

International Teaching Assistants and You



What this handout is about

This handout will help students interact more effectively with international teaching assistants.

Introduction

Almost 100 countries are represented at UNC, giving you a wonderful opportunity to learn how to communicate with people from all over the world. Some of your courses will be taught by faculty and teaching assistants whose first language is not English, and while this may present some challenges to you and your instructors, making an effort to ensure successful communication will give you an enriching educational and intercultural experience. Here are a few simple strategies you can use:

When listening to your TA

- Expect an accent, but be confident that you can get used to it. As you become familiar with your TA's particular speech pattern, you'll be able to understand it as well as you understand, for example, a heavy New York accent. This just takes a little patience and a positive attitude.
- Don't automatically assume that you won't succeed in the class because your TA has an accent. Your TA has expertise in the subject area and genuinely wants you to learn the material. Keep a positive attitude about the accent, and focus on how you can master the material.
- Prepare for lectures by reading the material in advance. Becoming familiar with new concepts and vocabulary will help you understand a lecture delivered with an unfamiliar accent.
- Focus on the content of the lecture, paying attention to what your TA is saying. Ignore the grammar mistakes or pronunciation differences that are noticeable but not seriously confusing.
- Politely ask your TA to slow down a bit if necessary, or ask permission to record the lecture so you can listen to it again.
- Politely ask your TA to write things down on the board or to post notes on Blackboard. Use this written supplement to make your own notes more complete.
- Double-check your comprehension by repeating a word or phrase, or by explaining a concept in your own words. This allows you and the TA to clarify any misunderstanding and to focus on the material you're struggling with.

- If something is confusing, be specific about what it is. “I just don’t understand you” gives the TA nowhere to start, but questions like “I didn’t understand the second point. Would you repeat that please?” lead to better clarification. Simply put, more specific questions get better answers.

When talking to your TA

- Remember that **you** have an accent too, just like native English speakers from England, Ireland, Australia, Kenya, Singapore, Zambia, or India. We all grow up speaking English, but we all sound very different from each other. Be kind to your TAs as they get used to various North Carolina accents. They really are trying.
- Speak more slowly and clearly, though still naturally. Even with excellent English, many international TAs have a hard time when people speak quickly.
- Emphasize the most important words in your question or comment. If your TA misunderstands, politely rephrase or repeat the question, stressing the key words a bit more.
- Use non-verbal cues, like gestures, facial expressions, etc. to help convey your meaning.
- Use visuals, draw diagrams, point to something in the textbook—use whatever you can use to illustrate your question and support the oral communication.
- Avoid slang and idioms your TAs may not be familiar with. English classes can’t teach street language as quickly as it changes, so be prepared to rephrase something. For example, the common slang expression “Get out!” doesn’t mean “Leave now!” It means something like “Really?!?” or “That is surprising!”
- Be patient. Let the TA pause for a moment to formulate a careful answer to your question, then use the double-check strategy above.
- Send email. Written communication can help your TAs understand you better and allow them to compose a clear response. Again, pay attention to the information and ignore the grammar mistakes that are noticeable but not confusing. If something is confusing, however, by all means, send a reply with follow up questions. Your TA really does want you to understand the course material.
- Take advantage of office hours, especially when the course is difficult. Have a list of questions written down that you and your TA can look at together.
- Be patient with the learning curve. All of your international TAs have achieved good English proficiency, but every new communication situation brings a new set of challenges. Remember that your TA may be frustrated by the language barrier too, so stay positive and work together. You’ll be glad you did!

Useful phrases

- “Let me make sure I understand this” (before you explain your understanding of the point)
- “Could I ask a question?” “I have a question about X.”
- “Would you write that down please?”
- “I’m sorry. Would you say that again?”

- “What I mean is...”
- “Could I come to your office hours tomorrow?”
- “Could I email you some questions?”
- “Thank you for helping me.”

Final thoughts

- International educational cultures are as different as international cuisines, and what we think is normal is influenced by what we’ve been exposed to. Keep this in mind if your TA doesn’t teach exactly the way you’re used to being taught, and try to be open to the new style.
- You can learn more about international TAs and help them learn about American undergraduates through the Graduate School’s “Preparing International Teaching Assistants Program” ([PITAP](#)). Volunteering just a few hours in a semester can make a huge difference to a lot of people.



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