

## **Faculty Development for Teaching International Students: A Seminar Series Approach**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper describes and reflects on a seminar series in linguistically responsive instruction across academic disciplines, providing faculty in different institutions a model for faculty development in working with international students.

**Keywords:** faculty development, international students

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In the United States, international students comprise 5.5% of total higher education enrollment (Institute of International Education, 2018), and many are also emergent multilinguals (EMs) learning the language of their discipline along with disciplinary content. Instructors are often underprepared, however, when it comes to teaching EMs from diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, which can lead to concerns about fairness, grading, and cheating (Ferris et al., 2015). For faculty across the disciplines, the inclusion of EM students in university classrooms calls for enhanced knowledge and skills for supporting both language and disciplinary learning.

At the university where this faculty development project took place, faculty had recently expressed concerns about faculty workload, student preparedness, and fairness in assessment reminiscent of those reported more broadly in the literature (Haan, Gallagher and Varandani, 2017). To address the potential for more supportive classrooms, two of the authors developed a seminar series addressing culturally and linguistically responsive instruction. Because faculty development has the potential to enhance faculty attitudes and skills, change professional behaviors, build

collegiality, and support interdisciplinarity (Sorcinelli, 2007), we used this series to better prepare faculty with no previous TESOL training to work with international students, particularly those who are EMs.

The semester-long seminar series was comprised of six 75-minute sessions and included discussion, instruction, and reflection. We carried out the sessions in cooperation with the university's teaching and learning center, recruiting participants via a university-wide email invitation. The pilot seminar, capped at 10 participants, filled within a week and included faculty from the departments of art and design, communication, civil engineering, economics, English, languages, philosophy, and education. We recruited faculty via email invitation, and participants were offered a modest stipend for their participation. Although the invitation email included both full- and part-time faculty, only full-time faculty members responded, some tenured/tenure-track and others lecturers. Grounded in theories of linguistically responsive instruction (LRI), the goals of the seminars were to dispel second language acquisition (SLA) myths, address anxieties about teaching international students, and foster instructional techniques for supporting integrated content and language learning. Knowledge and skills required of teachers in culturally and linguistically responsive classrooms include a working knowledge of students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, processes of SLA and instructional applications, and cultural expectations of multilingual learners (Coady et al., 2011; De Jong & Harper, 2005; De Jong et al., 2013; Lucas et al., 2008).

### **FACULTY DEVELOPMENT SEMINARS**

The faculty development program discussed here was built on the conceptual framework described above, using each session to address a different component of LRI.

#### **Seminar One: The Role of Language in Teaching and Learning**

The first meeting invited participants to share their own experiences. Faculty's experiences working with international students varied; all of them had worked with some international students through the years, but they were attending the seminar series to improve their own interactions with students and better understand how to teach culturally and linguistically diverse classes while maintaining appropriate academic rigor.

This first session also aimed to increase language awareness by addressing the role of academic language, literacy and discourse, and genre in teaching and learning across the disciplines (e.g., Gee, 1992; Scarcella, 2003; Tardy, 2009) as well as providing strategies for thinking about academic language in their own courses. This topic was new for many of the faculty members—while they had thought about their students' English language skills, most hadn't considered how to integrate academic language instruction into their own classes. However, we did ask them to reflect on their own use of academic language and discussed it in later sessions.

## **Seminar Two: Students' Linguistic, Cultural, and Educational Backgrounds**

In the second session, we invited faculty knowledgeable about the predominant linguistic, cultural, and educational traditions of our university's international students. These invited speakers focused specifically on Arabic- and Chinese-speaking educational and student backgrounds. Both spoke about educational systems and cultural traditions in Arabic-speaking countries and in China. They also addressed English language tests in these settings and differences in writing and rhetorical systems between Arabic, Chinese, and English.

Participants were highly engaged, and these topics generated lively discussion in both this and following sessions. In fact, the cultural comparisons addressed in this meeting resurfaced in most of the following sessions.

## **Seminar Three: Principles of SLA and Academic Honesty**

In seminar three we discussed strategies for helping students avoid plagiarism and shared basic principles of SLA, including the differences between academic and social language, building upon students' first languages, techniques for promoting interaction and scaffolding language use, and the importance of creating a comfortable learning environment for students (Lucas et al., 2008). During the discussion on academic honesty and avoiding plagiarism, faculty referred back to the session on culture and shared beliefs and anecdotes from their own experiences. When asked how they were already applying principles of SLA and what they could do differently in the future, several participants shared concerns they saw as roadblocks such as large class size, student initiative, and difficulty they perceived students had accepting critical feedback. One wondered how this was different from teaching students with advanced English proficiency and another differentiated his role as a content rather than language teacher.

## **Seminar Four: Supporting Writing**

The fourth session focused on supporting academic writing; our goal was for participants to consider the process of writing in a new language and access support strategies. We addressed clarity in writing directions—writing not just as a tool of production, but also for reflection, synthesis, analysis, and creativity, and for becoming a part of a community. We also recommended strategies for responding to writing, both in terms of feedback and assessment. Participants related the material to their own experiences, offering their own anecdotes, insights, and concerns about teaching writing to international students.

## **Seminar Five: The University Context**

The goal of seminar five was to increase participants' familiarity with programmatic, co-curricular, and extra-curricular university resources for EMs and their instructors. We invited colleagues in the intensive English program, the teaching and learning center, and the writing center to share their expertise. These presenters

spoke on language proficiency prerequisites, international student writing support, international student learning-focused classes, and campus engagement.

After the presentations, participants discussed these university-initiated supports for international students and brought up what they saw as challenges yet to be addressed such as lack of class time to adequately support language learning, legal and instructional similarities and differences between teaching EMs and students with disabilities, and the difficult balance between grammar and content feedback with second language writing.

### **Seminar Six: Reflection and Feedback**

In the final seminar, we asked a series of questions regarding both how the participants would use LRI techniques in their classes in the future and any comments, concerns, and suggestions they had about the seminar series. These included asking which LRI techniques the faculty found most helpful, if and how they planned to use the LRI techniques in their classrooms, and if they thought any changes would make the LRI techniques more effective at the university level. Participants cited the information on culture, language proficiency testing, avoiding plagiarism, and supporting writing as highly useful.

### **REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED**

From these seminars, we gained insights into planning and facilitating faculty development in LRI that might be useful to colleagues doing similar work. First, while we anticipated the bulk of our focus to be on language, we were surprised by the extent of participants' interest in the cultural and educational backgrounds of their students. This could be due to the perceived ease of observing and acting on cultural in comparison to linguistic practices. However, while participants discussed ways to apply insights on culture, some simultaneously resisted by minimizing the extent of cultural differences between domestic and international students' prior cultural socialization to particular practices surrounding academic honesty and academic writing. In future LRI faculty development sessions, then, we will plan ample time for exploration of culture and anticipate challenging topics, while also making sure we have time to work through the ways that discussion of cultural difference might unintentionally support stereotyping.

The faculty members' interest in culture, as opposed to language, also provided insight into the perceptions of faculty as it relates to their role in developing the academic language skills of their students. By and large, faculty were interested in developing the pedagogical strategies to address perceived cultural differences, but were less interested in learning about how to support academic language development, viewing this as something that should be addressed by the university, either through stricter admissions practices or through extracurricular support services. In the future, we would spend more time addressing these beliefs, so as to make more of a space for LRI within the university classroom.

We also learned about how to facilitate faculty development with university instructors across the disciplines. Topics that generated the greatest interest such as

second language writing foregrounded the practical aspects of LRI. On the other hand, when we presented topics such as academic language and second language acquisition principles from a more conceptual perspective and asked participants to make connections to practice, uptake of information and conversation felt less robust. Like with professional development several of the authors have conducted with teachers in other contexts, it seems that university faculty development, too, may be best received when grounded in the practical tasks of teaching. We intend to apply this insight in future faculty development sessions by more consistently modeling and actively engaging participants in LRI tasks.

## CONCLUSION

The robust population of EM international students studying abroad in universities in the United States invites faculty and staff to examine support and inclusion practices both in and out of the classroom. In particular, it offers an opportunity for instructors to enhance their knowledge and skills for working effectively with the globally mobile population of students joining their classes. Our seminar series was a step in exploring how to foster faculty learning in this area and we hope that it may be a resource to others in the field. We invite others to build upon these efforts in a collective venture to improve teaching and learning with international students in U.S. universities. Such efforts are crucial steps in keeping pace with the 21<sup>st</sup>-century globalization of education.

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