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UNL bilingual students look for needed communication awareness

By Doreen Charles

Communication problems with bilingual students may influence a professor's judgment of their ability, according to UNL bilingual students.

Although foreign students must meet a certain level of competence in English before being admitted to the university, there are various adjustment problems that can cause difficulties, according to Linda Becker, an international student adviser.

"Students sometimes mention they have problems adjusting their ear to the American accent," she said. "Most of them have been taught the British pronunciation."

Listening and comprehending lectures also may become a problem when professors mumble or use colloquialisms or slang expressions.

Other problems arise because of the technicalities within the university system, Becker added.

Abbreviating terms relating to feet and inches may confuse a student who has been trained in the metric system, she said.

Slower reading rates because of translation and unfamiliarity with certain types of testing also can be obstacles for foreign students.

"Some professors are sensitive to the problems, some aren't," she said.

"If a person didn't stop to think about it, they might perceive a student as less intelligent. It can damage students' self image. They know they're intelligent, but they fail tests."

Biased perceptions

Professors in areas such as engineering and agriculture who come in contact with a lot of foreign students need to understand various cultures, she said.

Instructors with biased perceptions of foreign students as being less intelligent may expect them to cheat on exams, said Alberto Aponte, a junior from Puerto Rico studying pre-medicine.

Bilingual students who have learned English in their home country didn't get a chance to practice it as often as if they had learned it in America, he said.

"That's like when you take a Spanish class here. After you leave the classroom, you speak English," he said.

Professors tend to judge American-born bilingual students differently than foreign students, according to Rumaldo Lovato, Chicano graduate student majoring in sociology.

"They have two different sets of values for foreign-born and American-born people," he said. "People expect American-born bilingual students to understand more, the native of Scottsbluff said."

Although the university is a multilingual society, Spanish-speaking students sometimes are discouraged from speaking Spanish in American grammar schools, Lovato said.

"They (school officials) seemed to feel that these groups (Spanish speaking people) were a threat to the system," he said.

Growing up with a particular language may cause a person to lack certain information about a second language, preventing full participation in certain situations, he said.

"There is absolutely no correlation between a person's second language and their ability to learn," he added.

Negative perceptions

Assumptions that foreign students have not been exposed to modern technology also can cause a professor to have negative perceptions of them, said Mets Motoboli, an agriculture student from Lesotho, Africa.

"These assumptions are based on propaganda. I'm studying machinery in agriculture, and professors don't expect me to have been exposed to those types of machines there (in Africa)," he said.

"Professors see us as less intelligent," Tanzanian student Reggie Gidey said.

"Professors are used to 'American' English. We are used to 'pure' British English."

"There are always a lot of corrections on our papers. Professors shouldn't correct the English usage, but the content of the material."

Professors assume that American pronunciations and spelling is the only standard, Motoboli said.

Some professors may be helpful and take extra time with a foreign student, but there also is a tendency to overcompensate for what they perceive as a student's inability to understand English, Katayoon Amirdeifan, a junior medical technology student from Iran said.

"They explain things more, talking slow and loud," she said.

Professors at the university should have more education about foreign people because of the large number of foreign students that attend the school, she said.

Lack of interest or lack of concern may make educating people about foreign bilingual students difficult, Motoboli said.

"Would offering education do them any good? Do they want to know? People have their own preconceived ideas. They need appreciation, awareness of interational people," he said.

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