Our Multilingual Classrooms:
Insights + Approaches from ECU Teachers and Students
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We also thank all the ECU faculty, staff, and students who generously gave their time and lent their insights and expertise to our campus events and research this past year.

The back cover graphic is a visual representation of the languages spoken by ECU students in 2017–18. Front cover graphic designed by Liora Agronov. Back cover graphic designed by Sahil Mroke

Credits
The Multilingual ECU Project advocates for an inclusive learning environment that supports linguistic and cultural diversity. We are looking at ways to better support multilingualism on our campus through shared resources and dialogue. Our aim is to support multilingual students who face barriers to education and inclusion, and the teachers and staff who work with them. We work within an anti-oppression, social justice framework that acknowledges the larger systemic forces that create social inequality in our community.

The Multilingual ECU Project is an initiative of Cissie Fu, Dean of the Faculty of Culture + Community, to assess and serve the needs of our multilingual teaching and learning community and to build understanding across linguistic and cultural differences.

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Visit Us Online!
www.multilingual.ecuad.ca

The ECU Student Survey referenced throughout was conducted by the Multilingual ECU Project during October 2017. All current students were invited to participate, with 588 students responding to the survey. For more detailed information gathered by the survey, see our multilingual.ecuad.ca.

The ECU Teacher Survey referenced throughout was conducted by the Multilingual ECU Project during November 2017. Regular and sessional faculty, technicians, library workers, and Writing Centre tutors were invited to participate, with 108 teachers responding to the survey. For more detailed information gathered by the survey, see multilingual.ecuad.ca.

The student focus groups referenced throughout were discussion groups hosted by the Multilingual ECU Project during 2017-18. All students who identify as multilingual were invited to participate, with approximately 80 students contributing over the course of the year.

The Voices Project referenced throughout is an ongoing collection of student thoughts and stories about languages, and the role that they play in students’ experiences at ECU and in Vancouver. The project includes written and audio-recorded testimonials. It is curated by Liora Agronov, was showcased at ECU April 11-13 2018, and can be viewed at multilingual.ecuad.ca.

We would like to thank the Ontario College of Art and Design for inspiration. Their Inclusive Teaching booklet is full of constructive ideas and is available on our website and at http://www.ocadu.ca/Assets/content/teaching-learning/Inclusive+Teaching+Booklet.pdf.
Welcome!

We’re so glad you’re here.

In our desire to do our best for students, ECU faculty have been developing ways to support and celebrate all of the students we teach. Whether through engaging in anti-racist and decolonizing practices, or drawing on principles of universal design, we’ve been figuring out how to create classroom environments that work for everyone.

Here, you’ll find insights and strategies that ECU faculty, staff and students have shared with the Multilingual ECU Project throughout the 2017-18 academic year, through two school-wide surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one consultations. Our aim has been to recognize and learn from some of the amazing work going on in our classrooms, studios, and shops. We hope that, as teachers and learners, you’ll find something here that inspires you in your own direction.

The conversation continues over on multilingual.ecuad.ca – stop by to share your strategies, successes, and struggles.

Debora O + Tara Wren, Multilingual ECU Project Coordinators + ECU teachers

What makes our teaching accessible and inclusive?

As artists and designers, we know how to make objects, texts, and systems with an audience in mind. We might even be using universal design principles to make our work accessible for a wider audience. But how can we apply these ideas to our teaching?

As teachers, we can make choices to support students with different learning abilities, including differences in how our students read, write, listen and speak English.

I try to… **demonstrate through pictures, demos and other non-verbal means.**

ECU Teacher Survey response 36

I use online forums where students can post, continuing the discussions from home. These… **level the participatory playing field** in my class, bringing it in line with my values re. reducing inequity in all ways possible.

ECU Teacher Survey response 76

A Note about Universal Instructional Design

Universal Instructional Design aims to make education accessible to a wider variety of students. As with other types of universal design, when we make changes to support students with English language differences, we make our classrooms and activities clearer and more accessible for all students. More about Universal Instructional Design strategies: multilingual.ecuad.ca
Getting to know our multilingual students

At ECU, we often refer to students who are not native speakers of English as ESL (English as a Second Language) students. This is a readily recognized but problematic term. “ESL” does not account for the complexity of the linguistic backgrounds of our students, many of whom spoke another first language at home but learned English as soon as they entered the school system and are fully fluent, or students who have been learning English as a 3rd, 4th, or 5th language. The term “international student” is also misleading, as many of our multilingual students were born in Canada or are permanent residents.

At ECU, 42% of students surveyed considered themselves multilingual. * This large multilingual population is extremely diverse in terms of language, background, fluency, and identity. *The Multilingual ECU Projects Student Survey was conducted October 2017, with 588 students (31% of all students) responding. Full survey results are available at multilingual.ecuad.ca

When describing our students, we might come across other terms that are commonly used to refer to multilingual students. In some cases, these terms might allow us to discuss things more precisely, though in other cases, older terms might be inaccurate or exclusionary.

- EAL (English as an Additional Language) students
- English language learners
- Less fluent English speakers
- International students
- ESL students

What does multilingual mean?

Multilingualism covers a broad range of language use and fluency. This may encompass students who are new to Canada and whose English proficiency is mostly written, not spoken. It also includes students who were born in Canada, but whose home and community language is not English and who might struggle with formal aspects of writing in a language they have largely learned by ear. And some students may be fully fluent in a number of languages and want to incorporate their multilingualism into their writing and studio practices.

Supporting our linguistically diverse community

There is a growing awareness of the value of multilingualism at ECU – 73% of students and 75% of teachers feel that multilingualism is an asset for students.*

*The Multilingual ECU Projects Teacher Survey was conducted November 2017, with 108 teachers responding from across ECU. Full survey results are available at multilingual.ecuad.ca

Survey results also show that multilingualism is not an issue that affects only newcomers to Canada. Of all ECU students who identified as multilingual in our survey, more than 25% were born in Canada, or have been here for over ten years.

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How long have multilingual ECU students lived in Canada?

- Born here 12%
- 10+ years 14%
- 5-10 years 17%
- 1-5 years 37%
- <1 years 20%

It always comes as a surprise to others when I say that I can speak German or Chinese. Every time I speak in the language, I always get a positive reaction! Alisha Steinberger, 4th year Animation, Voices project

Including all of our students

Despite the acknowledged value of speaking multiple languages, some multilingual students continue to feel a sense of shame and exclusion based on how they speak English. This exclusion is a barrier to full participation in student life and to a sense of belonging to the ECU community, preventing students from accessing resources and supports they need.

When I meet someone new, sometimes people can’t see past my accent. They immediately ask me where I’m from when they don’t even know my name yet. Liora Agronov, 4th year Industrial Design, Voices project

I think for most international students there is a sense of outsidersness. Student focus group, spring 2018

Sometimes teachers, technicians or instructors just ignore people that speak broken English. 4th year Industrial Design student, Voices project

A note about Englishes

While there are many different Englishes spoken at ECU, “standard” forms of English continue to be given more legitimacy and value. In this traditionalist, colonial framework, multilingual learners at ECU face judgement and exclusion based on their use of English.
As microcosms of the wider world, our classrooms are not immune to the larger political and cultural forces that create social hierarchy and injustice. Having open and respectful discussions on issues of cultural and linguistic diversity encourages all students to question their assumptions and judgements, and to become aware of the larger systemic forces at play in classroom interactions. Embracing diversity in our classrooms and curricula also creates opportunities for culturally and linguistically diverse students to be seen and heard.

Sometimes I think most of our academic courses are based on western culture... I feel I am disconnected. Art and design should be international.

Chao Wu, 4th year Animation, Voices project

I believe our curriculum needs to reflect the diversity of our student body.

Rita Wong, Faculty of Culture + Community

In my Humanity class, there are less native speakers than international students, which makes me feel more easy to share my ideas at first.

Student focus group, fall 2017

I refer to my own multilingualism and own challenges in going back and forth between languages; I support work that includes languages other than English where appropriate.

ECU Teacher Survey response 93

Explaining to students the different ways that logographic versus alphabet based language functions differ culturally... to enable students to benefit from both [and] to deepen the learning journey for all.

ECU Teacher Survey response 91

We’re encouraging students to write in the language that the ideas arrive in: write from your language and your place... that type of approach is also useful for people with learning differences.

Hélène Day Fraser, Faculty of Design + Dynamic Media

Interested in knowing more about how faculty and students incorporate diverse cultures and languages into their studio and writing practices? Visit multilingual.ecuad.ca.
Academic Culture

Coming to university as a foreign student has its difficulties. One of the problems I’ve faced was learning what requires citations. In second year, I got an essay back with three words circled, “the butterfly effect” (a small action can cause a big change), and a comment beside it: “This is considered plagiarism! Be careful!” Cultural differences influenced my mistake. In my culture, this is an everyday phrase.

I think citing is important, however, I don’t think it is helpful to instill fear in students. The overall feeling that is given to students is that plagiarising is a crime, which creates a lot of anxiety around citations. It also makes students focus more on citations than on the content, from fear of being penalized.

How long does it take to become fluent in academic English?

A conversationally fluent student arriving in Canada to do their degree at ECU may well graduate before they have time to become fully fluent in academic English. Jim Cummins, in his research on academic language acquisition, notes that it can take an additional 2-6 years to become proficient in academic English – the ability to use English in complex and abstract ways, or to use English as a tool for learning.*

“Passing” for a fluent academic English writer might not be a useful goal for these students, and attempting to do so could hinder their ability to learn and share the complex and creative ideas that they, like all of our students, bring to the table.


I think don’t worry the skill of english… just to try and creative. Share amazing idea is a good way to absorb language knowledge.

Wenbin Xia, Industrial Design Grad 2014

Cultural Differences

Liora Agronov, 4th year Industrial Design

Adjusting to ECU’s academic culture

Sometimes a student might be struggling in our classrooms, not because of their abilities with concepts or language, but because they have been trained in a different academic culture. About 1/3 of our students have lived in Canada for less than 5 years (11% for less than a year), so many students may be accustomed to academic expectations that differ from our own (ECU Student Survey).

Canadian classrooms regularly require active and experimental participation – behaviour that in many countries would be considered disrespectful or inappropriate. Even when they see their classmates questioning an instructor or an authoritative text, or sharing their own half-formed ideas, it can be challenging for students trained in more formal classrooms to try these behaviours themselves.

I’m not always clear on when I am supposed to talk in class.

1st year Foundation student, Voices project

“The way you teach is not the way I’m used to.” Students come to us with expectations of what education is – it’s not infrequent that I have them telling me this.

Hélène Day Fraser, Faculty of Design + Dynamic Media

In my high school, and for most high schools in China, most students are silent in class. And there are not much chance for them to talk about their own ideas. The most important thing for them is to take notes about understand what’s teacher’s idea.

Yang Yu, 4th year Industrial Design

Some students are new to the idea that they will have to support and even defend their work during a critique – self-reflection and critical analysis are crucial to a practice-based environment.

Trish Kelly, Faculty of Culture + Community

When I started to study here, I was shocked in the first class, lots of people eating snacks in class, and sharing with other people, and teachers said nothing to them. I feel more free here!

Voices project
This graphic is drawn from the Multilingual ECU Project’s spring 2018 student focus group, where students were asked to give more candid and detailed feedback on what they identified on the Oct 2017 student survey as the most challenging of classroom activities: classroom participation.
Encouraging class participation

Class discussions are a key component of teaching and learning at ECU. However, this is an activity that is new to many students, particularly those who are not used to thinking on their feet in English or who are still getting accustomed to the participatory nature of our classrooms.

I always hold small group discussions before whole class discussions to allow students who are less fluent to organize their thoughts before they participate.

ECU Teacher Survey response 34

Before engaging in a large class discussion, I will often do a prep assignment of reflective writing or note taking or questions so students have time to think of ideas ahead of time.

ECU Teacher Survey response 82

I put class discussion questions in writing on paper or on the board, rather than just stating them verbally.

ECU Teacher Survey response 5

Using Indigenous practices such as talking circle… welcoming different roles for all students… time to reflect together, visuals, slowness.

ECU Teacher Survey response 15

Critiques

While crits are similar to discussions, the added nuance of providing critical and constructive feedback in a respectful manner is an additional challenge for students whose first language is not English. As with class discussions, creating low-stakes or alternative opportunities for participation can level the playing field for students who are acclimatizing to Canadian and ECU culture.

I also give them the opportunity to provide written feedback to each other, as opposed to or in addition to speaking during class discussions/critiques and they really really appreciate this and I see a lot of participation this way.

ECU Teacher Survey response 9

Getting to know one another before critique process.

ECU Teacher Survey response 15

I also find that, when they are in smaller, informal groups, they open up and communicate comfortably overall.

ECU Teacher Survey response 20

Student experiences of discussions and crits

Sometimes I get nervous in a crit and my brain just couldn’t function properly. A lot of my thoughts are generated after the crit or after class when I’m not that nervous.

Student focus group, spring 2018

In some of my class, our teacher let us to discuss on Slack, and it would be counted as participation. I can use dictionary and spell check when I was organizing my answer. I would feel more confident with my answers.

3rd year Interaction Design student

In my case, before saying something, I tend to think too much and feel worried too much.

Student focus group, spring 2018

I find that some profs are less sensitive to Asian culture in crits. We don’t really speak up too much because we weren’t taught it!

Voices project

Critiques can be challenging when silences seem too long and just a few students are commenting. It’s not that students don’t want to participate, but designating time for them to think can be one of the keys. Before discussing a work, I give several minutes for every student to experience it and write one comment and one question for the artist. Then we go around the room, and everyone has something provocative to contribute.

Scott T. Mallory Jr., Faculty of Design + Dynamic Media

Designating Time

For more tips and resources on supporting students in the classroom and studio: multilingual.ecuad.ca.
Writing assignments for all

Many teachers at ECU are realizing that the "one-assignment-fits-all" approach disadvantages many students and operates from a regressive and naive cultural assumption of sameness (in language, culture and educational background). As teachers, we have been opening up the assignment process so that there are multiple approaches to the same goal, as well as promoting a process-driven focus for writing that includes low-stakes writing, drafting, and peer editing – a creative process that parallels what many students practice in their studio classes.

Having clear assignment descriptions where goals are broken down and evaluation criteria is made explicit can also enable students' understanding and embolden them to ask questions and clarify expectations.

I believe in creative approaches to writing; multilingual writing; collaborative writing; multiple drafts.
ECU Teacher Survey response 40

I allow them to write non-formal written assignments - whether putting together a brochure, or making a small video.
ECU Teacher Survey response 37

Different types of writing which focus on asking questions rather than providing grammatically and syntactically correct and conclusive answers.
ECU Teacher Survey response 45

Low stakes writing assignments to get practice and help catch deficiencies and advance comfort in writing.
ECU Teacher Survey response 82

Reflective Writing
Vicky Ha, 3rd Year Visual Arts

Short reflective writing encourages me to participate in my academic classes. It’s more similar to participation mark than tests. A short text each class, even if it’s just about what I do not understand, helps me build up a vocabulary to talk about the topics. And I can always use what I wrote in class discussion!

Generous Curiosity
Jacqueline Turner, Faculty of Culture + Community

I use low stakes writing any time I want students to talk in class discussion or critiques. I find that super common experience of facing the unresponsive class can be alleviated by asking students to preview topics and write what they already know about the subject or to respond in writing to a set of criteria for critiquing each other’s work in studio. Giving students a chance to gather their thoughts really helps to build dynamic discussions with broad-based participation. It helps with students who are quiet, but it also helps to even out those discussions where one or two people can dominate.

Low stakes writing can also give students a more creative way to engage with the material – having the class write a list of what they see or know about the work, making connections to their own experiences, engaging in a fictional dialogue with the authors or artists under discussion, or writing poetic versions of the subject matter can all be ways to decrease the pressure of writing grammatically perfect sentences.

Our thinking is often messy, so letting writing reflect the non-linearity of our thoughts can be the first stage in leading to a class or studio space where we can all try out ideas, experiment with multiple modes of articulation, and figure out how to talk to each other with a generous curiosity.

How can I help my students with reading?

Lots of students struggle with the amount of reading we assign. Many haven’t considered reading strategically, and carefully study every word of every text with equal reverence. Explicitly discussing how deeply you expect a text to be read, or what you want students to gain from it, can ease students’ workload and improve their understanding. For more ways to support student reading, visit http://blogs.eciad.ca/wc/.
Personal connections

Multilingual students face extra linguistic and cultural challenges when making connections with teachers and peers. Encouraging peer-to-peer and teacher-to-student connections helps them to build confidence as well as feel included. These personal connections can help teachers understand students’ unique and complex cultural and linguistic backgrounds (such as how new they are to Canada, and what sort of educational background they come from).

ECU faculty are facilitating personal connections by:

• Making opportunities for casual conversation among peers
• Using current events or social media as a way to “break the ice” and get everyone talking
• Creating spaces outside the classroom for interpersonal connection, such as field trips or critiques in the hallways

I am available immediately after class for students with questions who did not want to speak in front of a group.
ECU Teacher Survey response 53

I try to meet with less-fluent English speakers as frequently as possible. I make an effort to have friendly conversations, to strike a rapport.
ECU Teacher Survey response 20

I do a lot of one-on-one consultation with students to address their specific needs.
ECU Teacher Survey response 34

Ask them to sit at different places in the studio and not exclusively with peers of the same cultural background. I also suggest they do the same throughout the day, including in social spaces.
ECU Teacher Survey response 58

Language proficiency is just one of many learning issues that arise in an inclusive, multicultural classroom. As with other academic challenges, with time, attention, and support, any issues can be worked through.

Visit multilingual.ecuad.ca for a list of questions to consider when getting to know your multilingual students better.

Gentle Humour

Martin Rose, Faculty of Design + Dynamic Media

Through short, casual, friendly conversations, before class, during the break, and afterwards in the hallway, I get to know my students. I ask questions about their home and their interests. They get to know me, as I too was 19 once and was both nervous and excited about being at university.

It’s nice if they can teach me something new. It’s good if they are in small groups and tell stories together. Gentle humour helps. I make them laugh. If they struggle with English, I patiently wait, let them take their time to find the right words, and I quietly guide them along. This builds trust. The student will then gain enough confidence to actively participate in the course.

Kind Words

June Tang, 3rd Year Interaction Design, Writing Center Peer Tutor

In Foundation year, I wrote an essay about my hoodie which represented my initial discomfort and fears of moving to another country. Besides the feedback on my writing, my instructor gave me welcoming words that were truly unexpected. I still remember clearly the kind words on my paper:

“Welcome to Vancouver! I am very happy that you are enjoying your stay here, and have overcome your fears and pressure!”

His words were an acknowledgment of me as a student, a writer, and a person. And school, afterwards, did not feel like it was all grades and studying. It was also about making connections.
Teaching beyond language

As one teacher survey respondent pointed out, none of us are here to teach grammar. But how can we help our less fluent students, while teaching them (and the rest of our class) about critical theory, sculpture, or interaction design?

As a bilingual student myself, I learned English by watching a lot of TV... Part of learning English is about learning the culture, and this technique helps in learning more about the culture of the chosen English-speaking country.

ECU Teacher Survey response 52

Instead of using “art speak” and assuming everybody understands it, I use it and define it.

ECU Teacher Survey response 4

I suggest that all students read their work out loud, even to a plant, or a pet, because we all speak with more fluency than we write.

ECU Teacher Survey response 87

I look for ideas, and am less focused on correcting grammar, which often shuts down students.

ECU Teacher Survey response 21

I often find that writing from ESL students is clear, nuanced and authentic, even when the English is not perfect...I always encourage them to speak freely.

ECU Teacher Survey response 61

Writing Centre

Heather Fitzgerald, Writing Centre Coordinator

The Writing Centre is a resource for students and for you. Several of our tutors have ESL training and/or teaching experience, and many of them are multilingual writers themselves.

But we also support teaching. You can book a consultation to discuss assignment design, teaching multilingual students, or responding to student writing issues, including plagiarism. Some instructors book appointments to review assignments with our undergraduate tutors, to get a student’s point of view.

We also visit classes to talk about writing issues, such as reading and notetaking, brainstorming and planning, writing from sources, revising and editing, as well as specific forms of writing. Just let us know what you need and we will do our best to support you.