

## Letter from Chicago

I RECENTLY had a conversation with a colleague about students who make rude comments in class. Many of us in higher education have experienced a student's inappropriately disparaging comment like 'This is boring/stupid/worthless/a waste of time/you fill in the blank.' I remember how shocked I felt the first time this happened to me. 'Jack' walked into class 10 minutes late, dropped into a desk in the back of the room and let out an audible yawn. That was the extent of his participation in class that day. He promptly leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. Frankly, I'm surprised he didn't start snoring. A few minutes later, after I instructed the class to read a short text individually, I tapped Jack on the shoulder. Startled, he looked at me with what can only be described as a glare. Five minutes later, his head was down on his desk, eyes closed. I woke him up again and his response was, 'But English classes are so boring. They're a waste of time. I'm just stuck here until I pass the TOEFL.'

Unfortunately, I've now come to expect a few of these comments to crop up every semester. At the risk of sounding like an uncaring teacher, I'll admit to sometimes writing these students off, letting them make their own choices, even if that results in failing the class. However, in my more patient moments, I try to reason with the student. Occasionally I've even asked a student for some practical suggestions to improve the class. But I always wonder, is this really my responsibility? After all, I'm their teacher, not their mother.

To be sure, teachers need to examine their lessons carefully to ensure worthwhile, engaging activities are filling up our class time. However, often students' criticisms are as unfounded as they are disrespectful. I fear that in the ESL field we fail to discipline our students in the name of cultural sensitivity. Don't misunderstand me; I'm the biggest proponent of cultural sensitivity, in the classroom and in life, that you'll ever meet. It's precisely because of my advocacy for cross-cultural competence that I feel strongly about this. ESL teachers have a responsibility to teach their students what is expected in American culture.

By way of reconnaissance, I asked the chair of our English department how he would respond if a domestic student made an inappropriate remark in his class. Without hesitation, he explained that he would reply decisively along the lines of, 'That's a worthless comment that doesn't aid our discussion today'. Or perhaps, 'Obviously, you are not prepared to take part in class today, so please refrain from commenting again until you have something valuable to say.'

Many ESL teachers would likely respond with much less severity than my English department chair. We may even excuse students' behavior by saying, 'Perhaps their culture is more direct than American culture.' Unarguably, cultural differences do play a role in this phenomenon. Additionally, students' lack of maturity is a factor. Probably 90% of the students who have displayed blatant disrespect in my classes are 18 or 19 year olds who are living away from their parents for the first time in their lives. Like most American college students, they test the limits of their newfound freedom.

These factors should not be excuses. As educators, don't we have a responsibility to do just that – educate – in all senses of the word? We have an obligation to teach linguistic competence and cultural competence. Although a gentle approach may be easier on students' egos, we do students a disservice. If students go through their ESL classes learning that disparaging comments are acceptable *de facto*, what a rude awakening they will have when they enter mainstream classes. We set our students up for future cross-cultural conflict by coddling them in our ESL classes.

Contrary to what you might think of me by now, I'm not the crotchety old professor that I may seem. The next time this happens in my classroom, I will ask to see the student after class. I will explain that negative comments are inappropriate because they evince disrespect

*KIMBERLY SANFORD is an instructor in the English Language Program at Purdue University, Calumet. Her professional interests include incorporating literature into ESL classes and fostering intercultural communication. Email: kimberly.sanford@gmail.com*

for me and drag down the motivation of the other students. However, if this student continued to cause problems, I would quickly become much more severe in my reprimands.

Possibly an even better approach is one of proactivity. I've often seen speaking teachers provide students with a list of respectful phrases on the first day of class. The rationale is that students will then say, 'With all due respect, Professor, I'm having a hard time with this assignment' instead of 'This is stupid.' I have yet to hear the former, or anything like it, come out of a student's mouth, except perhaps in role play drills.

I have seen some success with another colleague's assignment. Students were required to approach one of the ESL program instructors and request to make an appointment during office hours. Then during that appointment, the student must practice discussing their grade, a particular assignment, etc. with that

professor. This out-of-class role play worked quite well, as long as the students mentioned to their chosen instructor that it was a role play only. A few of us experienced some confusion when we thought these students were seriously concerned about their grade or an assignment.

A proactive solution requires more time in planning and preparing students for what is expected in an American college classroom. A creative approach may be necessary to integrate this material into our everyday lessons on vocabulary and grammar. Despite the cost of a little more time and creative energy, our students need this comprehensive preparation for college classes that goes beyond language competency. Our students depend on us to prepare them for their academic future. If we won't discipline them, who will? ■

Kimberly Sanford  
*Chicago*

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