit meanings of common verbs such as 'consider', 'contrast' and 'justify'.

Feedback to students on language issues is specific, selective and useful

Written feedback concentrates on key language issues rather than copy-editing or noting and/or correcting errors. Markers note instances of especially effective language use.

Feedback suggests how changes should be made and points the student to additional guidance on making future changes in, for example:

- the university's student services unit
- the university's website
- on line, where help that is tailored to disciplinary requirements and is easy to locate with a key word search
- study-skills books for students which are widely available in any university bookstore.

In high value work such as a thesis, tutors might rewrite one paragraph as an example of what is expected and provide a model to guide the students' revision.

Referral systems are in place

Referral systems are sufficient and are staffed by flexible language support specialists

Teachers and students use referral services regularly

Teachers and language specialists work together ([See A Quick Guide to Working with Student Learning Services](#)).

The best model of collaboration is 'best fit' for the characteristics of the student cohort and the content teachers' requirements. A range of collaboration models exist: from paired teaching at one extreme, to specialists running tailored sessions in several courses across a program, to the more detached approach introducing specialists then expecting students to access support as and when needs arrive.

4

Principle 4: Good teaching across cultures will enable meaningful intercultural dialogue and engagement

Culture and language issues are intrinsically connected. In interactive communication, for example, participants use verbal and nonverbal signals which are culturally specific and they must understand and work effectively with others who might be using different styles and unfamiliar ways of communicating. They will also need to learn to use the language of the discipline and to use valued and preferred styles of presentation and discussion in their discipline.

Teachers need to teach all students how to communicate effectively with others from diverse cultural and language backgrounds.

4

What to look for

Students have opportunities to use oral English

Interaction is a regular feature of seminars, practicals, fieldwork, etc. Social interaction precedes assigned tasks and students are expected to carry the insights gained in 'getting to know' activities into interactive course work.

Tutors and research supervisors devote time to supporting students' growing sense of themselves as articulate members of the discipline. Asking open questions and listening to the replies is often a key way to show students they are developing their oral skills.

Overt links are made between course-based activities, students' developing oral skills within the program and the importance of oral skills in their post-study lives.

*The teacher uses 'real world' problems with interaction embedded in the curricula to provide opportunities for students to draw on their own knowledge and experience (CG8-725).**

All students learn to communicate with others who have variable English language skills

Discussion between students crosses cultural and linguistic boundaries. Problems in communication are seen as shared rather than the sole responsibility of those for whom English is an additional language.

All students are supported in developing their own communication skills, including increasing:

- tolerance for different accents
- tactics to check for understanding (their own and others')
- self-awareness of what makes them easy or hard to understand by diverse audiences in different situations.

Students are, as far as possible, protected from negative or frustrating experiences when trying to communicate with their diverse peers. This is because such experiences can have long lasting negative effects on all students' willingness to engage and can damage their sense of self-efficacy (See [A Quick Guide to Managing Group Work](#)).

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Principle 5: Be adaptable, flexible and responsive to evidence

Teachers' reactions to combining the role of language developer and content teacher vary. Some are surprised but accept it as part of the role in universities where language diversity is the norm. Many are unsure how to proceed and more than a few resent the additional demand. Whatever their reaction, teacher support for students' developing language skills will require time and effort. Those who wish to be more effective in the role will need to regularly seek and review feedback from students and check on evidence of student success. This makes it likely that interventions and adjustments will have the most impact with the least possible demand on teachers.

What to look for

Student surveys seek feedback on language development in content teaching and from other service providers

Students have opportunities to comment on what was and was not helpful in their efforts to become better English speakers, readers and writers. They are also invited to say what additional support they might find useful.

Feedback is gathered at both program and course-level. Analysis of feedback looks at the program as a whole as well as individual courses.

Teachers seek guidance and support from language professionals

Program leaders ensure that planning and evaluation events include language learning support staff where appropriate.

Annual performance reviews address issues of language teaching skills and where appropriate, refer teachers for additional information and guidance.

Contact and access information for language support staff are widely disseminated.

5

What to look for

Teachers monitor their own English use

Teachers use feedback from colleagues and students to reflect on how understandable they are. They do not just use their own assumptions but listen to others' comments to questions such as:

Do I speak too quickly? Is my pronunciation clear?

Do I use too many metaphors, colloquial expressions or idioms?

When lecturing, do I pause sufficiently after significant ideas to give students time to think?

Do I signal clearly when I am changing topic or moving to a new section in lectures?

Do I invite students to tell me if they don't understand me?

Teachers guard against stereotyping or making assumptions about student groups by nationality and recognise the changing educational contexts from which their students come.

There are opportunities within annual performance reviews and professional development interviews to discuss and evaluate the issue of developing students' English language skills.

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Principle 6: Prepare students for life in a globalised world

English is a global language in worldwide use. Whatever students decide to do after graduation, it will involve communicating in English with others with a wide range of abilities to use English and levels of confidence and competence in the language. Students are likely to use English in employment, as global citizens and in their on-going professional development. How can teachers help students to achieve the language skills needed in a globalised world?

What to look for

Help all students see the importance of English language capability for their post-university life

Support for CV writing and job seeking assistance emphasises the language expectations of different international workplace environments.

Teachers are aware of and emphasise the linguistic diversity of the academy, the workplace and society.

Domestic students understand the importance and transferability of the language skills they gain at university. Students are able to describe their skills in interacting and communicating with those for whom English is an additional language.

Internships and/or work experience are available in global companies or local companies with international connections and students reflect on the variety of language skills needed in those workplaces. Insightful reflections are shared with other students.

Programs have clear links with careers professionals

International students are realistic about what employers in their home countries are likely to expect in terms of returning graduates' English. They are aware of the rising expectations amongst employers for language competence.

All students, especially monolingual Anglophones, are encouraged/required to reflect on the language demands of work placements and internships; to identify areas in which they need to develop their skills and to name strategies they will use to do this.

Related OLT Projects

CG8-766, *Investigating the efficacy of culturally specific academic literacy and academic honesty resources for Chinese students*,

<http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-efficacy-culturally-specific-academic-literacy-vu-2010>.

CG8-725, *Finding common ground: enhancing interaction between domestic and international students*,

<http://www.olt.gov.au/project-enhancing-domestic-international-melbourne-2008>.

CG7-489, *Evaluation of teaching and learning delivery modes in arts*,

<http://www.olt.gov.au/project-evaluation-teaching-learning-monash-2007>.

CG7-453, *Addressing the ongoing English language growth of international students*,

<http://www.olt.gov.au/project-addressing-ongoing-english-monash-2007>.

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