

*They are learning the language
while also taking notes, writing papers, studying for exams, working in group projects,
giving presentations, and doing every other assignment for the classes they are taking.*

Listening to Multilingual Students

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Listening to Multilingual Students...

“It is very challenging. Even though it has been hard to learn my everyday class material in a different language, I’ve learned that everything is possible!”

There are many programs and academic services that are willing to help students.

From this perspective, it might be harder to accomplish your goals, but so far I like everything about CSUS!”

—learning English as second language

“Being 1st generation Hmong was alright. Hmong was my first language. I think that hindered my ‘English speaking’ abilities. I was considered ‘bilingual’ and was placed in remedial classes, which I found pointless and a waste.”

—Hmong; 21 years old

“Being a Latino student at Sac State has really pushed me to my limits since I am still not fluent in the English language.”

—Latino

“I am proud that I speak different languages. Sometime embarrassed when I don’t understand in class.”

—English is my second language

“It is hard when you don’t speak well English. I understand most of the time but not always then I am confused or scared to not know what to say or do.

I enjoy this college. I learn so many new things and try hard in all classes.”

—no student specifics given

“It was difficult to be a bilingual student, because of the limited language sometime I feel left out from others at first. But now I feel better because I kind of getting familia with the school, professors, and friends.

When I first step in the...class, I feel that im the only student with the Vietnamese accent, I was scared that my classmate will ignore me and think that im a weird. However they was nice to me instead”

—I come from a family without knowing any English, we came to America five years ago from Vietnam. A 13th year old girl knowing 0 english come to school with all different kind of people in the world. It wasn’t easy at all, however, for a better education

“Some of the challenges I have faced here at CSUS are language, and the fact that I am the first one in my family to go to college. The language has been a difficulty because I don’t understand it very well and also because when it comes to speak it I don’t speak it well enough. It makes harder my communication with professors and classmates.

Sometimes I feel lost in my classes because while I am confused, everyone else seems very comfortable with the topics.”

—Latino, 19 years old, that came to the U.S. without knowing any English

“I am bilingual and I love it. Not many of my peers are.”

—Latina

“From my own perspective having English as my second language makes things harder for me.”

—22 years old, Mexican, from small town, learning English

“Learning the English language is hard. I like when I hear someone speak my language. It feels like home.”

—No student specifics given

“being here at sac state is a challenge for me. I come from a family where everyone speaks another language and it affects me in many ways but my professors are there to help me.”

—arab. 18 years old. low income.

“I never had any difficulties in college. English is my second language, but I have always received good grades.”

—white female under 30, European

“Even though I am Hmong and don’t speak fluent English, I have experienced that even if you don’t understand something all you have to do is ask and everyone will help you.”

—Hmong

“hard because learning English is difficult if you did not had the help when you were small (I have experienced) by telling me that if I do not know what a word means I should not try to use it when I speak

(I like) That my English teacher has asked for her help to help me out by going to PARK”

—hispanic

“It was very hard adapting until I fully learned English and got rid of my accent.... All of the faculty were so supportive of me learning English and understanding my situation as an immigrant.”

—Arab-American male

“CSUS is a good place for international student for learning. Many students are very friendly and willing to help us. Even my English is poor, they still listen to me and help me.”

—International Student

“It feels sad because there are still a small percentage of us here in Sacramento State. I feel like some professors don’t understand that courses can be very challenging when English is not our first language.

I have a professor now that is so hard and doesn’t care if his class is hard for some of us. Doesn’t give us any chance to get extra credit to pass his class and he just rushes through lectures.

I like mostly everything here.”

—Mexican/female/23 yrs/graduating senior/straight

“I feel embarrassed to not understand what peoples say to me. I like the patience of my teachers and classmates. They are respectful and assistance me.”

—learning English, 2nd year student

“As an English learner, it’s difficult to face the difficulty of the college courses.”

—Male – 19 yrs old – Cambodian – Buddhism

“Once I was taking a class from a professor who was a colorblind racist. I went to her office one day to get advice about a portfolio I was writing. She glanced at my portfolio no more than 30 seconds, looked up at me and back at my portfolio then said ‘I can tell English is not your first language.’ I was taken back and shock that an educator would jump and make this assumption of me. Yes, I dress differently perhaps more conservatively than most but little did she know that English is my first language + that my mother tongue is my second language. Due to this situation I feel someone who’s a educator + faculty of an educational institute should not bring their beliefs + their own shortcomings when teaching + dealing with others from so many different backgrounds. If one has trouble doing this then they should not be in the educational field at all.

I really like...(my) department. I have learned a lot + met many great professors who really do care about their students progress despite the one bad apple that I mentioned above.”

—Mixed Ethnicity + Muslim

“It is difficult for me to face other people to communicate, because I feel like I’m not saying things right because English is my second language. I have been here ten years and I still struggle with language.”

—30 years, full-time, legally blind

“I do get positive social responses from young people as I speak several languages.”

—American/Persian

“It is somehow hard because at the time of doing a presentation, I have the feeling to speak Spanish and do my presentation bilingual. Also, when it comes to writing the way we have to write English is a little hard because my Spanish pops up in the way of phrasing words and sometimes it is very frustrating or mispronounce words, that’s one of the biggest one.

Last semester during a presentation I mispronounce a word, it was so embarrassing.

(I like) having American friends that help you edit your work. 😊

(I don’t like) Directions of an assignment too wordy, more simple would be perfect. 😊

—Mexican American (Chicana)

“To me personality is hard, because of English, but I don’t complaining because I’m in a country where English is the main language, so it is my responsibility to do my best. I just wish to have more tutoring help for my English paper, sometime they are closed, cause I also have to work.

All my teachers have being very nice with me, when ever I ask for help they help me. There had only being few time when they can’t help me and it is because they just can’t and I understand that.”

—from Nicaragua, Latina, 21-being in USA since 2005

“I love to learn American language and culture. I wish to get better each day.”

—I speak three languages

Multilingual Students

Over 350,000 languages are spoken in the country, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. A multilingual student, also called bilingual, ESL, or a second language student, is one “whose first language (the language to which they were exposed in the home as young children) is not English,” according to the former TESOL Coordinator at Sacramento State, Dana R. Ferris, in her book, *Teaching College Writing to Diverse Student Populations*. Therein, she provides the following information regarding different types of multilingual learners:

Who They Are

Multilingual students differ greatly in their background and language skill. While there is some variation in name or definitional parameters, there are three different types of multilingual students:

1. International Students
2. Early-Arriving Resident Students
3. Late-Arriving Resident Students

International Students

International students are second language students “born, raised, and educated in another country who come temporarily to the U.S. on a foreign student visa for a short-term educational or training program, with the stated intent to return to the home country when the program is completed.” International students may excel in reading, writing, speaking, and understanding the English language because it was the official or predominant language in the country from which they came and/or their educational background included this as subject matter. They are also required to demonstrate English language proficiency at Sacramento State through the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

Yet this doesn’t mean that they might not struggle here. Many international students tend to learn through formal instruction in reading and writing English, making them what some scholars call “eye learners,” which makes it likely they will complete written work and course reading proficiently. Speaking ability and listening comprehension in interaction or the classroom, however, may be more difficult. This is usually due to fewer opportunities for practice to speak and hear it, given their short time in the U.S., and less oral and aural English instruction typically provided, because there is more emphasis placed on grammar and vocabulary. Moreover, international students may find that what they learned of written and read English may differ greatly from the spoken English they encounter. If the international student were to assume from their reading and writing English capabilities that they would be equally proficient in speaking and listening skill, then troubles with conversational language ability needed to navigate daily life in the host country can take them by surprise.

Resident Students

While international students comprise a small group of multilingual students here at Sacramento State, the majority are students who came to live permanently in America and, as a whole, are called “Resident Students.” Some of these students may have “permanent resident (‘green card’) status, meaning they are legal long-term residents of the United States, or they may be naturalized American citizens.” Others may be undocumented immigrants, who “may have come to the new country on their own or with family as adults or they may have come as children

accompanying their immigrant parents—or they may be the U.S.-born children of first-generation immigrants.”

Resident students may or may not have come from a country where English was spoken predominantly or where they received formal instruction in the English language. Because they are living in the U.S. culture, however, they have had exposure to English in their daily lives. Multilingual students who rely on this more informal type of learning through listening to talk in natural settings are called “ear learners.” This is a valuable form of instruction that helps multilingual students to increase English speaking fluency and listening comprehension, although it provides far less preparation for academic reading and writing.

Resident students are divided into the last two main groups of multilingual learners:

Early-Arriving Resident Students

These are second language students “who were born in the U.S. to immigrant parents, who arrived in the U.S. prior to age 10, or who have been in the U.S. eight years or longer.” Some early-arriving resident students came to America later in life, in their teens or adulthood and, therefore, likely had less instruction in English in the U.S. Many are the children of immigrant parents, who may grow up in a household where the primary language spoken may have been one other than English, which can impact English acquisition skills. Some of these children may be referred to as “Generation 1.5,” a term that came about because, in terms of learner backgrounds and abilities, they lie somewhere in the middle of first generation adult immigrants and the second generation children born to them in the U.S. These are students who were born elsewhere, making them non-native speakers, but who also completed all or almost all of their education here, which means they do not share the same learning needs as other types of multilingual learners.

Because early-arriving resident students have had the greatest exposure to American discourse than the other types of multilingual students, they tend to speak and listen to English well. Their difficulties often come in reading and writing, the academic language use needed for most college coursework. In some cases, the early-arriving multilingual student will speak English with ease, even without a discernable accent, and it is only when a paper is handed in that is written using conversational norms of English rather than academic ones, and/or containing spelling or grammar errors, that their difficulties at the academic level are revealed.

Late-Arriving Resident Students

These are second language students “who intend to reside permanently in the U.S. and who arrived after age 10 and/or who have been in the U.S. fewer than eight years.” Their language skills will depend on whether English was spoken in their country of origin, the amount of instruction in English they have received, how long they have been in the U.S., and at what age they arrived.

Generally speaking, however, this group tends to have greater difficulties than the prior two groups in all areas: less English reading, writing, speaking, and listening skill. Because they came to the U.S. later in their lives, language acquisition typically doesn’t come as easily. The shorter time spent in the country, also, means that they typically have less conversational English skills than the other groups.

For further information regarding the multilingual learners discussed, please see: Ferris, D. (2009). *Teaching College Writing to Diverse Student Population*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

The Stress They May Feel

Difficulties in trying to express themselves clearly and understand others accurately in the classroom, out on campus, and in the larger community can sometimes cause uncertainty, worry, embarrassment, confusion, misunderstanding, mistakes, and missed opportunities for the student. For some, the language barrier may be terribly intimidating and a real obstacle in the student's personal, professional, and/or academic life.

It should also be noted that some may experience bias in relation to their language abilities. Some may encounter "English only" sentiment that may be hurtful, given that language is such a central part of any cultural identity. Any accent or English speaking difficulties may result in derogation or discrimination by others in their lives, research shows, and even at our institution. In the last *Campus Climate Survey Report (Fall 2016)* the Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning provided the following findings from a survey to a sample of all students here at Sacramento State:

4.7% students surveyed reported that they very often or often have personally been harassed or discriminated against on campus based on language or accent, and

13.8% very often or often have seen or heard insensitive or disparaging comments, behaviors, or gestures toward others on campus based on language or accent.

What They're Up Against

Multilingual students have their work cut out for them in learning the English language...

- The vocabulary is extensive. There are thousands of words listed as entries in dictionaries, still more if you count slang terms, vernacular, and the like.
- The pronunciation of words can be difficult. English is also particularly difficult to learn because the language doesn't sound the way it is written (for example, there are five vowels but fourteen different vowel sounds).
- The meanings of words can vary widely. Sometimes a word may have numerous meanings (e.g., the word "set" or "run") other times the meanings of a word might even be contradictory (e.g., the word "sanction" can mean permit or consent or deter or punish, "refrain" can mean not doing something or repeating something, one can "dust dust").
- Sometimes both pronunciation and meaning can differ in use (e.g., "I refuse to take the refuse to the dump," "The present is a good time to present the present," "Farms can produce," "The bandage was wound around the wound").
- Grammatical rules are complicated. English grammar is a complex system, and this an area where those early-arriving resident students may be most at a disadvantage, because their "ear learning" of English (through listening to others) makes them less familiar with the formal grammatical rules, which formal paper-and-pen English instruction provides best for "eye learners."

It takes approximately two to three years for a multilingual student to develop social conversation skill, called Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills, or the communication that is used in everyday life and learned from listening and observing others in conversation.

It takes at least seven years to develop academic language skills, called Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, the reading and writing skills that pose problems for many college students, but especially those for whom English is a second language.

Included in this more advanced level of language proficiency and germane to college success are the following:

- Familiarity with strategies for textbook reading (determining the key ideas, outlining and taking notes) and writing papers (brainstorming ideas, researching points, integrating support and sources)
- Use of more advanced forms of sentence structure and vocabulary in written assignments (e.g., greater, more sophisticated general vocabulary, as well as academic and/or subject matter terminology used in different courses)
- Execution of different academic purposes in writing (such as defining, summarizing, explaining, critiquing, synthesizing, supporting, and arguing points)
- Observance of academic conventions in writing (e.g., thesis, review, transitions) and presenting research (e.g., citation protocols)
- Familiarity with different academic genres (e.g., abstracts, research studies) and modes of discourse (e.g., narration, persuasion, compare/contrast)
- Thinking critically (about such things as source selections, claims made, validity of arguments, differences in source discussions of topic, differences in source information and personal experience)

What They Need to Succeed in College

Both types of language skill—Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency—are required to succeed in a learning environment.

The former type of language skill is essential to interacting with peers in class discussions and group work, conversing with faculty and staff, following along in lecture, and potentially giving class presentations. The latter is needed for the extensive and intensive academic reading and writing that comes in college life.

That is why a student oftentimes may be fluent in English but may not be fully prepared for college classes, because they have developed the former language skill but not yet the latter.

What We Can Do

The benefits of being multilingual in personal and professional life are well-documented. In academia, however, the multilingual student experiencing language difficulties may be at a decided disadvantage. The following suggestions for faculty and staff may be of help to multilingual students with different needs when it comes to speaking, listening, reading, and writing English:

In Conversation

For those students who have not yet become proficient in following or speaking English (international and late-arriving resident students)

Speak clearly and not too quickly when talking to a multilingual student, and use natural gestures and facial expressions to better convey the meaning of your words.

Don't jump in to fill silences. Comprehension may take longer for multilingual students, so allow for pauses in order for the student to translate in their heads the meaning of your words. Wait time may lengthen also after a question has been asked, to give the student time to think of the answer and then how to formulate that response in English.

Be careful with the use of American idioms and slang expressions, which are embedded in the culture, and that, when literally translated, may cause confusion (e.g., "drop by," "hold on," "test the waters," "pour your heart out," "you're killing me," "I'll catch you later"). Offering a quick explanation or synonym when you do use cultural expressions or others in the conversation use them can be helpful in such cases.

Don't assume understanding has occurred. Check verbally (ask) and nonverbally (look for signs of confusion) if it is something important that you are trying to convey, because some students are too polite or reluctant for cultural or other reasons to admit they don't understand.

In Discussion or Group Work

For those students who have not yet become proficient in following or speaking English (international and late-arriving resident students)

Understand that some multilingual students might not be comfortable participating in discussions in groups or the class as a whole. They may be hesitant to contribute because they feel a little shaky in their English speaking or comprehension skills, especially in a more public forum.

Be careful of classroom or group discussions getting too fast-paced for the multilingual student to follow. Remember that translating English in their heads takes time and becomes especially difficult when the pace quickens and more than one person is speaking at once. A quick paraphrase for clarification or summary of points said can be very helpful in such instances.

Look out for multilingual students when they enter into collaborative work. Make sure that they find a partner or group with whom to work, because sometimes the other students hold back when it comes to their peers who are developing their English-speaking skills, to avoid any potential awkwardness in communication. Take a second or two to make sure that students understand what the task is and feel comfortable with their peer(s). Ensure that the other students are communicating effectively with the multilingual student by monitoring a bit in the beginning and modeling if necessary.

In Class Lecture

For those students who have not yet become proficient in following or speaking English (international and late-arriving resident students)

Present all key terms and concepts visually on the board, slides, or hand-outs, ideally in advance of the lesson, and offer supplementary materials, as well, in print or online, if possible. These are guidelines that help all students to better succeed in the classroom, of course, as are those below.

Define key terms and concepts clearly and more than once. It doesn't hurt to announce the fact that you are giving the definition either, with explicit cues such as, "here's the definition."

Provide definitions and explanations worded in more than one way. Restating using different words may increase the likelihood of understanding.

Don't talk too quickly or too softly when lecturing. Be sure to pause frequently after giving key definitions to allow students time to process and take notes.

Ask students "What questions do you have?" (rather than "Any questions?") and state early and often in the semester that questions are sincerely welcome, because usually more than one student is wondering the same thing, and questions are valuable opportunities for you and the class or group to clarify and better understand the topic of discussion.

Look for nonverbal signs of confusion indicating that a student has become lost. Not all students are assertive enough to ask for clarification and multilingual students, in particular, may be reluctant to spotlight language difficulties or "hold up" the class with their questions.

For Course Reading

For multilingual learners who struggle with reading or vocabulary:

Remember that course textbooks and other materials can be difficult reading for many students, given the elevated terminology and length, but may be far more arduous and time-consuming for some multilingual students.

Provide reading assignments well in advance and in manageable amounts more ideal to international students and other multilingual students who feel they are not yet strong readers.

In Testing Situations

For multilingual learners who struggle with vocabulary or reading:

Allow dictionaries and translators in test situations, if possible. Many multilingual students will not ask about the possibility, so you might want to volunteer that information ahead of time.

Allow for breaks, if possible, because exams are tiring enough for most students, but for multilingual students can be especially exhausting.

Offer more time, when possible, to read through the test questions and/or to write out essay responses.

For multilingual students who struggle with writing:

Be aware that essay questions may pose a problem, even for the student who knows the material well, and that writing quality may not be an accurate indicator of the student's mastery of the content or degree of test preparation, so much as it is the student struggling in an exam situation with written responses.

For Written Work

For multilingual students from another country:

Be aware when reading written work that cultural differences also impact writing norms. American students are taught to be direct in thesis, opinion, and argument, and to make their points clear to the reader. Other cultures instruct students quite differently (e.g., put your thesis at the end after you have built up to it, make an implicit case in order to let others decide for themselves, let the reader take responsibility for clear understanding). Additionally, some cultures may not have the same rules for source attribution and citation, or emphasis placed on understanding exactly what plagiarism and copying of material are and how to prevent this.

For multilingual students who struggle with writing:

Remember that multilingual students may also have problems with vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, spelling, clarity, and use of support and sources. If you aren't aware that the student is multilingual (not all will have an accent) then you might receive a poorly constructed paper and assume that the work is a last-minute effort when, in fact, the student put in a considerable amount of time into the work but is struggling with English writing, which takes longer to master than speaking it.

Be aware that students who learned English largely from listening to others (those "ear learners" of the basic interpersonal communication skills described earlier) will tend to write the way they hear the language spoken. Their writing tends to be characterized by: shorter sentences, less varied sentence structure, more limited and everyday vocabulary use, personal pronouns, and informal style. The more simple writing style may give the impression of less than substantive thought given to the assignment, which may not be the case at all.

A word about grading written work:

Each instructor grades papers according to personal style, course objectives, assignment purposes, subject matter, and more, and reading papers in subjects other than English necessarily requires a greater focus on content. That said, faculty strive to help students strengthen in writing skill, but grading the papers of multilingual students may present unique challenges. In such cases, keep in mind the following:

Know that providing clear and constructive advice for key areas of the student's work where you see frequent and/or egregious mistakes is very helpful. Multilingual students are often the ones who desire to know most what they need to do to improve in their writing, but they don't always get the specific feedback they need. Excessive feedback in any one paper, however, may be overwhelming or discouraging for some multilingual students.

Be aware that using abbreviations for corrections isn't always understood by monolingual or multilingual students, but especially the latter (e.g., "sp" to indicate spelling mistakes, "vt" for verb tense errors). Note, also, that the practice of asking questions to spark greater student thinking (e.g., "Can you elaborate here?" "Do you have an example of this?") may not be effective for multilingual students, who may interpret this literally, without understanding that these were directives for future paper improvement ("Yes, I am able to say more on this" or "I do have more examples"—"but I have already turned in and am now receiving this paper back from you, so I am not sure why you ask").

In Student Presentations

For the multilingual student who is good at oral communication, but struggles with academic reading and writing:

Offer opportunities for the students to give presentations so that they can shine in the type of English and form of academic assignment they may feel most at ease—public speaking nervousness and all. For some, this is the one area where they may feel they excel, and this can be a huge source of confidence moving forward in the coursework and a nice complement to reading and writing assignments.

For the student who struggles with English speaking:

Understand that almost every student gets nervous at the prospect of giving a class presentation, and sometimes none more so than those who will not be doing so in their native language.

Be aware that more personal topics might be harder for a multilingual student because emotion can sometimes cause the student to have greater difficulty finding the words in English or to revert to their primary language.

Offer this advice to multilingual students who are nervous about class presentations:

Rehearse the speech multiple times (8-10 times) to help to deliver smoothly and repeatedly practice clearly saying the key terms of the speech or words that are necessary to the presentation but are difficult for the student to pronounce.

Use visual aids that contain the key points or terms of the presentation to help the audience follow along (e.g., handouts or slides with an outline of the main points or key terms of the presentation).

Know that students who can give a speech in a language other than their primary one have the utmost respect and admiration of their audience.

For Students Struggling Academically

Refer students to the help they may need. Any student at any time may experience difficulties with coursework, but these students may encounter even greater difficulties due the language barrier.

The academic resources listed on the following page may be very helpful for students who are multilingual.

(With appreciation to all who work with our multilingual students here at Sacramento State,
and especially to
Julian Heather, Professor of English and TESOL Coordinator,
for assistance with this information.)

Campus Resources

Peer and Academic Resource Center Workshops and Individual Tutors (WIT) —

Offers tutoring to students, including multilingual students, to help with assignments and homework in their classes. Students may go online, call, or come by for further information, availability hours, and appointments.

Location: Lassen Hall 2200

Phone: (916) 278-6010

[Peer Advising & Tutoring Website](https://www.csus.edu/student-affairs/centers-programs/peer-academic-resource/peer-advising-tutoring.html) <https://www.csus.edu/student-affairs/centers-programs/peer-academic-resource/peer-advising-tutoring.html>

University Reading and Writing Center (URWC)—

Provides encouraging one-on-one peer tutoring for students, including multilingual students wanting help with reading and writing at any point in the process, including planning, organizing, developing, and revising a paper to understanding difficult texts. Students are welcome to come in with reading and writing assignments for any course in any academic discipline and learn how to become a more confident writer or reader. Students may come by during the drop-in hours posted (website/at Center) for a single session of tutoring, or may make a session appointment or regular weekly standing tutoring appointments for the semester.

Location: Calaveras Hall 128

Phone: (916) 278-6356

[URWC Website](https://www.csus.edu/undergraduate-studies/writing-program/reading-writing-center.html) <https://www.csus.edu/undergraduate-studies/writing-program/reading-writing-center.html>

Smarthinking—

Provides online tutoring that enables students to get the help they need 24-hours a day, seven days a week, in many subject areas, one of which is English for Speakers of Other Languages, to help students to strengthen their English skills. A tutorial for how to access and use this online tutoring service is there on the website.

[Smarthinking \(PDF\)](https://www.csus.edu/student-affairs/centers-programs/degrees-project/_internal/_documents/degrees-smarthinking.pdf) https://www.csus.edu/student-affairs/centers-programs/degrees-project/_internal/_documents/degrees-smarthinking.pdf

English Department—

Offers a number of English courses specifically geared to multilingual students. Please note that any English course listing with an “M” (meaning multilingual) following the number of the course will be taught by an instructor skilled in working with multilingual students.

[Website for Sacramento State Catalog Course Listing](https://catalog.csus.edu/) <https://catalog.csus.edu/>