

Being a Link Mentor was both enjoyable and valuable. Because of my experience teaching and working with low-proficiency ELLs, I was given a special high-risk target population to work with: low-proficiency Muslim women. This international student population is high-risk for academic problems at INTO CSU because often they have very low English proficiency and families they must care for. This specific group was also formed in an effort to practice cultural sensitivity. It has been observed by INTO staff and students that often in class, Muslim women do not feel comfortable speaking surrounded by men because in most Arabic-speaking countries men and women have separate classrooms. Unfortunately, not feeling comfortable speaking has a negative effect on the women's oral proficiency. In my group, Arabic women had a unique opportunity to practice English without be discomfited by their cultural norms. We had great discussions about the differences between Colorado, Libya, and Saudi Arabia. We found common ground with hobbies, love of family, and the difficulties of foreign travel. I appreciated the struggle of my students to adjust to a brand new life in a very exotic place.

My favorite discussion was Week 2 Culture Shock. It came at a time when the women in my group were beginning to feel the effects of culture shock and homesickness. None of them had ever left their home countries before, and they were facing 3-5 years of living in the U.S. away from their families and friends. We talked about what culture shock is, how their low language proficiency was frustrating to the point where they just wanted to go home, and how their headscarves and *burqas* made them feel unable to fit comfortably into the community. We discussed coping strategies and community resources available to them. At the end of the lesson, I had an increased respect for our female international students.

I believe that facilitating these small group discussions as a Link Mentor has given me cultural insight and a unique perspective on the challenges of our international students. As a teacher, I am aware of many of the academic challenges my students face, but as a Mentor I had an opportunity to discuss non-academic trials like homesickness, transportation issues, childcare issues, and daily living issues such as going to the store and not having the adequate vocabulary to ask someone for help. This experience reminds me that it is very important for teachers to keep in mind that cross-cultural conflicts and challenges can negatively affect students' academic performance. I want to take measures in my own classroom, such as creating opportunities for all students to practice speaking, which help build cross-cultural understanding and support whenever possible, so that students can be academically and socially successful.