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Resource: The Torch or the Firehose

Arthur Mattuck

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Teachers From Other Countries

If this is you, your main problem is likely to be that you don't know there is any problem. You do everything just as you think it should be done, but the students don't stay in your class; well, that's their problem, not yours.

Wrong. In this brief chapter, we want to signal what seem to be the three main difficulties.

Non-native-English-speakers

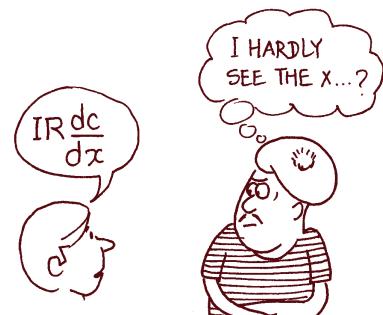
Despite what you may think, or students may say, it's not your accent, or your grammar, or your vocabulary, even though these may be poor. It's that you don't understand what your students say—you don't understand their questions, you don't understand the answers they give to your questions; you don't understand the comments they make. Your students feel they cannot communicate with you, grow frustrated, and leave.



In learning a language, auditory comprehension comes last. English is especially troublesome because of its huge vocabulary, and the fact that students are likely to use all sorts of colloquial expressions, run together in rapid and unintelligible speech. English-speaking students raised in this country (let's call them Americans, for simplicity) are often not used to talking to people whose first language is not English; they do not know how to speak clearly to them, nor do they know how to simplify their speech to standard non-colloquial English.

When you feel you can not make a good guess at what a student is asking, it is the hardest thing in the world to keep saying "I'm sorry, but I still do not understand you." *But you must.*

Read the chapter on Questions: follow its advice, constantly repeating the question until you are sure you have got it right. Find a classroom interpreter if you have to.



A Japanese instructor with the most rudimentary spoken English and virtually no auditory comprehension was given a recitation in linear algebra. We expected the students to leave almost immediately. But they didn't. A classroom visit revealed his secrets. He knew his stuff perfectly, he wrote everything necessary on the board, and all questions were either rephrased by a student who spoke each basic English word with digital perfection, or they were passed up front to him on little slips of paper. His students were so appreciative that they took turns helping him out with the words he was looking for and supplying all the missing articles (definite and indefinite).

This vignette shows you also how to solve your accent problem---if your board work is good, everyone will be able to figure out what you mean and take notes regardless of how impenetrable your accent is. In general, Americans are polite; only the most obnoxious will complain about your accent or try to correct your grammar. But in two words, the best quick fix for a bad accent is to speak slowly and loudly---if you do this, you will be understood no matter how strong your accent is nor how poor your grammar. If you want to improve your English skills, speak to an administrator in your department to see what sort of help---classes, language labs, audiotapes, videotapes, etc.,---is available. At MIT, check out the resources available through MIT's English Language Studies program at <http://web.mit.edu/fli/www/languages/ELS.shtml>

Level

A second main problem affects many teachers from abroad, even the ones from Oxford. You tend to misjudge the level of American students, whose prior education and background is not the same as yours. The subjects they have studied may be the same, but they are taught differently. In particular, though American students have many strengths:

- most don't have the verbal facility or literary background of a typical English student;
- most don't have the same familiarity with abstract concepts and abstract thinking of the typical European student;
- most don't have the self-discipline for sustained effort on an assigned task of the typical Japanese or Chinese student.

Over and over one sees teachers from abroad present material at too advanced or too abstract a level, fail to supply examples and applications, or assume work has been done just because it has been assigned.

Cultural differences

A third problem is that cultural differences can cause trouble if they are not allowed for. For example, American students will expect you to look at them, even though eye contact may be rude in your culture. Sleeping or eating in class does not usually show a lack of respect for you; most of your students would be surprised to find out you thought it did. Nor does calling you by your first name. If any of these things really bother you (they bother some American teachers also), you can ask the students not to do them. But it's better not to: rules should have a purpose, not just be rules. (You could prohibit excessively smelly food, since it makes everyone hungry, and likewise forbid snoring and the eating of celery.)

In general, the best way to approach these differences—of level and culture—is to seek advice from one of your American colleagues when anything bothers you or seems strange. Do this before you let yourself get angry with your class. Try to avoid being arrogant in their eyes, and remember that students are often badly overworked.



The first day

Pay particular attention to what you do, since a good start can forestall many difficulties. Write your name on the board. Tell them how to pronounce it (and whether they can call you by your first name or a nickname).

Acknowledge your accent if you have one; ask them to let you know when you are speaking too fast, or when they can't understand you. Tell them how you will handle their questions and ask for their patience. Try to gauge their level. Show that you care about whether they understand you. A little good will on both sides will take your class a long way. If you show that you want to try hard to be a good teacher for them, they will be generous and patient.

The TA was confusing and unprepared, but masked this with his inability to speak English.

The TA does not speak English. The TA does not understand English. "How many problem sets have we had so far?" elicits the response, "Test Wednesday."

