

Teaching in American Universities: Overcoming Verbal Disadvantage

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ABSTRACT

To most teaching professors in US universities, securing tenure and promotion are two critical goals. Immigrant professors whose native language is not English (the verbally or linguistically disadvantaged professors) face more than these two challenges, the challenge of securing adequate student enrollment in their assigned courses (especially elective courses) each semester and the opportunity to earn supplementary income in summer and winter sessions. This presenter shared some personal practices in surmounting these challenges.

INTRODUCTION

In the USA, it is generally accepted that professors employed at “research universities” operate under the modus operandi of “publish or perish.” Thus a foreign born professor whose native language is not English and who speaks it with a heavy accent or has less than accurate pronunciation is generally not handicapped as long as he/she publishes. But that is often not the case for foreign born professors whose native language is not English and who are employed in “teaching universities.” Although continuous intellectual contribution is still expected, teaching is the primary focus. Thus their accents and pronunciation often become “conspicuous problems.” Some classroom experiences:

Instructor said

What is MIS?

Core value

Soup or salad?

He tried the liquor

Ate a hamburger and kimchi

Organizational atrophy

Students heard

What is in my ass?

Call value

Super salad?

He tried to lick her

Hate hamburger & cream cheese

Organization and a trophy

Their verbal or linguistic disadvantage becomes especially serious when students don't score well in their assignments or earn less than expected course grades. Often, these students attribute their low performance to their foreign born professor's accent and pronunciation. These students also are more likely to rate their professor's performance unfavorably in their end of semester's course evaluations including berating them in web sites (such as: Rate My Professors) even if their professor actually taught effectively, was well prepared for each class, and graded fairly. As is generally known, students' evaluations often constitute a significant weight in determining annual reappointment at teaching universities. Thus, non native English speakers, especially those with a heavy accent and less accurate pronunciation, face a competitive disadvantage. This disadvantage may be exacerbated if he/she is judged as unattractive or not well dressed. Moreover, students who are less accepting of foreign-looking and sounding names,

may be hesitant to register in their courses particularly if these courses are not required but are electives. As such, these verbally disadvantaged immigrant professors' courses may not run due to insufficient enrollment. This in turn affects their annual income since faculty's annual remuneration in teaching universities is significantly lower than those in research universities. Thus, many professors in teaching universities use summer and winter courses to boost their annual income. In the case of verbally disadvantaged immigrant professors, it means they face higher competitive disadvantage: the higher likelihood of insufficient enrollment.

QUESTION

Hence the question: How could verbally disadvantaged immigrant professors improve their chance of success (that is, survive annual reappointment, improve their chance of teaching summer/winter elective courses, and ultimately earn tenure and promotion) when employed in "teaching universities" in the USA?

PURPOSE OF THIS PRESENTATION

In this presentation, I want to share some personal practices that have helped me survive academe in the USA as a verbally disadvantaged immigrant professor. To establish my credibility on this matter, let me share a little of my academe experience. I completed my doctoral education in the summer of 1995. Throughout my doctoral education (2.0 years of course work and 1.5 years of dissertation), the primary focus of my education was on developing research ability. There was no formal instruction and/or training on how to teach in a university upon graduation. It is assumed that when one completes one's doctoral study, one could teach because one has the specialized knowledge (one's major). Yet my first year experience as a tenure track faculty was not positive. Despite much earnest effort, my students' evaluation scores were in the low 3s on a 5-point scale. Since then I have experimented with different strategies/practices and am now proud to state that my teaching scores for every course taught each semester including summer and winter elective courses continue to receive positive scores -- all above 4.5/5.0 scale. I have also been officially recognized several times as an "excellent teacher" and was granted tenure and promotion to full professor three years ago. So let me now share what I came to share:

1. Practices to build positive student evaluation scores
2. Practices to build enrollment in elective courses
3. Practices to build intellectual contribution in view of heavier teaching loads

Teaching Practices

- Mindset --- I adopt a mindset of "students are my customers & products." As customers, I apply marketing principles to make them happy customers. As products, I think innovatively on how to add educational value to the course text.
- Selection of textbook --- which one would you choose: a very good one, a mediocre one, or a weak one?
- Winnowing --- in the first few weeks of each semester, I use "scare tactics:" tough talks, curt responses, and holding unannounced tests that "count."

- Market research --- for the students who remain enrolled in my classes, I research their accessible background and treat each accordingly. And every week, I email three different students to interact with them on a one-on-one format (micro-marketing).
- Lecture preview --- at least 3 days before each lecture, I email the class lecture materials and urge students to review and think about them before we meet for class.
- Class sessions --- I go to class at least ten minutes earlier to interact with students on an informal basis (to build rapport). I especially make an effort to reach out to those who seem quiet and less popular.
- Lecture review --- at the beginning of each lecture, I review the previous lecture and conduct a Q&A session using voluntary, random and systematic sampling of students present. Then I commence the day's lecture.
- Field trips and community projects --- most students enjoy trips and involvement with "real world" organizations. So I incorporate at least one field trip/community project each semester.
- Extra credit opportunities --- most students want a good grade but they appreciate it more when it is earned. Thus each week, students are granted opportunities to write reaction papers on topics relevant to the course (more points are granted for articles selected from academic journals than newspaper, magazine, or You Tube, etc...).
- Humor, real-life stories and games --- I want students to enjoy coming to my classes. So I incorporate humor, stories, and appropriate games to spice up each class.
- Less stress exams --- My exams are quite challenging as they are not memory recall but analytical type including mini case studies. To help reduce students' anxiety, I offer two options: work with a partner with no cheat card or work alone but with a cheat card.
- Post exam review --- students are allowed to question and challenge answers. If their explanations or challenges are deemed reasonable, points are adjusted accordingly in class.

Build Enrollment Practices

- Offer elective courses that are linked to existing courses, e.g. Marketing Special Events, spinoff from Introductory Marketing; and Marketing Touristic Startups, spinoff from Special Events Marketing and Entrepreneurship.
- Market research --- conduct formal and informal market research to determine when courses are more likely to be selected by working students: day, time, and format (hybrid and customized courses are popular).
- Build relations with academic advisers --- colleagues who are cordial are more likely to recommend their students/advisees to take your courses.

- Build relations with informal advisers --- don't overlook relevant others who may have influence on students choice of courses, such as secretaries and senior students.
- Offer incentives --- to existing students to enroll and to existing students who refer others.
- Request ex-students to spread positive w-o-m and through social media.
- Request sales presentation in colleague's classes and students' club meetings
- Email course syllabi to all accessible students and advisers

Intellectual Contribution Practices

- Encourage students to write weekly reaction papers thereby keeping you abreast of current research and their submissions may trigger research paper ideas.
- Require students to conduct mini research projects in courses. In these carefully planned activities, you are collecting research data at little/no cost.
- Seek collaboration with colleagues. Needless to say, many hands and heads make work lighter and of higher quality than doing things alone.
- Seek collaboration with foreign colleagues to produce cross-cultural studies thereby making them more appealing to journal editors.
- Solicit community projects. The projects completed provide publication material and help to earn points for "service" towards tenure & promotion.
- Sacrifice --- work on evenings and weekends.

CONCLUSION

You and I know: among other variables, success comes from hard work and the courage to try something different. I hope my presentation reinforces this belief. Thank you for listening. I will now take questions from the floor.