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Writing, teaching and speaking skills are crucial for any graduate student. For English as Additional Language (EAL) students, graduate studies can be an opportunity to strengthen their multicultural and multilingual skills.

Okay so...you've moved your life to a new place - a big first step. Welcome to Canada, welcome to BC, welcome to Vancouver; and of course, welcome to SFU! We are here to help you see this move as an opportunity to grow both personally and professionally. Ready for some quick tips?
2.0 Living in a New Culture

Canada is a multicultural society, with people from numerous ethnic backgrounds.
In your first few months here, you will probably notice various things in your daily life that are different from what you are used to. Canada is a multicultural society, with people from numerous ethnic backgrounds. You may meet people from Indigenous, Asian-Pacific, Latin and North American, African and European cultures on the same day; and, you may even hear a handful of languages on a single bus ride.

Despite these new sights, sounds and experiences, you will get used to all the different habits and approaches – trust us! Indeed, living a multicultural life is valuable as it will broaden your perspective and help you grow personally.

Still, culture shock is normal when transitioning to a new culture. You may feel isolated or bored, or even experience body pain. If you ever need help or wish to speak about adjusting to a new culture, SFU Health & Counselling Services offers counselling appointments and a weekly drop-in group especially for international students. You can also download a new phone app called "My SSP" that gives 24/7 counselling support. You could also speak with the International Advisors at International Services for Students as they can help you with questions regarding your study permit and health insurance, for example.

Also, it is more fun to explore your new life with others. Come to the weekly “Lunch’n’Chat” for international graduate students, where you...
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Also, it is more fun to explore your new life with others. Come to the weekly “Lunch’n’Chat” for international graduate students, where you can connect with others, practice your conversational English, or play a game. As well, try the monthly “Global Kitchen” offered by the Global Student Centre, where you can learn about recipes and dishes from around the world, join in the cooking, and of course eat!

Okay, so now that we’ve touched on some of the non-academic part of things, how about actual life as a graduate student. Hold on -you ask yourself - is it really that different from life as an undergraduate? Am I not just taking classes, conducting some research, and writing some papers?! Well, this is where we’d like to highlight a few aspects to help you through the challenging bits.
3.0 Writing

The main writing challenge faced by international grad students is “learning the language,” as one student puts it.
You will write. A lot. The main writing challenge faced by international grad students is “learning the language,” as one student puts it. But there is help! The Student Learning Commons (SLC) offers many resources to support EAL writers and speakers working to gain more fluency in English. And just so you know, the SLC isn’t only for undergraduates. Grad students can bring short pieces of writing for a 30- or 60-minute consultation or may simply come in with questions. You can also attend any of their free workshops.

For longer pieces of writing such as articles or thesis chapters, the Research Commons (RC) offers a “Read Ahead” service for honours and graduate students. A “Read Ahead” gives more in-depth feedback and suggestions for revision. The Research Commons also provides a range of other writing services for grad students — including free workshops — as well as support for researching, managing data, and scholarly publishing. Best of all, both the SLC and RC are conveniently located in the SFU Library.
4.0 Teaching (and Speaking)

Your funding offer may require you to accept appointments as a Teaching Assistant (TA) or Tutor Marker (TM).
Your funding offer may require you to apply for appointments as a Teaching Assistant (TA) or Tutor Marker (TM). Some graduate students apply for such positions as a part to earn their living. Either way, you want to be prepared for the job.

All TA/TM jobs are posted on the same date, 8 weeks before the start of the next semester, and remain open for 2 weeks. To get an idea about your role as a teaching assistant, check out the Guide for Teaching Assistants at SFU from the Teaching and Learning Centre. As a TA or TM, you become a member of the Teaching Support Staff Union (TSSU). Check out their website to learn about your rights, benefits and wages.

As a TA/TM, you may suddenly deal with a crowd of undergraduate students, mark papers, hold tutorials or labs, and/or offer office hours to support students in understanding the material. Even though no one expects you to know everything, it sounds like a huge responsibility. That is true, but it is also a huge opportunity for your personal and professional development.

To get started, the free 10-week International Teaching Assistant (ITA) Program provides you with knowledge about North American academic culture and language (particularly English colloquial and idiomatic usage); an understanding about your roles and responsibilities as a teaching assistant; and skills
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To get started, the free 10-week International Teaching Assistant (ITA) Program provides you with knowledge about North American academic culture and language (particularly English colloquial and idiomatic usage); an understanding about your roles and responsibilities as a teaching assistant; and skills to effectively lead tutorials. Graduate students are encouraged to participate as early in their program as possible in order to gain the greatest benefits.

And don’t miss the TA/TM day at the beginning of the term (spring and fall). It’s a day-long orientation with numerous sessions about teaching and technological skills that are essential for you as a teaching assistant or tutor marker. Many of these sessions are given by current graduate students who share their own experience of both the challenges and successes they’ve had as a TA/TM.

There are many other opportunities to strengthen your teaching skills. For quick, but thorough tips and tricks, the Effective Teaching Series offers 2-hour sessions every week on topics such as teaching in culturally diverse classrooms, collaborative learning, or indigenizing course outcomes. To increase your confidence and impact in the classroom, consider participating in private or group sessions for voice and presentation skills. In the 4-day Instructional Skills Workshop, you can advance your learning-centered teaching through intensive yet practical exercises. And finally, the Certificate Program in University Teaching and Learning (CUPTL) is a non-credit certificate for SFU graduate students who are aiming for employment in post-secondary institutions.
Participating in these professional development opportunities will also polish your English public speaking and presentation skills. Who doesn’t want that with all the class and colloquium presentations, conference presentations, or even when trying to explain your thesis to your family and friends?! By the way: A great way to practice your public speaking skills is the 3MT, the 3 Minute Thesis competition. As the name suggests, in only three minutes, and with one static power point slide, you present your research in a compelling way to a public audience. If you don’t feel ready to compete, join the faculty heats and finals to learn what fellow grad students are working on. These are all also opportunities to make friends.
5.0 Reach Out - We’re Here

Yes, graduate studies can be challenging, especially for international students.
Yes, graduate studies can be challenging, especially for international students. But SFU is here to help make your transition as smooth as possible. Reflect on your needs and wishes and make use of the resources mentioned in this guide. And if you want to speak to someone to learn more about these resources, or determine which would help you best, you are welcome to connect with Tomke, the International Graduate Student Coordinator at Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. You can reach her at gradintl@sfu.ca, 778.782.9284 and in MBC 1500 on Burnaby campus.

For even more resources for EAL speakers, visit GPS International graduate students website.
FROM    Tomke Augustin (GPS), Sonja Embree (TLC), Amanda Goldrick-Jones (SLC), and Zoreen Nuraney (WIL/CELLTR)*

* What do all these acronyms mean? They refer to different units at SFU. Check out their services!

GPS: Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies >>
TLC: Teaching and Learning Centre >>
SLC: Student Learning Commons >>
WIL: Work Integrated Learning >>
CELLTR: Centre for English Language Learning Teaching and Research >>