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ESL Student Success in U.S. Higher Education

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Introduction

The United States is the world's top destination for foreign students. In 2017, U.S. schools hosted about 1.1 million of the 4.6 million international students enrolled worldwide.¹ Often times, these students arrive without knowing exactly what to expect, or how their experience will differ from the educational experiences which they have already had.

This paper aims to be of interest and use to anyone who has an interest in language learning in the ESL or EFL context, particularly as it relates to college and university success in the United States. This may include instructors and students as well as those who are involved with administrative functions or government-related positions related to education.

Those who have not grown up familiar with certain conventions and expectations in U.S. higher education may need extra support in order to succeed. This is a rich subject which has been covered by many books, articles, language teacher presentations, webinars, and the like. The hope is that this white paper can serve as a summary of some of the research and pedagogy that has gone into this topic.

Those who have not grown up familiar with certain conventions and expectations in U.S. higher education may need extra support in order to succeed

The following will be addressed within this paper:

- What is English for Academic Purposes (EAP)?
- What guides the specific role of critical thinking in U.S. academia?
- What is the best way to use the internet as a research source?
- Why is synthesis perceived as a special skill in U.S. academia?
- How can students avoid academic dishonesty (plagiarism)?
- How important is it to be aware of campus life issues that may be new, e.g. lifestyle management, student-teacher relations, classroom participation, and time management?

English for Academic Purposes (EAP)

We have to begin with a definition of "academic English". If a student is not regularly accustomed to using English for academic study, he or she may have added challenges that others do not have – but all college students are facing new challenges when they choose to enroll in higher education. Much of this is due to the fact that college-aged students do not typically use the formal, scholarly kind of language expected in academic discourse. Lower-frequency vocabulary, more sophisticated sentence structures, and accurate grammar and vocabulary are not necessarily part of their everyday experience when they communicate with friends or family, when they text or

¹ Zong and Batalova, 2018

e-mail, and so on. Many international students arrive in the U.S. with a knowledge of English based largely on television programs, Hollywood films, video games, or social media posts. Academic language has a different “flavor” from the kind of language found in those sources, or even in journalism or fiction. For some students, effective use of academic English takes some time to master. One way to do this is to read academic English as much as possible. There are many resources in textbooks and on the web for learning academic language, such as the academic word list which was compiled by linguist Averil Coxhead in 2000.²

Like speaking, writing natural and effective text in a second language, as Hyland (2007) has pointed out, is more successful when a learner knows what is appropriate for the genre s/he is aiming for in a second language. Writing is a social activity, and it is needs-oriented. Certain patterns and language will show up again and again in certain genres, and they convey meaning to a reader. Learners need to focus on “how target texts are structured and why they are written in the ways they are”.³ For example, the science student or the history student needs to acquaint him- or herself with the conventions of that discipline, and emulate them. Students can ask their instructors or teaching assistants for suggestions on texts to review for this purpose. One good resource for students is the book “They Say, I Say” (Graff and Birkenstein, 2014). This has templates which students can use in their writing to make it sound both natural and academic, such as “X’s claim that _____ rests upon the questionable assumption that _____.”

Additionally, college often have writing centers where students can for help with writing assignments. Students who feel that their English writing skills are still developing should take advantage of this resource.

Another challenge for students in college is developing effective academic study skills. This requires good time management. Students will need to figure out test study plans that work for them, and ESL students will need extra time for this, particularly in classes which require a lot of reading. Creating study groups with other students is one time-honored way to achieve this. More specific pointers are listed later in this paper.

In addition to reading and writing, college students may need to deliver presentations in some of their classes. For a learner to feel successful with this, it will help to practice presentations as much as possible, and ask classmates or instructors about unfamiliar word meanings and pronunciation. Some instructors, such as ESL instructors if a student has one, may allow the student to video or audio record themselves making the presentation beforehand and send it to them for feedback. Others may be able to find fellow students who are willing to watch a practice talk and offer comments.

General tips on delivering a good presentation are as follows:



- 1 If you are nervous about a talk, because of English or just because it is a public speaking task, practice the introduction as much as possible. Once you have started, and you feel it is going well, the nervousness will decrease.
- 2 Make sure you have a clear introduction and a clear conclusion.
- 3 Don’t speak too quickly or too softly
- 4 Speak with energy; if you seem bored while you speak, your listeners will feel bored.
- 5 Make eye contact with your listeners.
- 6 Make sure that your listeners understand the vocabulary you use. If you use specialized language, or jargon, explain it.
- 7 Proofread any PowerPoint or other visual materials for grammar and spelling mistakes. It is unimpressive (and can affect your grade) if there are mistakes there.

² Coxhead, 2000

³ Hyland, 2007, p. 151

⁴ Anderson et. al., 2001

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking skills are vital for success in U.S. college, and yet many international students arrive without having developed them. Bloom's Taxonomy, a classification of the goals of learning initially developed by American educator Benjamin Bloom, has "creating" and "evaluating" at the pinnacle of the hierarchy.⁴ This is a bedrock idea in American education, and it speaks to the importance of critical thinking (as opposed to lower-order skills such as "remembering" and "understanding") in U.S. academia.

Academic success depends on a student's ability to question statements made by others, make connections, derive knowledge from collected data, make educated judgements, synthesize information from various sources, and deliver insightful presentations. Americans in college are accustomed to having been raised in an educational environment in which they are constantly asked, "what do you think about this? What is your point of view?". They learn to write standard argumentative essays in high school which require a thesis statement with supporting details, and arrive at college ready to engage in critical thinking. This is not always the case for those who have grown up in an educational system which emphasizes memorization, or knowing "the right answer". Therefore, students who are planning to come to the U.S. to study must be aware that these skills are needed, and teachers of such students will do well to help them understand the concept of being able to communicate one's own point of view on issues.

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According to Zhang (2003), the ideal critical thinker possesses such characteristics as inquisitiveness, open-mindedness, honesty in facing personal biases, willingness to reconsider, and reason in the selection of criteria.

Research Sources

When ESL students do research in college, it can be a particular challenge to identify authoritative, credible, and objective sources that are appropriate for academic assignments. Generally speaking, professors will not want to see Wikipedia or someone's blog as a cited source. Two steps in particular can help to address this:

1. Make sure that the source was published recently (if the assignment requires the latest knowledge or thinking on a topic).
2. Do a web search on the author you plan to cite, to check his or her credentials and reputation.

Certain sources will usually be reliably credible, such as internationally-read newspapers e.g. the New York Times, and government and NGO websites such as that of the United Nations www.un.org.

If a student is unsure about the suitability of a source, he/she can always ask the instructor.

Synthesis Skills

EAP students may be especially challenged by lack of exposure to synthesis in academic work.⁵ This crucial skill for academic success at the college level requires students to gather information in order to produce a new representation of that information or a solution to a problem. As outlined in TESOL Journal⁶, in the U.S., a new focus on synthesis has emerged in many educational arenas. The Common Core State Standards Initiative to prepare students for college education has synthesis as a core standard and emphasizes text-based evidence. Synthesis skills are also an important criterion in testing: integrated skills tasks

⁵ Plakans, as cited in Zhang, 2012
⁶ Numrich and Kennedy, 2017

were added to the TOEFL iBT in 2005. The New York State Regents exam incorporates document-based questions in which students analyze multiple texts of different genres on social studies tests. The International Baccalaureate exam tests students' ability to synthesize literary genres and content from two or more works studied in English classes. Discourse synthesis, which requires the integration of information from two or more texts, may be the most important skill for students to achieve academic success, as it is a required genre of writing in most academic settings.

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ESL students in college will be assigned academic tasks which require them to read multiple texts and produce writing that draws on them, so they need to become familiar with discourse synthesis writing. Villalon and Calvo (2011) stated it clearly: "Writing assignments are ubiquitous in higher education" and "university students are expected to develop higher-order cognitive skills such as analysis and synthesis".⁷ Darling-Hammond and Adamson (2010) stated:

whether the context is the changing nature of work, international competitiveness, or, more recently, calls for common standards, the premium today is not merely on students' acquiring information, but on recognizing what kind of information matters, why it matters, and how to combine it with other information.⁸

All college-level students need a base level of reading ability to succeed in their coursework, but ESL students may face particular challenges. A study conducted by Michigan State University, for instance, reported 63% of instructors saying that international students experience reading comprehension issues.⁹ In order to truly succeed at U.S. colleges, these students will need to focus on improving their reading comprehension skills so that they are able to produce effective writing that involves synthesis. Research suggests that ESL students who need to use English in

academia lack practice in manipulating source documents to construct a new text.¹⁰ This is something that international students should be aware of, and try to address.

Good paraphrasing skills are essential to this style of writing, ESL students who are tempted to plagiarize (whether intentionally or not) may have particular problems mastering this skill. If a student is coming from an educational culture that does not teach critical thinking skills, but rather promotes memorization and more rote styles of learning, he or she may be particularly challenged by discourse synthesis writing. Unfortunately, English for academic purposes (EAP) courses that students may take while in college do not always prepare students for the type of discourse synthesis writing that is required in college-level classes.¹¹

Three basic operations have been identified for the effective synthesizing of texts: organizing, selecting, and connecting¹² (Plakans, 2009; Spivey, 1990, 1997). Students who are working to master this skill need to ask these questions as they read source materials: where do concepts intersect, overlap, support, or contradict each other? Once those different texts are examined together, the relationships between or among those texts will typically involve one of the following synthesis structures: example-general rule, problem-solution, cause-effect, time sequence, or comparison-contrast.¹³

Plagiarism

There is a good deal of emotion and, can we dare say, drama among college professors on this topic (particularly as it relates to student who plagiarize and then say they truly did not know "that it would be considered plagiarism"). To be fair, it is quite possible that a student who has grown up in the U.S. educational system may be more likely to be trying to "get away with something", whereas an international student may not.

Educators working with international students who plan to study in the U.S. should do what they can to make their students aware of this issue. They need to understand that what constitutes academic dishonesty in U.S. academia

⁷ Villalon and Calvo, 2011, p.16

⁸ Darling-Hammond and Adamson, 2010, pp. 1-2

⁹ Webster, 2014

¹⁰ Leki and Carlson, 1997

¹¹ Reid, 2001

¹² Plakans, 2009; Spivey 1990; Spivey 1997

¹³ Numrich and Kennedy, 2017

may be different from what is acceptable or not acceptable in their country. Not being American will not be a valid excuse for not following the academic honesty policy of an American institution. Punishments for plagiarism range from having to rewrite and re-submit an assignment, to receiving a zero or "F" grade on the assignment, to, in the most serious cases, suspension or expulsion from a school.

Students should also know that some professors will use online programs such as *Turnitin* in order to gauge whether or not a student has plagiarized. Although it is true that internet makes it easier to plagiarize, it also makes it easier to detect.

To avoid getting into trouble with academic dishonesty, there are two important rules that students planning to study in the U.S. should be aware of:

academic dishonesty

RULE #1

If you are using words from another source in your writing, you must indicate that someone else wrote those words by putting quotations around them and listing the source (even if it is only 4 or 5 words).

RULE #2

If you are making a reference to another author's novel idea (a new point of view in a field, or a combination of the ideas of others in that field), you need to list that author as the source. Otherwise, it is plagiarism

Example:

A STUDENT FINDS A WEBSITE THAT SAYS THIS:

"The failure of regulators worldwide to address European banks' fragile dependence on short-term funding is putting the Fed in an awkward position. The Fed has made good on most of its investments over the years, but increasing its exposure and that of the U.S. government to foreign banks is a moral-hazard problem."

quoting options

1. QUOTING (using quotation mark):

According to Craig Torres (2011) in *Business Week* magazine, "The Fed has made good on most of its investments over the years, but increasing its exposure and that of the U.S. government to foreign banks is a moral-hazard problem."

2. PARAPHRASING (using your own words):

As author Craig Torres noted in his 2011 article, the Federal Reserve finds itself in an undesirable position these days thanks to the vulnerability of European banks who are depending on short-term funding.

Two additional things students need to remember:

1. A good paraphrase: keeps the main idea of the original author, does not add any new ideas to the original passage, and uses only a few of the original words (if any).
2. It is not necessary to cite sources for anything considered common knowledge in the field, e.g.
 - "The Fed" stands for the U.S. Federal Reserve
 - China has the biggest population of any country in the world
 - The economic relationship between the U.S. and the EU has great impact on world economies.

If a student is not sure if something written for a class assignment is plagiarism or not, he/she should ask the instructor before handing in writing, via e-mail or in person.

For more on plagiarism, and how to avoid it, the Cambridge University Press series volumes "Final Draft" has clear explanations on different types in each chapter.

Campus Life Success

For many students, the challenges of college life can be overwhelming and unexpected. And yet, success

in navigating college life is inextricably linked with academic success, and so it is important to ameliorate any stress and unfamiliarity that may arise.

Lifestyle Management

It is important that students stay as healthy and happy as possible in order for college to be a successful experience.

International students may feel awkward about seeking help for any physical or mental health issues that arise, but they should know that there are always resources for students at U.S. colleges.

- If they feel ill, they should make seeking medical help a priority
- If they feel stressed, anxious, or depressed, there will always be someone on campus they can talk to, and they should take advantage of this resource.

Students should also make time for socializing. Making friends, having fun, and meeting different kinds of people are important parts of the college experience.

International students should be discouraged from spending time only with people from their own country. They will need to go out of their way to forge friendships with others, and may feel that imperfect English might be a barrier. Still, there are many opportunities to meet other students from different backgrounds by joining or forming study groups, joining clubs, playing sports, volunteering, or joining a church or religious groups. All college websites will have information on these types of groups and activities.

Student-teacher relations

- Most classes will have a syllabus, printed out, or found online, or both. If a student has any questions about class expectations, policies, how the grading works, or other issues of this type, he/she should ask the professor (or teaching assistant) for help.

- If students are not sure what to call a professor, they can ask him or her. They may have a preference – first name, “Professor X”, etc.
- If a student misses a class for some reason, he/she will usually be expected to find out about the lessons and assignments that were missed by asking a fellow student or finding the information online.
- If an instructor requests that students tell him or her about plans to miss a class, they need to honor that request. If a class is missed because of illness, it is not normally necessary to go into detail about the illness. In most cases, simply explaining about feeling unwell well and promising to make up any missed work will be enough.

Class participation

In some educational systems, the teacher will do most of the talking in class while students are expected to remain quiet and take notes. It is important for students to realize, therefore, that in the U.S. they will be expected to participate in class: ask questions and offer insights, and let their voices be heard. In many cases, the final grade in a class will be based partly on participation.

Learners should not allow their status as international students to hold them back from participating; most American colleges are international communities with students and instructors who are also not native speakers. Those in the classroom will likely understand that the sound of certain students’ English may differ, and the breadth of people’s English may not be the same as their own.

Time Management

Students need to develop good systems to manage their time effectively. The following are taken from “The Secrets of College Success” (Jacobs and Hyman, 2013):

1. Try to sign up for courses that are back to-back, or even on the same day rather than scattered throughout the week, so that you have larger periods of time for studying.

2. Once you have the syllabi for your courses, enter all the assignments into your electronic or print calendar. Then develop a plan for both your routine studying and larger assignments and tests. One good rule of thumb is that one hour of lecture time usually equals two hours of study time.
 3. Attend all your classes. Trying to learn material that you missed in class will be more time-consuming.
 4. Figure out if you study better at certain times of day and plan accordingly. Be sure to schedule time for sleep.
 5. Keep a log of how long it takes you to do the homework in your classes, for time management purposes.
 6. Do your homework on time and review the course material regularly; don't "cram" at the last minute for your tests.
 7. Don't spend most of your time on the most interesting or easiest course.
 8. Try to focus—without breaks or additional stimulation—for 15- to 20-minute units.
 9. Plan to do each task once (reading, listening to a lecture, etc.) for time efficiency.
 10. Break up large projects into manageable chunks.
 11. Don't take long vacations during college. Set aside some time to study on the vacations that you do take.
 12. Avoid social, family, or volunteer commitments that are not absolutely necessary. Your schoolwork should come first.
- For more on navigating campus life, the Cambridge University Press series volumes "Prism" has clear explanations on different types in each chapter.



Summary/Conclusion

For all students, this period of life has special challenges both academic and personal in nature. Here we have endeavored to supply some tips about ESL student success in U.S. higher education, which include both academic skills and other aspects of student life. Certainly, improving one's familiarity with EAP in writing and speaking, and understanding the roles of critical thinking, source selection, synthesis and academic honesty are vital. Managing ones' personal life and one's study time are just as important. As well, students must understand the norms of U.S. academic and campus life. Fostering positive relationships with campus contacts and making oneself heard in class may be more daunting for ESL students, but they are important ingredients in the mix.

The experience of going to a new country to study can seem overwhelming, but it need not be. When students are armed with good information about what to expect and where to find support, they can anticipate having a richly rewarding life experience which will shape them for the rest of their lives. Knowing how to succeed in one's studies, and how to ask for help, will be crucial. But the opportunities for social enrichment and personal growth are also of paramount importance. It is hoped that this information will be of use, and point students in the right direction towards achieving their goals.



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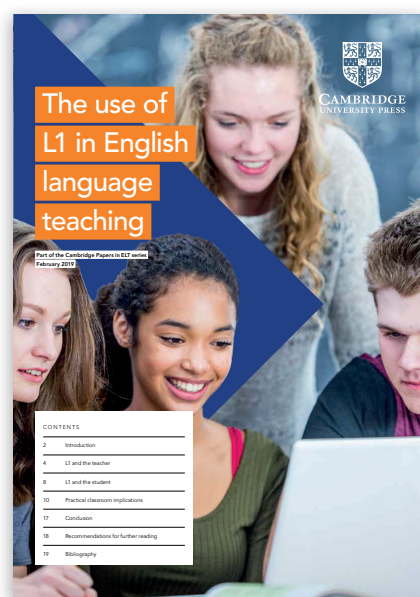
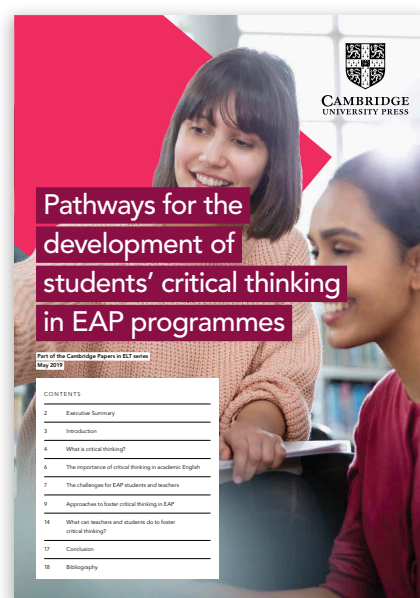
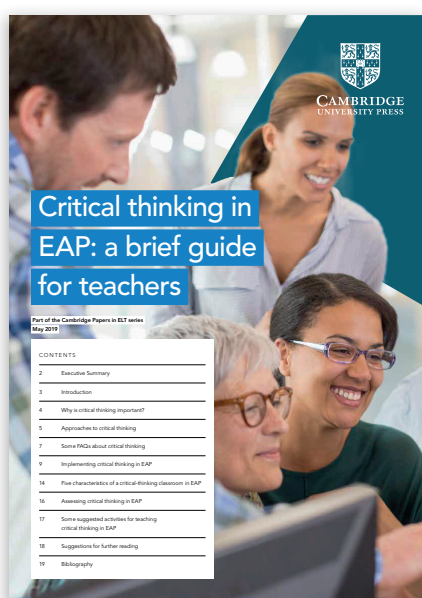
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