Making Timed Exams Inclusive of Multilingual Students

Inclusive Practices Prior to Administering Quizzes/Tests/Exams

Offer to meet with students before the test. This may mean setting aside specific times for this conversation and/or emphasizing that you are available during office hours to discuss questions.

Organize a review session. Sessions where faculty or TAs provide an overview of exam content, as well as how students can best prepare, can be especially helpful.

Review the format of the quiz/test/exam and explain how the questions will be phrased. Students can more effectively determine how to study if they know whether questions will be multiple choice, short answer, and/or essay format and whether or not they will need to interpret visuals, charts, figures, etc.

Provide study guides and vocabulary lists for tests[1]. Both study guides and explicit instruction in academic and field-specific language used on the test can be especially beneficial to multilingual students (Nerlinger 2021).

Inclusive Practices During Quizzes/Tests/Exams

Allow students to translanguage or use words or phrases from their preferred language when possible, particularly for short answer responses[2]. Translanguaging creates space to recognize how multilingual students regularly move between and within languages to communicate and acknowledges that a certain word, phrase, or idea may be easier or better communicated in a language besides English. If a student's answer is unclear because of this practice, you can discuss their answer with them or the Multilingual Specialist, or use online translation resources to clarify. There are exceptions; for example, if a student is being assessed on their proficiency in a particular language, then allowing translingual responses may counter the assessment goals.

Be willing to provide support during exams. Making yourself available to answer clarifying questions on vocabulary, question parameters, and directions can help students better understand the test. It is also helpful to make explicit your willingness to provide support during exams, as this may not be assumed or evident. Offering to rephrase questions or clarify vocabulary within a question (when comprehension of that term is not what's being assessed) ensures only a student's knowledge of the material affects their grade.

Allocate for additional time. Additional or unlimited time is a valuable feature of a Universally Designed classroom, and acknowledgement that "it takes exponentially longer to process ideas and generate prose in a second language than a first language" (Cox 2020). This can be done both through designing a test that will take less than the usual class time by your estimate, and by allocating time outside of class for students to complete. However, if providing additional or unlimited time is not possible due to the type of knowledge being assessed or professional standards, applying the inclusive practices above can be effective methods for ensuring your quizzes/tests/exams are equitable and fair for all students.

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[1] Suggestions 1, 2, and 4 are from Teemant, p. 96, 2010

[2] Translanguaging does not mean that an entire answer is written in a single language, but that a student may use parts of multiple languages– terminology, argument structure, turns of phrase, etc.– to demonstrate their knowledge in a way that may feel incomplete or dissatisfactory to them if only using English. This creates space for students to use their full linguistic capabilities.

Sources

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