



International Students

Beyond the Podium Podcast

Alexandra

Hi. My name is Alexandra Bitton-Bailey. And I want to welcome you to this episode of the Beyond the Podium podcast series. Our guest today is Melina Jiminez, a thoughtful and inspiring instructor who works primarily with international students. In this episode, Melina offers some insight into the lives and studies of her international students. Melina also provides some great course design strategies that benefit all students.

Melina Jiminez

I'm an instructor at the English Language Institute. I've been there since 2006. And I'm core faculty. And I've taught our core classes, like reading and writing and grammar, and listening, speaking, as well as some of our electives.

I came as a transfer student from a community college. And then I stayed and did my master's. And while I was doing my master's, I-- while I was doing my masters, I worked at the ELI. And then I realized that I loved it, and I stayed there. Been there ever since.

All of our students are international students. The majority come from Arabic-speaking nations, like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. But we also have a lot of students from South Korea and Venezuela and Spain. So from all over the world.

The program is from beginners to advanced. So these are students-- the beginners are students who have very, very little English. Like, they have a hard time going to the store by themselves. All the way to students that are ready to start their graduate school, and just need a little bit of reinforcement before they start.

Alexandra

These students come to the University of Florida with little knowledge of what to expect. And their first semester here can present some distinct challenges. And it most definitely requires a period of adjustment.

Melina Jiminez

I've worked with students, not at the ELI, but who have come directly as first semester students. And they always cite that first semester as a period of adjustment. And it's things like participating in the classroom.

Like, how much should I participate? Should I be talking every day? Should I not? How do I format my presentations so that they're appropriate for a graduate-level class, for example?

Or I don't understand what a professor means by critical analysis of a paper. We had to read this article, and do they want me to judge the grammar? What it would do they want? So those kinds of questions where they might not have had to do it, or where they had to do, but the vocabulary was different, the way it was presented to them. Then helping them understand what it is that the professor wants from a certain assignment or assessment.

Alexandra

Many of the ways in which international students have to adjust are linked to culture, and not always language barriers. In fact, a good example of this is related to citing sources and plagiarism, because what is considered plagiarism differs from culture to culture.

Melina Jiminez

So some cultures, they really value experts. And the experts are used as a-- like if a person wrote something, they're an expert. The way that they said it was the best way that it could possibly be said. So why would I try to change it or paraphrase it for my paper? I'm just going to go ahead and incorporate it into my paper.

But in the US, we value individualism, and recognizing someone for the hard work that they put into this paper or book that they wrote, that we want to give them acknowledgment. So helping students understand that difference in giving someone recognition, where in other cultures, it might be we're recognizing their words. In the US, we also want to recognize the person themselves by putting their name in the paper itself.

Alexandra

Understanding these cultural differences is essential. It can make a world of difference particularly to international students. For instance, some cultures view the instructor with such reverence that sharing an informal conversation would seem odd and out of place.

Melina Jiminez

And participating in class might mean different things to different teachers. So participation might mean answering a question in front of the whole class, or it might mean working in groups or in pairs. And if a student comes from a culture where the teacher is the authority, and we sit and we listen and we take notes, then it's hard to answer questions or ask questions in class. Or to talk to a classmate who's a peer and at the same level, and therefore not an expert on the topic that we're supposed to be learning about.

Alexandra

As a non-native English speaker, I still have those moments when I can't seem to put my finger on just the right word. This is really a common experience for international students, and one that may require a little extra time and patience.

Melina Jiminez

And that's another thing that students have a hard time with, is finding confidence in their language skills. And if their language isn't strong enough, finding the right words for more complex or abstract concepts that they could do really easily in their first languages, but finding just the right words in English, in just the right time, is so much harder for them.

Alexandra

How can faculty help international students, and really all students, to better navigate their college experience? Melina has a number of simple, easy-to-use ideas that can help.

Melina Jiminez

I think making expectations really explicit. I think expectations are different culturally. So an expectation for a college student in the US is different than an expectation for a college student in Saudi Arabia or South Korea.

So if a teacher, let's say in a smaller class, wants students to participate by answering questions out loud, include that in the syllabus. If there is a grade for participation, say this is what participation looks like in my class. If you're uncomfortable with that, maybe provide an alternative.

So if you're not comfortable speaking out loud in class, send me a little email once or twice a week about ideas that you had. Ask me some questions or give me some comments. So maybe if

you aren't ready to give those comments in class that you thought about them later, I'll still except in email after class as participation

Alexandra

Another helpful tactic is to provide clear directions, because clear directions first help the instructor identify what exactly the students will be learning. What they will be able to do once they've completed any given task.

Melina Jiminez

So another thing with setting expectations is, what do you want from an assessment? So setting expectations for students who have never written a research proposal before, and making it really explicit in your methods section, you need to explain the materials. You need to have language that uses the passive voice, because that's what's appropriate for a methods section in a proposal. Things like that, that obviously, it takes a lot of work for the professor to set up ahead of time, to set up a know solid assignment sheet and a solid rubric, but then makes it so much easier further down the line. Not just international students, but our local students also.

Alexandra

Melina also recommends investing some time on the front end of every course to build rubrics. Those rubrics can help save you time, and save your students a lot of frustration.

Melina Jiminez

So as I mentioned, setting up those rubrics-- it takes work when you're setting up your Canvas page. Because you have to sit down and really think, OK, well what is 10 points? What do I want at a 10-point level, or what do I want at a five-point level. But if you have a student-- not just an international student, but a student who came from a background where they didn't do a lot of writing at their high school, it's going to help that student as well. Not just students who have different cultural expectations, but just different backgrounds here in the US.

Alexandra

Good assignment directions and examples help make it clear to students what is expected of them in each and every assignment. It also makes grading a whole lot easier.

Melina Jiminez

Having clear directions really helps the instructor think about what it is that the instructor wants. And going through the process of, OK, so when I say I want an 800-word research proposal, what do I want at the end of that? Maybe I should find a model that is around 800 words that has all of the pieces that my students can look at. Obviously, not plagiarize, but that they can look at as a guide.

Oh, so, a research proposal has headings. And a research proposal has research questions and a hypothesis that may be in an assignment sheet. It just doesn't have those clear sections, but a model does. And by having a model and having more clear directions, it really benefits the teacher to know what it is that I want out of this assessment at the end.

And it helps all of the students to know, even students that come from a strong writing background, that come from a-- maybe they were great writers in their high school. But this kind of writing that they're doing in college is more advanced, or it's a different kind of writing. So it's beneficial for all students, not just international students.

Alexandra

Melina didn't learn these strategies overnight. She learned them as many of us do, as young instructors, through trial and error.

Melina Jiminez

Well-laid out expectations like I said are great for teachers, because sometimes when I go into an assignment, I know what I want. And then we get to the end of it, and I realize my students didn't need it. This happened a lot when I was a beginning teacher. I would tell my students, do a five-minute presentation. And then I would take points because they didn't have an introduction or a greeting or a hook.

And then I realized that I hadn't explicitly taught them how to do those things. And I hadn't really told them that they had to have those things. So they didn't know what I was expecting. I knew what I was expecting. But I didn't make it clear to the students what I was expecting.

And after I went through that process of, OK, what is it that I really want from them, I was able to teach it to them and say, this is an outline for a solid presentation. You have to have an introduction and a greeting. You have to at some point use this vocabulary that we talked about in class.

And then the students were able to meet those expectations, because they knew that what I was waiting for. They knew that if they didn't say good afternoon, everyone, they weren't going to get

the number of points that I had told them that they would get. And it helped me as a teacher to clarify what it is that I wanted. And it helped them as a student to have a checklist, basically.

So I sat down. I made my presentation. I remember to put in the greeting. I'm going to say it when I do it in class tomorrow. And I feel like that's true in not just the language class, but a content class also.

Alexandra

Using strategies, such as the ones mentioned by Milena, can help create a classroom that fosters engagement, and allows international students to bring to the table their unique perspectives and gifts.

Melina Jiminez

Oh, they bring so much. They bring so many experiences that we can't begin to imagine. Like, I have a student from Haiti. And when we talked about hunger and homelessness in our class, the student had a very different perspective than a student than comes from Saudi Arabia, who doesn't have the same kind of interaction with that topic. So the students are able to talk about things that they experienced back home in their countries or if they've traveled. And it brings just a different perspective to the classroom.

Alexandra

Fostering the kind of classroom culture that allows these new perspectives and ideas to be shared, to come to light, takes some careful and thoughtful planning on the part of the instructor.

Melina Jiminez

I think it really takes mindful discussions and creating a safe space in the classroom. So if you want students to talk about something, let them know that this is the place where we're not going to judge each other for those experiences that we had. But we want to learn from each other, what is it that you experienced in your home country or in your hometown in the US? And why do we want to learn from each other? Why is that learning important?

If we have a classroom full of students who all came from the same place, they're not going to have-- they're going to have experiences. But their experiences aren't going to be as broad as if we have students from many different cultures, and many different ancestries or languages. So how do we learn from each other?

Alexandra

All students, but especially international students, find that those instructors that take the time to notice them, to care for them, have a lasting and memorable impact on their lives.

Melina Jiminez

Treating them as individuals. Students at the ELI, and students who have gone on to their undergraduate and graduate courses, they really value professors and instructors who see them as people in the classroom. I'm sure that's hard in a classroom of 500 students.

But if a professor is able to identify, OK, something's happening with the student. So going back to participation in the classroom. If a professor has set a goal for participation in the classroom, and a student hasn't been achieving that, at some point in the semester, three weeks or four weeks into the semester, just say, hey, I've noticed this thing. How can we overcome it?

Since participation is a big part of this course, how can I get you to participate? In a way that's non-confrontational. Would you rather participate in pairs? We can have discussion in class. But I would really like the other students to benefit from the experience that you have.

Or would you like to participate after class, during office hours with me? Or we could do, like, a study group session with other students. What would it be helpful for you?

So students have noted that having professors really approach them, and show them that they care about their learning, is really beneficial. And again, not just for international students. But if a local student is also having trouble, I'm sure that that's something that a student would also benefit from. Just having that one-on-one with a professor.

Alexandra

Melina isn't one of those caring instructors, a natural encourager who sees the value and significance in each interaction and every student.

Melina Jiminez

I really want my students to use the skills that I give them for everything. Like if they have to write a complaint letter to someone, use the stuff that I give you.

Alexandra

Melina's ideas and strategies apply to all students. Ideally, we help our students gain knowledge. But most importantly, we help them to learn how to use that knowledge in everything that they do. Thanks for joining us for this episode of the Beyond the Podium podcast series. We hope to see you next time for more tips, strategies, and ideas on teaching and learning at the University of Florida.