

Creating an Interactive Online Orientation to Academic Practices for International Students

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Abstract

While universities are increasingly implementing programs to support international students' language development, fewer orientation programs have sought to provide explicit guidance on expected academic practices in Canadian institutions. Many such academic norms—including the expectation to complete weekly readings, the use of first names with instructors, or participation grades—may be unfamiliar to students who were socialized in different academic cultures. This paper describes the creation of an online orientation module that introduced newly arrived international students to three aspects of local classroom practice: participation, preparing readings for class, and emailing instructors. Drawing on theories of academic discourse socialization, the module discusses norms (e.g., asking questions is expected) and provides ready-made language models for engaging in related practices (e.g., email templates). Initial results of a pilot with 74 incoming students suggest that these types of modules provide a promising avenue for supporting international student success. Details of the design process, including the selection of appropriate platforms and tools and the implementation of inclusive, accessible, and multimodal design principles, are presented. Recommendations for institutions wishing to develop similar support materials are also provided.

Introduction

Over the last decade, international student numbers have tripled in British Columbia (BC), with over 60,000 international students attending BC's post-secondary institutions (Heslop, 2018). Given these massive increases, universities' strategic plans for internationalization are now foregrounding the need to foster students' sense of belonging and their ability to participate in the local academic community. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated the need for high-quality, accessible, and inclusive online offerings for domestic and international students alike. To date, studies conducted at English-speaking institutions (e.g., Heng, 2017; Ryan & Viète, 2009) have reported that international students often feel that the prevailing norms for classroom participation do not value their contributions (e.g., instructors dismiss international perspectives or do not make an effort to understand students' accents). Other researchers (Straker, 2016; Yates & Nguyen, 2012) have noted that international students are often (incorrectly) perceived by instructors and others as "shy" or "uncritical" and are thereby implicitly positioned as deficient participants within the local learning space. Other work has provided a more hopeful vision, describing linguistically and culturally supportive classes in which international students are viewed as intellectual and cultural resources who can contribute their unique multicultural perspective to their local community (see for example, Morita, 2004). These studies raise important questions about how instructors and institutions can create

(scaffolded) opportunities for international students to meaningfully and legitimately participate as active and valued contributors.

We propose that one way to support international students is through resources and discussions that help them decode the implicit norms of their classroom communities. Such interventions are likely to have multiple benefits: students receive explicit guidance about local practices and, through the discussion process, instructors and staff are afforded the opportunity to think critically about the cultural nature of participation in higher education in the host community (Murray & McConachy, 2018). In this paper, we describe the process of designing and implementing an online orientation module that introduced students in a one-year study abroad program to three communicative practices: in-class participation, preparing readings, and emailing instructors. Drawing on research in academic discourse socialization (Kobayashi, Zappa-Hollman, & Duff, 2017), we discuss the theoretical principles and tools used to design online activities for the project. Students' feedback and lessons learned will also be presented.

Background and Rationale

The online orientation module grew out of a workshop designed to support a cohort of international students participating in a one-year sheltered study abroad program (the origin of the students and the program name are omitted to maintain confidentiality). Each year, a cohort of between 75 and 100 students from the same university arrives in August to take classes in academic writing, culture, and intercultural awareness with their cohort-mates at a post-secondary institution in Canada. Grounded in a social and constructivist notions of learning, classes within the program require regular attendance and encourage small group discussion, group presentations, critical analysis assignments, and interaction with instructors in person and via email. Many of these practices differ significantly from the students' home university practices, where attendance is not closely monitored, and assessment is typically exam-based.

Over the years, many instructors have remarked that newly arrived students are unsure of how to negotiate the instructor-student relationship and that students have few strategies for managing the program's demanding reading and assignment loads. Through informal consultations, we learned that students' ability to succeed in the program was often tied to their ability to quickly take up and navigate the program's unfamiliar classroom norms. In 2014, a team of instructors proposed that a workshop be developed to support students in decoding the implicit norms of classroom practice. The two-hour face-to-face workshop, initially developed in 2014, focussed on the following areas:

- Introducing oneself in the classroom
- Saying no/refusing requests from peers
- Participating in class discussions
- Giving in-class presentations
- Reading and class preparation strategies
- Emailing instructors

At the time of writing, the workshop had been running for five years and had received highly positive reviews from students, staff, and instructors. In 2019, the team received a small

grant to extend the workshop into an online module. Ultimately, a hybrid model was proposed in which part of the workshop would be delivered face-to-face, followed by a 30–45-minute-long online module that would reinforce and extend several of the topics covered in the workshop. This paper focuses on the online component of this project.

Theoretical Framework

In selecting and designing our content for the online orientation, we drew upon scholarship in academic discourse socialization (ADS). ADS research explores the nature and development of academic practices promoted in specific institutions and disciplines (e.g., presentations, in-class discussions, and academic writing). ADS offers insights into the socialization processes by which newcomers (usually students) gain the communicative competence and sociocultural knowledge necessary for meaningful participation in those practices, often through interaction with more expert members (Kobayashi et al., 2017). These processes are conceptualized as complex and *multidirectional*: experts' practices are shaped by the behaviours and attitudes of novices just as novices learn from more experienced members of the academic community. Newcomer students' learning trajectories are also influenced by their capacity for and interest in seeking out "additional resources independently to facilitate and mediate their own socialization into academic and other communities" (Duff & Anderson, 2015, p. 338).

ADS researchers that have examined socialization of additional language speakers also recognize that while socialization often occurs through interaction, interaction can also be a potential site of struggle, especially when the values and expectations underpinning local language practices do not align with newcomers' previous experiences in education (see Duff & Talmy, 2011). For this reason, ADS studies pay special attention to the explicit and implicit ways that classroom interactions shape—and are shaped by—students' ability and willingness to participate in new practices and the extent to which new students become aware of the norms and values that underpin those practices (for a review of ADS research in Canadian contexts, see Duff, Zappa-Hollman, & Surtees, 2019). Findings have illustrated the ways in which misalignments between student and instructor expectations can negatively impact international students' experiences and success (e.g., Yang 2010). Studies also point out that participants often lack prior experience and training in skills and knowledge necessary for fuller participation in the target academic discourse (e.g., Morita, 2004), calling for explicit instruction and assistance for various forms of oral, written, and online academic communication. The module described in this paper responds to that call by providing scaffolding for several practices that consistently posed a challenge for students in our target program: classroom participation, preparation for class, and emailing instructors.

Target Practices: Classroom Participation and Email Exchanges

Socialization into classroom participation and emailing practices have both been researched from an ADS perspective. Morita (2004) examined the challenges faced by three Japanese graduate students participating in open-ended classroom discussions at a Canadian university. Findings showed that students often remained silent to save face despite their desire to participate during whole-class conversation. Their continued silence, in turn, reinforced their positionality as "limited" contributors within the class, further exacerbating their reticence in the classroom. In

other words, students' participatory challenges and their positionality were mutually influencing and thus co-constitutive of each other. One of Morita's participants reported how her experience of classroom participation differed in supportive and unsupportive courses: in supportive classes she felt she was able to modify her modes of participation to adjust to academic life, while in an unsupportive class, she felt ignored. Morita's findings suggest that although students may be aware of the norm that requires active participation, students need more support than simply being told that speaking up is important.

Emails to instructors are another academic form of communication with which international students can sometimes struggle. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) analysed UK-university lecturers' perceptions of the textual features of 200 request emails written by Greek Cypriot university students using English as an additional language. She reported that the emails were characterized by significant directness marked by lack of appropriate opening and closing, absence or underuse of hedged language (i.e., overuse of imperatives), and misuse of address forms (Dr. first name). She found that students who employed direct request strategies (e.g., "Please email the syllabus ...") were unknowingly judged by university lecturers as *abrupt* and *disrespectful* (pp. 3209, 3212). Like the other authors cited in this paper, Economidou-Kogetsidis emphasized the need for incorporating explicit email instruction into language curricula.

Taken together, ADS studies have suggested the need to not only scaffold students' understanding of norms (i.e., by telling students that it is important to participate), but also the need to provide explicit guidance on the types of language use that correspond to local practices. Based on these findings, the module described in this paper was designed to provide scaffolding for academic practices in two ways: it explicitly states the tacit norms of various classroom communication practices, and it provides examples and models of language that could be used to engage in those practices. In the remainder of the paper, we describe our design process for the online orientation.

Project Overview

The online module was developed collaboratively by the two authors over five months beginning in March 2019 and was hosted on the university's course learning management system (LMS), Canvas. The final version of the module is divided into six sections: an introduction, three subsections with activities, an overview with information for accessing additional support, and a feedback survey. The three subsections contain content from the face-to-face workshop that the team felt would benefit from additional scaffolding and would be suited to online delivery. Emailing was selected because written communication strategies could easily be addressed through asynchronous textual modes. In-class participation, including the importance of attendance and asking clarifying questions, was also identified as requiring additional reinforcement, particularly given the high stakes nature of regular participation in the program. Finally, strategies for preparing readings for classes (e.g., writing down main ideas and keywords, noting questions to ask in class) were identified as a topic that was often less engaging in a large group setting and could be more easily modelled through videos and activities online. Each of these three subsections was further broken down into a short lesson, including:

- An introduction page with objectives
- A minimum of three interactive activities (each on a separate page)
- A self-check quiz in which participants indicate how confident they feel about each objective

In what follows, we describe the principles used to design the activities.

Design Principles for Online Activities

Online modules can offer flexible, multimodal, and self-paced learning experiences (e.g., videos, games, and quizzes), making them an ideal choice for delivering content to large numbers of students who may or may not be present on campus. However, to access content, students often have to navigate unfamiliar online platforms, which can present a supplementary learning burden for students. In addition, the lack of personal interaction in online modules means that students who are having difficulties may not have the opportunity to ask questions. Based on discussions around these benefits and drawbacks, the team agreed on three key principles to guide our design: *multimodality*, *accessibility*, and *representation*. These principles, which are similar to those described in work on universal design for learning (CAST, 2018), reflect a growing trend in online design work to reduce barriers to learning and to cater to a variety of learning styles.

Multimodality. Content that is multimodal is delivered via several modes (e.g., images, sound, and text). We decided that not only should our content be multimodal, but learners should also have the opportunity to manipulate and interact with the knowledge presented by answering questions, exploring content in non-linear ways, and organizing new ideas (i.e., multiple modes of engagement). To achieve our aims, we embedded interactive videos and activities throughout the module. Interactive videos included embedded comprehension questions to enhance student interaction with the video content. Our interactive activities were created using H5P, which is a web-based service that allows the user to create activities, such as flash cards, drag-and-drop activities, interactive timelines, and image hotspots that can be embedded directly into the HTML code of webpages, such as pages in Canvas (www.h5p.org).

Figure 1 on the next page shows an example of an H5P multiple hotspot activity embedded in the module. In this activity, students must find hidden “hotspots” by clicking on the image of an email from a student to a teacher. When the area containing inappropriate language is clicked, advice on how to modify the email is provided. The activity is completed when all hotspots have been discovered, at which point the student can click “next” to move on to the next section of the module.

The purpose of this activity is two-fold: it raises awareness about norms (e.g., by explaining that demanding help is inappropriate), and it provides language models to support participation (e.g., “Could you give me some feedback”). This activity was the last of four in the “Email” section. Previous activities included: a video on reasons to email instructors, a hotspot activity of a sample “good” email, and a drag-and-drop activity of email openings and closings. Each of these activities took only a few minutes to complete.

INSTRUCTIONS:
Discover common mistakes that students make by clicking on the image. When you find a mistake, some advice will appear at the bottom of the image.

From: kenfu43!

To: christina.smitl

I am Kenki Fukui

Dear instructor,

I am in your class. This is my assignment. Please check it.

Anyways, I like your class. Your smile is nice.

Kenki

"Please check it" is not appropriate. If you want some advice from your instructor, you can write "Could you give me some feedback?" or "I look forward to your feedback." Great job! 1 of 6 Mistakes.

Figure 1. H5P multiple hotspot activity.

Accessibility. Both linguistic and technological accessibility were central to our project design. Firstly, it was essential that the oral and written language in our module was manageable in terms of both its quantity and complexity. We limited the written text to just a few sentences per page, employed active verbs, and used repetition strategically to expose students to key academic vocabulary. For instance, the word “efficiently” (a frequently used academic word) is repeated several times and was also repeated in the final self-quiz for this section. Figure 2 on the next page shows the text for an activity page from the section on preparing for class. The use of bullet points breaks up the reading to make it less intimidating for students. Figure 2 also shows a screenshot from the accompanying video about strategies for completing course readings. To make the video accessible, narration was recorded at a deliberately slow pace with pauses throughout. In addition, notes, such as the ones shown in Figure 2, are displayed to highlight the most important information for students. The linguistic content was also reviewed by speakers of English as an additional language to identify challenging words or expressions.

Question: How can I do required readings efficiently?

Each week, your instructors will ask you to prepare by reading or doing other activities before coming to class.

They might ask you to:

- Read an article or book chapter
- Watch a video
- Explore a website
- Do a writing activity

If you read and prepare the activities, it will be easier for you to understand the lecture or seminar and to participate actively. Do the activity below to learn more about how you can do readings efficiently.

Instructions:

Watch the video and answer the questions. You can stop or replay the video as many times as you need to.




Figure 2. Interactive video on preparing readings.

To enhance technological accessibility, we ensured that all content would display correctly across most devices (e.g., phones, tablets, and desktops) and operating systems (e.g., Mac OS, iOS, Windows, and Android). Cross-platform usability was also enhanced by limiting content on each page to reduce the need for scrolling. All content was embedded directly within the module to reduce any rerouting issues. The choice to use Canvas as the hosting platform was also driven by concerns of accessibility: all students had been granted Canvas usernames and passwords and would have to learn to use the platform for their coursework. These circumstances enabled us to reduce registration issues and provided a legitimate rationale for requiring students to learn a new platform.

Representation. To ensure that the audience for the module (study abroad students) would have an opportunity to see themselves represented as legitimate and valued members of the campus community, we decided to include copyright-free images and clips that showed a variety of students, including students of colour, and to feature narrators with a variety of accents as narrators in our videos (e.g., American, Japanese, and British).

Implementation

First, we created the draft version of the activities within a digital “sandbox,” where we could experiment with different media and ideas. After testing the activities across devices, the module was migrated to the program’s shared Canvas hub, where it would be accessible to students during their stay (September–April). Two instructors and a staff member provided feedback.

The module was introduced to students during their face-to-face orientation session the week before classes in September. One section of the online module (topic: in-class participation) was completed in the 2-hour workshop face-to-face to ensure that students were able to log in and locate the content. The remaining sections were assigned as homework, to be completed independently before the end of the following week. Students were reminded via email and in classes to complete the module. One of the authors was available via email for technical support during this period.

Once the module had been completed, students filled out an anonymous online feedback form containing 12 questions related to interest/usefulness, accessibility, time to complete the module, and preferred sections/elements (see questionnaire in Appendix A). Student responses ($n=70$) were collated and qualitative responses were analyzed for recurring themes. A “response” was counted if at least one question was answered. The response rate was around 90% (74 students attended the face-to-face workshop); however, these numbers are reported as approximate because it is impossible to know if some students completed the module or the survey more than once, which might have inflated the numbers. Around 75% of respondents indicated that they had completed all the activities while the remaining respondents admitted that they had completed only some of the activities. In addition, not all respondents answered all the questions. With those caveats in mind, the initial feedback suggests that students found the module to be useful, interesting, and accessible.

Student Feedback

Table 1 on the next page displays students’ responses on Likert questions related to overall usefulness of the module as well as linguistic and technological accessibility. Note that the total number of respondents differs slightly for each question.

Overall, the results for Questions 1 and 2 show that students’ experiences with the module were largely positive. Most students either agreed (4) or strongly agreed (5) that the module was both useful and interesting. Their open-ended comments suggest that they specifically appreciated the enhanced accessibility and clarity made possible by the interactive features and video materials. For example, one student commented on the “Clear and understandable movies,” while another mentioned “There are some activities in the instruction. I like these.” These findings point to the importance of multimodality for enhancing students’ understanding of materials. When asked if they would like more modules on additional topics, the majority of students (58/61) expressed interest depending on the topic. They identified extra-curricular activities and recycling practices as areas where they would like to learn more. Students’ interest in these topics demonstrates their desire to participate in all aspects of campus

life. It also indicates a relatively high level of satisfaction and engagement with materials that orient them to the implicit norms of the local institution.

Table 1

Participant Responses to Likert Questions

	1	2	3	4	5	Total	Average
Q1. The information was useful.	0	0	3	16	50	69	4.7
Q2. The activities were interesting	0	0	8	20	40	68	4.5
Q3. The level of English was okay for me.	0	0	10	22	34	66	4.4
Q4. The activities worked well on my device.	0	1	9	12	45	67	4.5

Note. To enhance linguistic accessibility, ratings were in the form of stars (i.e., 5 stars = strongly agree).

With an average of 4.4, responses to Question 3 suggest that for the majority of students, the level of English was generally suitable. This trend was also reflected in students' open-ended responses regarding their favourite features of the module, with five students commenting that the module was "Easy to understand/read/see." However, 10 students rated the English level of the module as a "3," indicating that some students found aspects of the module difficult to understand. In the qualitative comments, several students suggested that an automated subtitle feature would enhance their online learning experience; however, other students commented that they viewed the module as an opportunity to learn English (e.g., "There is no subtitles so I could practice listening"). These comments suggest that additional support needs to be *optional* to provide a linguistically suitable condition for students with different language proficiencies.

The average rating for technological accessibility for the module was 4.5, indicating a generally high level of functionality across devices. However, nine students rated the module as a "3," and one rated the module as "2," indicating that they experienced some difficulties. Because of the absence of detailed feedback, the reason for the reduced accessibility remains unidentified. However, it would be advisable for program administrators to request that students update their operating system beforehand, or that they use a device provided by the institution to limit potential issues related to technology. It might also be prudent to survey students to find out about the devices they will be using and their ability to access high quality internet services prior to implementing online programming.

Lessons Learned

Throughout the design process and implementation, we encountered a number of stumbling blocks and successes, two of which are discussed here. The first challenge we faced was in upholding our commitment to equitable representation. The majority of copyright-free materials represented certain types of student population (namely White students) more often than others, with those portraying BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) markedly less available in

the database. Very few visual materials were available that represented racial and gender diversity in teaching staff. Finding appropriate images often required the use of racial keywords (e.g., “Asian students” and “diversity on campus”), marking students of colour as “others.” The overrepresentation of White students and White male instructors as the default representation for the “student” and “instructor” categories points to ways in which mainstream media continues to enable English-speaking institutions to centre whiteness as the status quo (for a discussion of whiteness in English as an additional language teaching and learning, see Gerald, 2020). We agree with Gerald (2020) that it is the duty of English language educators to actively disrupt this status quo in order to provide a sense of safety, belonging, and legitimacy for incoming racialized students. Ultimately, as a result of our careful selection of copyright-free images, video-clips, and narrators, we were able to represent linguistic and racial diversity throughout the module. However, without an explicit commitment to equity from the outset, it is unlikely we would have arrived at the same result.

The second unexpected outcome was related to delivery and impact. As mentioned in the implementation section, the module was introduced during a face-to-face session. This in-person introduction to the online content was especially helpful for securing student buy-in, as evidenced by the high participation rate we had from the student cohort (over 90%). What we did not expect was that the feedback process and face-to-face presentation would also generate buy-in from the faculty and staff who attended. For faculty, the module served as evidence that students were being given tools to be more successful in their courses, which in turn made them feel supported. For student support personnel who attended the face-to-face seminar, the module was a valuable resource: they reported referring students back to its various activities during their one-on-one sessions. For the administrative staff (including a representative from the students’ home institution), exploring the module raised their awareness of expectations that might be new for students. In other words, while the module was originally created for the benefit of the students, it ultimately generated productive conversations among staff and faculty collaborators as well.

Recommendations

For our students, faculty, and staff, this module was a valuable resource. Its value resides in its accessibility, its integration within our local digital infrastructure and programs, and its responsiveness to specific needs within our context. In that sense, the exact content and design are likely not suited for all students or institutions. With that in mind, we have developed a list of more general recommendations to keep in mind when embarking on this type of project:

- Keep it relevant: Select content based on the local needs of students.
- Support not only understanding but also language: Address both *what* students need to know (academic expectations) as well as *how* they can use language (and other behaviours) to fulfill those expectations.
- Incorporate interaction: Ensure that activities are not only text-based but also provide opportunities to interact with ideas and content. Make the language accessible for learners at a variety of levels and if possible, include (optional) subtitles for all videos.

- Make it convenient: Host content on a platform that students either already know how to use or will need to know how to use. Insofar as possible, ensure that content works on a range of devices.
- Develop content collaboratively: Involve not only students but also staff and instructors.
- Keep it representative: Include diverse speech models and images to provide positive reinforcement for incoming students.

Finally, a few words of caution. It would be simple to create a module that seeks to uncritically acculturate international students into Western forms of participation. However, most internationalization strategies at BC institutions seek to create spaces that value the knowledge and practices that newcomers contribute to Canadian institutions. Thus, crucial to this type of project is the recognition that norms for classroom communication and participation are not common sense for most students—international or otherwise. Rather, they are profoundly cultural and institutional. As Murray and Connachy (2018) have suggested, academic staff and lecturers can also benefit by reflecting critically on their beliefs about the value and form that class participation might take and to what extent those beliefs reproduce colonial perspectives. By consulting multiple stakeholders, including the students themselves during the development of support resources, projects such as this one could also constitute meaningful opportunities for transformative discussions about institutional cultures and practices.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Dr. Reginald D’Silva for his encouragement and insights related to this project, as well as the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback. This project would not have been possible without the gracious seed funding provided by the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia.

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Appendix A

Anonymous online feedback form

Question	Response Form
What did you think about the module?	
• The information was useful.	☆☆☆☆☆
• The activities were interesting.	☆☆☆☆☆
How easy was it to complete the online module?	
• The level of English was okay for me.	☆☆☆☆☆
• The activities worked well on my device (e.g., laptop, tablet).	☆☆☆☆☆

How long did it take to do the module?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less than 10 minutes. • 10–20 minutes. • 20–35 minutes. • More than 35 minutes.
Did you do all the activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, all of them! • I did some activities. • I only did a few activities.
Which topic did you find most useful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participating in lectures and seminars • Preparing for class • Emailing instructors • None were useful
What did you like about the online module? (Answer in English or in students' first language)	Open-ended text entry response
What did you NOT like about the online module? (Answer in English or in students' first language)	Open-ended text entry response
Do you want more online modules?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, I want more online activities about life at the university. • Maybe, it depends on the topics and activities. • No, this module was enough.
What topics would interest you most?	Open-ended text entry response
Do you have any other questions or comments? (Answer in English or in students' first language)	Open-ended text entry response



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