Three Components of Technical Competence to Support International (and Domestic) Students

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Introduction

Research using the Teaching Behaviors Checklist (TBC), an inventory of twenty-eight research-supported effective teacher qualities and the behaviors that characterize them, has shown interesting parallels and divisions among different learning populations. One that piqued our interest was Liu, Keely, and Buskists's 2015 article in *Teaching of Psychology* that looked at patterns and differences in the TBC scores of Chinese, Japanese, and U.S. undergraduate students. Interestingly there were more parallels between Japanese and U.S. students than between Japanese and Chinese students, and the researchers were surprised to discover that:

> Chinese students placed less emphasis on their teacher being *approachable, confident, enthusiastic, knowledgeable and effective communicator* and a *good listener* than both Japanese and U.S. students. Interestingly, they placed more emphasis on only one quality, that is, *technologically competent*. (85)

At Auburn, Chinese students make up our largest international undergraduate student population (1377 Chinese undergraduates pre-Covid, and 1051 post Covid) and most come to us via to the Auburn Global pathway program that started in 2015. At Carleton College in Minnesota, a small private liberal arts college with a total of 2,000 students, there are 234 international students, so over 11% of the student population. Students from China, South Korea and India have the largest representation. Both of our institutions emphasize face to face instruction, though this changed during the Covid pandemic. Based on these situational factors, the emphasis on technical competence of instructors by Chinese students, and the growing number of Chinese students on our campuses, our essay explores the need for thoughtful implementation of instructional technologies in order to serve growing numbers of diverse populations of international students. Specifically, we are interested in questions related to three different categories: language technologies, communication technologies and classroom management technologies.

Language Technologies: Framing Questions

Translation tools are becoming increasingly sophisticated, but how should we use these tools in our courses? Should such technologies fall under the umbrella of Universal Design for Learning as they level the linguistic playing field and create equity? What is our philosophy around translation tools and teaching and learning?

The pros and cons of allowing students to revert back to their native language in service of learning new content in a course taught in the non-native language have been a topic of pedagogical debate for years. With advances in the ability of handheld translation apps and devices, the question has certainly shifted from *should we allow them?* to *how best might we support/plan for them?*

Translation tools should also be considered in connection with inclusion and equity – with increased conversations and initiatives to provide an increasingly diverse student population equitable learning opportunities and environments, we need to consider how welcoming, safe, and learning conducive our spaces are for all students. Translation tools can help with students feeling safe and more comfortable, especially when navigating the physical space of the campus, reading signs, seeking medical help or pharmaceuticals or accessing emergency information.

At Auburn faculty have taken a variety of approaches to managing the use of such devices by creating course and syllabus policies that specific when and how such tools might be used. This approach has had varying success. Many faculty in our development workshops have bemoaned the fact that no

matter what policy or enforcement approach they take they can't get students to stop using their phones or other hand held technology. During this year of the Covid-19 pandemic, the switch to fully remote instruction has once again changed the conversation. One tool Carleton is using for language learning is Language Lessons, an institution-developed tool that allows not only the voice recording but also a visual representation of the recording – this is used in language learning environments but can also be used by students to visualize something they can only hear.

In our experience, *effective use* of language technologies is characterized by providing choices for students, and by the quality of flexibility by instructors. Although acquiring the language is a key outcome for many students, having the ability to translate vocabulary or check understanding can support that goal while also helping build study and problem solving skills for students. The vast majority of students using these technologies at Auburn state that these tools are used to supplement instruction, not replace it.

Communication Technologies: Framing Questions

Synchronous and asynchronous communication tools can help build student-faculty rapport in a safe space, allowing international students to practice written and oral communication without the pressures of being exposed to a larger audience. What are the barriers to faculty using these technologies effectively and how can they be overcome?

Auburn faculty share that Zoom / online learning seems to be working for students based on their feedback and performance in class, but faculty feel "mediocre" in the Zoom classroom because they aren't getting the nonverbal feedback and energy from students.

Carleton had a significant number of international students outside the U.S., which added the complexity of time zones and potential network and other software issues to the classroom equation. Many faculty took the time to offer alternative means for students to participate asynchronously, which allowed for more careful reflection on the students' part and greater sense of accomplishment when turning in their work.

In our experience, *effective use* of communication technologies is characterized by: Choice, based in UDL principles of multiple means of representation, expression and engagement. Not all students thrive in a high-energy classroom environment, so asynchronous learning opportunities not only benefit international students but all students. Although the collaboration tools offered by Zoom allowed for interactivity, student engagement in non-facilitated breakout rooms tended to be far less than the same activity administered in a face-to-face room. Carefully designed prompts and teacher "pop-ins" during the breakout rooms have had some positive impact on getting students to engage in meaningful ways.

Class Management Technologies: Framing Questions

Chinese students perceive the need for more structure in the classroom (Liu, Keeley, & Buskist 2015). How can learning management systems provide this structure? What are the most important aspects of online course design and organization of content and assignments?

Frustrating experiences in the LMS underscore many of the "15 mistakes instructors have made teaching with technology in the pandemic" according to a recent Educause report. Such frustrations may become bottlenecks for Chinese students who "perceive the need for more structure in the classroom" (Liu, Keeley, & Buskist 2015). At Auburn, we allow faculty the freedom to design their LMS courses in any way they see fit. On the positive side, this allows the flexibility necessary for diverse disciplinary approaches; however, we frequently get student feedback that they wish all the Canvas courses were more similar so they didn't have to "re-learn" the interface with every different instructor's interpretation. For Chinese students the problems are again, higher stakes as the confusing organization can be exacerbated by linguistic, cultural and pedagogical differences.

In our experience, *effective use* of class management technologies is characterized by again, by student choice and instructor flexibility. Added is the need for clear organization with Weekly Modules being most effective design based on our students' feedback.

Conclusion

Our research and experiences over the past year make clear that *effective* use of instructional technologies, especially in classes with international students, is no longer a choice but a requirement to deliver effective teaching and support student success. Giving students choice was a recurring theme in what we saw working for faculty at both of our campuses. Additionally, clear organization and meaningfully designed collaboration activities helped all students, and international students, succeed.

References

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