

## Readying ELLs for Higher Education

by [Miranda E. Wilkerson](#)

As teachers, we share a drive and desire to see our students excel, wishing, too, for them to experience success as they transition from ESOL to a degree program at a college or university—often at a U.S. institution. To be sure, the U.S. is the leading destination for international students to study and earn a postsecondary degree. In 2012, the United States hit a record high with 764,495 international students, a 5.7% increase from the previous year (Institute of International Education, 2012). Indeed, a significant number of these students were enrolled in or had come from intensive English programs.

Yet, successfully navigating an institution is not merely a matter of English proficiency but also a matter of adjustment to sociocultural norms and academic expectations. In the words of Andrade and Evans (2009), succeeding for these students “requires cultural and educational adjustment strategies as well as institution-specific adjustment skills” (p. 63). Many of us have made that connection conceptually but struggle with how to develop these skills in our students.

Starting small, and using extant resources, you can begin to incorporate activities in your own teaching that make a natural connection between common curricular objectives in ESOL and acculturation challenges. Each activity presented here is stand-alone and includes a set of interrelated tasks that can be modified to accommodate student needs at any level (e.g., high school). Activities together with learning goals for students and guidelines for teachers are provided.

### Activity 1: Course Syllabus Analysis

*Handout: Course Syllabus Analysis Form*

The goal of this first activity is to broaden student knowledge and grasp of academic departments and courses at a college or university.

#### **Task 1**

In the first task, students select and explore an academic department online, noting faculty who teach in that department.

#### **Task 2**

They then choose a course they might enjoy taking in that department and analyze its master syllabus. If master syllabi are unavailable, students should select a course that is being offered that semester. That way, they can request an electronic copy of the syllabus from the instructor.

Instructors tend to be responsive to prospective students, particularly if they provide some context as to why they are writing. (e.g., “I am requesting a copy of your syllabus as part of an ESOL assignment to learn more about courses in [discipline] at your institution.”) Studying the make-up of a department and a course syllabus within that department not only exposes students to terms and concepts common to degree planning, it also prompts them to consider ways in which the degree program and selected course might be exciting, yet challenging.

## Activity 2: Course Observation

*Handout: Course Observation Form*

The goal of this second activity is to grant insights into U.S. classroom culture by providing students with an opportunity to experience a class in their discipline alongside their domestic counterparts. While a class visit alone cannot dissolve classroom adjustment challenges, it is hoped that it will lead to an increased understanding of academic, social, and cultural norms.

### **Tasks 1 and 2**

The first and second tasks in this activity instruct students to research a department and select a course within that department that they wish to observe.

### **Task 3**

Next, students draft an e-mail in which they ask the professor's permission to sit in on the selected course. Because ESOL students at my college are matriculated, arranging course observations with faculty is not only feasible but welcomed. Even so, with little to no experience writing e-mails to professors, students require mentoring and guidance on this topic. Appropriately written e-mails make for positive first impressions on the professors, too.

### **Task 4**

The fourth task solicits background knowledge with respect to the course topic. The idea here is to help students relate their ideas and experiences to the course content.

### **Task 5**

Last, once students have attended the class, they are invited to reflect on the course, professor, and students in the final, culminating task.

For high school students, teachers may wish to arrange a full-class field trip to a nearby college or university for course observation purposes. Typically, group visits are organized through the admissions office. Working with admissions counselors has its benefits. First, they can help identify professors amenable to hosting high school students in their classes, relieving teachers of the pressure to help students coordinate these visits by e-mail. However, depending on course schedules and other criteria, students may have to observe classes in small groups and/or be willing to sit in on classes not directly related to their anticipated major.

The other chief advantage to working with admissions is that they can combine the classroom experience with any number of other campus activities or sessions, making for an exhaustive, yet interrelated, all-day event. A class visit, for example, could be combined with sessions on admissions, academic opportunities, or financial aid; a campus/facilities tour; and a one-on-one meeting with a professor.

## Activity 3: Professor Interview

*Handout: Professor Interview Form*

The goal of this activity is to build student confidence in interacting with faculty in their future area of study. Indeed, the value professors in the United States place on developing relationships with students is unusual for many ESOL students given the customary gap between faculty and students in their home countries. This is one example of an activity aimed at closing that gap.

### **Task 1**

First, and because students are often unfamiliar with academic rankings and what they mean, students complete a matching exercise in which they pair faculty titles (e.g., Assistant Professor) with their descriptions (e.g., a full-time faculty member with a terminal degree).

### **Tasks 2 and 3**

Students complete tasks similar to those described above in which they first research an academic department, including faculty who teach in that department, and then draft an e-mail to a specific faculty member requesting a meeting. As before, the e-mail will most likely require revisions prior to sending. For high school teachers arranging a full-class field trip, requiring an e-mail may not be plausible, especially if the admissions office is responsible for setting up interviews.

### **Task 4**

I tend to connect this task, in which students write their interview questions, with a minilesson on developing open-ended (as opposed to yes/no) and follow-up questions.

### **Tasks 5 and 6**

The fifth and sixth tasks help students prepare for the scheduled interview, which tends to last anywhere from 15 to 45 minutes. Students complete the final task, a self-reflection exercise, after the interview.

## **Concluding Remark**

It is impossible to prepare students for each and every hurdle they may face as they transition from ESOL to a degree program. What we can do, however, is develop in students an awareness of academic life, helping them set realistic expectations for college study. In so doing, we also provide our students with specific opportunities to use English and interact in academic communities. The above activities serve as starting points for how we might move in that direction and improve articulation.

## **References**

- Andrade, M., & Evans, N. W. (2009). Keys to persistence—International students in higher education. In M. Andrade & N. W. Evans (Eds.), *International students: Strengthening a critical resource* (pp. 43–72). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education; and Washington, DC: American Council on Education.
- Institute of International Education. (2012). International student enrollments by institutional type, 2004/05–2011/12.” *Open doors report on international educational exchange*. Retrieved from <http://www.iie.org/opendoors>

---

*Miranda E. Wilkerson* is assistant professor and coordinator of Columbia College of Missouri's ESOL Program. She earned her PhD in German applied linguistics/second language acquisition from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and two certificates (TESOL Core Certificate and TESOL's ELT Leadership Management) from TESOL International Association. Prior to her current position, Miranda trained teachers in Ukraine as a Peace Corps volunteer, directed the German minor at Western Illinois University, and taught English in Austria.