Classroom Communication for International TAs and Others

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Session Outline

- Expectation of teaching assistants (TAs) in a US classroom
- Tips for classroom communication
  - What you say
  - How you say it
- Facilitation techniques
TAs in the U.S. Education

- TAs lead the recitations and office hours (OH), answer questions via email/online class page
  - Recitation is not only a TA-led revision of material, students are encouraged to participate (Active learning!)
- Guest Lecturing
- TAs grade the assignments & exams, sometimes write problem sets/exams
There are many different presentation styles - Everyone is different!

Whether you are soft spoken or have an accent, the key is to be heard and understood.

Being confident is important, which comes with practice and preparation.
Effective Classroom Communication

What you say?

Effective Communication

How you say it?

Adapted from materials by Dr. Robyn Javier (rjavier.caltech.edu)
A lecture often follows a structure of:

- **Introduction**
- **Key Point #1**
  - Elaboration, Reason
  - Example, Demonstration
  - Transition to the next point
- **Summary**
- **Key Point #N**
  - Elaboration, Reason
  - Example, Demonstration
  - Transition to the next point
What You Say: Organization

Use “Review - Preview”, just like in TV series

For example: during your introduction,
“In the last lecture, we covered ABC. Today we will see how XYZ helps us to solve ABC.”

Introduction sets a clear and engaging agenda for students.
What You Say: Transition Phrases

To connect the dots smoothly, for example...

Let’s cover ____ with three main aspects...
First, let’s start with...
Similarly... / Moreover ...
On the other hand....
Therefore....
Our next important element is...
Now that we’ve covered the theory, let’s see it in action ...

We introduced X earlier; let’s explore that further now.
Let’s recap what we’ve covered today ...
In your homework set, you will solve a similar problem...
Next time, we will learn ____
Common Mistakes

- Incompatible transitions
- Too many tangents
- Over-using the same transition
- Miscounting your transition
Some goals of asking questions:
- To check if students understand core concepts
- To probe students to think deeper on a topic

Questions are genuine invitations:
- What parts of this are still a little unclear or confusing for you?
- What are you wondering about that I haven’t yet addressed?

Types of questions: open or closed
- Closed: What is the data input in this inversion D=GM?
- Open: How does the data choice impact this inversion?

Aim for direct, clear, specific questions
Ask one question at a time
Let students know if they can interrupt with questions or should save them till the end

Make sure you understand the questions. If not, ask the student to clarify the question

Repeat a student’s question before answering (especially in large classroom setting)
What You Say: Tricky Words

- No jargon and acronyms, unless introduced
- Write/draw technical terms or concepts on board
- Present ideas in a few different ways
- Check pronunciation and spelling for difficult terms ahead of time
What You Say: A Summary

Effective Communication

- Organization
- Transition
- Questions
- Tricky Words

Adapted from materials by Dr. Robyn Javier (rjavier.caltech.edu)
How You Say It: Non-verbal & Verbal

- Organization
- Transition
- Questions
- Tricky Words
- Effective Communication

Adapted from materials by Dr. Robyn Javier (rjavier.caltech.edu)
Posture

- Sit straight or stand tall
- Watch out for physical signs of nervousness
  - e.g. hand in pockets, mindless movements

Adapted from materials by Dr. Robyn Javier (rjavier.caltech.edu)
Movements

✓ Find movements that feel natural
✓ Keep your movements within the computer screen
✓ Walk around, utilize the stage
✓ Use gestures and other body languages

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Eye Contact

- To engage the entire room
  - Look at foreheads or just above audience
  - Choose just a couple of places to look back & forth
- Look at the camera as much as possible

Adapted from materials by Dr. Robyn Javier (rjavier.caltech.edu)
Verbal

✓ Remember to enunciate
✓ Project your voice based on room size
✓ Watch out for pace, long sentences and “uhmm…”
✓ Vary tones and pitches

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Effective Communication

What you say?
- Organization
- Transition
- Questions
- Tricky Words

How you say it?
- Posture
- Eye Contact
- Movement
- Verbal

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The student’s idea is unclear, confusing or contradictory

- **Paraphrase**: summarize what you think the student said
  - “Is this what you mean….”
  - “It sounds like what you are saying is … is that right?”
  - *Mirror*: use the students own words/vocabulary

- **Draw people out**: ask open-ended questions to encourage them to explain more.
  - “Why is this important?”

- **Linking**: try to make connections between their ideas and the topic of discussion
  - “Is that important because …?”
No one is speaking or answering the questions that you ask

- Wait to allow students to process
- Rephrase your question
- Ask leading questions
  - “Are there solutions in the area of ...”
- Change the discussion format:
  - Think, pair, and share
  - Individual writing

- What if nothing worked out...?
The conversation is being dominated by one or two students

- Encourage others to join the conversation:
  - “Are there any other ideas?”
  - “Can I hear from someone who hasn’t spoken yet?”
  - “Can I hear from someone on this side of the room?”

- Balance: ask for other perspectives:
  - “Are there other ways of looking at this?”
  - “That’s a good point. We will get back to it later. Other ideas?”

- Change up the structure of the discussion so everyone has a chance to participate:
  - Example: structured go around
Be prepared and flexible

Be brave and confident

Have fun and enjoy the process

- Please visit https://teach.caltech.edu for more resources on teaching remotely
- Visit https://learn.caltech.edu for more resources on learning remotely
- Visit https://rjavier.caltech.edu/ http://www.writing.caltech.edu/ for more resources on STEM communication