

Universal Design for Learning: Classrooms that Support International and English Language Learners

Universal Design for Learning (or UDL) is a way to “improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn” (CAST, 2015). UDL considers the why, what and how of students’ learning.

While postsecondary classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse in many ways, international and English language learning students represent a growing sub-population. While universal design for learning (UDL) strategies can lower barriers and increase access for all learners in your classroom, these tactics can specifically help those students who may have to surmount cultural and language barriers in particular.

TEACHING STRATEGIES: *Not every strategy will work in every classroom, or for every subject area—find the ones that you are comfortable with and that work for your discipline and learners.*

ENGAGEMENT

You can provide international or English language learners multiple means of engagement in the following ways:

- Encourage opportunities to use learners’ own culture and experiences in the classroom -- use this cultural diversity to compare/contrast other cultures
- Broaden the examples provided to highlight applicability in a range of cultures and countries
- Approach your classroom with a pluralistic attitude instead of an ethnocentric one
- Have a knowledge of, and respect for, cultural differences; this may include asking learners what their traditions and practices are without asking them to represent for their cultural or ethnic group
- Provide learners with opportunities to share their cultural norms or experiences, but don’t single them out
- Offer learners feedback that focuses on mastering course outcomes or assignment objectives
- Provide a range of activities (e.g. individual, paired, group) for both in-class and out-of-class learning tasks
- Develop a “buddy system” for all learners in a class -- identifying a “go-to” peer may help students feel less intimidated asking questions, discussing issues, or inquiring about expectations/norms

REPRESENTATION

You can provide international or English language learners multiple means of representation in the following ways:

- Record class sessions/lectures for learners to review
- Provide access to translation materials
- Provide access to text-to-speech technology
- Offer definitions for vocabulary, key definitions, simplified terms, and examples
- Use visuals and icons when describing key concepts
- Use videos to illustrate key ideas or as supplementary resources to text-heavy content
- Provide learners with scaffolds to build their thinking, such as flow charts, outlines, or diagrams,
- Offer reading materials on key course concepts at beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels
- Be careful in using culturally-situated metaphors, sarcasm, or in referencing assumed knowledge
- Offer learners resources that may help illuminate culturally-different knowledge (i.e., OU Libraries’ Using and Citing Sources tutorial on plagiarism)
- Provide study resources for learners, such as study guides or old course documents (assessments, rubrics, syllabi) available electronically or on course reserve at OU Libraries
- Share study techniques / strategies to foster critical thinking over rote memorization

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TEACHING STRATEGIES *(continued): Not every strategy will work in every classroom, or for every subject area—find the ones that you are comfortable with and that work for your discipline and learners.*

EXPRESSION

You can provide international or English language learners multiple means of expression in the following ways:

- Provide learners variable time to submit work
- Provide learners variable time for exams
- Build in opportunities for feedback and revision
- Aim for mastery -- allow learners to attain course outcomes in several small assignments that build their knowledge and skills
- When appropriate, provide learners with alternatives to long written assignments
- Unless a course's learning outcomes include attaining grammatical and spelling mastery, limit the points assigned to these areas
- Provide learners with a range of assessment types, not just writing-based tasks

For additional strategies on approaching your teaching from a UDL perspective, visit

oakland.edu/cetl/ou-teaching-initiatives/