

Classroom Communication for International TAs and others

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Objectives: Session participants will learn ...

- A quick overview of U.S. higher education and expectations for TAs in classrooms
 - what to look for in effective communication
 - how to ask good questions
 - how to be an active facilitator in classroom
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Teaching in U.S. universities (such as Caltech) can be a rewarding experience for many graduate student teaching assistants (TAs) from different parts of the world. Yet it comes with some challenges, such as a lack of teaching experience and being a non-native English speaker. This session will go through several easy-to-implement techniques for effective communication and facilitation to help participants overcome the aforementioned challenges and to teach effectively.

➤ **An overview of U.S. higher education**

The U.S. classroom is often *learner-centered*, as compared to teacher-centered. In a learner-centered approach, the students assume responsibility for learning while the instructors (faculty and TAs) facilitate the learning process. TAs play important role in U.S. classroom in supplementing lectures through recitations and office hours, and facilitating active learning by encouraging students to directly participate and engage in problem-solving in the classroom, rather than being a passive listener.

➤ **Useful communication strategies**

Some basic tips are shared below, to boost your effectiveness and confidence in teaching, and to allow you to incorporate your educational background and personal teaching style.

1. Starting out

Give yourself time to: (i) know your students and American culture and (ii) explore and develop your own teaching style. Keep a sense of humor and make yourself approachable with simple ice-breaking techniques, such as introducing yourself and sharing your background on the first day of class. Remain open to the possibility that your interpretation of students' behavior may be different due to cultural differences.

2. Expectations

Clear expectations minimize misunderstanding and eliminate difficulties in the future. Some questions you may consider: "How students should interrupt you during recitation?" "How can student let you know when you are speaking too quickly, too softly or if the students don't understand a certain sentence/phrase?"

3. Effective communication

The key for engaging classroom environment is to maintain an appropriate instructional

pace. Set time parameters for each activity. Watch out for run-on sentences while giving explanation. In addition, many communication errors can be corrected before they interfere with student learning. Always check for pronunciation or spelling before lesson. Presenting ideas in several ways, writing technical terms on board or drawing concepts help students visualize and understand better. As for posture, watch out for body language, eye contact and speaking volume. Thinking positively, instead of focusing on your fear, calms nervousness and helps you speak with greater confidence.

4. Explain complex concepts

Writing an outline on the whiteboard and listing the main points of each recitation is a way to have clear idea organization, making your lectures easier to follow. A suggested formula to help tracking your lecture is: 1st, state each point, 2nd make the point, 3rd summarize what has been said, and 4th make a transition to the next point.

5. Check for understanding

Students may or may not feel comfortable asking you questions, so it is often better for TAs to ask student questions instead, in order to assess their understanding of the material or to address any general issues. Different types of questions, e.g. “open” and “closed” questions can help you achieve different course goal you have in mind. Closed questions are useful to test your students’ comprehension and retention on core concepts. Open questions help students to think critically on a particular topic. A simple open question like “How do you know that?” can prompt students to delve deeper by giving arguments/evidences to support their interpretation.

6. Facilitation Techniques

Below is a list of facilitation strategies that can be used to ensure the discussion runs smoothly and help to keep the group focused and engaged. This material is adapted from the book *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* by Sam Kaner, which we encourage you to read if you want more information.

- Asking for themes: ask the group to identify the common theme(s) that link the many conversations within the discussion together. It helps to preserve the focus when the group has gone off on tangents or is having many seemingly unrelated conversations.
- Balancing: ask a question to broaden the discussion by adding a new perspective. This is a good way to avoid the conversation being dominated by one idea or opinion. Ex. “Is there another way to look at this?” “Does anyone feel differently about this?”
- Calling for responses: ask people to directly respond to a topic/question. This can help to keep the focus of the discussion.
- Deliberate refocusing: tell the group to move on to a specific topic. This can help you to regain the focus of the discussion.
- Drawing people out: ask open-ended, neutral questions to have them expand upon their ideas. Ex. “Can you say more about that?” “What do you mean by....?”
- Encourage: open up a space for people to enter the discussion without calling a specific person out. This is a good way to avoid the conversation being dominated by one

person/group. Ex. “Who else has an idea?” “Is there an undergraduate perspective on this?” “Can I hear from someone who hasn’t spoken yet?”

- Intentional silence: wait a couple of seconds to give the group time to ponder on the question or gather their ideas before speaking. Silence can feel awkward, but it is also necessary!
- Linking: ask the speaker to explain how their ideas tie into the topic/theme of the discussion. This can be a good way to recover from a tangential comment. Ex. “How does your idea fit with...?” “Can you make a connection between...?”
- Mirroring: repeat what the speaker said using the same wording. This helps to ensure you and the speaker are on the same page.
- Paraphrasing: repeat what the speaker said using your own words. This helps to ensure you and the speaker are on the same page.
- Sequencing: allot a specified amount of time for each topic or part of the discussion. This can be a way to deal with tangents. Ex. “We will spend five minutes on X, and then we will move on to topic Y for the remainder of the time”
- Stacking: ask for everyone who wants to speak to raise their hand; give everyone a number and go through that speaking order. This is a great strategy to use when many people want to talk, and it ensures that no one feels skipped or have to compete to be heard. However, this does not allow people to immediately respond to others.
- Summarizing: at the end of one part of a discussion, restate the main outcomes before moving on. This helps participants feel closure and prepared to move to the next topic.
- Tracking: summarize all of the different conversations going on within the discussion. This can be useful when multiple ideas have come up.

More Resources:

- Eland, Alisa Jo, Sidney L. Greenblatt, and Michael Bruce Smithee. *US classroom culture*. NAFSA, Association of International Educators, 2009.
- “International Teaching Assistants Guide” Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/itas/>
- “International TA Handbook” UC Santa Barbara, Center for Instructional Development. <http://oic.id.ucsb.edu/international-ta-handbook>
- “Tips for Surviving as an International Teaching Assistant” by Metis Hasipek, Duquesne University. <http://www.duq.edu/about/centers-and-institutes/center-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-and-learning/surviving-as-an-international-ta>
- IDEA Paper #49: Effective Classroom Discussion, by William Cashin. IDEA Center, Kansas State University
- “Asking Questions to Improve Learning” from the Teaching Center at Washington University in St. Louis, <https://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/resources/refining-teaching-methods/asking-questions-to-improve-learning/>
- Question templates: <http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/questioning.html>
- Kaner, Sam. *Facilitator's guide to participatory decision-making*. John Wiley & Sons, 2014.