

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO AT BOULDER
GRADUATE TEACHER PROGRAM
INTERNATIONAL TA MANUAL: A PROBLEM-BASED APPROACH
FALL 2006

INTRODUCTION

The Graduate Teacher Program's International Teaching Assistant (ITA) Network was set up in the Fall of 2004 to better meet the needs of international teaching assistants (ITAs) at the University of Colorado at Boulder. As graduate students, ITAs bear the responsibility of giving lectures, running recitation sessions, leading discussions, supervising labs, and carrying out other duties depending on the nature of their respective departments and fields of study. Although all teaching assistants strive to provide better learning environments for their students, ITAs face a multitude of challenges as they start actual teaching in American classrooms which are in many respects different from their backgrounds because of differences in cultural values, practices, and expectations.

The classroom challenges that ITAs face can be grouped into five broad categories: (a) linguistic, (b) socio-cultural issues, (c) classroom management, (d) methodological and (e) affective, as will be expounded in subsequent chapters of this manual. The ITA coordinators in the Graduate Teacher Program (GTP) organize and/or conduct workshops aimed at helping ITAs, providing a better understanding of the challenges they may face in their classrooms or recitation/lab sessions and ways of dealing with them. For example, on Saturday prior to the fall semesters, the International Graduate Teacher (IGT) Cultural Intensive is held as a part of Fall Intensive training. In both the fall and spring semesters, the GTP hosts a series of workshops for ITAs run by the ITA coordinators, other members of the GTP staff, and guest speakers. The ITA-network coordinators also attempt to talk to and conduct needs assessment among ITAs in order to identify what exactly the challenges, demands, and needs of ITAs are in addition to incorporating their personal experiences as ITAs into the workshops and into this manual.

The purpose of this manual is twofold: One is to provide some idea about classroom teaching in the American classroom for the new ITAs, and another is to provide resources for new and returning ITAs. This manual offers ITAs and/or graduate part-time instructors (GPTIs) basic information and guidelines to enable them to have a better understanding of:

- American classrooms,
- challenges they may face especially when they take teaching assistant (TA) or GPTI positions for the first time, and how to deal with them,
- roles and responsibilities they have as TAs and, GPTIs
- how they can make their responsibilities easier and more manageable, and
- how they can successfully balance their roles and responsibilities as TAs/GPTIs and as graduate students.

The manual is divided into four chapters and also has an appendix providing lists of resources for improving English intelligibility and CU Student Services that are essential contacts for international TAs/GPTIs.

CHAPTER I

First Time International Teaching Assistants (ITAs) and Graduate Part-time Instructors (GPTIs)

(Adapted from *GTP Lead Graduate Teacher Manual 2005*, Chapter 7, pp. 132-174)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Please reflect on and write down your answers to each of the following questions before you read the rest of the chapter.

1. What do you think is the importance of your services as a TA or as a GPTI?

2. What do you think are your roles as a TA or as a GPTI? What are the differences between the two roles?

3. What are some of the major differences between teachers/instructors in the United States and in your country?

4. When assigned as a TA or as a GPTI for a course, what are some of the things you should consider before you go to your first recitation or your first class?

5. What are some of things you would do in your first class or recitation?

1. Introduction

When international graduate students choose to study at the University of Colorado at Boulder, most of them come not only to do their graduate studies but also to assist the faculty in their respective departments. This could take either of two forms: as teaching assistants (TAs) or as graduate part-time instructors (GPTIs). (Some are also employed as research assistants, RAs, even though this is not the concern of this manual since RAs are not involved in teaching.) The contribution of TAs and GPTIs is of paramount importance to departments in particular and to the university in general. Their service is also very crucial to undergraduate students as well as to the professional development of the graduate students themselves. This chapter provides key ideas regarding the importance of TAs and GPTIs, their roles and responsibilities, tips about meeting classes for the first time and other additional ideas about the new environment for international students.

1.1 The Importance of Being a TA/GPTI

The positions of TAs and GPTIs are important on many levels within the university structure. As stated above, TAs/GPTIs perform a needed service to their respective departments, to undergraduate students, and to the university in general while serving a teaching apprenticeship with their future colleagues (faculty and more advanced fellow graduate students) which proves very helpful for their professional development.

1.1.1 To the Department

- ❑ TAs provide vital assistance to instructors or professors in basic teaching duties, specifically leading recitations and/or labs, and serving as a liaison between faculty and students.
- ❑ The TA's role as recitation leader or lab facilitator is extremely important, because TAs encounter students at the introductory level and are their first personal contact with their discipline. The experience that the students have with the TA may determine whether or not they develop enough interest in the discipline and pursue it further in future courses.
- ❑ Serving as a TA is a good way to learn how the TA's department specifically and the university at large work.
- ❑ GPTIs on the other hand supplement the faculty by actually serving as instructors of record usually for lower level undergraduate courses. When assigned to teach large classes, teaching assistants may be assigned to GPTIs or faculty to assist them with running recitation sessions, facilitating labs, and grading exams.

1.1.2 To Undergraduate Students

Many undergraduate students spend their first two years in large lecture classes. International teaching assistants (ITAs), similar to native English speaking TAs, have direct contact with students via recitations or labs and by holding office hours. The time spent interacting with undergraduate students plays a large part in determining how they view the entire academic process. Interactions between TAs/GPTIs and undergraduate students may be the deciding factor in the latter's choosing a major and, thus, a career path. This shows that TAs/GPTIs can have a profound impact in the future life of undergraduate students. In addition, the interaction between ITAs and undergraduate students during office hours may also broaden the horizon of undergraduate students regarding the culture and way of life of other people and countries the ITAs come from.

1.1.3 To the University

Well-trained TAs and GPTIs who perform their tasks effectively can contribute to improving the quality of undergraduate education at CU-Boulder. This is also a very important factor in retaining a diverse and enthusiastic body of students. Coming from diverse academic and cultural backgrounds, ITAs bring with them valuable teaching and academic qualities which can be emulated by fellow TAs or GPTIs to serve the university.

1.1.4 For Professional Development

An assistantship or instructorship provides a training ground where graduate students learn to teach, as well as learning about how the department and the university as a whole function. TAing for various professors allows for personal contact with those who are active in their field, and may be helpful in the subsequent job search. Even if a teaching career may not be what graduate students desire, they will gain valuable skills in time management and human relations which are applicable to other aspects of life. There is, of course, an immediate monetary benefit in the form of a tuition waiver and a monthly salary which makes the pursuit of graduate degrees at CU-Boulder possible.

1.2 Roles and Responsibilities

1.2.1 TAs' Basic Roles

- Recitations are usually held for one hour, once a week for 20-40 students in a class. Graduate students, faculty and sometimes advanced undergraduates may lead recitation sections. Methods used in recitations may include:
 1. summarizing the main lecture,
 2. recapitulating difficult issues and concepts covered during lecture,
 3. answering students' questions,
 4. leading discussions based on lecture and assigned readings,
 5. leading small group problem solving,
 6. organizing pair work or pair discussions,

7. solving problems on the board,
8. setting up student debates,
9. guiding student presentations,
10. helping students give project presentations,
11. giving quizzes,
12. going over answers to exams,
13. facilitating the preparation of drafts of student papers,
14. giving feedback sessions on student works
15. leading review sessions for exams, or
16. having guest speakers, and so on.

When using any of these methods, TAs need to be capable of providing essential help to their students, and must have a good understanding and mastery of their roles as TAs. In this regard, Ronkowski, McMurtrey, Zhuang, and Myers (1986: 5) point out, “Since the perspectives on TAing are as varied and individual as the TAs themselves, each TA must work out a suitable and comfortable perspective of the TA role that takes into account the TA’s individual personality as well as the expectations of students and professors.”

- In the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) disciplines, TAs lead labs, grade student papers, and hold office hours. In some cases, what the TAs have to do may be decided in advance by the professor or instructor, while in other cases TAs may be given more freedom to run their recitations or labs in ways of their choosing.
- TAs should attend all lectures given by their faculty mentor and be familiar with the material being presented. They should obtain all handouts and take notes as needed so they may help to answer specific questions students may have later during recitation or office hours. At times, TAs may not agree with some of the things the professor says when giving lectures or may not be clear about some of the things they are expected to do during recitations. In such cases, they should contact the professor to clarify questions and their responsibilities. Ronkowski et al. (1986: 4) write, “In

fact many professors believe that if a TA does not ask questions, it means that the TA understands exactly what is expected of him or her and no further information is offered by the professor.”

- ❑ TAs grade assignments turned in by recitation or lab students and participate in grading midterm and final exams with fellow TAs.
- ❑ TAs also hold consistent office hours each week and allow students the opportunity to arrange appointments in case they are not able to come during office hours. (See pp. 16-17 for more ideas about office hours, under section 1.4.3 “More Tips for TAs and GTPIs.”)

1.2.2 GPTIs’ Basic Roles

- ❑ As an instructor of record (this means being responsible for the course and students’ final grades), GPTIs prepare for and conduct classes (by lecture, discussion, demonstration, and/or whatever method is best suited to the course content). They keep all course records and turn in final grades to the Registrar at the end of the semester.
- ❑ As an instructor of record for large classes, GPTIs supervise TAs assigned to their course. They hold regular meetings with the TAs and hand out a list of their expectations.
- ❑ GPTIs may also grade assignments, or share or supervise this task with TAs.
- ❑ GPTIs design tests with or without their TAs’ assistance.
- ❑ GPTIs hold consistent office hours each week, and allow students the opportunity to arrange an appointment at other times when necessary. (Again, see pp. 16-17 for more ideas about office hours, under section 1.4.3 “More Tips for TAs and GTPIs.”)
- ❑ GPTIs keep all course records and turn in their final grades to the Registrar at the end of the semester.

Absences and Illnesses

If for any reason TAs or GPTIs are unable to perform assigned duties on a particular day, they should telephone the department chair, department administrative assistant, or graduate advisor immediately. A class may never be canceled without prior notice or

approval. If a substitute is asked to cover the class, the person must be approved by the chair and in the case of a TA by the professor or lead instructor. If instructors arrange to cancel their class, the students must be notified ahead of time so they can avoid unnecessary travel time and expense. The bottom line is that students have paid for instructional time, and graduate student teachers as well as faculty must meet this commitment.

University Requirements

Note that all employed graduate students, whether or not they are pursuing Graduate Teacher Certification, are required to attend a session on CU's Sexual Harassment Policy at the GTP Fall Intensive or later. Please see the GTP web site (Teacher training > Workshops/Intensives) for dates. A record of your attendance will be noted on your employer record in Human Resources.

1.2.3 The Dual Role of Graduate Students and TAs/GPTIs

Becoming a TA/GPTI presents new challenges for the graduate student in general and for international graduate students in particular. The dual challenge of delivering instruction to students (with backgrounds and expectations different from one's own) and making progress toward achieving one's advanced degree requires good time management and a high degree of professionalism. Course preparation, office hours, and grading need to be balanced against one's required reading, writing, and research. How this balance is achieved will be a little different for each department and for each graduate student, but there are many shared issues and experiences. It might be worthwhile to ask the advice of more advanced students who have successfully managed their responsibilities for teaching and who are making adequate progress toward completion of their degree.

Rapport with students

As a liaison between faculty and undergraduate students, TAs are in constant contact with undergraduates both in recitations and office hours throughout the semester. Although it is important that they remain open and approachable to students, appropriate balance

between closeness with students and reserve must be established. In other words, personal relationships with students should not compromise TAs and GTPIs roles.

Additionally, many international graduate students have other aspects of their lives to consider, such as their family (spouse/partner and/or children), a personal life, and at times, a part-time job outside the department in case they do not receive enough monetary support from their department. It is important that each of these responsibilities and roles be given the time necessary, which requires careful scheduling. It may be wise to designate one day a week, possibly Saturday or Sunday, as a non-academic personal rejuvenation day, in which you refrain from all teacher or student responsibilities. Relax, exercise in Colorado's great outdoors, and socialize with family and/or friends. Long-term effectiveness of international TAs or GPTIs and their satisfaction with the demands of a scholarly career rest on their ability to effectively balance all facets of their life.

1.3 Getting Started: The TA Assignment

The professor international graduate students are assigned to assist as a TA will apprise them of the particular duties and expectations the professor has for TAs. Nevertheless, there are some general issues which routinely arise in TA-professor relationships. The following checklist of questions, when addressed to the professor, will help TAs have a better understanding of the scope of their assignment.

- What are the goals of the course? (Reviewing the syllabus and text will also help TAs grasp the content and scope of the course. Reviewing old exams the professor used in previous courses will help them delineate the importance attached to the various themes and topics to be covered in the course.)
- How many class sessions (lectures) am I required to attend? All of them?
- Will I be required to present any of the lectures?
- What are my grading responsibilities? How much time will grading take?
- Will I be expected to construct exams or contribute exam questions for the midterm and final exam?
- Who is responsible for conducting review sessions?

- ❑ Are there any labs, and will I have to lead any of them?
- ❑ How many office hours am I required to hold?
- ❑ How much freedom will I have in designing/teaching my own recitations (highly structured with much supervision from the professor or free-form without much supervision)?
- ❑ What sort of teaching methods should I employ in recitations? Should I ask questions and lead discussion? Should I lecture and re-teach what the professor or instructor taught? Should I use a study guide to lead my recitations? Should I focus on issues that I felt were unclear during lectures or in the assigned reading? Should I get students to work in pairs or in small groups? What about employing debates, role-plays, and other more active and interactive methods of learning? Should I give them a quiz during every recitation?
- ❑ How closely should I coordinate what I offer in recitations with that of the other TAs assigned for the same course? How uniform should our content and approach be?
- ❑ Are students required to come to recitation? How much of their grade will attending and participating in recitation count for?
- ❑ How do you want me to handle argumentative or disruptive students?
- ❑ How should I handle suspected or clear-cut cases of cheating on exams, assignments, or projects? How does the Honor Code apply to recitations?
- ❑ What should I do if I have a student who seems to have personal (i.e. psychological, emotional, or family) problems?
- ❑ Will a faculty member ever observe my recitation? (Most likely the TA supervisor or lead graduate teacher of your department may do so.)
- ❑ What should I do and to whom should I speak if something comes up (an illness, or an emergency) and I am unable to conduct my recitation?

1.4 Meeting the Class for the First Time

1.4.1 Preliminaries

The first day of class is always a challenge for new TAs and GPTIs. Before going in to teach the first class, it is helpful to plan out the first day in some detail. All this means is becoming familiar with their classroom and having ready the things they need to take with them. It is always helpful to be prepared for classes in general and more importantly for the first day of classes so that a positive tone is set for the rest of the semester.

The Classroom

Before the first meeting TAs and GPTIs should visit the room to which they have been assigned. Some rooms in some buildings may be really hard to locate. Besides just knowing where the classroom is and the best way to get there, they would want to check it for the following features:

1. Is it a SMART classroom? Can you go online? Are all the cables available? Does it have wireless? Does it have an overhead projector? Do the media cabinets require keys?
2. How do you get ITS Support?
3. size and layout (consider your class activities)
4. number of desks for the number of students on your class roster
5. lighting (natural via windows and/or electric)
6. ventilation and cleanliness
7. adequate chalkboard, chalk, erasers, or white board and dry erase pens
8. potential noise and distractions from within or outside the building

Do whatever is necessary to accommodate their teaching style and create an optimal learning environment (e.g. rearrange desks, open windows, or close the blinds.)

Appearance and Materials

Instructors should dress in a style that is comfortable for their role. Most international students appear to do this which may be due to the highly formal nature of being a teacher in the culture of their respective countries. Also, the following materials should be taken to class the first day:

1. class roster
2. syllabus
3. texts & materials
4. lecture notes
5. pen or pencil
6. index cards or information sheets
7. water bottle

1.4.2 Suggested Outline for the First Class Meeting:

Instructors should arrive at least 5 minutes and enter the classroom when the prior class and instructor have exited. (Do not enter the classroom until the prior class and instructor have exited, unless the instructor from the previous class goes over her/his class period.)

They should write the class/recitation number and their name, the course title, the professor's name, if appropriate, office location, office hours, and phone number or email address on the board. This information should be listed in their syllabus as well.

Introduction

Instructors should introduce themselves to the class and give some background on who they are, where they are from, what drew them to their major area of study in the first place, their present interests/pursuits in the field, and to CU-Boulder. Students may be curious to have some knowledge of these issues.

The Students

There are several ways to get to know students. For starters, instructors can take attendance using the class roster. Depending on the department's policy, attendance at recitation may vary. But more importantly, students are dropping/adding the course or switching to a more convenient recitation section during the first two weeks of a semester, so it is important to keep track of the record until the class list settles down for the semester.

Another way instructors can get acquainted with their students, and students with each other, is to go around the room and ask them to introduce themselves—by name, hometown, class year, and maybe sharing an interest or a hobby that distinguishes them. Students can also write pertinent information down for the instructor on a student profile form the instructor provides (e.g. name, nickname, class year, major, email address,

preferred learning style, why they want to take the course, what they expect from the course, and prerequisites taken).

Students appreciate it when instructors learn their names, including the correct pronunciation. Instructors can indicate correct pronunciations to help themselves to remember right on the roster. Some names are ambiguous regarding gender. Hence it is helpful to mark ‘m’ for male and ‘f’ for female next to any such names. Matching names with faces by making a mental note of a distinguishing physical characteristic, such as eye color, glasses, hair color, clothing style, unusual hairstyle, and so on is useful. As of Spring 2006, TAs and GTPIs should be able to find their course roster as well as a photo roster of their students in the Faculty Course Toolkit provided by CU Connect, once they change their personal setting to “Faculty” after being awarded a TAship.

The Syllabus

TAs may decide to develop a recitation syllabus, distribute it and explain it to their recitation class. Everyone in class should have a course syllabus and understand the important points as well. Syllabi should focus on the following:

- a) Contact information (mainly name, e-mail address, office & office hours)
- b) Required (and optional if any) texts and materials
- c) Attendance policy
- d) Assignments – number and type of, and due dates
- e) Preferred format of written work
- f) Exam dates
- g) Make-up exam and assignment policies
- h) Grading and late work policies
- i) Extra credit policy (if applicable)
- j) Extra help and/or tutoring options (if any)
- k) Emergency policy (what constitutes an emergency and what to do)
- l) Cell phone policies (e.g., turning off the ringer while in class)
- m) Students’ personal needs such as disability support and accommodation (look for handouts and the university emails regarding diversity statement on the syllabus)

The Subject

Even if the professor or course instructor gives a general introduction to the course, it is worthwhile to introduce the subject and its importance or relevance to the students by way of definitions, examples, and applications of the subject in everyday life in the first recitation session. TAs may recapitulate what the professor said about the course and add their own ideas to raise the interest of the students in the course and motivate them to learn.

Even as the course progresses, it is important to motivate students in the course using different strategies. According to Ronkowski et al, “Some of the ways TAs help to increase student interest in course material include providing personal anecdotes, relating course material to the personal lives of the students, and of course, by sharing their own enthusiasm for the subject area” (1986: 17).

Time for Questions

Students often have questions the first week about the course, department, and even university policies and procedures. Issues such as drop/add, waitlists, textbook availability, changing recitation sections, prerequisites, relevance to majors, student computing and library support are commonly raised. TAs are not expected to know all the answers. They may need to ask the course instructor and/or the department chair and get back to the students with answers to their questions. TAs may also refer the students to appropriate support offices who can give them the help they need (see resources in Appendix).

1.4.3 More Tips for TAs and GPTIs

Credibility

Students will be watching TAs and GPTIs closely to gauge their professionalism and qualifications to be an instructor. As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, speaking English with an accent may give students a false impression about TAs’ expertise. If TAs’ mastery of the subject matter is not visible, their overall control of the class might

be jeopardized. TAs need to model and expect professional behaviors: preparedness, punctuality, enthusiasm for the subject, good organization, neatness of written work, and respect for all people and viewpoints.

Communicating In and Outside of Class

- Students often neglect to learn their instructors' names. Students may especially have a difficulty with the names of international TAs. TAs can solve this problem by writing their name on the board for the first several sessions or by wearing a nametag as some professors do. Also, be clear about how instructors want to be addressed (e.g. first name or last name). At CU-Boulder as in many other universities in the US, it seems customary for TAs to be addressed with their first names, although this might be contrary to the cultures from which many international students come.
- TAs can take roll during the first several weeks of class to learn students' names. After that, if attendance is required an attendance sheet can be passed around for students to sign with the date written at the top. This can be very helpful to prove the number of times students attended the recitation.
- Email is a great way for students to ask TAs questions and get a quick response. TAs should keep up with their messages. Also, communications with students should not be deleted until after the semester has ended. TAs may need to prove something they or any of their students said; saved messages keep record of their interactions. If necessary, crucial interactions can be printed and filed, since some students may come back for clarification of their grades after the semester is over.

Time Management

- TAs should maintain a good day planner, a wall calendar, or e-calendar; writing classes, office hours, meetings, and appointments down by the hour as well as the day.
- TAs should keep a copy of the university's *Schedule of Courses* and the calendar prepared by the United Government of Graduate Students (UGGS); both give a list of all important university dates, including final examination schedules. TAs should

refer to these when advising students about, for example, drop/add deadlines. It is also better to say ‘I don’t know’ than to give wrong information.

Handling Assignments and Grading

- ❑ If possible, TAs should have a stapler available when students hand in assignments and tests because many forget to staple their work together. Carrying some paper clips to hold loose papers together is also useful.
- ❑ It helps to use a red or colored pen for grading. Students appreciate brief comments on what is done well in addition to where improvement could be made rather than simple grades or points without justification.
- ❑ TAs should keep a bottle of “white-out” (correction fluid) on hand for any mistakes with grading.
- ❑ TAs should check a dictionary or spell check to avoid making spelling mistakes on students’ papers.
- ❑ TAs should keep an up-to-date grade book, marked with grades and absences, as a backup to an Excel spread sheet. Students’ names can be penciled in as roster changes during the first few weeks of class. Grade books are confidential information that should not be seen by students or anyone else.
- ❑ It is against university policy to return papers or tests by leaving them in a public place; they should be handed back in class.
- ❑ TAs should return any graded papers toward the end of a recitation or class to avoid causing students to be distracted from the planned lesson for the day. TAs should give some group feedback (such as grade range, their overall satisfaction with the students’ performance and what they would like their students to do better in the future, including clarifying concepts that seemed to trip up many students).

Office Hours

- ❑ During office hours, TAs can write on a piece of paper while they explain and illustrate concepts to their students; students often like to take explanations with them for future reference. TAs may want to keep a copy as well if other students might benefit from the particular illustration.

- When TAs work with students during office hours, they should get to know their students; where their students come from, what their major is, what career they intend to take, and so on. Students also may be curious about their TAs. Once trust is established, TAs can proceed to help students' problems or questions about the course content and help them deal with the material in a way that allows them to go home and figure out future difficulties on their own.
- Some of the most satisfying interactions with students occur one-on-one during office hours. TAs usually enjoy the time they spend with their students on course material.

Instructional Equipment

If TAs need overhead projectors, TV/VCR combinations, or other technology not available in the classroom, the administrative assistant or departmental secretary can help. If there is a media cabinet in the classroom, call Classroom Support (AV Experts) of ITS at 2-8470 to check out a key for the semester they are teaching.

- When using an overhead projector, colored markers enhance the layout. Such skills require preparation and practice beforehand. TAs should be aware of the basic handling of the projector including not getting in the way of the machine and covering the transparency with their hand.
- TAs can use the chalkboard or white board to write down important terms and points, or make diagrams. Effective use of board also requires planning and practice so that it looks neat and is logical for students.

Organization and Overall Suggestions

- TAs should keep materials in file folders or an expanding file with several slots. They should retain extra copies of the syllabus and assignment sheets for those who enter the class later in the semester, were absent on distribution day. It is wise to keep papers "to be graded" and "graded papers to hand back" in separate folders.
- TAs should know something about their own learning style and about the learning styles of their students so they can facilitate learning through varied approaches.

- ❑ Post-it notes are useful to jot down things to remember about an individual student, assignment, or important tasks.
- ❑ Midterm evaluations are helpful to gain information about how things are going and to give feedback to students.
- ❑ TAs should go to their colleagues (other TAs/GPTIs, faculty, or Lead Graduate Teacher) for ideas and support.

CHAPTER II

Expected Behaviors in the Classroom

A number of classroom behaviors appear to create challenges for teaching assistants in general and international teaching assistants in particular. If TAs understand these problems, specifically disruptive behaviors, in the classroom, they can better handle them. This chapter presents actual scenarios, specific suggestions, and teacher behaviors that help overcome the challenges.

2.1 Problems and Solutions

There are a number of problems that instructors or TAs may encounter in their classes and/or recitations (adapted from Kraut 1996: 105-110). Before reading further, in the spaces provided, give your reflections to each scenario and write down your suggested solutions briefly regarding what you would do to address the problems and how you would react in each classroom scenario.

1. During your lesson, students have repeatedly informed you that they do not understand many of your questions. They also said that the instructions in your exams/quizzes are not clear.

2. A student constantly yells out answers to your questions in your class/recitation even though you want all your students to participate fairly equally. Other students have also made complaints, as they are not able to participate.

3. A student complains to you that you don't specifically like her, that you are much stricter when grading her work, and that you do not give her the grade she deserves. She accuses you of bias against her and informs you that she will see the department chair about the matter if things remain unchanged.

4. A student participates actively in class, demonstrates an obvious grasp of the content material and strives very hard. However, he has a failing grade.

5. More than half the students in your recitation class have failed your midterm exam. Some students have expressed their frustration and anger at you. One student in particular says that he hates studying and learning because of you.

6. A student submits a neatly typed and bound assignment for your acceptance two days after the pre-set deadline.

7. Two students, sitting in the back of the class, are talking and chuckling, and this clearly interferes with your teaching and the concentration of other students.

8. A student uses headphones and listens to music while reading a newspaper. He pays no attention to your lesson.

2.2 Suggestions

1. During your lesson, students have repeatedly informed you that they do not understand many of your questions. They also said that the instructions in your exams/quizzes are not clear.
 - a) You need to ask yourself whether the problem is only with your questions or with the overall intelligibility of your English. If the problem is just with your questions, state them clearly and loudly making sure that they are brief and to the point, unambiguous, and whenever possible, personalized and related to the experiences of the students. If the problem is with the overall intelligibility of your English, see Chapter 3 (pp. 31-32) for ideas and suggestions.
 - b) If the complaint is about written questions and instructions (as in quizzes, exams and assignments), ask other colleagues/friends to read your exam questions and give you their ideas about the clarity of the questions and instructions. Sometimes, you may also ask the students how they would rephrase the instructions so that you can see things from their side.

2. A student constantly yells out answers to your questions in your class/recitation even though you want all your students to participate fairly equally. Other students have also made complaints, as they are not able to participate.
 - a) Tell the student privately that you appreciate his/her class participation and enthusiasm, but make him/her aware that other students also need to have the opportunity to answer questions.

- b) If need be, you may tell him/her that other students have expressed complaints about their inability to participate in class. You may also advise him/her to raise his/her hands to answer questions.
3. A student complains to you that you don't specifically like her, that you are much stricter when grading her work, and that you do not give her the grade she deserves. She accuses you of bias against her and informs you that she will see the department chair about the matter if things remain unchanged.
- a) It is important that TAs in general treat their students fairly and equitably both when teaching and grading students' papers. Making your expectations clear from the beginning is important. For example, you can tell them what they are responsible (and not responsible) for in the readings and lectures.
 - b) As much as possible, TAs and/or GPTIs should try to contain problems in their classrooms on their own. You need to know that you are responsible for dealing with student challenges. You need to know how to dissolve tension and handle problems early, before they escalate.
 - b) If students have any complaints, the best thing to do is being available to them during office hours (or by making an appointment if your office hours are inconvenient for them), then listen to what they have to say openly without getting defensive. If a student feels that you are biased in your treatment of students, you need to convince him/her that this is not the case and that you treat all your students equally. However, when students come up with such complaints, it is important to look into it, ask yourself about it, and if there is a mistake on your part, you need to accept the fact and correct your behavior.
 - c) With regard to exam grades, you need to make students aware of your rubric, preferably before the exam time, which will allow students to understand what you expect from them, and also bring up questions they may have in advance. If you are responsible for making exams, provide a study guide for exams to make your expectations clear to your students. Further, it is not fair to the students to test material in exams that you did not cover in the lectures or assignments. TAs need to have a clear rubric (and expectations) that they can use to grade students'

- papers. Students need to know the rubric in advance so that they have a good understanding of how they are going to be graded.
- d) If you are sure that you did not make a mistake in grading, stick with your grading and convince them by referring back to your rubric and expectations that were made clear in advance. It is also helpful to remind them that grades are earned rather than given. If you made a mistake, however, you need to admit your mistake, apologize, and correct it right away to give the students the grade they actually deserve.
4. A student participates actively in class, demonstrates an obvious grasp of the content material and strives very hard. However, he/she has a failing grade.
- a) It is possible that there are some students who do fairly well in class activities and assignments but may fail in exams because of the stress that the exam situation brings. It is good to bear this in mind in the first place. Exams are considered as ‘necessary evils’ by some educators. Others believe that quizzes encourage students to study. Students with persistent problems can be referred to a tutor or to the Counseling Center.
- b) The best way to help such a student is to talk to him/her personally and find out what the real source of the problem is. You may raise several questions to the student, some of which may be personal, to have a better understanding of the student and the situation that he/she may be in. You may also raise the problem itself to the student and listen to what he/she has to say about it.
- c) If you are convinced that the student has a good grasp of the content of the material, you may consider an extra credit option to help the student pass the course. However, the extra credit should be made available to all students in class.
5. More than half the students in your recitation class have failed your midterm exam. Some students have expressed their frustration and anger at you. One student in particular says that he hates studying and learning because of you.
- a) If the majority of the students fail in your course/class, something is wrong either with your method of teaching or with your method of evaluation. Thus, you

should perhaps review and make some changes either to your teaching strategies and techniques, or to your exams.

- e) There is a tendency for the vast majority of teachers to teach the way they were taught. Besides, teachers may have the feeling that their students learn the way they do. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that students have diverse learning styles and you should try to design class activities in your lessons and questions in your exams that may cater to different learning styles. It would be a good idea to use Kolb's learning style inventory as a guideline both for your teaching and setting exams. If you do not know what Kolb is or do not have a good understanding about it, you may contact the Lead Graduate Teacher in your department or the Graduate Teacher Program staff for ideas.
6. A student submits a neatly typed and bound assignment for your acceptance two days after the pre-set deadline.
- a) Unless there is documentation showing the reasons why the student couldn't submit the assignment by the due date or a prior convincing request for an extension, NEVER accept late works as doing otherwise would be unfair to other students who have met the deadline. Make it clear to the student that he/she has the responsibility to keep note of and meet deadlines.
 - b) It is important that you remain firm in your policies, including late submission of assignments, that you stated in your syllabus at the beginning of the course. Nevertheless, this doesn't mean that there is no room for flexibility especially when students come to you with convincing reasons and formal documentation.
7. Two students, sitting in the back of the class, are talking and chuckling, and this clearly interferes with your teaching and the concentration of other students.
- a) You may ask them to talk to you after class and tell them that you are unhappy about their behavior and their lack of consideration for other students. Tell them firmly that when they talk and chuckle in class, they not only miss what is being presented but also affect the attention of other students in the class.
 - b) You can maintain eye contact and those who are talking would feel that you are paying attention to what they are doing and then they behave accordingly. If this

does not work, tell them that they had better postpone their talk for a later time and pay attention to what is being taught now.

- c) Ask questions occasionally calling on them by name and draw them into the lesson. If they are unable to respond to your questions, they will learn that they should always pay attention.

8 A student uses headphones and listens to music while reading a newspaper. He pays no attention to your lesson.

- a) Talk to the student privately so as not to hurt or embarrass them in front of other students; make him/her aware that what he/she is doing disrupts not only your attention, but also that of other students. Approaching such a student individually helps to protect the student from being the center of your comment or criticism. Also doing so helps to build good rapport between you and the student concerned which makes him learn more attentively and seriously in your subsequent classes.
- b) If need to be (especially if the problem persists), you may tell the student in front of the class that he should focus on the lesson rather than listen to music and read newspapers while class is in progress since this affects the attention of the teacher and other students as well.
- c) However, along with the cliché ‘Prevention is better than cure’, such problems can be prevented from happening by making your expectations clear and by setting the ground rules for classroom behaviors at the beginning of the semester.
- d) It can also be avoided by assigning pair or group work that would make students engage in problem-solving activities (i.e., active learning techniques).
- e) If, despite preventative measures, students should engage in these kinds of disruptive behaviors, you need to manage and start mitigating such behavior by reminding and reinforcing your expectations and ground rules to the whole class.
- f) Sometimes, a simple eye contact helps students stop negative behaviors.

2.3 Additional Scenarios and Suggestions

Here are some other common complaints students reportedly make that may adversely affect your class along with suggestions for dealing with them.

9. You are giving us too many assignments, and your assignments are too hard. We've already had two tests this semester; I have other classes to study for, too; and I just can't do this much work for your class.

A good question you need to ask yourself is whether the complaints made are by a few individuals or by the majority of the students. If it is by the majority of the students, you need to give it a second thought and make the necessary changes accordingly. However, this doesn't mean that individual student concerns and complaints should be ignored. In fact, they should be addressed. One-to-one meetings with students can bring a lot of success in dealing with individual complaints. Most of all, if you clearly state everything at the beginning of the semester and in the syllabus for the course, most complaints can be avoided. It is also important that you see the course load with the level of the students: it should be neither too much nor too little work.

10. The questions on your test were not fair, nor were they clearly stated. The test was too long; we couldn't possibly finish it.

This is another common complaint which was reported by many international TAs/GPTIs. Preparing tests and exams is a very broad enterprise on its own right. It constitutes a very significant portion of teacher education and pedagogy. There are three issues raised in the above complaint: fairness, clarity and length. First, with regard to the issue of fairness, students complain that the test was very hard because it covered areas which were not well covered in class. The solution for this is pretty straightforward. You need to make sure that you test students on the basis of what was covered in the course. After all, the purpose of administering tests and exams should be clear; evaluation of your students' progress and that of your teaching. In other words, apart from their function for assigning grades, tests and exams should follow what was taught. As was stated earlier, if most students complain or fail in an

exam, what this implies is that there was a problem either with your method of teaching or with your method of evaluation, i.e., your exams or tests. Hence, you need to identify where the problem lies and put remedial options in place.

Second, with regard to the issue of clarity, it may be necessary for you to ask friends or colleagues to go through the exam or test and give you their views about the clarity of the instructions and the questions. Then you can make the necessary changes on the basis of the feedback you get from your colleagues.

The third issue concerns the length of the exam for the time allotted. The exam you set may not be really hard, but students may not have enough time to finish it. This will lead to failure for some students. Even though you want your students to be both efficient and fast, the skill and knowledge of students should not be determined primarily because of speed. This would affect the validity of your exams. You need to give them enough time to demonstrate their skill and knowledge of the material being tested. You need to properly time your exams. The exercises you give in class can be indicative of how much time students may need for a test or an exam. You also need to bear in mind that the exam situation itself will have its own impact on the performance of students. In sum, it is important that you give them enough time to answer the questions.

11. You should have given me a higher grade; this answer is not wrong; you should have given me at least some points for this answer because I have part of it right. I answered this most exactly the way my friend did, but she got more points for it than I did. I think I deserve a higher grade.

This is a global complaint made by students against TAs/GPTIs, native or nonnative English speakers. It may even apply to professors as well. Whenever there is a grading discrepancy on the part of the teachers, this makes students feel that there was a problem with fairness when grading students' papers. If the TA or the GPTI has a clear and objective grading rubric, such problems can be avoided. After all, the students cannot have such a complaint if there is consistency in your grading. If students come up with such a complaint, you can easily convince them that you treat all your students equally and grade them fairly. If for some reason there is a mistake

in your grading, admit it, apologize and make the necessary corrections. A brief face-to-face conversation can solve quite a lot of problems and create healthy student-teacher relations. It is, therefore, necessary to encourage students to visit you during your office hours whenever they have concerns of any kind, or to require that all students make an appointment with you during office hours.

2.4 A Sample Critical Incident

Scenario:

A young TA, probably 22 or 23 years old, had a lab/recitation section in Department X. Once, she had her students do an experiment in class to get some data which they could use later in the class. One student, in his mid 30s, expressed outrage that they would be expected to do an experiment in class because it was unethical. The TA explained that it was voluntary and invited him to leave the classroom for the duration of the experiment if it made him uncomfortable. He said that nobody in the class should do it, and that it was “outrageous” that she was asking them to do it, even if he left. Again, she explained that it was a learning experience and that he was welcome to leave if it made him uncomfortable. At this point he recanted and decided to stay and participate in the experiment (which was totally innocuous and not anything questionably unethical), but then talked through the whole thing, and probably ruined the results. The TA spoke to him after class and expressed her disappointment with his behavior; she also spoke to her supervising professor, who said to just wait and give the student another chance.

Questions:

1. Do you have any suggestions for her about how to handle this student specifically?
2. She feels as though the problem were one of authority and that the age difference might be making it so (that he doesn't see her as an authority figure). Do you have any suggestions for her about how, as a young TA, she can help to establish more authority in the classroom?

2.5 The Major Roles of an Instructor and a Teaching Assistant

Moore (1998: 4-6) suggests that teachers have three major roles: instructional expert, manager, and counselor. If properly attended to, these roles can serve as macro-solutions to the specific challenging classroom scenarios mentioned above. TAs/GPTIs need to keep these roles in mind in order to be successful in their classrooms.

2.5.1 Instructional Expert

As instructional experts, instructors and teaching assistants plan, make choices, guide, facilitate, and evaluate learning. They are expected to make decisions related to what objectives to set, what to teach, what teaching materials to use, what methods, strategies and techniques are best suited to teach the selected content, and how to evaluate the intended learning. It is important that instructors make sure they have good mastery of the material they are going to use for their class and make prior preparation for their lessons (Moore 1998: 4).

Students need to have confidence in instructors' knowledge of the subject matter. If students cannot see their instructional expertise, this may lead to other problems due to doubt on the students' part about their credibility as a TA/GPTI.

2.5.2 Manager

As managers, teachers or teaching assistants order and structure the learning environment. In this regard, they are expected to make decisions and take actions required to maintain order in the classroom such as laying down rules and procedures for learning activities, boosting the confidence and students' motivation, and making sure that the classroom atmosphere is convenient enough to start teaching before the actual teaching-learning process begins (Moore 1998: 5). It is important to remember that classroom management and classroom discipline are not synonymous, as the former is much more complex in its scope (see also 3.3.3 Classroom management in Chapter 3, p. 39). At the beginning of the course, as a manager, the instructor or teaching assistant should do the 'establishment task' pretty well as this lays the foundation for subsequent instructor-student relationship and the overall running of the class.

2.5.3 Counselor

As counselors, instructors and TAs need to be sensitive observers of human behavior though they may not be trained as counselors or psychologists. They are also expected to respond constructively when behavior problems get in the way of student learning and

development. Instructors and TAs need to bear in mind that there are students who always look for their guidance. It is also equally important that they have a thorough understanding of themselves, their motivations, hopes, desires as well as prejudices, which in one way or the other will have some impact on their relationship with their students (Moore 1998: 5).

Instructors and TAs should expect diverse student behaviors, be friendly and try their best to contain problems in their class before requiring help from others such as their department chair, graduate advisor, TA coordinator, or lead graduate teacher of their department. They may approach any of the above people for assistance as a last resort.

CHAPTER III

Classroom Challenges of International TAs and GPTIs

This chapter will focus on the challenges international TAs and GPTIs will likely to face in the American classroom. The challenges that international TAs and GPTIs face can be grouped into five broad categories: (a) linguistic, (b) socio-cultural problems, (c) classroom management (authority issues), (d) methodological and (e) affective. (Note that some of the issues raised here may apply to any TA or GPTI, native English speaking or nonnative. Yet the problems are more serious and more exacerbated among international TAs/GPTIs.) All five challenges will be discussed below; however, first give your reflections to each scenario in the next section “Problems and Solutions” before reading further.

3.1. Problems and Solutions

Please reflect on and write down your answers to each of the following questions before reading the rest of this chapter.

A. General Questions

- 1. What do you think are some of the challenges you might face as an international TA or GPTI in CU-Boulder classrooms?

- 2. Which of these do you think apply to TAs and GPTIs in general and which are specific to international TAs and GPTIs?

- 3. What would you do if you were faced with some of these challenges?

B. What would you do if:

- 1a) Students complain that they cannot understand what you say. In other words, they say that your speech is not intelligible or clear to them.

- b) Students ask you questions, but you cannot understand what they are saying. You ask them to repeat and still you cannot understand.

2. You want your students to participate in class and respond whenever you ask questions, but they neither participate nor answer your questions?

3. One student asks you questions persistently, which interferes with your plans. Other students appear to be fed up with him/her.

4. You intend to cover some material in a session, but the class comes to an end before you finish. You also face similar problems timing your exams.

5. Some students participate actively but they make errors when they give answers.

6. One of your students invites you to a party that s/he is hosting. S/he strongly insists that you join the party and tells you that other students are also inviting their TAs.

3.2 Some suggestions for the specific classroom scenarios/problems

1. (a) Students complain saying that they cannot understand what you as a TA or GPTI say. In other words, they say that your speech is not intelligible or clear.
(b) Students ask you questions, but you cannot understand what they are saying. You ask them for repetition and still you cannot understand..

This is probably the most serious complaint against ITAs and it could mainly be because of your language since you may speak English as a second or third language. Your accent may be problematic to the students. This can be a very frustrating experience both for you and your students. The following suggestions may be helpful.

- a) It helps a lot to tell students at the beginning that English is not your native language though that is pretty obvious. You tell them that you will try your very best to make sure what you say is intelligible, comprehensible and understandable to them. This way you show your students that you care for them and make the overall classroom atmosphere open to comments and question.
- b) It is important that you use every opportunity possible to improve your English proficiency. This could be primarily by socializing with native speakers of English or by going to formal instruction or training aimed at improving your English in general or comprehensibility in particular. Useful resources are (a) Clear Speaking offered by Speech, Language & Hearing Center, CU-Boulder, (b) the International English Center Continuing Education, CU-Boulder, and (c) the Talk Mastery Center in Boulder (see Resources in Appendix for more information).
- c) It is also advisable to invite one of your colleagues to your class to observe and to give you feedback. Preferably, you may invite the lead graduate teacher of your department to videotape your class and have a videotape consultation afterwards. The ITA Coordinator at the GTP is also available for videotape consultation. The videotape consultation is especially designed by the GTP to help you not only see for yourself how you teach and how you behave while teaching, but also to reflect on your own teaching on the basis of a set of questions by the Lead Graduate Teacher. Videotape consultation is not evaluative. The main purpose of the

video consultation is (a) to ask questions to guide you with your reflection, (b) to help you identify one major problem you would like to work on through the discussion, and (c) to help you come up with some suggestions that can be used to overcome the problem you identified. Thus, no evaluative comments are given as this is not the purpose of the videotape consultation. (You may visit the GTP web site at: www.colorado.edu/gtp or talk to the GTP staff for more ideas.)

- d) It is also good to know whether such a complaint is made by several students or just one. Sometimes, students are xenophobic and develop a negative attitude toward international TAs/GPTIs and may even develop the feeling that they cannot listen to what they say no matter how clear the English you speak may be. Such complaints by few students are not valid, but it is your responsibility to try to change the negative attitude to a positive one by doing what you can do on your part. For instance, you may talk to them during your office hours, be friendly in class, sometimes start your class with humor as needed, and so on. You need to make the students feel that you have the instructional expertise and understandable communicative and linguistic skills necessary to do the job.

2. You want your students to participate in class and respond whenever you ask questions, but they neither participate nor answer your questions.

If students neither participate nor ask questions, this could mean that the classroom atmosphere is not conducive to such kinds of student-centered activities. This is something that TAs need to establish at the beginning of the semester. If the class started with no such activities, it would be hard to introduce such activities later. As mentioned earlier, what teachers do at the beginning of the course will have a strong bearing on how things go throughout the semester.

3. One student asks you questions persistently. This interferes with your plan and other students appear to be fed up with him/her.

Similar to other students with disruptive behavior, the best way is to talk to the student individually and convince him/her that others in the class should also be given

the opportunity to ask questions. You may also need to tell him/her that other students have expressed their complaint about that. Besides, persuade him/her that you need to have enough time to cover the topic for the day. Yet you need to make provisions for the student so that he/she may come either during your office hours or some other time that is convenient for both of you. You may also try calling on students by name to give them enough opportunities to participate actively.

4. You intend to cover some material in a session, but the class comes to an end before you finish. You also face similar problems timing your exams.

This is also a common problem that many TAs and teachers share. Research shows that it is not how much you cover but how well you cover material matters most for the students. With this keeping in mind, you need to prepare for what is manageable for the time allotted. You cannot be sure how your teaching is going to be on any given day since teaching can be affected by various factors that are not under your control (e.g., the state of your students' physical and mental conditions). However, preparation is one crucial factor that is under your control for a successful teaching. It is a good idea to select three to four major objectives in a 50- to 75-minute class (e.g., Cyrs, 1994). In order to do so, you need to distinguish between main issues and supporting details, and further to try to include illustrative ideas (e.g., providing concrete examples and charts, engaging students into a problem-solving activity, providing mnemonic skills, etc.) that reinforce the selected main objectives. Once you have done your homework and identified the main issues and how to present them, it will be much easier for you to focus on the main issues if you start running out of time. It is also a good idea to reflect your teaching after each class to assess and evaluate your teaching. You may have some difficulty especially at the beginning of the semester, but you will get better as the semester progresses. Especially at the beginning of the semester, rehearsing what you intend to teach in a session can be helpful.

The same applies to your exams. You need to be concerned about the length and the time it takes for students to finish it within the time frame (i.e., you need to properly

time your exams). The exercises you give in class can be indicative of how much time students may need for a test or an exam. You should also remember that the exam situation has some impact on how fast the students perform in the exam. You should, therefore, not add an additional burden to the students. You need to give them enough time to answer the questions, which means that they are tested for their mastery of the content rather than for their speed. (See Chapter 2, Section 2.3 for more information about exams.)

5. Some students participate actively but they make errors when they give answers.

Error treatment is one of the main issues in teaching methodology, in curriculum and evaluation. Errors in these fields are considered healthy components of the learning process contrary to how they were perceived in the past. Hence, it is okay when students make errors when they answer questions. You need to convey this message to students from the outset that making errors is just a part of learning. What is more important is the way you handle errors students make as well as the way you respond to students who make those errors. When students make errors, it is always good to thank the students for their attempts and at the same time make it clear that the answer was not right. You need to be careful in making the comment that the answer was wrong. You may use different expressions instead of just saying it was wrong to protect the student who made the error from losing face. Sometimes, students may make errors due to misunderstanding your question. If that is the case, you need to restate your question for clarity.

6. One of your students invites you to a party that s/he is hosting. S/he strongly insists that you join the party and tells you that other students are also inviting their TAs.

It is very important that you establish healthy relationships with your students. Going to a party that your students organize is not an unhealthy event on its own.

Nevertheless, it is always good to be cautious about the motives and potential repercussions. (A reason for this could be that you are an international TA and it would be a good idea to interact with others and share something about your country and about your culture.) Some scholars advise TAs, especially those with no

previous teaching experience and near the age of undergraduate students, “to keep social distance between themselves and their students in order to maintain student respect” (Ronkowski 1986: 4). In addition, you need to know how late the party might last. Under all circumstances, you need to remain sober so that you do not find yourself in a compromising situation. If you decline for some reason, you need to thank the student for the invitation and say that you are sorry that you could not attend. In sum, it is a good idea to be cautious about socializing with individual students. It is also essential to avoid amorous relations with students (or faculty). When considering the above situation, you also need to be aware of the Conflict of Interest in Cases of Amorous Relationships statements under the CU-Boulder Discrimination and Harassment Policy. The general policy is to protect the CU-Boulder’s commitment to “maintaining a positive learning, working, and living environment,” and to avoid the conflict of interest between two individuals involved in a romantic and/or sexual relationship. The chance of conflict of interest greatly increases when an amorous relationship between two individuals are also in an unequal power relationship that involves the direct evaluation of one party by the other (e.g., a teacher and a student). Thus, the policy states that “direct evaluative authority” should not be exercised “in cases where amorous relationships exist or existed within the last seven years between two individuals.” For more information about the Conflict of Interest in Cases of Amorous Relationships Policy, go to the web site at: www.colorado.edu/policies/Personnel/amorel.html

3.3 Five Types of Challenges

In what follows, five types of classroom challenges international TAs or GTPIs are discussed in turns: (a) linguistics, (b) socio-cultural differences, (c) classroom management, (d) methodological, and (e) affective.

3.3.1 Linguistic

This is usually the number one challenge of international TAs/GPTIs. The main problem as reported by most international TAs/GPTIs and their students is intelligibility on the

part of the international TAs/GPTIs, that is, speaking clearly: nothing else matters if students cannot comprehend what the TA/GTPI says.

As a corollary to this, there is frustration regarding ITAs' difficulty comprehending what students ask. A related concern is difficulty in using rhetorical connectors, which are linguistic signals that indicate to students the sequence of material, for example; first, second, third, finally, primarily; adverbs like moreover, furthermore; etc. Practicing and planning material to use such verbal is useful to TAs who speaks English as a second language.

SUGGESTIONS:

1. The most crucial component of language learning is to be able to get opportunities to use the language outside the classroom. Educators in language pedagogy argue that using English as a communication medium for only academic purposes does not offer sufficient exposure to the language or motivation to learn it. TAs need to use every opportunity they have to use the language so that the proficiency in English can continually improve. Practice the language as much as possible. Use every opportunity at thier disposal.
2. International TAs and GPTIs can also go to English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in general and to courses aimed at accent reduction in particular. For instance, international TAs/GPTIs can go to special language programs designed to identify difficulties and improve comprehensibility and overall language proficiency. ESL classes are offered by the International English Center under Continuing Education here at CU-Boulder. The Speech, Language and Hearing Center is the Department of Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences of CU-Boulder, and also offers resources for international TAs/GPTIs. The Talk Mastery Center in Boulder provides private and group intelligibility instruction (see Resource in Appendix for their contact information).

3.3.2 Socio-cultural Differences

International TAs/GPTIs come from socio-cultural backgrounds different from the American academic culture. One aspect of the challenges they face is a direct outcome of such socio-cultural differences: establishing and maintaining rapport with students, i.e., being approachable as an international TA/GPTI and distinguishing between formal and informal kinds of relationships. International TAs/GPTIs may come from cultures where the relationship between teachers and students is usually formal while in the US it is typically informal. For instance, in the US students may address their instructors using their first names, which is uncommon in most other cultures.

Differences in socio-cultural backgrounds may also manifest in the way international TAs/GPTIs speak, such as being soft-spoken. International TAs/GPTIs may have difficulty in teaching with a sense of humor. They may come from cultural backgrounds where students' interruptions while the teacher is teaching are not tolerated or acceptable.

CU-Boulder, similar to many other universities in the nation, advocates diversity, yet it may be challenging for international TAs/GPTIs to handle cultural diversity in the classroom or to understand gender discrimination, racial issues, and dealing with American and non-American students.

SUGGESTIONS:

1. The best way to be able to learn the culture of a society is by keeping in touch with members of that society. It is absolutely important for international TAs and GPTIs to use as many opportunities as possible to mix with different people with diverse backgrounds in the US so that they can learn the cultural values and practices as they surface. This can be both in the department as well as in the neighborhood where they live whether it is on- or off-campus housing. There can also be many other opportunities organized by the International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) and the United Government of Graduate Students (UGGS).

2. The GTP organizes an orientation for international students who may become TAs and GPTIs. This is done in the fall semester and is called the “International Graduate Teacher Cultural Intensive.” This is conducted on a Saturday right after the Fall Intensive, i.e., a week before the beginning of classes. To see what is available at the Graduate Teacher Program for the resources, please check the GTP Web Site at: <http://www.colorado.edu/gtp>.
3. The Office of International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) is also a good resource. It is advisable to talk to ISSS advisors to see what options and opportunities international TAs and/or GPTIs can have. For more information, please visit their web site at: <http://www.colorado.edu/oie/iss/index.html>

3.3.3 Classroom Management

Classroom management refers to the overall structure and order of the teaching and learning environment. TAs and GPTIs are expected to make decisions and take actions required to maintain order in the classroom (Osborne and DiMattia 1998). This includes setting rules and procedures for learning activities, boosting confidence, motivating students, and making sure that the classroom atmosphere is conducive to learning before the actual teaching-learning process begins.

Some international TAs/GPTIs here in CU-Boulder reported that they have difficulty gaining and/or maintaining authority in the classroom. As stated above, this has to do partly with maintaining order, particularly dealing with/controlling/handling disruptive behavior. Some of the behaviors that international TAs/GPTIs consider to be disruptive are: students listening to music, reading newspapers, talking to other students in class during lecture, etc. When students do such kinds of behavior in class, it is more challenging for international TAs/GPTIs although it is problematic for native speakers as well. A related issue worth mentioning here is gaining and maintaining the attention of students on the part of the international TAs/GPTIs; they want students to follow their lectures more attentively and behave well in class. For instance, they cannot tolerate

students who sleep in class or do some other things (e.g., work on an assignment from a different class) while the class is in progress.

Easing tension in the classroom is another challenge of International TAs/GPTIs. Instead of dissolving the tension that has been created, some may add fuel to it, making things more serious and at times out of control.

SUGGESTIONS:

1. What TAs/GPTIs do in the first class/meeting with their students will have a strong bearing on how the class will proceed and what it will be like throughout the semester. As an academic responsible for the class/recitation, the international TA/GPTI has the responsibility to maintain rule and order in the classroom and make the environment conducive to learning. A whole class can be ruined because of one student's behavior and the way the TA/GPTI handle the situation. Stating their expectations in the first class as well as in their syllabus help them to lay the groundwork, which makes students know the expectations TAs and GPTIs have of their students so that students act and behave accordingly. It is also important to follow up their ground rules stated on the first day and in the syllabus when they first notice disruptive behaviors.
2. If there is a tension in the classroom, it is important to first admit it and try to understand the reason why the tension exists in the classroom setting in the first place. Recognizing and understanding conflict helps to resolve the tension, which is a very crucial component of conflict management.
3. Whenever problems arise, it is advisable for the international TAs/GPTIs to try to contain the problems on their own. They need to give the incidents a second thought and see if there are any ways they can do to resolve the problems by themselves. If they think that they are unable to deal with them on their own, they may look for assistance from others. For instance, they may approach the lead graduate teacher in their department first. This is preferable because the lead graduate teacher is more of a colleague and hence easier to approach than the faculty. If the problems appear to persist and be more serious, the graduate advisor and ultimately, the department chair

may also be contacted.

4. Active learning is the best way to avoid disruptive behavior. Plan pair, small group and large group activities on a regular basis.

3.3.4 Methodological (Typically concerning presentation of new material)

International TAs and GPTIs need to be equipped with the necessary methodological (teaching) tools that enable them to stand in front of students and run classes. Different people involved in the field of teaching have their own teaching philosophies that underlie their teaching and are reflected in their actual teaching. One of the challenges that international TAs/GPTIs reported is creating active participation and an interactive atmosphere in the classroom. More specifically, they want to know how to better involve disengaged students in class. A related problem is how to organize effective whole class and group discussions.

There are also other more general methodological concerns such as overall organization of lessons. This has to do with ordering of the material to be taught and timing their lesson and the sections and subsections under it. It is not just talking clearly but stating where in the lesson one starts and ends; that is, signaling the organization of lessons and thoughts, whether the TAs/GPTIs have come to the end of a section or end of their thought in a subsection, using intonation to signal that there is a pause after a thought, and so on. There is also the issue of question stems, i.e., knowing how to form questions and what kinds of questions to ask (content questions versus yes/no questions), and dealing with students who have persistent questions.

Other methodological issues involve determining the level of difficulty of exams and quizzes and dealing with a wide range of knowledge and abilities among students and trying to create a balance.

SUGGESTIONS:

1. It is imperative that TAs and GPTIs prepare well before they go to class. This helps

them to be confident enough in the class and more organized in their teaching. Students can easily recognize whether TAs or GPTIs are well prepared for their lesson or not.

2. Organizing group work as well as pair work is important since it allows interaction among students. TAs/GPTIs need to design questions that involve students in a pair or group activity. One can easily see the distinction between talking for 50 minutes on the one hand and coming to class with problems for students to discuss or solve on the other. Lecture puts more pressure on international TAs and prevents learning on the part of students, whereas interactive pair or group activities lessen the burden on the TAs while helping students learn better. Research shows that “the amount of learning occurring in the room is inversely proportional to the amount of talking coming from the front of the room” (Ford, 2004: 9). Hence, to make active participation in class feasible and engage students in class discussion, TAs/GPTIs need to come up with effective exercises and engaging questions to be done in pairs or groups.
3. It is also important to use visual support to help organize the material. Giving an outline of the lesson at the beginning is very helpful so that students see what they will learn in a particular session. Hence, telling students what TAs/GPTIs are going to do in a lesson, doing it, and restating what they have done need to be an integral part of lesson.
4. With regard to the issue of determining the level of difficulty of exams and quizzes, international TAs and GPTIs need to be aware of the purpose of their exams. The results of the exams should be not only for evaluating students’ progress, but also be informative for their teaching. Exams are an important part of the teaching-learning process. When writing exams, it is important to take a critical look at the material covered in class and what TAs/GPTIs want their students to do, which helps to determine the content and kind of questions to ask.
5. Students’ diverse preparation, range of knowledge, and ability are problematic to ITAs. They need to know that all students are not the same and that creating a perfect balance among them is not a realistic goal. What instructors need to do is design lessons in such a way that students at the bottom of the ladder do not lag behind and

students at the top do not get bored to create a balance. A wide range of knowledge and ability will, however, remain to exist among students and this is quite normal and natural.

3.3.5 Affective

Some of the major challenges that international TAs/GPTIs may encounter with regard to the affective aspect of their teaching have to do with proving oneself in their fields, i.e., establishing credibility and having positive self-esteem and self-confidence. Another problem in this category is correcting students when they give wrong answers, i.e., error treatment. International TAs and GPTIs also report that they have problems addressing students' demands for higher scores/grades than what they should actually earned. International TAs also point out that they hesitate to ask for help due partly to cultural reasons.

SUGGESTIONS:

1. It is important that international TAs and GPTIs have the instructional expertise to be in a classroom. They have the responsibility to plan, guide, and evaluate learning. They are expected to make decisions related to which objectives to set, what to teach, what teaching materials to use, what methods/strategies/techniques to employ to best suit teaching the selected content, and how to evaluate the intended learning outcome. Above all, international TAs and GPTIs need to make sure that they have a good mastery of the material they are going to teach and make prior preparation for the lesson. They should make sure that students have confidence in their knowledge of the subject matter.
2. The Graduate Teacher Program has a number of activities concerned with classroom teaching: the Fall Intensive, Spring Conference, Friday Forums, Monday Special Workshops, International TA Workshops, Special Technology Workshops, and Summer Series. A number of pertinent and timely educational topics are addressed in these workshops. By going to any of these workshops, international TAs/GPTIs can develop their teaching skills, and also pursue Graduate Teacher Certification. Please

go to the Graduate Teacher Program website to find the details of Graduate Teacher Certification: <http://www.colorado.edu/gtp> (Teacher Training > Certification)

A summary of questions regarding possible classroom scenarios involving international TAs/GPTIs

I. Linguistic:

- What do you do to improve your English in general?
- What do you do when you can hardly understand what your students are asking?
- What do you do when a student tells you that s/he does not understand what you are saying?

II. Socio-cultural

- Do you ever talk with your students before or after class, or when you run into them outside the classroom? How would you balance your being “approachable” and keeping their respect towards you as a TA/GPTI? Do you distinguish between formal and informal kinds of relationship with students?

III. Classroom Management:

- How can you prevent behavioral problems from happening in the first place?
- What do you do if a student reads a newspaper (or other unrelated materials) during your recitation? (Other examples include working on assignments from other classes, listening to music during lab or recitation, talking to other students, etc.)
- What do you do if a group of students (who usually sit in the back of the classroom) keeps talking among themselves, sometimes even chuckling?
- What do you do if you have asked the students to work in groups, and some of them are not doing the assigned task?
- What do you do if the students as a whole have this attitude of “we” vs. “you” (i.e., they look at you as if you were their “enemy”), which runs against the learning environment you hope for?

IV Methodological:

- Although you would like to have an active participation, what would you do if one or few of your students dominated the floor? Worse yet, other students seem to be intimidated and/or annoyed by what these few students do.
- What would you do if some of the students seemed to be more or less at the “beginner’s” level, whereas others are more advanced? How would you balance the course material?
- What should you keep in mind (a) when you organize your class and (b) how you present your material (organization of material, use of visual aids, etc.)?
- How do you signal when you are wrapping up one portion of your material and moving on to the next?
- What do you do in order to encourage active student participation?

V Affective & Socio-cultural:

- How do you take it and deal with it if a student expresses a doubt in your instructional expertise and knowledge of the course material you teach?

CHAPTER IV

Questions and Answers: Tools for Teaching and Learning

Introduction

Questions constitute a significant portion of the teaching and learning process for both teachers and students who use them for a variety of reasons. This chapter addresses issues pertaining to questions and provides a discussion of different kinds and levels of questions on the basis of Bloom's Taxonomy. As in the preceding chapters, although most of the issues discussed here apply to any TAs or GPTIs, native or nonnative English speakers, international TAs/GPTIs are expected to benefit more since there are some differences with regard to the function of questions and the ways they are handled in different cultures. Some common expressions that may be helpful for international TAs are also provided (adapted from Bloom, Krathwohl, & Masia, 1956; Pica, Barnes, & Finger, 1990; Ronkowski et al, 1999; and Sarkisian, 2002).

4.1 Questions for Reflection

Reflect on the following questions and write your answers in the space provided before proceeding to the next part of the chapter.

1. Why do we ask questions in the classroom?

2. What are some of the major differences between the ways teachers ask questions in the US and in your country?

3. At what stage of the lesson do students ask questions in your country and why?

4. What kinds of questions do teachers and students ask?

Teachers: _____

Students: _____

5. If you want students to ask questions so that you can identify their problems and help them, but they never ask questions, what could you do to encourage them to ask questions?

6. What do you do when students do not respond to your questions and how could you elicit answers from them?

4.2 The Function of Questions

Research shows that the majority of class time is used up by teachers' talk and that students generally remain passive listeners. However, teachers can change the classroom dynamics from teacher-centered to student-centered by asking questions (Moore 1998:

278). Teachers may ask questions to check comprehension or to foster student learning. Students tend to ask questions for clarification and elaboration of the materials or for making sure that they are on the right track. As such, questioning can be used as both a teaching and a learning tool. Classroom questions can be broadly categorized into three types: (a) questions to check understanding, (b) “test” questions (Pica et al., 1990: 36), and (c) questions to guide students’ learning. Each type of question will be discussed in Section 4.2.1 through 4.2.3.

4.2.1 Questions to Check Understanding

Both teachers and students ask questions to check understanding. This type of question is crucial and helps teachers to make sure that students are following along in class. If students manage to answer the questions their teacher asks, it indicates to the teacher that the class is following the presentation. If students are unable to answer the questions, teachers can elaborate further to make sure that students comprehend the intended content.

It is also important that teachers invite students to ask for help whenever they have difficulty understanding the material or are confused during lecture. Students may be quiet in class even if they may not understand the content, thus teachers might assume that students have understood what has been said if they do not ask questions. However, there is no correlation between students’ being quiet and their understanding what the teacher is teaching. Thus, teachers should constantly encourage students to ask questions. This is especially important in the first few weeks as teachers are establishing a learning environment that will exist throughout the semester.

Sometimes, teachers appear to ask comprehension check questions such as “Is it clear?” “Do you understand?” or “Are you following me?” However, unless such questions are used consciously, they may not actually mean anything. Teachers should never ask simple “yes” or “no” questions, but rather content questions: Which part of my explanation is not clear to you? What have you understood? Which part do you have

questions about? It is also important that teachers look around the classroom and give students enough time to process questions they may want to ask.

As was mentioned in the preceding chapters, international TAs/GPTIs may face difficulties with understanding students' questions. Whenever TAs/GPTAs fail to understand students' questions, it is quite normal to ask for repetition or elaboration, i.e., a request for clarification. Of course, they cannot try to give an answer to a question unless they fully understand the questions themselves. Common expressions they can use when they have difficulty with understanding students' questions are given below:

- I'm sorry, but I didn't follow your question.
- Could you say that again (slowly)?
- Could you repeat what you just said?
- Would you mind saying that again? (Pica et al., 1990: 35-36)

In case international TAs/GPTIs fail to understand even after the repetition, they may also ask other students to help them out. Experience shows that students are willing to give such help, especially if TAs/GPTIs have established a friendly relationship with their students. Alternatively, TAs/GPTIs may rephrase students' questions if at all they have a slight or rough understanding of students' questions. Such kinds of questions are confirmation check questions, which are used to confirm what the students ask. When TAs/GPTIs understand part of students' questions, they can say:

- What you seem to be saying is that...Have I understood you correctly?
- Let me restate what I think you are saying. You're suggesting that...
- Are you saying that...?
- Am I correct in my understanding that what you want to know is ...?
- Are you asking...?
- If I understand you correctly, you are asking... (Ronkowski 1999: 21)
- Did you say fourteen or forty?
- Did you want me to go over Question 26 or 36? (Pica et al., 1990: 36)

4.2.2 Test Questions

Asked typically by teachers, “test” questions (Pica et al., 1990: 36) usually seek a specific answer about the content of the material being covered and they may be used to test students’ short-term memory. In other words, their function is to display or to elicit known information and check the knowledge level on the part of students. They are useful for teachers to make sure students are keeping up with the basic content of the course. On the other hand, they are also limited as they rarely provide opportunities for students to go beyond the basic facts of course material. Testing questions can evaluate the *product* of students’ learning rather than guiding students *through* the process of learning by asking questions (Pica et al., 1990, italics added).

4.2.3 Questions that Guide Students’ Learning

Teachers can employ questions as a teaching tool specifically for the purpose of guiding students’ learning. They can use questions to help students make connections between what they are learning and what they already know (i.e., connections between new and old information). They can also use questions to make their students think on their feet: for example, applying the abstract concepts and theories to practical problems, coming up with original ideas, or evaluating existing interpretations of an event. Such questions can also promote more interactive learning in the classrooms, and should be incorporated into teaching. These types of questions are further discussed in sections 4.3.1 through 4.3.6, but the different levels of questions will be considered first.

4.3 Levels of Questions

As TAs/GPTIs prepare their questions, it is important to keep in mind that there are different levels of questions. For example, Moore (1995) divides questions into two levels: convergent and divergent. According to Moore, convergent questions “allow for only one [or limited] right response, whereas divergent questions allow for many right responses” (1995: 279). Therefore, questions that ask for concrete facts are considered

convergent, while questions dealing with opinions, hypotheses and evaluation are considered divergent.

While both kinds of questions are important in their own right, Moore further suggests that teachers need to use divergent questions rather frequently since divergent questions, allowing many possible answers, encourage students to think critically and engage them in an interactive learning process. Convergent questions, however, also have their own function, for example, specifically dealing with background information. Moore recommends that it is generally desirable to start with convergent questions that cover the basics of the material discussed in class, and then proceed to divergent questions.

Bloom and his associates (1956) also provided six levels of cognitive thought processes that are now known as Bloom's Taxonomy. The building of the taxonomy of educational objectives was carried out in an attempt to provide general help to teachers and other professionals who deal with curriculum development and evaluation. Bloom's Taxonomy, therefore, is a useful tool as TAs/GPTIs prepare and lay out the goals and expected outcomes for a class, for a topic, and for a course. They should be able to find a range of possible goals and outcomes in Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom et al, 1956: 2). For example, in one class their goal is mainly building a strong foundation of knowledge and facts, while in another class their goals are focused more on application of the knowledge they have just provided in the previous class.

Bloom's Taxonomy is organized with six levels starting from the basic level and building to more sophisticated processing of information: (a) knowledge, (b) comprehension, (c) application, (d) analysis, (e) synthesis, and (f) evaluation. It is considered hierarchical because the objectives in one level are likely to incorporate the objectives of the preceding level (e.g., the objectives of the comprehension level are built on the objectives of the knowledge level). Each level will be discussed in turn in the following sections (4.3.1 through 4.3.6) based on the original book by Bloom and his associates (1956).

4.3.1 Knowledge

Knowledge involves “those behaviors and test situations which emphasize the remembering, either by recognition or recall, of ideas, material, or phenomena” (Bloom et al, 1956: 62.). In Bloom’s Taxonomy, the knowledge level is considered a prerequisite (Bloom et al, 1956: 38) for the rest of the taxonomy levels and includes various types such as: knowledge of specifics that are considered the hard core of facts in each discipline, knowledge of conventions, knowledge of trends and sequences, knowledge of methodology, etc. The expected behavior in the knowledge level is mainly remembering and recalling the specific facts and information accurately as found in the original learning input, while in the other levels remembering and recalling are a small part of a more complex cognitive process. So knowledge questions tend to be asked through multiple choice questions, true-or-false statements, or selecting for one correct answer.

4.3.2 Comprehension Questions

Comprehension is the next level up in Bloom’s Taxonomy. Comprehension bridges between the knowledge level and the levels that come after the comprehension level (i.e., application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation). At this level, students are expected to demonstrate that they understand the material and make some use of the material or ideas presented. In Bloom’s Taxonomy, three types of behaviors are expected in comprehension: (a) translation, (b) interpretation, and (c) extrapolation. Translation behaviors require that students to give concrete and illustrative examples for abstract ideas or concepts and vice versa and to summarize or paraphrase abstract ideas or concepts in their own words. Students are also expected to read symbolic forms in their field (e.g., maps, tables, diagrams, mathematical formulas, architectural plans, etc.) and translate them into ordinary English describing what they mean. It also involves translating metaphor or irony into, for example, ordinary English. Students are also expected to demonstrate their understanding of the significance of a particular word in its context.

Translation involves understanding of specific concepts by themselves without worrying about their relationships in a larger picture. Interpretation, however, moves further and is concerned with the understanding of relationships among the parts and grasping larger and more general ideas of the concepts. Differentiating relevant from irrelevant information is another behavior expected from students in interpretation. In short, students should be able to demonstrate the understanding of a larger picture as well as the relationships among its parts for interpretation.

Extrapolation, the last component of comprehension, goes beyond what is explicitly stated and shown. Given the information, students are expected to consider its implications, to draw consequences and inferences, or to make predictions.

The questions that are used to check comprehension seek to elicit any of the aforementioned thought processes. Some of the common expressions that can be used to check comprehension are given below.

- Who can give an example of the relationship between supply and demand?
- How can you best define the term X in your own words?
- We have discussed the significance of the word X in a different context before. But what is the significance of the word X in this particular context?
- How can we explain the difference between A and B?
- What is the main point the author is making on page X?
- What kind of conclusion can you draw from this table?
- We don't have a data here, but given X and Y, what can you predict?

4.3.3 Application

The third level in Bloom's Taxonomy is application. At this level, students are expected to apply the knowledge and comprehension abilities they have acquired to a new problem or situation. What differentiates application behaviors from comprehension is that students are expected to make their own decision on what is an appropriate method to apply for solving a given problem or situation without guidance. At the comprehension level, the expectation of students' behavior is to demonstrate that they *can* use an appropriate method when the method is shown to them. On the other hand, at the

application level, they are expected to go through steps themselves before making an appropriate decision to solve a new problem. In other words, teachers may have guided students by asking step-by-step questions to solve a problem for the comprehension level, but teachers would present a problem itself and have students solve it on their own at the application level. This is especially relevant in the sciences and engineering as in dealing with mathematical problems or lab assignments, for instance. Application may also involve selecting a concept or skill that is familiar to students or learned in class and using it to solve an unfamiliar problem. Therefore, what is important to keep in mind when asking questions at the application level is that teachers would like to include some new element in relation to the situation in which students were initially introduced to the concept. Common expressions that TAs/GPTIs can use in order to ask application questions are given below.

- How can you apply this concept in a practical situation?
- What can you do to solve this problem on the basis of the examples we saw before?
- How can you address this issue in light of the theory we discussed?
- How can you apply the principle X in identifying the characteristics of a new social situation?

4.3.4 Analysis

Analysis entails breaking the material down into its parts and explaining the hierarchical relations of the parts of a whole. Analysis also involves both content and the form as to how the content is presented, whereas the focus of the comprehension level was on content alone. Analysis may involve distinguishing the facts from the hypothesis, recognizing implicit assumptions and/or biases, differentiating main ideas from supporting details and so on. Analysis can be used as a mere exercise in figuring out the organization and hierarchical relationships, but it is more desirable to use analysis as a step toward a more complete understanding of the subject matter and toward the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, synthesis and evaluation (Bloom et al, 1956: 144). For example, analysis of an argument leads to the evaluation of how well the argument hangs together, and analysis of forms and techniques leads to expressing one's evaluative

opinion on how well the forms and techniques delivered the intended content. Common expressions that can be used for asking such questions are:

- Identify the main facts (or assumptions) that led to formulation of the hypothesis X?
- Consider whether this is a causal relationship or other sequential relationship?
- How/why does the author use a particular form?
- What kinds of techniques are used to persuade the audience?
- How does X relate to Y?
- What distinction can be made about X and Y?
- What are the main issues here and what are the ideas that substantiate them?
- Which of these ideas do you think appear to be more biased and why?

4.3.5 Synthesis

Contrary to analysis in which material is broken down into its component parts, synthesis involves producing something original and unique using elements and parts that have been analyzed. This is the level of the cognitive domain in which students are expected to demonstrate creativity within a particular framework (e.g., particular problems, materials or theoretical framework). Further, students are expected to go beyond a set of materials provided by an instructor but to draw from various sources on their own, as they put the materials together to produce an integral whole. Because of the expected behaviors at the synthesis level, it is more likely that tasks involved in the synthesis level result in a broader learning experience, and help to motivate and engage students in learning. Synthesis level tasks involve skills in writing, organization, planning with a purpose, and formulating a theory. Common questions TAs may ask are:

- What is your hypothesis for this particular phenomenon? In what ways can you test your hypothesis?
- How would you plan to make a presentation in a given audience?
- What kind of implications can you make from the results and how can you integrate them in order to solve a problem?
- What predictions can you make based on the data?

4.3.6 Evaluation

Evaluation involves making judgments of the value of ideas, work, solutions, methods, materials and so on. Evaluation is placed at the last level of Bloom's Taxonomy since it

is a complex process that involves some combination of the expected behaviors from other levels. However, it is important to keep in mind that evaluation is not necessarily the end of the process, but can lead to the beginning of a new learning experience (Bloom et al, 1956: 185). Unlike opinions, evaluations are made with distinct sets of criteria and the judgment may be made based on a pre-established set of criteria. In addition, evaluation can be made from various criteria representing various perspectives on a phenomenon: For example, has the speaker been using the terms consistently? Do the conclusions reflect the observed data accurately? Do implications follow the results logically? Example questions TAs may ask are:

- What judgments can you make about X?
- To what extent would X be valid in such circumstances?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of using X?
- Compare and contrast X and Y in terms of their pros and cons?

4.4 Encouraging Students to Respond to Your Questions

As a TA or GPTI, sometimes they ask questions but students do not respond. This can be a very frustrating experience. On the other hand, the same students may always actively participate in responding to their questions, yet TAs/GPTIs would like as many students as possible to respond. Here are a few suggestions they can try in their classes to encourage students' participation.

Suggestions

1. TAs/GPTIs need to create a safe environment right from the beginning of the semester. Students may feel uncomfortable and embarrassed to express their opinions in class. TAs/GPTIs can minimize discomfort by assuring their students that they expect mistakes or oversights in students' responses to complex questions because errors are part of the learning process. It would be advantageous to remind students about this throughout the semester to make the class atmosphere more relaxed. Also don't hesitate to admit when TAs/GPTIs don't know the answer to something. Tell the students that they will look it up and get back to their students.

2. Sometimes, the only answer TAs/GPTIs get is silence. Silence doesn't necessarily mean that students do not want to answer their questions. It is probable that students are thinking and mulling over their answer in their minds. Moore (1998: 292) suggests, "If you wish to raise student involvement, you must learn to increase your wait time tolerance so that students will have more opportunities to think about their answers." It is important to wait for a while before TAs/GPTIs expect a response from students. In other words, they need to give enough time for their students to process their answers to questions. In case the silence continues, TAs/GPTIs may need to paraphrase their questions, because the reason for the silence in this case might have to do with the clarity of the question. After doing this, they again need to wait for some time looking around slowly, remaining calm and relaxed. It has been noted that "wait time" has positive effects, some of which are given below (Moore 1998: 293 and Pica et al, 1990: 40-41):

- The length of student responses increases.
- Confidence of students increases and failure to respond decreases.
- Students volunteer more appropriate answers.
- Student comments on the analysis and synthesis levels (of Bloom's taxonomy) increase.
- Speculative thinking increases.
- Unsolicited responses increase.
- Students ask more questions.
- Students exhibit more confidence in their comments and answers.
- As a kind of discourse marker, wait time signals the end of a presentation.
- Emphasis on problem solving and group interaction are characteristics of the American classroom, which require wait time.
- Wait time gives students a chance to catch up with what has been said, especially with ITAs' unfamiliar pronunciation.

3. In cases where there are few students who always answer TAs/GTPIs' questions, they can have those students answer some of their questions, but they should also encourage other students to respond. It is okay to say, "I know you have a great answer as usual, but I'd like to hear from someone else this time (looking at the student with a smile). Could someone else answer this time (looking around the

entire class)?" This sends a signal to the few students who always answer questions to give opportunities to other students. At the same time, it will let other students know that TAs/GTPIs expect everybody's participation in responding to their questions as well.

4.5 How to Respond to Students' Answers

Feedback TAs/GPTIs' give to students' answers can have its own impact on subsequent question-answer sessions and the class atmosphere in general. If TAs/GPTIs handle students' answers well, there is an increased possibility that students will actively participate in answering questions in the future. On the other hand, if students are not happy with the way TAs/GPTIs responded to students' answers, students may refrain from answering questions for fear of a negative reaction they get from TAs/GPTIs. By all means, avoid putting students down (including sarcasm), but be positive and supportive when responding to students' answers.

TAs/GPTIs can start responding to students' answers by summarizing what the students have said briefly (especially in large classes). This is helpful not only to make sure that they have understood what was said but also to help other students who may not have heard what a student said.

It is also important to make it clear whether the attempted answer was precisely right, nearly right, or not right. TAs/GPTIs need to give positive feedback or reinforcement for students' efforts to speak up in class. This could be done by verbally praising them and/or by giving non-verbal positive responses such as nodding and looking at them directly.

When the answer given by a student is not quite right or what was expected, TAs/GPTIs may respond by saying: "I see your point, but that isn't exactly what I was looking for," "I understand what you're saying, but it's not quite what's needed here," "Do you think so? I came up with a different answer," or "Close. Can you try again?" (Pica et al.,

1990: 44-45). Alternatively, TAs/GPTIs may also use “prompting questions” (Moore, 1998: 287-288). Prompting questions guide students to reach more appropriate answers by providing hints and clues. In other words, prompting questions are rewordings of the original question with clues. Moore suggests that if teachers resort to other students for a more appropriate answer or if they answer the question themselves when a student fails to provide an appropriate answer, it would possibly make the original student feel excluded in the present discussion as well as future participation. Therefore, a prompting question gives a better way to show teachers’ appreciation toward students’ participation and clarifying their mistakes while reinforcing the inviting learning environment.

Sometimes, it is a good idea to make it appear that it was teachers’ fault in phrasing their question not clearly. For example, TAs/GPTIs can say: “Maybe I didn’t express the question clearly,” “I guess I didn’t cover that material well enough,” or “I think I might have confused you” (Pica et al., 1990: 45). Pica et al. (1990) notes that one of the benefits of placing the blame on teachers is to maintain an interactive learning environment to allow students to speak up and make mistakes without fear of negative feedback and embarrassment. For more information regarding error treatment, please see Scenario 7 on p. 45 (Chapter 3) in the section on suggested solutions to several classroom scenarios.

On the other hand, when it is obvious that students are not prepared for class or not paying attention to questions, it is crucial to talk to them about the importance of their participation and contribution to the class. TAs/GPTIs need to remind students that they should fulfill their responsibilities in the partnership between the teacher and the students in learning (Pica et al., 1990).

4.6 Encouraging Students to Ask Questions

As mentioned earlier, it is very important that students be encouraged to ask questions in class. In American classrooms, however, students may interrupt a teacher to ask questions while s/he is talking, which in most cases is considered normal. In the cultures

many international TAs and GPTIs come from, however, asking questions in the middle of a class is usually not an expected behavior. Further, it is considered rather rude for a student to interrupt a teacher to ask a question while class is in progress. The tradition in many cultures is for students to wait until the teacher finishes lecturing, at which point the teacher gives students some time to ask questions. This usually happens toward the end of the class or at the end of a part of a lesson.

Sometimes, even if a TA/GPTI may encourage students to ask questions, students may not ask a question at all. What is the international TA/GPTI expected to do if students do not ask questions despite of his/her encouragement? How can s/he motivate students to ask questions?

That students do not ask questions may be interpreted in at least two ways. On the one hand, we may assume that the course content or material was pretty clear for students and it may be a signal for the TA to proceed to the next topic. On the other hand, it may be that students do not feel like asking for a variety of reasons, which need to be taken seriously. There are various reasons for students not to ask questions in the classroom. The first reason may be attributed to the learning style of the students. Some students do not learn by asking or answering questions. This is quite understandable and acceptable and TAs/GPTIs need to remember that it has nothing to do with the quality of their teaching. As a corollary to the first reason, some students may not ask questions assuming that their questions might be seen silly by others. Still others may have the inhibition of asking questions in general even when the classroom atmosphere is friendly.

A good suggestion for all these is for teachers to make clear from the outset and throughout the semester that students can ask whatever questions they may have. TAs/GPTIs need to tell students that there are no silly questions as such and that if some students are feeling confused it is very likely that others are feeling the same way. If some students are still afraid of asking questions in front of others, TAs/GPTIs may give them the opportunity to ask their questions by email or during office hours in person. If TAs/GPTIs find a question relevant to the rest of class and think everyone will benefit

from the question, they can bring it up in class without revealing the identity of the student who asked the question.

There are various ways TAs/GPTIs can encourage students to ask questions. First, they can depend on non-verbal cues, which constitute a significant portion of face-to-face communication. After they encourage students to ask questions, they try to be calm in a relaxed posture scanning through the classroom while maintaining friendly eye contact with the students. Also, TAs/GPTIs need to give students enough wait-time to form their questions. Processing information and forming questions take time, so TAs/GPTIs need to wait for a few seconds instead of expecting students to respond immediately. Moreover, they can motivate students by being humorous. For example, after introducing a difficult concept you can say with a smile, “Well, that was easy. Now you all understand that completely, right?” (Pica et al., 1990: 42). On a more serious note, TAs/GPTIs may also want to emphasize that they care about students’ understanding the material by saying, “This is a fairly difficult and complex concept, and I really want you to have a good understanding of it before we go on. So what about time for some questions?” (adapted from Pica et al., 1990: 42)

If students avoid an eye contact, and are not asking questions, TAs/GPTIs might try to suggest a specific topic saying, “What does X mean? Do you have any questions about X?” (Pica et al., 1990: 42). Generally speaking, asking “(Do you have) any questions?” does not encourage questions from students. Also when used frequently, such a question may not have any value at all. TAs/GPTIs may also try calling on students by name to ask questions and see what the pros and cons of it would be.

4.7 How to Respond to Students’ Questions

Whenever possible, it is preferable to give a brief, honest and accurate answer to students’ questions rather than giving a long-winded answer (Pica et al., 1990). Teachers’ priority should be making sure that the student’s specific question is answered clearly and succinctly. When the answers are unnecessarily long, they can confuse

students instead of clarifying their questions and negatively affect their class. Pica et al (1990: 42) point out the negative impact of giving a long answer as follows:

- They take time from you and other students who may have more questions.
- They can bore other students who already know the answers.
- Your answer can get buried under many words.

Moreover, it is advisable to avoid getting into a long conversation with a single student. If a student does not get the answer after a couple of attempts, s/he can talk to the instructor after class or during office hours.

It is not unusual for international TAs/GPTIs to fail to understand students' questions. If they cannot understand and hence cannot answer students' questions, they need to do the following:

1. Admit that they do not understand the question and ask the student to rephrase it (a clarification request);
2. Repeat the student's words as much as they understand the question, or rephrase the question themselves, and then ask the student if they have understood it correctly (a confirmation check); and
3. Ask another student to restate the question, without showing disrespect to the first student. It's okay to say "Perhaps someone else can help us by restating the questions." (Pica et al, 1990: 43)

At times, students ask TAs/GPTIs questions to which they do not have an answer. It is more proper to say, "I don't know" if they do not know the answer to a question rather than risking a faulty answer to it. International TAs/GPTIs may have come from a culture in which a teacher is considered as the sole source of knowledge, therefore s/he does not say, "I don't know" when students ask questions. In the US, however, students appreciate teachers who recognize and are honest about their limitations. In a similar line, it is appropriate to tell students that they will look into the question and get back to students during the next class. In such a case, it is crucial that they follow up with what they promise to do so that they will not ruin students' trust in them.

Notes

At the outset of working on this manual for international TAs and GPTIs, we hoped to provide new international TAs and GPTIs with some idea about classroom teaching in the American classroom, so that they would feel more confident and comfortable as instructors when they go into the classroom for the first time and stand in front of their students. We hope we have accomplished our goal. Teaching, especially teaching in a different culture, no doubt offers difficult challenges; however, we believe that it is very rewarding at the same time when we all take the challenges, continue to work on our teaching as the dynamic relationships between instructors and students evolve.

Another goal we had in mind was for this manual to be one of the resources for international TAs and GPTIs as they grow as instructors. From the perspective of that goal, we would welcome any feedback and comments from all of you. This manual is going to be our work in progress and waiting to grow in the future as we receive inputs from you and incorporate your comments and insights.

The Graduate Teacher Program hosts a series of workshops on regular bases as well as special workshops to share experiences and improve teaching. We strive for high quality in teaching and are here for you as resources. As you journey through the road of teaching in America, it is our wish that you would have the best experience possible. Don't hesitate to let us know if we could serve you better in any way. Good luck and happy teaching!

APPENDIX

Resources

The most common challenge international TAs face in the American classroom is language: speaking English clearly so that your students can understand (i.e., intelligibility). Below are some resources you can use to improve your English.

Speech, Language & Hearing Center
(Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences
Department, CU-Boulder)

Located in the Speech, Language &
Hearing Sciences Building
Contact Doug Langley
303-492-3066

www.colorado.edu/CDSS/slhs/slhcenter.html

International English Center (IEC)

1030 13th St.
(Located on the Hill)
Debra Dais & Charl Norloff, Co-Directors
303-492-5547

www.colorado.edu/ContinuingEducation/iec/index.html

Center for Talk Mastery

1800 30th St. 217A
Boulder, CO 80301
(Located in the Crossroads Gardens Bldg.)
Dr. Antonía Johnson, Director
(Tel) 303-499-5117
(Cell) 303-818-4579
www.talkmastery.com

CU Student Services: Where to Go & What to Do

In their intermediary position between professors and students, TAs often assume the role of friend or advisor to the younger, undergraduate students. TAs may be approached by students with concerns that do not fall into the area of the subject matter. Students may present personal problems, ask for academic or career advice, or need instructional services such as tutoring. The following resources are available to all students, undergraduate or graduate, on the Boulder campus. Keep this list on hand so you can refer students to the appropriate offices.

Academic Advising Center	2-7885
Academic Skills Assistance	2-2177
African Student Association	2-1354
Anderson Language Technology Services (ALTEC)	2-6217
Asian Pacific American Student Sources	2-5667
Association of Latin American Students (ALAS)	2-8567
Boulder County AIDS Project (BCAP)	303-444-6121
Black Student Alliance	2-1863
Book Store	2-6411
Boulder Community Hospital	303-440-2273
-- Emergency Room	303-440-7037
Career Services	2-6541
Coalition for Justice in Palestine (CJP)	2-8567
Counseling Services for students	2-6766
COURAGE (CU Rape and Gender Education)	2-2937
CU Upward Bound Program	2-6134
Cultural Unity Center	2-5667
Day Care Center	2-6185
Detectives at CUPD	2-8168
Disability Services	2-8671
Diversity and Equity - Office of	5-1332
Equal Opportunity Department	2-6706
Ethnic Studies Department	2-8852
Event Scheduling – UMC	2-8833
Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender (GLBT) Center	2-1377
Graduate School	2-7401
Graduate Teacher Program	2-4902
Helpline	303-449-5555
Human Resources	2-6893
Information Technology Services (ITS)	2-8172
-- Help Desk	5-4357
-- Classroom Support (AV Experts)	2-8470
-- Graphics (making slides)	2-2672
-- Media Production Services	2-1857
-- Scanning Services	2-2512/ 2-6700
Japanese Student Association	2-1095
Korean American Students of Boulder	2-1063
Learning Disabilities	2-8671
Libraries	2-7511
Library Information	2-8705
Minority Arts and Sciences Program (MASP)	2-8229
Move to End Sexual Assault (MESA)	303-443-0400
- 24 Hour Hotline	303-443-7300
Multicultural Development Team (MDT)	2-6766
Night Ride / Night Walk	2-3230
Non-Traditional Students	2-1536

Ombudsman	2-5077
Oyate Indian Club	2-8874
Pharmacy - The Apothecary at Wardenburg	2-8553
Police, Emergency	9-1-1
Police, CUPD (non-emergency)	2-6666
Police, Boulder	303-441-3333
Police, Boulder - County Sheriff's Department	303-441-3300
Program Council	2-7704
Ralphie's Resource Center	5-RALF (7253) and 5-RALPH (7257)
Sexual Harassment Office	2-2127
Student Affairs	2-8476
Student Conduct	2-5550
Student Financial Aid	2-5091
Suicide Prevention (24 hours)	303-447-1665
Tutorial Services	2-8761
United Government of Graduate Students (UGGS)	2-5068
United Mexican-American Students (UMAS)	2-6571
Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs	2-8476
Victim Assistance	2-8855/2-4307
Vietnamese Student Association at Boulder (VSAB)	2-5354
Volunteer Clearinghouse	2-7632
Wardenburg Health Center	2-5101
Wardenburg Student Psychiatry Services	2-5654
Wardenburg HIV Testing and Information	2-8704
Women's Resource Center	2-5713

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