My stay in [the United States] has widened my horizon of perception of events from the way I used to see them.  
—Hans Kibona, Humphrey Fellow in International School for Economic Developmental Studies (Tanzania)

Keys to Success for English Language Learners

In these materials, you’ll explore answers to the following questions:

► What are the benefits and challenges of speaking more than one language?  
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► What resources can help you improve your English skills and get used to American culture?  
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► How can you work toward academic success in your new environment?  
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► How can you meet people and acclimate socially?  
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► How can you manage the stress of cultural adjustment?  
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► What can you do to prepare for success beyond graduation?  
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Miguel grew up in coastal Mexico, surfing the Baja waves and enjoying a stable family life. A strong and ambitious student in high school, Miguel dreamed of a career as a doctor or a researcher. He decided to seek educational opportunity north of the border, spending one term as an exchange student at a school in Colorado, and then deciding to pursue an undergraduate degree there in biomedical sciences.

Miguel found that the lifestyle took more of an adjustment than he had suspected. “It’s very different just going to the U.S. than actually living there,” he reflects. Although his freshman year was exciting, he encountered several roadblocks. One was that he missed friends and family back in Mexico. Another was making the adjustment from a laid-back lifestyle to the more regulated American society. There were rules that limited his ability to get an off-campus job, traffic regulations, social regulations, and other constraints that were unfamiliar to him.

The biggest challenge was language. Miguel knew a little English from songs and movies and his English classes in middle school and high school, but those were basic level, with an emphasis on grammar and writing. Looking at the price tag of his education, Miguel wondered if he had made the right choice. Was his dream of earning a degree from an American university realistic?

### Status Check

Are you prepared to adjust to an English-speaking educational environment?

For each statement, circle the number that best describes how often it applies to you.

1 = Never  
2 = Seldom  
3 = Sometimes  
4 = Often  
5 = Always

1. I know where I can find support if I feel lonely or isolated.  
2. I feel comfortable speaking in English.  
3. I feel comfortable writing in English.  
4. I understand spoken English without difficulty.  
5. I easily join in conversations with people who are speaking English.  
6. I understand what is required of me in class.  
7. I know American classroom etiquette.  
8. I participate and answer questions in class.  
9. I understand my instructors’ expectations in the classroom.  
10. I feel comfortable researching possible internships or jobs.

Each of the topics in these statements will be explored further in these materials. Note those statements for which you circled a 3 or lower. Skim these materials to see where those topics appear, and pay special attention to them as you read, learn, and apply new strategies.
What are the benefits and challenges of speaking more than one language?

From the origins of the United States, when the majority of the established early settlements were populated with English speakers, English has been the dominant language of the country, and has retained this unofficial status throughout U.S. history. Most Americans speak only English. Additionally, in the international realm, English is becoming the primary language of business transactions. This is largely due to the fact that so much of the global population can speak English passably well—approximately 25 percent and growing, perhaps increasing to 50 percent in the next few years.1 If you are a business and you want to succeed, you will try to reach as many customers as possible, in a language that they understand—and chances are that language will be English.

Contrasting with this dominance of the English language is the fact that many U.S. citizens come from all over the world, speak a wide variety of native languages, and are part of an incredibly diverse cultural mix that characterizes the nation. Hundreds of languages other than English are spoken in households all over the country. Spanish is the second most common language spoken, with approximately 12 percent of the population speaking Spanish as a first or second language. Some states even have two official languages (such as Hawai‘i with English and Hawai‘ian) or have laws that require signage and government information to be published in two languages (such as New Mexico, which publishes information in both English and Spanish). Rising rates of immigration continue to bring families to the United States from all over the world. Of U.S. children in their K–12 school years, it is estimated that one in four, or 25 percent, live in immigrant households where they use a language other than English.2

This mix means that students for whom English is not a first language, like yourself, are a growing population in
postsecondary education. Such students are also not all the same. Individual students have different levels of English proficiency, different citizenship, and different needs. You may see terminology like the following as you make your way toward your educational goals:3

▶ **English as a Second Language (ESL).** This refers to any coursework or programming designed for students who have a language other than English as their first or native language. Students participating in ESL coursework or programming are often called *ESL students.*

▶ **Limited English Proficiency (LEP).** This government term is used to identify students whose proficiency in English is below a particular level. LEP students are officially eligible for ESL services.

▶ **English Language Learner (ELL).** Any student who is in the process of learning English can be considered an ELL student. ELL students can be at any stage in that process, from just starting to nearly fluent.

▶ **International students.** This designation refers to students with citizenship from countries other than the United States who have come here on a student visa to study. International students have a wide range of proficiency in English. For international students who are fluent English speakers, the challenges lie more in the area of acclimating to an unfamiliar culture.

▶ **Language Minority student (LM).** People referred to as *LM students* are those from homes where a language other than English is spoken. As with international students, LM students can have varying degrees of English proficiency. For example, an LM student may have grown up with one parent speaking Mandarin and the other speaking English, and may be fluent in both.

As you read, think about where you fit among these terms and which may apply to you, and consider what that means for your strengths, challenges, needs, and eligibility for services. For example, one international student may also be an ESL and ELL student, with an official LEP designation, while another may be proficient enough in English not to qualify for ESL coursework. For the sake of simplicity, these materials will refer primarily to ESL and international students, because the other designations fit within these larger categories.

First, think about how your status may benefit you on the job and at school.

**Benefits**

Speaking two or more languages has benefits in today’s world of global communication, international business, and virtual work teams. The most obvious benefit is being able to communicate with a wider range of people. Because many businesses have offices in other countries, an employee who can speak more than one language is a real asset. That individual can bridge cultures, keep meetings running smoothly, and explain and understand concepts that someone who only speaks English can not.

When you know multiple languages, you often know multiple cultures. This can make you valuable in a business setting. You may be less apt to make confusing, embarrassing, or offensive errors when meeting clients from varied
cultural backgrounds; you may be able to perform on-the-spot interpretation of other languages or customs; and you can build rapport with non-English speakers who are potential customers or business partners. You may have developed heightened sensitivity from your diverse experiences, along with thoughtful judgment that allows you to put that sensitivity to productive use.

There is another benefit to speaking more than one language that goes beyond business. In recent years, scientists have discovered that being bilingual actually has a profound effect on the brain, improving cognitive skills. If you speak more than one language fluently, these different language systems are active in your brain even when you are using only one particular language. This forces your brain to resolve the internal conflict, giving your mind a workout that strengthens its executive control system—the system that directs the attention processes to attend to what is relevant. You use this executive functioning for planning, solving problems, and performing other mentally demanding tasks.4

The beneficial results of this brain workout include improved ability to ignore distractions, switch attention willfully from one thing to another, and hold information in your mind. Benefits like these are key tools for success in an educational setting.

**Challenges**

Just as there are great benefits to speaking more than one language, there are some challenges that both international and ESL students may face when attending school in the United States.

One of the biggest challenges is working to understand English at the speed it is spoken by native English speakers in and out of the classroom. A related challenge is understanding large amounts of written materials in English. Although reading gives you more time to think, it may involve more complex vocabulary and grammar than the English you hear from people on campus and even from the English spoken in the classroom. Meeting both of these challenges may require extra effort on your part to prepare for class by reading material ahead of time, working with a tutor, or getting extra help from your instructor. We will go into more detail on how to do this later in these materials.

Even if you are an international student who speaks excellent English, you may run into other types of challenges, such as getting acclimated to a different culture. You may feel homesick or lonely. You may feel confused or embarrassed in social situations. You may feel uncomfortable with American customs, behavior, and dress, or feel nervous about interacting with people who do not speak your native language. Even as these issues have the potential to make your experience uncomfortable at first, coping with them effectively can bring you to where you enjoy the best of both worlds—your world and language of origin, and the new world of American English and life in the United States. Read on to find out more about how to face these challenges as you set forth on your academic journey.