



Introduction to the International Classroom

Further Resources I France

Valérie's international classroom

Valérie Lebrun is a French associate professor of Genetics at the University of Bordeaux in France, with 10 years of research and teaching experience. She has been teaching students in the 2nd year of the degree programme for several years now. She works in a team with four other teachers – each teacher takes one group for class tutorials given in addition to the large class lectures of the course. Together they have developed quite effective teaching and learning activities over the years, with the students going through examples and exercises in groups and taking it in turns to present their work. Her main concern is to make sure the students are able to learn from each other and the teacher in order to apply their knowledge of genetics. She is used to mixed ability groups in degree programme teaching – there are usually a wide range of abilities in each class and not all students have the same motivation for the course material.

Over the years Valérie would occasionally notice that there were students who did not speak French as their first language in the group. In a group of 30 students there were usually two or three international students of North African origin. Those students, she assumed, had probably been in French language secondary schools in their country of origin and seemed to manage well enough; she was hesitant to ask them about their background as she did not feel comfortable singling them out as different from the rest of the students. In any case, it would be difficult to see whether their difficulties, if they had difficulties, were due to poor skills in French or lack of solid grounding in Biology. This time, however, there was a larger group of students who seemed to be second language speakers: four students from Morocco, two students from China who had been through an intensive French language programme before entering the degree programme, and three scholarship students from Senegal.

Valérie had gone about preparing the classes as she always had but the course unfolded quite differently from what she had expected. First of all, Valérie noticed that she was spending more time on the course than usual. The students with an international profile would send her emails with all kinds of questions, not only about the course but also about housing matters and other personal issues affecting their lives in France.



She also found she had to spend more time preparing for her classes. Some of the international students took a lot longer to get to grips with the exercises; for instance, some, but not all of them, seemed to be unsettled by the interactive format of the class. She noticed that they were often hesitant to ask questions or had not prepared correctly. She wondered whether they had been able to take good notes in the lectures that accompanied her class. She was not sure whether they all spoke French well enough to interact with the other students, or whether they were just a little lost in the course. Above all, she was not sure how much attention she should pay to this – she did not want to treat them differently from the rest of the students.

The classroom dynamics were also quite different. The international students and the French students spontaneously formed separate groups, and at first this seemed to work well, because it allowed her to check the understanding of the international students and give them a little more attention; but it also made her feel uncomfortable. She then tried deliberately mixing the groups but she noticed that the international students did not participate as well – some of them were a little inhibited even when they had a lot of ability in the subject. Sometimes the French students would take over the discussion and not listen to the international students' ideas. Again, she was not sure whether this was because of language issues or cultural ones. She did notice that some students resented her forced organisation of the groups. One French student came to see her after class to explain that he liked working with the Chinese students, but that trying to understand their heavily accented French slowed down their work as a group.

By mid-semester all of the students had given short presentations of their work to the class, and Valérie felt that their results were not unlike the classes she had had in previous years. She had been able to adjust her marking for the language level of the students – and she felt gradually more confident in their ability. However, the written exam results were a little disappointing. Some of the international students seemed to have misunderstood the format and marking scheme – they did not obtain the grades that she had thought them capable of.

Valérie found herself wondering what changes, if any, she could make next year to make the learning run more smoothly.

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