Internationalization of college classrooms challenges international instructors, students, and their relationships. This chapter addresses these challenges and offers strategies for overcoming them.

Being an Interculturally Competent Instructor in the United States: Issues of Classroom Dynamics and Appropriateness, and Recommendations for International Instructors

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During the last two decades an increasing number of international faculty specializing in different disciplines have been hired by U.S. institutions of higher education. Most of these instructors have been college educated in their native countries but have come to the United States for graduate studies and then earned doctoral degrees from U.S. institutions. Although some of them return to their places of origin, many remain in this country and follow academic careers at teaching or research universities (Bresnahan and Kim, 1993; MacLennan, 2002). At the macrolevel, the absorption of this specialized workforce contributes to globalization in education. At the microlevel, it enhances the internationalization of college classrooms in the United States and brings other practical implications. This chapter focuses on the microlevel, the internationalization of college classrooms in the United States—already a common phenomenon in Europe and Australia.

Several questions come to mind when one ponders the internationalization process and the intercultural relations embedded in it. On the one hand, are U.S. students aware of the need to become prepared to interact and work in an international community? It appears that our students are
not aware of the need for competence in intercultural communication or to acquire an education that will equip them to become effective leaders in the global community. McGray (2006) asserts that the culprit of this intercultural incompetence is the provincialism of our school system and curriculum. Further, he mentions President George W. Bush’s 2006 concerns and efforts to review previous government reports such as *Strength Through Wisdom* (President’s Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies, 1979) with the possibility of reconsidering implementation of foreign language programs and international experiences as crucial to students’ education, beginning in elementary school. On the other hand, are international instructors interpersonally and pedagogically equipped to work with our college students? What challenges do they face when interacting with their students? What do they need to know in terms of strategies to foster a classroom climate that is conducive to learning? Throughout the chapter I discuss intercultural and interpersonal challenges emerging from the internationalization of our classroom process, and I suggest ways in which instructors can productively deal with those challenges.

### Challenges to Globalization and the International Faculty Experience

Bringing globalization to the American classroom challenges the educational system, international instructors, and students. This process will take time and requires curriculum change beginning in elementary or middle school. Without global awareness, a myopic view of the world and discomfort with the unknown will prevail. This section addresses three themes: (1) students’ naïveté and lack of interest, (2) their difficulty in accepting nonnative instructors, and (3) students’ perceptions of instructors’ effectiveness.

**Naïveté and Lack of Interest.** Naïveté and lack of interest are prompted by a curriculum that minimizes world issues, thus becoming a stumbling block to awareness of world citizenship (McGray, 2006; Otten, 2003). An example of this outcome occurred in 2001 in one of my graduate classes at a Midwestern university. I remember vividly the students’ apathy concerning any need to be aware that not all people around the globe are American sympathizers. To my surprise, a female graduate student expressed in class her belief that “Americans are generally loved and respected abroad”—a belief apparently held by most of the students. That attitude changed abruptly, however, when five months later we all saw in the media the horrifying images of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C.

**Receptivity and Acceptance.** Bringing international issues and people to our classrooms is even more challenging when we face students’ resistance to and lack of curiosity about issues unfamiliar to them. One example is the level of receptivity to and acceptance of nonnative instructors, many of whom are teaching English as a second language. Rubin and Smith (1990) found that teachers’ ethnicity and choice of topic were more impor-
tant determinants of undergraduates’ attitudes than accentedness. It appears that many of the negative behaviors of undergraduates toward international teaching assistants (ITAs) tend to continue when these international students stay in the United States and follow academic careers.

What are the predictors of receptivity and resistance to ITAs and other international faculty members? Bresnahan and Kim (1993) assert that the accentedness variable by itself fails to explain why some students are receptive to international instructors and others are not. They found that two personality traits, authoritarianism and dogmatism, were strong predictors of low receptivity to internationals. Authoritarians embrace uncritical acceptance of the status quo and see outside interference as a threat to maintenance of lifestyle. Dogmatic personalities have low tolerance for ambiguity and feel uncomfortable with internationals.

Moreover, Caucasian students rated Asian American instructors less credible and less intelligible than European American instructors (Rubin, 1998). In another study, African American teachers were challenged more often than European American teachers concerning teaching credentials and classroom authority (Hendrix, 1998). Acceptance takes time, effort, tenacity, and experience on the part of the instructor. Hope and self-efficacy (the inner belief that one has the skills to succeed) are necessary ingredients for nonnative instructors to succeed (see Bandura, 1989).

**Perceived Teacher Effectiveness.** Comparing domestic and international college instructors on several other categories of perceived teacher effectiveness, such as affect toward the teacher, affect toward the content of the class, and others, McCroskey (2002, p. 74) found that domestic teachers were perceived as more effective than international instructors, and that “students clearly have less positive affect for courses taught by international teachers, and less positive affect toward those teachers.” Rubin and Smith (1990) also found that, although not as important as teachers’ ethnicity and topic choice, the level of perceived English accentedness had an impact on how students rated the teaching competency of international instructors.

It appears that complex factors contribute to students’ perceptions of disciplines taught by an accented speaker. Yook and Albert (1999), studying international instructors and the interrelatedness of intercultural training, cognition, and emotion, found a relationship between emotions and students’ ratings of international teachers’ competence. Emotions affected evaluations of teachers’ competence and students’ comprehension. Happiness prompted higher evaluations and greater comprehension of content. Sadness prompted both lower evaluations and poorer content comprehension. Thus it may be possible that the dissimilarity between students and instructors regarding ethnicity, country of origin, levels of cross-cultural exposure, and first language can prompt negative emotions such as “anxiety and uncertainty” (Gudykunst, 1988). Such uncomfortable feelings may develop into “intercultural communication apprehension” (Neuliep and McCroskey, 1997). Consequently, this apprehension may influence students’
evaluation of instruction by biasing their perceptions of teachers’ effectiveness and affecting the scoring of international instructors (McCroskey, 2002) and possibly of other instructors of color. However, two questions remain unanswered by McCroskey’s study: “Are the differences in perceived teacher effectiveness a function of real differences in the communication behaviors of teachers? Are they a function of various biases of the students?” (p. 65). Research is still needed on these subtopics. The next section explains potential variables affecting undergraduates’ satisfaction with, receptivity to, and tolerance of their “different” instructors.

**Satisfaction, Receptivity, and Tolerance**

What accounts for the low levels of satisfaction with, receptivity to, and tolerance of the international instructor? As mentioned in the last section, negative perceptions may be prompted by the discomfort that Gudykunst (1988) and Neuliep and McCroskey (1997) named intercultural communication apprehension. Specifically, this term refers to the anxiety and uncertainty arousal that are typical of intercultural communication contexts. Having an international instructor in charge of the classroom requires a stretch of students’ comfort zones, that is, their biases and stereotypes, which are capable of destroying any potential effectiveness of such interactions. Moreover, some undergraduates assume that ITAs and international professors come from less developed societies to learn in the United States because of our superior educational system (Brislin, 1990; McCroskey, 2002). As Mestenhauser (1983) further explains, the bottom line is that these internationals are in the United States to learn from us and not to teach us. Psychologically this places international instructors in a submissive position, reinforcing students’ beliefs in the lack of equity among the parties (Brislin, 1990).

**Perceived Competence.** What can instructors teaching in a second language do to be perceived as more effective in the classroom? The first step is to train the teacher; the second is to train the student. Although intercultural orientation programs exist at larger universities, little attention is paid at the level of the institution to teaching preparation for international professors. Regarding training for undergraduates, Yook and Albert (1999) have suggested that intercultural sensitivity training could help. Participating in study-abroad programs is also beneficial (Pennington and Wildermuth, 2005). Such training would contribute to reducing U.S. undergraduates’ ethnocentrism, which in McCroskey’s study (2002) was the strongest variable in predicting students’ negative perceptions of international instructors.

Although intercultural communication theory and previous empirical research help to explain why domestic college teachers are perceived as more effective than international teachers, the reasons for such perceived differences are not clear. McCroskey (2002) concluded that besides ethnocentrism, perhaps certain instructional communication behaviors could be responsible for the less positive perceptions of effectiveness of international instructors.
Specific teaching behaviors of international instructors that may be different from those of native teachers and need adaptation to fit U.S. classrooms are generally addressed in ITA training. Such teaching behaviors include organization and clarity of presentation, use of practical examples, use of contexts familiar to students, teachers’ presence (confidence, appropriate authority, rapport with audience), teachers’ methods of handling questions, and clarity of response to questions (Smith, Meyers, and Burkhalter, 1992). Female instructors may more often deal with other relational issues, such as power and incivility, which are addressed in the next section.

Gender and Power in the Classroom. In the field of human communication a large number of international faculty are females. One of the issues that concerns us as female faculty is the issue of power and incivility, which are experienced in various degrees by almost all faculty members (Alexander-Snow, 2004). Such behavior can be detrimental to teachers’ performance, students’ learning, and course evaluations. Investigations into causes of incivility (Boise, 1996) suggest that it may be prompted by a teacher’s lack of immediacy. Because Boise was not investigating international female instructors or female faculty of color, I believe that Alexander-Snow’s suggestion of adding a cultural dimension to Boise’s work is plausible. Alexander Snow asserts that cultural perceptions play an important role in understanding this type of behavior in the classroom. We also need to consider Aries’s clarification (1996) that stereotypical beliefs about minority people can lead to expectations about how people should conduct themselves that are based on their cultural identities. I therefore agree with Alexander-Snow (2004) when she poses that believing that just by showing immediacy in the classroom the “different instructor” is going to prompt civility is a very simplistic approach in an intercultural classroom.

Incivility reflects power struggles between students and teachers. If the teacher’s behavior or profile is a mismatch to what students expect, it may propitiate incivility, no matter how much prosocial behavior the female faculty member uses with her students. Thus, unlike their white male colleagues, international female faculty must be aware of how their cultural identities and gender complicate the classroom environment. They know that there is a high probability that their credibility and authority will be questioned. Alexander-Snow (2004) addresses this point, adding that students uncomfortable with having the material taught by a member of a subordinate group will be more likely to practice incivility. In the next sections I present the construct of communication competence and a feminist pedagogy that I practice in my classrooms to narrow the gap between my students and me.

Strategies: Narrowing the Gap

Effective communication in intercultural classrooms requires knowledge of the cultures involved. Especially challenging for international female faculty are cross-cultural situations in which only one party involved
understands the cultural schema and expectations of the others. Because U.S. students generally lack knowledge and curiosity about the culture of the “different” instructor, the role of narrowing the cultural gap is the sole effort and responsibility of the instructor. In the next section I suggest a feminist perspective on teaching that I have adopted in my work, and I call on international women of color in academia to establish a self-support system to overcome challenges they may encounter.

**Intercultural Competence in the Classroom.** Effective teaching begins with the teacher. My experience has been that in order to know better the cultural traits of my U.S. students, I first needed to know the traits of my own (original) culture. Only then can I reflect on our differences and adapt to their background and needs. It has also been my experience that students in various geographic areas in the United States require specific adaptations. The reason is that cultural dimensions such as individualism or collectivism, time orientation, and other dimensions will differ by degrees in different geographic areas of the country. These dimensions require constant adaptation depending on the state and region.

In the intercultural classroom, communication competence is the process by which the instructor continually strives to achieve the ability to work effectively and appropriately within the cultural context of his or her students. For instance, Campinha-Bacote’s approach (2001) to intercultural competence demands that we see ourselves as in the process of becoming culturally competent rather than believing we are already competent. A route to competence includes *awareness* of our own culture, and of how wide the cultural gap is between others and us. Another variable is our *knowledge* about the culture and worldview of the other. My choice of appropriate communication is the skill of making use of certain strategies in a sensitive, nonjudgmental manner. Useful also is the *motivation* to learn about U.S. culture and my students, to ask them to express their worldviews, opinions, and expectations in classroom discussions. Conversely, intercultural competence involves prompting in U.S. students an interest in “different” people, and encouraging them to adopt the idea of becoming a global citizen. This approach includes giving examples of how people in other areas of the world might have different ways of solving the same problem.

**Feminist Pedagogy.** I adopt in my work a feminist perspective on teaching and learning. Feminism analyzes and opposes diverse forms of oppression. In this context, feminism, as Wood (1989) embraces it, includes the assumption that diversity is valuable and that multiple ways of knowing are acceptable because they reflect our standpoint in life. I also make clear for them that in my classes (for example, Gender Communication, and Diversity and Organizational Culture) all students’ voices are heard and that an interactive style of teaching is employed. I teach that we need to learn about life from the perspective and experiences of others because our perspective and experiences alone give us a myopic, incomplete view of reality. I try to make my students see that we need to move from a gender-based
machista, patriarchal view of oppression to a perspective that respects diverse worldviews.

My use of feminist pedagogy in the classroom enforces an integrative, collaborative, respectful, nonauthoritarian process of teaching and learning, as Kenway and Modra’s (1992) work suggests. In order to create such safe space, I value and recognize the unique life perspective and contribution of each individual in the class and let students know that they should be active participants in the learning process. Two main strategies have helped me in dealing with social power struggles in the classroom when they have sporadically happened, mainly in the undergraduate freshman classes. The first strategy is the community approach, and the second is the diplomat approach.

The community strategy is generally employed when I spot resistance from one person or a small group of freshmen (a clique of two or three). Now and then I encounter disruptive students to whom the teacher or her message or her accent may be too funny or decoded with sarcasm. As far as I can remember, the most disruptive students in my career have been young white males, also at the freshman or sophomore levels. Once I observe their behavior, I act immediately and try to keep those students engaged and busy. I do not confront them but instead ask (in front of the class) for their collaboration as participants in our community. Their nonverbal behavior after the invitation shows surprise. They reluctantly accept the invitation. I make sure that I add several inclusive pronouns, such as “we,” “our class,” “us,” and “our objectives,” when I talk to the class. The task in which they will be collaborators is to be time manager for the public speakers that semester or that week. They serve their function in the beginning somewhat reluctantly. However, after about three classes they begin volunteering for the task. I tell the class that during that stipulated time of day they will be “in charge” of when speakers should start their presentation, because “I am too busy” grading and going through the speech evaluation form for every speaker. They take the task seriously and do a good job. By delegating power for a small amount of time and for a specific task, I enable my formerly disruptive students to feel empowered and engaged, and to become responsible students for the rest of the semester. If the disruption comes from a small group, I ask them to take turns being the time manager for the speakers that week or semester. I also highlight that this work is voluntary.

The diplomat strategy works best for students who have never been exposed to an international person or environment. These students may behave very critically or judgmentally. This is a good strategy for the parochial students, who are always giggling in the corner of the room with friends. For them everything is funny when they have an international professor who speaks in accented English. For this type of people in the audience I begin with comparisons, suggesting that they could one day be working for a multinational corporation, or even the United Nations. I begin by saying that “our way of solving problems is just one way,” but people around the world solve problems in different ways using the different types.
and amounts of resources available to them. Sometimes we do not solve problems because we may not have the resources. Then I explain the role of culture in giving us scripts for meaning and behavior. Next I ask for contributions from people who have lived in other states of this country, then from those who have lived in other countries or who have participated in a study-abroad program. We then compare and contrast how we do “this” in Latin America. The students give me the corresponding response for the United States, such as how we pronounce a particular word or what the word is in Portuguese or Spanish, and what the corresponding word or pronunciation is in English. This strategy engages them in the discipline, and they demonstrate satisfaction in learning something that is “different.”

**Support Groups for International Women and Women of Color.** This last section is a call to other international women and women of color in academia to found a base of self-help groups for support and mentoring. In these support coalitions, female faculty who are more experienced would provide information and mentorship. Their members could suggest and engage in diverse ways of combating forms of oppression and inequality in academia, and learn strategies for coping with challenging situations and strategies for job effectiveness.

These types of coalitions with other diverse women can compensate for barriers such as information deficiency. Many international and women of color feel uninformed because of limited access to or exclusion from informal networks. Limited access to the “grapevine” has many disadvantages, including restricted knowledge of issues at the departmental, college, and university levels, such as the experiences of other faculty members with classroom management challenges and how they have solved them; issues of academic publishing, tenure, and promotion; and mobility within the university. Another barrier for international women and women of color is the difficulty of finding a female mentoring relationship that can be beneficial academically and psychosocially, and ultimately empowering. This nonformal education received from mentors can be used for positive, transformative purposes.

**Conclusion**

What do international female instructors need to know to be interpersonally and pedagogically equipped to do an effective job? We need to develop teaching skills that are compatible with those of the host culture, effective verbal and nonverbal communication skills, and sensitivity to intercultural differences. Throughout this chapter I have highlighted the importance of flexibility, perceptiveness, control, awareness, adaptability, and the instructor’s need to gain intercultural communication competence in the classroom. This competence does not come easily. It takes time, perseverance, and experience. Two other important strategies are to adopt a feminist pedagogy in the classroom and to search for coalition with and the support of other international feminists and feminists of color who understand our
realilty, including our contributions and challenges, with whom we can brainstorm for solutions.

References


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