

# Clear Communication: Compensation Strategies for When Students Just Don't Understand

by

Brian J. Rybarczyk

The Graduate School

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill



Liu Shen, a teaching assistant in the science department at Western University, began teaching Introductory Biology this semester. She couldn't help but notice that students asked lots of questions in the American classroom. She often got frustrated during her 50-minute lectures with all the interruptions. Liu had been in the United States for five years and was continuously working on her English language skills. Today, at the end of class, she handed out a short, anonymous course evaluation form for students to complete. After class, back in her office, she reviewed some of the students' comments:

*"Our TA knows a lot about Biology, but I can't always understand her."*

*"When I ask a question, she hesitates and asks me to repeat the question at least 2 more times."*

*"I couldn't follow her explanation of photosynthesis, I just stopped listening."*

Liu wasn't sure what to make of the students' comments and consulted with her officemate, Jim Lowry, another teaching assistant in the department. Jim taught a different section of Introductory Biology. Jim was also reviewing comments from his mid-semester course evaluation forms:

*"Our TA is a smart guy but he talks low and faces the board when he tries to explain something."*

*"He seems to walk into class and just talks about a topic, he seems disorganized, I don't know what I'm supposed to know for this class."*

*"I couldn't follow his description of how ecosystems work since he used lots of terms I didn't know, so I just zoned out."*

Jim asked Liu, "So Liu, how were your teaching evaluations?"

"OK I guess," replied Liu. "I'm not confident speaking English so that's why students aren't learning in my class."

"Your English is good, Liu," said Jim.

"Maybe the Center for Teaching and Learning can help us. They offer a workshop on active learning strategies. I think those are ways to help students learn besides just lecturing. I can also work on improving my communication with students," said Liu.

“I think my students aren’t prepared for college level science courses and they don’t read the textbook. That’s why they don’t know what I’m talking about in class. They don’t ask questions in class, so I’m just going to continue teaching the way I always teach,” said Jim.

### Questions

1. What issues are students having with Liu Shen? What issues are students having with Jim Lowry? How are they similar? How are they different?
2. What are some possible sources of miscommunication between Liu and her students?
3. Propose ways that Liu can ameliorate the students’ concerns expressed in the evaluations.
4. What are possible sources of miscommunication between Jim and his students?
5. Propose ways that Jim can ameliorate the students’ concerns expressed in the evaluations.
6. From the lists you generated for questions 3 and 5 above, identify which approaches you can use to increase your communication effectiveness in the classroom.
7. What are some benefits and challenges of using active learning techniques in teaching?
8. What are the possible consequences of Jim’s attitude and lack of action to improve his teaching?



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