
Teaching International & English as an Additional Language Speakers

A Guide for Vanderbilt University Faculty

Compiled by the VU English Language Center (ELC)

Main source: *Recognizing and addressing Cultural Variation in the Classroom* [PDF]. (n.d.). Pittsburgh: Eberly Center for Teaching Classroom Intercultural Communication Center, Carnegie Mellon.



Today's university students come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and many use English as an additional language.

Teaching these students can present challenges. Some students do well on tests but rarely speak in class; When they do speak, they may be difficult to understand. Others may be vocal and understandable but struggle with academic reading and writing tasks that go undetected.

To help students succeed, modifying teaching styles can be beneficial. The following information is from various sources including language programs, surveys of students, and observations compiled from universities across the U.S.

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introduction

Pedagogical practices:

- Make your expectations far more explicit than you may think is necessary.
- Model the kinds of work you want your students to do.
- Represent the material you are teaching in multiple ways.
- When possible, give students opportunities to practice applying the knowledge and skills you want them to acquire, and provide feedback to guide the development of new skills.
- Provide varied opportunities for student-student and student-faculty interaction.

Note: “International” does not automatically mean speakers of other languages. Likewise, the English of some domestic speakers may vary greatly from what is used in the US academic context.

Cultural Considerations

“In the past, I could assume that all or most of my students shared certain kinds of understandings or experiences. With classrooms increasingly made up of students from other countries, or from ethnically-identified subgroups within the U.S., I can no longer make any assumptions at all.”

—Carnegie Mellon faculty member

strategies

Addressing vocabulary

Provide synonyms or explanations of discipline-specific and unusual words. Encourage students to ask about unfamiliar vocabulary.

Highlight key terms and important names on the board slides and/or on handouts during the lecture.

more strategies

Addressing cultural-specific references

Curve Ball

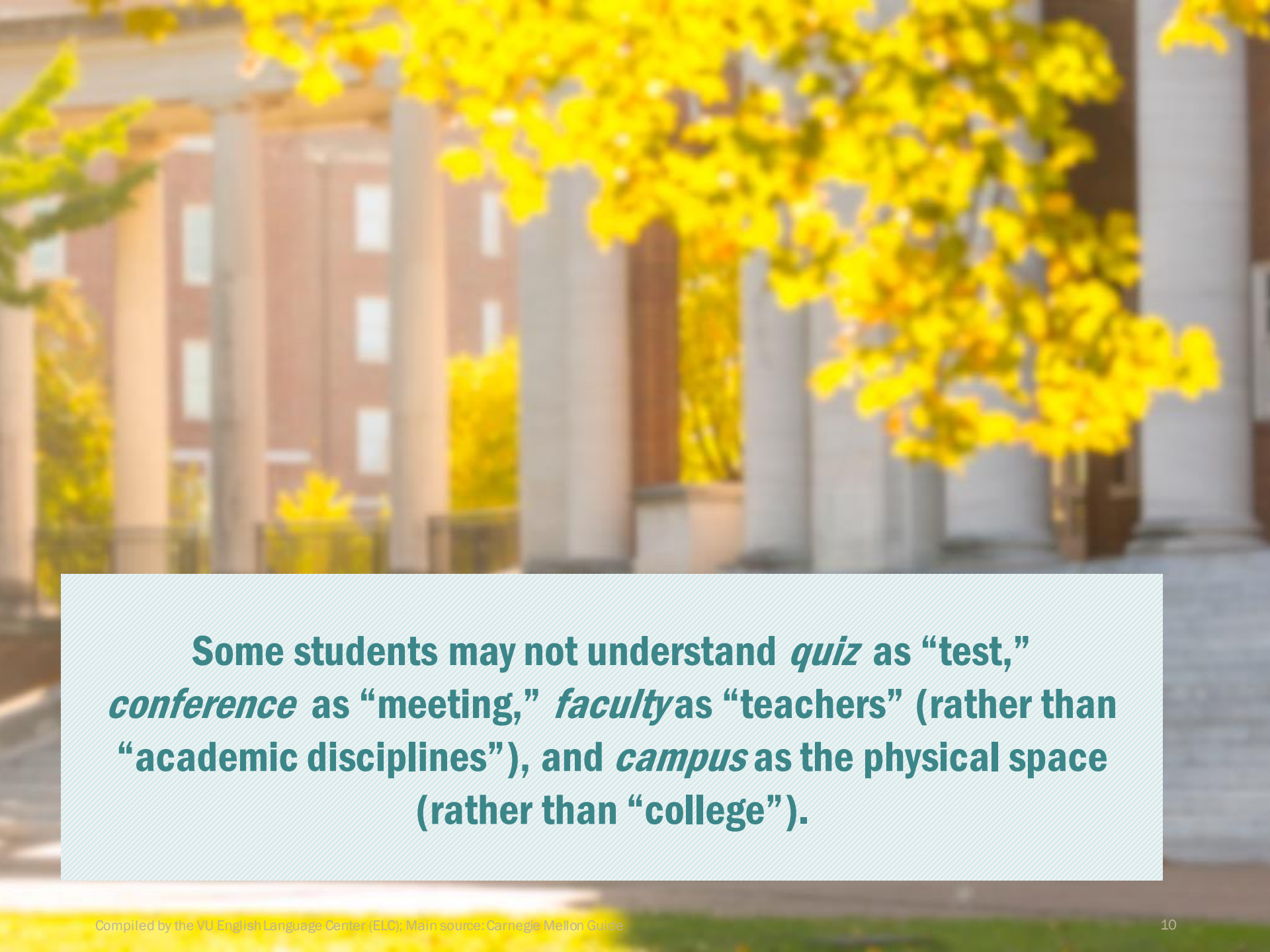
Be aware that idioms and metaphors, such as sports metaphors (“throw a curve ball”, “Monday Morning Quarterback”), might be cryptic to people from other cultures. Avoid over-using metaphors and be prepared to explain their meanings when you do.

Because we all know...

Avoid phrases like, “Because we all know the story of..., I won’t tell it here.” Those who didn’t grow up in this country may not know the story and may feel too embarrassed to ask about it.

If you use current pop culture references, use *current* references rather than alluding to events and trends that occurred 15 or 20 years ago since international students are more likely to “get” them. Be prepared to explain their meanings when you do.

And when possible, include references from different cultures.



Some students may not understand *quiz* as “test,” *conference* as “meeting,” *faculty* as “teachers” (rather than “academic disciplines”), and *campus* as the physical space (rather than “college”).

generalizations

What do Americans...? How do professors...?

Such generalizations may be useful: for instance, students may benefit to learn that U.S. academic writing generally favors the statement of issue/thesis before elaborating it.

And yet, international students should be reminded that even within the same department/discipline, professors, courses, assignments may be unique; for instance, some professors in certain disciplines may encourage substantive backgrounds, accept the use of visuals without much elaboration, and so on.



Students may not understand the language used for providing feedback (especially shorthand such as “awk” for *awkward*), signals used for drawing attention, and even non-directive questions. Similarly, body language may cause problems during class discussion or 1-on-1 meetings. (Students from South Asia, for instance, may confuse others by shaking their heads from side to side while saying, “of course”!)

Being appropriate

Encourage appropriate communication

Tell students how you want them to address you both in person and in writing.

Model acceptable ways of speaking in class, for example, rewording a too informal comment into a more acceptable form or vice versa. This modeling helps students develop their professional identity.

Offer guidelines on e-mail etiquette. For example, encourage students to use their university e-mail account, to state the subject in the subject line (instead of their first name or “hi”), to keep the greeting professional (“Professor”), and to end with a “Thank you,” or “Best regards,” followed by their **full name as it appears on the roster and reference to their class and section.**

strategies

Considerations for Grading

Grading

Seeing all the course requirements and how they are weighted can be helpful for students from cultures in which only end-of-term examinations really “count”.

A breakdown of the graded components of your course not only helps students make reasonable time-allocation decisions, it also tells them the fact that their course grade will be determined on the basis of multiple graded assignments.

Rubrics

A detailed grading rubric is helpful for students to recognize the component parts of a task, and to see how their competence at these tasks will be assessed in grading.

Rubrics help show students that grading is based on demonstrated competence in discrete areas, and reduce any suspicion that grading is completely subjective and arbitrary.

Class Lectures

background

Class Lectures

Lectures are the standard mode of instruction in many cultures, and discussions may not occur in the classroom. Some students may not see the benefit of discussions or group work, believing they cannot learn anything substantive from their peers. They may wonder why (as they see it) the teacher is not teaching. They may not have learned the skills necessary for participating in discussions or debates. Students may only feel comfortable participating in class when they can answer questions that require direct recall of what they have read or learned.

When international students are quiet during discussions, faculty may assume that they are not interested or have not done the assigned reading.

Even in cultures where discussions are a standard classroom activity, the unwritten rules for discussion may be very different than in the U.S.

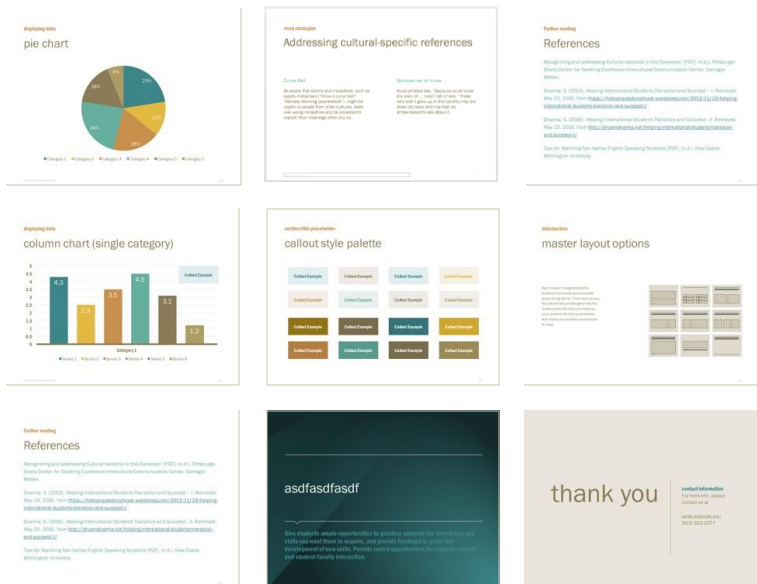
**More on class discussions in
the next section**

strategies

Lecture Slides

Limit text on slides. Even students who use English as a primary language find it difficult to listen to a lecture and simultaneously take notes. Including a few key words or phrases stating the main points on well-designed slides is preferable to slides dense with text.

Be aware that a slide-based lecture is generally much faster and, possibly, more challenging for students who use English as an additional language than traditional lectures during which the professor stops to write on the board.



strategies

What to do to help students follow lectures more easily

Academic Speaking courses are offered every semester at the English Language Center. See Resources section for more information.

Repeat important or complex ideas by paraphrasing.

Instead of asking, “Do you understand?”, repeat the same idea using different words, or ask students to summarize or repeat what you said.

Provide brief outlines (preferably a day in advance online) or write the lecture topics on the board as signposts, explicitly explaining the outline at the beginning of class, as in “Today we will cover the following topics....”

more strategies

What to **avoid** to help students follow lectures more easily

Avoid lengthy digressions.

As one international student put it, “My professor tells stories and makes us laugh all the time, but he never writes on the board and at the end of class, it’s hard to know what the main points were, and what to study.”

Make connections to earlier material at the beginning of a new lecture and at the end, summarize ideas. Finally, preview what will be covered in the next class to help students prepare.

Outlines and clear transitions help students take organized notes and make it easier for them to ask follow-up questions about specific points. A student can ask about “part three” only if they know they missed the third part of the lecture.

strategies

Things to do before & after class

Set up an online discussion board in Blackboard where students can pose questions.

Assign discussion questions as homework so students have time to prepare answers in writing. A list of key words related to the discussion can further help student participation.

Assign quick writing assignments, such as ungraded “minute-paper” at the end of class, asking students to list anything needing further clarification, or simply collect written questions about the lecture.

Participation

background

Participation

Faculty in the U.S. may have varying expectations for what participation in class means. Additionally, the typical “learner-centered” classroom, in which students are expected to be active participants in the learning process, might be very new to international students. This is especially true for those coming from more teacher-centered learning environments where asking questions or expressing opinions during class is not the norm. Also, formulating a question or expressing an opinion invariably takes longer in a second language.

Simply telling students that participation is important may not be enough to encourage it. It is therefore essential to be patient and understand that some students’ demonstration of participation is different and may take time to change.

Discussion ground-rules

Because students do not all come to the classroom understanding why classroom discussions are beneficial or knowing how to participate in one, it is helpful to:

- Explain (on your syllabus and again in class) why you think discussions and **group-work are valuable**, and what you think students will gain by participating.
- Explain how participation in discussion will be evaluated and how much participation is expected. For example, you might inform students that a meaningful contribution involves stating a claim and using evidence from readings to support it. You might specify that you expect students to speak up at least once a class period, or twice a week, or three times a semester via e-mail or discussion board, etc.
- Clearly lay out the ground-rules for discussions in your class: i.e., whether students should raise their hands or just speak out, how students should challenge one another respectfully, how they may ask one another for clarification or illustration, etc. Some faculty members find it effective to ask students to discuss and determine these ground-rules for themselves. This may be an opportunity for international students to engage in a dialog with their peers about cultural expectations regarding classroom behavior.
- Encourage your students to speak slowly and clearly, and prompt them to explain cultural references that other students might find confusing. A Korean student in a business class, for example, might need to explain the concept “chaebol” [a large family-owned business conglomerate in South Korea].

class norms

Class Discussions

If you are comfortable with students recording your lectures, let them know that it is OK to do so. If not, tell them so early on. It is a good idea to let students know your policy since some students might not realize they need to ask permission.

For some international students, the formal English of lectures and writing is more familiar and easier to follow than the colloquial English of classroom discussions.

Discussions also require students to adjust to the speaking styles and pronunciation of numerous people, not just the instructor. U.S. students may also casually reference cultural phenomena that are unfamiliar to international students. These factors may make it difficult for international students to follow the train of thought, and thus to join in.

“Sometimes students from China or other Asian countries look quiet in class. **But this does not mean they lose concentration.** On the contrary, keeping quiet is a way to show respect to the lecturer and is highly valued in China, usually.”

– **Chinese undergraduate student**

strategies

Encouraging Class Participation

Allow time for students to formulate a response.

Wait a little longer (three to five seconds) after posing a question before calling on a student.

Avoid asking a student whom you have difficulty understanding to repeat him/herself, as it might be just as difficult to understand the same words a second time. Ask them instead to restate their answers, although note that may be challenging for them as well.

The English Language Center offers Pronunciation classes every semester. More information can be found at the end of this resource.

background

Teamwork/Group Dynamics

In some cultures, group dynamics are developed in a more systematic and sustained manner than in the U.S., with greater value placed on interdependence and collaboration than on individual performance.

Students may find the teamwork skills of their U.S. counterparts rudimentary, or simply have a different set of expectations for how groups should operate. Students from

some countries may think certain forms of collaboration are acceptable which might be construed as cheating in the U.S.

In group tasks where English language skills or familiarity with American culture is an asset, U.S. students may view working with international students as disadvantageous to their grades. If you only assess the end result of a group's work, rather than considering both the task and the way it was achieved, the U.S. students may well be correct to seek monocultural groups.

If you remove the assessment threat, perhaps by including assessment of the process as a significant part of the grade, it is possible to use in-class or group tasks to encourage real cross-cultural inclusion.

section 04



In many educational systems, young men and women are separated. Consequently, mixed-gender pair work or group work may be a new experience for some international students, who may initially feel embarrassed and self-conscious.

How to Avoid Plagiarism

Academic honesty

Plagiarism—Cultural Variations

Plagiarism may be defined very differently in other countries especially those in which less importance is placed on the Western concept that an idea can be “owned.”

For example, in some cultures, students are encouraged to memorize and use long passages from well-known experts.

In fact, in systems where the deferential incorporation of accumulated wisdom is stressed over intellectual property or the generation of new ideas, using the words of experts without citing them may be more respectful and appropriate than using your own words. U.S. standards and expectations regarding plagiarism, therefore, may not be immediately evident to all students.

In cultures where a strong emphasis is placed on interdependence, “helping” your classmates do well in a course may be more important than competing with them. Students may not thoroughly understand what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable forms of collaboration in the U.S. context. For example, they may not perceive a difference between helping a friend with homework vs. helping him with a take-home exam.

Academic honesty

Plagiarism—Cultural Variations

In some cultures, where interpersonal relationships and group solidarity are emphasized over abstract principles or institutional rules, “turning in” a classmate who cheats would be considered a more serious ethical breach than the cheating itself.

Actions that would be perceived in a U.S. context as cheating (for example, copying a friend’s correct answer) might not strike someone from another culture as inappropriate (why not learn the material via your friend?). Some practices that are widely accepted in U.S. society are viewed as illegitimate in other cultures.

In some other cultures, a certain amount of cheating on exams may be expected, particularly if students perceive those exams to be arbitrarily and impossibly difficult. In these contexts, actions that are considered cheating in the U.S. might be considered just good common sense, and may perhaps not even be described as cheating.

I thought summarizing related articles and giving my thoughts were good format for the paper. I did not know proper way of making referencing. **I had by no means any intention to steal other peoples' works.** I did not realize that this would cause this big trouble for me. However, the result is bitter because of my ignorance of reference format.

— **Korean graduate student**

Academic honesty

Plagiarism—Cultural Variations

Students from cultures with different orientations towards cheating and plagiarism may not realize that the sanctions for such behaviors in the U.S. are harsh,

and be shocked to find themselves facing severe penalties (failure, expulsion, etc.).

Students may lack the **language proficiency to paraphrase an expert**; i.e. they may find it difficult to put textual ideas “into their own words”. They may also have **trouble distinguishing common phrases or idiomatic expressions** (i.e. language that is not necessary to attribute to a particular source) from words or phrases that are a specific scholar’s intellectual property (and thus require attribution.)

Many students struggle to keep up with reading and writing assignments, and may reach a point where they perceive cheating or plagiarism to be the only way to survive academically. **Because international students struggle not only with workload but also with language, they may reach this point of desperation even sooner.**

“In some Asian countries, such as Japan where I am from, concepts of plagiarism are not taught or even brought up in the context of academic settings.

I personally do not remember being taught how to create a reference list or how to cite works by others. Why is this? In many Asian countries, the instructional style is focused on gaining knowledge: in other words, teachers transfer their knowledge to students, who memorize the given information. *Students are hardly (or never) asked to do extensive research based on what they learned, using resources other than the class materials. Thus, it is unnecessary for students to cite documents and thus such training is also unnecessary.* Instead, students’ performance is usually evaluated based on exam results. Exams often focus on the exact information from textbooks so students’ ability to memorize and reproduce exactly what was presented to them is highly valued. Little emphasis is placed on how students have internalized what they’ve learned. . . . Given such experience prior to coming to college, many international students might experience difficulty fully digesting the magnitude of academic integrity. They might know it in theory, but they might not take it seriously.” — **Japanese faculty member**



downloadable resource

Guide to the Culture and Language of Maintaining Academic Integrity



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Center

You can view the ELC's *Guide to the Culture and Language of Maintaining Academic Integrity* here

<https://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/resources/guide-to-the-culture-and-language-of-maintaining-academic-integrity/>

The ELC's Guide to the Culture and Language
of Maintaining Academic Integrity

“I waited **too long** to start coming to the ELC for help.”

1-to-1 Writing/Speaking Consultations student

References

Further reading

References

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Tips for Teaching Non-Native English Speaking Students [PDF]. (n.d.). New Castle: Wilmington University.

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English for Academics and Professionals (EAP)

ELC Classes

Academic Writing

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/programs/english-academics-professionals/academic-writing/>

Academic Speaking

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/programs/english-academics-professionals/academic-speaking/>

Pronunciation

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/programs/english-academics-professionals/pronunciation/>

*write*ELC for Undergraduates

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/programs/english-academics-professionals/write-elc/>

ITA Communication

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/programs/english-academics-professionals/ita/communication/>

Vanderbilt University English Language Center (ELC)

Consultations/Workshops

1-to-1 Writing Consultations

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/programs/1-to-1-writing-consultations.php>

1-to-1 Speaking Consultations

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/programs/1-to-1-speaking-consultations.php>

Academic Workshops

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/programs/academic-workshops/>

Dissertation Workshops

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/programs/dissertation-workshops/>