Supporting First-Generation and International Students: An Interview with Dr. Marwa Abdel Latif

By Erin Bell, Assistant Director of Educational Development

Dr. Marwa Abdel Latif is an assistant professor in the Chemistry and Biochemistry department at the University of Detroit Mercy. Growing up in Lebanon and being of both Lebanese and Palestinian descent, Dr. Abdel Latif attended an UNRWA school for Palestinian children and youth in Lebanon. After performing extremely well on her national examinations, Dr. Abdel Latif was awarded a prestigious scholarship through the HOPE Fund operating through the AMIDEAST Foundation which secures university funding for Palestinian students to attend college in the United States.

Although she is extremely gifted in science and mathematics, Dr. Abdel Latif found her first semester in the United States challenging due to cultural differences including language barriers that she encountered inside (and outside) her courses. After overcoming these challenges, Dr. Abdel Latif went on to earn her Ph.D. at Virginia Tech. With these experiences in mind, Dr. Abdel Latif recently shared her thoughts regarding how instructors, staff, and administrators can best support first-generation college students, particularly those whose first language may not be English and who may be immigrants to the United States.

The following article highlights key pieces of advice Dr. Abdel Latif offers to all of us who work with first-generation and/or international college students.

STRATEGY ONE: Make a conscious effort to use clear language in class materials, during lectures, and particularly in examination questions. Make sure you have used terminology and language in class before deploying an assessment/exam.

(The exam should not be the first time students are reading/hearing a term). Avoid using idioms, clichés, and other phrasing that may not be clear or understood by non-native speakers (i.e. "a dime a dozen," "the best of both worlds," or "add insult to injury," etc.).

"I had a really funny professor; he used jargon, sayings, and proverbs, and while everyone would laugh I did not understand what he was saying," explains Dr. Abdel Latif. "There were no outlines and everything was spoken—so I missed much content."

Some terms that seem "simple" to native speakers may not be easily understood by all students, so instructors should aim to avoid using idioms or clichés or, they may wish to explain and define such terms (creating a teachable moment). Dr. Abdel Latif also mentions that not all cultural references (i.e. the Super Bowl or a *Star Wars* quotation) are known to all students. She recommends that instructors stop and clarify information so that students can follow the conversation.

STRATEGY TWO: Use equitable strategies and policies. Make your expectations clear from day one of class. Let students know that if English is not their first language, they may use a dictionary during exams if you are comfortable with that practice.

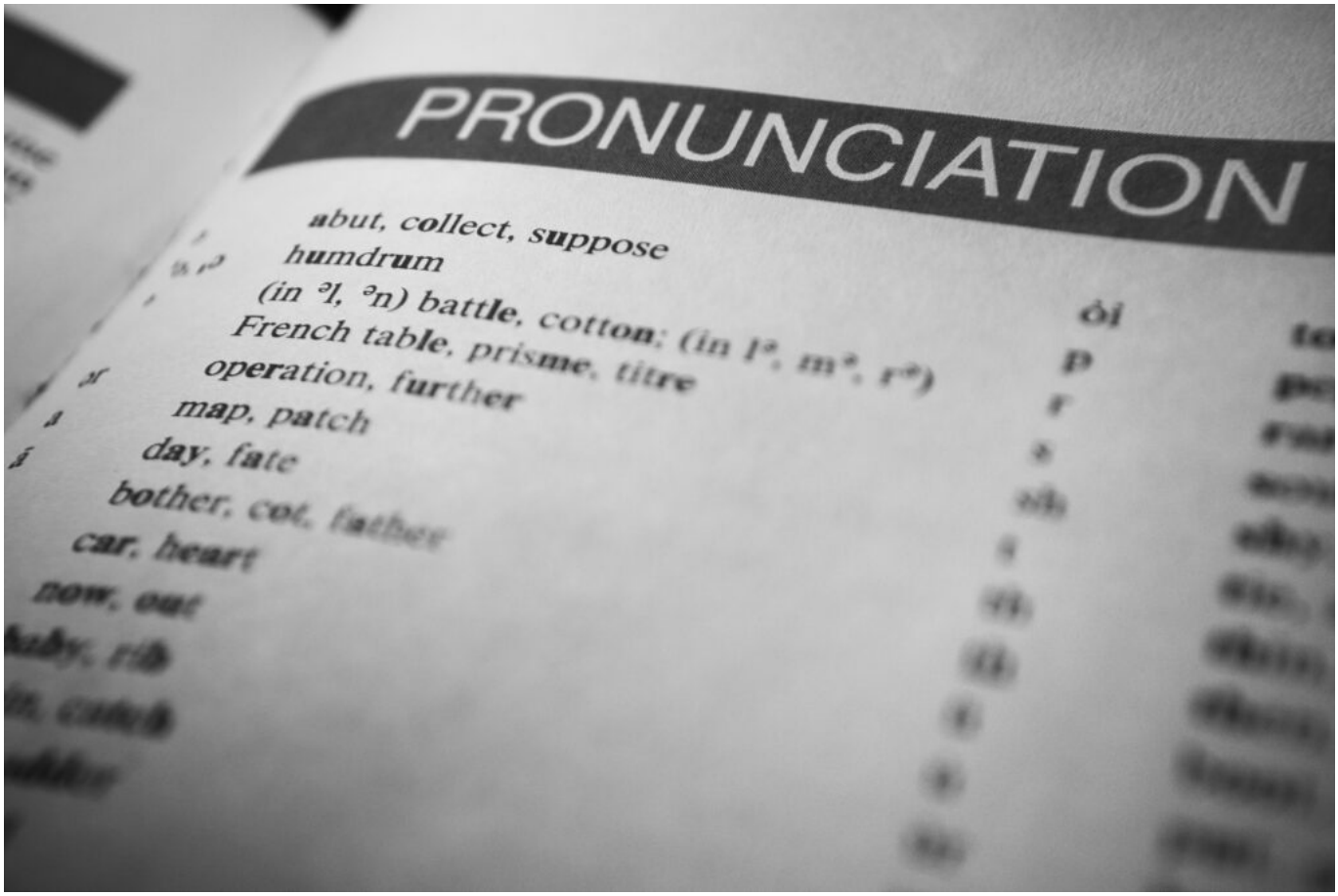
You can also establish rules about recording lectures. Non-native English speakers may wish to use their phones or other recording devices to record content so that they can process and actively listen to it later.

"When we accept students we have to accept the challenges that they face," said Dr. Abdel Latif. "If we are welcoming to *everybody* we need to have strategies to assist *everybody.*"

In the past, Dr. Abdel Latif has provided surveys to students to gauge their understanding of materials and processes. She also makes sure that all projects include clearly worded rubrics for each assignment and shares and discusses the rubrics with her students so they understand the assignment expectations.
"During my undergraduate studies, I noticed that the other international students did not necessarily have the same journey as I had." explains Dr. Abdel Latif. "They traveled; some of them traveled around the world and English was their second (home) language. They were so well-versed in writing.

"Spoken language is very different from written English," continues Dr. Abdel Latif. "English 101 was my most difficult class. I was not at the level that I needed to be at. I had to accept the fact that I was lacking in it, but I was going to try my best but that turn-around I needed was not going to happen in one semester. That is something that I tell my students. What mattered was the improvement and that I did not lose my scholarship."

Dr. Abdel Latif suggests that allowing students to work as your teaching assistant (if funding allows and appointments are available) can be an excellent way of helping them improve their English skills.



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STRATEGY THREE: Some first-generation students may not feel confident or comfortable asking for help from their professors. They may not know what types of questions to ask them.

"I would never ask for help as an undergraduate. I didn't know *how* to ask questions or *who* to ask questions," notes Dr. Abdel Latif. "I didn't want anyone to think I was weak and I could not stand on my own two feet. I didn't want to come off as immature."

Dr. Abdel Latif suggests that professors can clearly explain their policies from the first day of class and outline office hours so that students feel comfortable posing questions.

STRATEGY FOUR: Using less expensive books (such as Open Educational Resource) to keep prices down can be extremely helpful to many students.

"I didn't have money for books—I had opt go to the library and I didn't want to tell my classmates that because I didn't want them to feel like I was a charity case."

Dr. Abdel Latif mentions that if a student is not completing the assigned readings it may be because the student cannot afford the textbook(s). As such, using OERS (as noted above) can be very helpful for all students in financial need. Financial barriers can prevent the success of many students.

STRATEGY FIVE: Many first-generation students feel pressure to succeed please be mindful of this pressure and offer support and resources accordingly.

Dr. Abdel Latif notes that many first-generation students (from outside and inside the US feel like, "there's so much pressure on them and that they cannot fail. Being afraid of failure has enormous power." Pressure to represent their families positively and successfully is often compounded by other stressors and duties outside of college.

International students may face obstacles relating to their VISA status which can impact their ability to work and support themselves while studying in the US. The loss of funding can be disastrous for many students, but for international students in particular, as they may risk losing their living space as well.

STRATEGY SIX: It can be helpful to provide all students — but particularly those whose home language is not English — with a list of key terms/phrases frequently used in your discipline.

"I have a lot of students in my lab that ask what is meant by certain terms. That inspired me to start a document of keywords and key requirements called Key Codes. It has definitions and examples. Other instructors might have their students build their own dictionary."

There are many ways that instructors can assist their students in mastering language and vocabulary in creative and innovative ways.

In conclusion, Dr. Abdel Latif notes that her experiences as an international undergraduate student made her particularly attuned to the challenges that international and first-generation students may face at University of Detroit Mercy. She recommends that instructors consider such challenges as they map out the curriculum for their courses. Be sure to check back in with the CETL website for more resources on assisting first-generation and international students.