

WELCOMING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS BACK THROUGH A LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH

Rita L. Naughton, Ph.D.*

Associate Professor, Institute for Language Education, Southern New Hampshire University

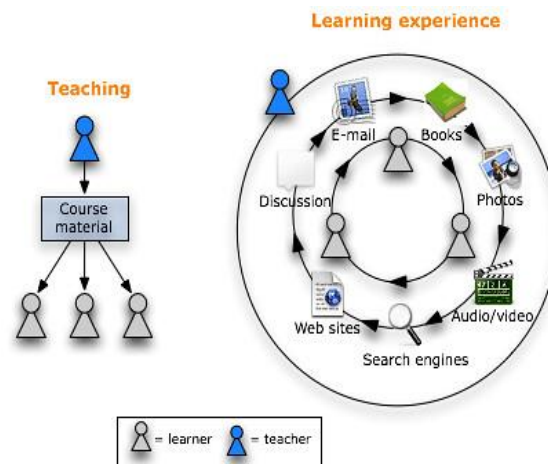
Keywords: *learner-centered, second language teaching, COVID-19, face-to-face teaching*

Abstract

This article details how an Intensive English Program course employed a framework of learner-centeredness in adapting curriculum for returned face-to-face instruction after a year of remote virtual learning due to COVID-19. The article highlights the acclimatization of high-intermediate learners' academic experience, the application of learner-centricity, and the identification and the resolution of their needs.

Introduction

Fall 2021 was a significant semester for international students enrolled in a full-load of English language courses at Southern New Hampshire University's Intensive English language Program (IEP). After a year's hiatus from face-to-face teaching due to COVID 19, the IEP welcomed twelve new students to campus to the Institute for Language Education. To enroll in their courses, the students had to show proof of the COVID 19 vaccination and agree to wear their masks when taking courses on campus. For the majority of the students, this was a small sacrifice to make considering that they had been waiting a year to matriculate at SNHU's IEP and actualize their academic dreams. Revitalizing their dreams by coming to the United States to take graduate or undergraduate courses, these students demonstrated motivation, perseverance, and resilience. To welcome these students to SNHU's IEP and face-to-face instruction, emphasis was placed on providing students with learner-centered experiences which not only aimed to strengthen their English language proficiency throughout the semester, but also provide them with genuine learning to bolster language acquisition and create meaningful cognitive and social experiences.



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC](#)

Figure 1: Teaching Centered vs. Learning Centered (2021).

Before exploring the IEP students’ gains through a learner-centered approach, it is important to first examine what is meant by a learner-centeredness. This can be illustrated by the diagram shown in Fig. 1.

Here we see the dichotomy between teacher-centered and learner-centered. On the left, teaching is one directional; learning is dictated solely by the teacher’s agenda. Whereas the graphic on the right illustrates a cyclical process led by the student to meet diverse learning needs. Linguist and English educator, David Nunan (1986) notes the following:

... a curriculum can only claim to be learner-centered if, at all stages in the planning and development of learning activities, materials and in sequencing and ordering learning experiences, key factors about the learner are not only taken into consideration but are made the cornerstones for curriculum design.(p. 2)

It is important to note that the teacher still exists and plays an active and crucial role in guiding, directing, and managing the students’ learning. The “key decisions about what will be taught, how it will be taught, when it will be taught, and how it will be assessed will be made with reference to the learner” (Nunan, 1995, p.134) Furthermore, the teacher through the curriculum realizes a learner-centered approach to build on “the richness of the student’s diverse experiences to create cognitive structures that form the basis of the individual” (Fach, 2006, para. 3). Through a learner-centered approach, “learning is not restricted to the classroom environment but rather encompasses social, cultural and professional aspects of a student’s landscape” (Fach, 2006, para. 3). Thus, a learner-centered approach facilitates active learning and discovery supported by the teacher’s guidance, direct instruction, and management.

To guide my teaching via a learner-centered approach, I incorporated Blumberg’s Learner-Centered Framework (2004) in face-to-face instruction throughout the fall-2021 semester (see Fig. 2).

Blumberg’s Learner-Centered Framework (2004)

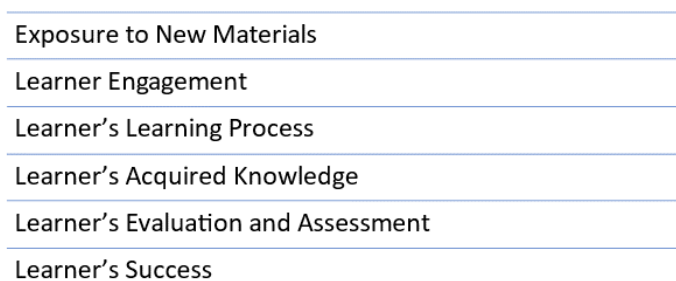


Figure 2: Blumberg’s Learner-Centered Framework (2004).

Blumberg defines six components necessary to achieve learner-centeredness. The six components of the framework are not linear by any means, they all work in conjunction with one another to ensure that the learner is at the center of instruction. The first one is exposure to new materials; these materials should be varied and be chosen with the students’ needs, wants, and success in mind. The second one is learner engagement; this component is vital to the success of any learning experience because.... The third one is the learner’s learning process. It is my responsibility as an educator to get to know my students and help them get to know themselves as learners. Getting to know the learners’ process is ongoing and requires frequent check-ins. Hence the next component, students’ acquired knowledge, knowing what was acquired in terms of the student’s background knowledge and what needs to be acquired in terms of the student’s learning goals is the impetus for learning. Along with the check-ins mentioned earlier, it is the task of both teacher and learner

WELCOMING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS BACK THROUGH A LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH

to assess and evaluate the learner's progress in the acquisition of language. Both teacher and learner should take an active role in the language learning process. The last component is success. Success is the biggest motivator for the learners, and it can be defined in various ways. One way Blumberg defines success in learning-centered teaching is the showing of concern for the well-being of students (p.73).

Before presenting the use and outcomes of Blumberg's Framework, it is important to identify my IEP students and the teaching context. The courses I taught in Fall 2021 included an Intermediate Core Literacy course that met three times a week for a total of six instructional hours per week; and an Integrated Skills Humanities course that met twice a week for a total of three instructional hours per week. In both courses, there were students from Morocco, Jordan, Niger, Turkey, Taiwan, Myanmar, and Japan. They took courses in a building devoted solely to the instruction of ESL students. They were glad to be in the country and abided by the mask mandate without any objections.

To assist the students in their adaptation to face-to-face instruction, students were asked on the first day to complete a background questionnaire, provide a writing sample, and write down their academic goal for the semester. More information on these materials is forth coming. Furthermore, at the beginning of the semester, students were provided with information regarding office hours. I told them about my open-door policy and explained to them that I welcome any feedback regarding class materials and instruction.

Exposure to New Materials

Students were directly involved in the encounter of academic content through contact with various learning materials. This approach aligned with Blumberg's Learner-Centered Framework. One component in Blumberg's Framework is exposure to new materials. In a learner-centered environment, students are directly involved in the discovery of knowledge through exposure to materials administered in a predictable and flexible manner. This exposure of materials came in the form of Brightspace, our learning management system and RingCentral, an online virtual meeting? tool. Through these materials, students were in control of their learning. They could revisit daily agendas, check on upcoming assignments, review class materials, and post comments on discussion boards. All handouts, PowerPoints and learning aids were posted on Brightspace for the students' access, as well as their grades, assignments, attendance, supplemental videos, and syllabus. They also had access to request a virtual meeting via RingCentral if they were unable to attend my office hour meetings. The materials I presented to the students also allowed me to tap into their prior knowledge, language learning needs, and educational goals. Thus, students' exposure to new materials not only allowed me to guide and support their learning but also permitted them to take control and seek information when needed.

Learner Engagement

Another component of Blumberg's framework is learner engagement. This refers to students being actively engaged in their learning process. Engaged learners seek learning opportunities and are willing to work more independently, accompanied by the guidance of their teachers. Furthermore, student-centered engagement encourages "learners to be responsible for their own learning and become independent learners at the end of the day ... bringing the learners into the Center of the whole learning process" (Arman, 2018, p. 65). Engaged learners acquire knowledge through integrated materials that involve multiple associations among concepts and experiences. My students had the opportunity to engage in learning that went beyond paper-based materials and engaged them in experiential learning experiences. These experiences are described below and fall under the following categories: Collaboration classes, Cultural exchange club, Culture Fair, and the Culture Fair Panel.

Faculty in the Intensive English Language Program at SNHU had the opportunity to collaborate with other courses on campus. This fall, the IEP collaborated with the Education and Communications

departments to deliver experiential learning opportunities to our international and domestic students. These collaborations were invaluable to our international students' academic and social growth as they immersed themselves in conversations with native born/domestic students to learn about each other's culture, norms, and languages.

At these collaboration meetings, the students gathered together to get to know one another and discuss topics on culture, language, education, social norms, and traditions. The meetings involved group activities and focused on the students getting to know one another and learn from one another. The student group conversations were all student led. From these collaborations, students were also asked to meet individually at the library, student center, local café or virtually to continue the conversations started in the classroom. The last meeting was a celebration meeting where regional and or international food was shared.

This year, IEP faculty kicked-off a Cultural Exchange Club aimed at giving international and domestic students the opportunity to learn in a social environment separated from their morning academic courses. The first meeting was a fall festival which occurred in October. It involved food, activity and playing a getting to know you card game. Along with a handful of my IEP students, we had 20 students attend this meeting. The students in attendance were half domestic and half international. IEP and Education department faculty are currently planning winter and spring festival events. These events also provided professional development for the faculty involved and created a community of practice among departments. According to Short et al. (2018), teaching "English language learners requires that teachers be part of a community of practice within their school and the broader education community that afford them access to ongoing professional development" (2018). By offering both international and domestic students a cultural connections opportunity such as the Cultural Exchange Club, both my colleague in the department of Education and I aimed to create a student-centered environment that promotes social, language and cultural growth. This club was also an outgrowth of our previous collaboration of courses.

Our intention to bring diverse groups of students together has met with great success. The next phase is to have a student governing board: President, Vice-president, Secretary and Treasurer. My fellow colleague and I will continue to act as the advisors.

The next experiential learning experience is the Culture Fair. I have managed, coordinated, and supervised our department's Culture Fair since 2012. It takes place every fall during International Education Week. The Culture Fair is a great opportunity for our international students to share their culture, food, music, and art with the SNHU community. Every year, SNHU students, instructors, administrators, and even the outside community come to partake in the festivities of the Culture Fair. The international students create wonderful slide shows, present educational displays, explain artifacts, teach origami, demonstrate calligraphy, and leave a lasting impression on all those who visit. Without question, the Culture Fair gives our international students the opportunity to use their listening and pronunciation skills to improve their English language skills. It gives them exposure to the SNHU community and instills in them a great sense of pride and accomplishment. Last year due to COVID 19, we were unable to host the fair in person, so it was so wonderful to have the fair be held in person again this year, energizing the campus community with diversity and collaboration.

An additional bonus to the fair this year was the International Culture Fair Panel. At the fair, three of our international students and two domestic students volunteered to share their culture and learning experiences at SNHU. This panel was moderated by me and my colleague from the Communications department. The students who participated in the panel were asked a series of topic-based questions. The panel lasted about 30 minutes. A full list of questions can be found in **Appendix 1**. At this panel, we also had an international student join us virtually from Lebanon, adding to the cultural diversity of the panel. All four students enjoyed this time sharing their knowledge and learning from one another. This gave our students the added opportunity to practice their English skills. Furthermore, this panel discussion was filmed and has been archived in both programs: Communications and the Intensive English Language Program. According

to Gutierrez (2013), it is crucial in a learner-centered approach to allow students to “collaborate with each other by giving them opportunities to actively seek and share information, construct meaningful insights, produce a diverse set of ideas and appreciate multiple perspectives.” These gains were achieved by the participants of the panel and the audience that attended the panel discussion.

Learner’s Learning Process

The third component of Blumberg’s Learner-Centered Framework is attention to the Learner’s Learning Process. This example of learner-centeredness was achieved throughout the semester in a variety of ways. Arman (2018) noted the important of this approach stating, “In a learner-centered class ... learners can work individually and jointly; they can work in groups sharing their ideas and experiences; make comments to improve their partner’s work; and compare and discuss their answers” (p. 65). By asking the IEP students to complete a weekly journal they not only practiced writing fluency but also had the opportunity to voice their opinions about weekly topics and experiences. The journals engaged the students in reflective and deep learning. Some of the reflections shared in the journals are forthcoming in this article.

Learner’s Acquired Knowledge

The fourth component in Blumberg’s Learner-Centered Framework is Learner’s Acquired Knowledge. The Learner’s Acquired Knowledge both prior to the fall 2021 semester and during the IEP courses is an essential factor in optimizing student-centered instruction. Here, acquired knowledge is comprised of factual, conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive knowledge segments as defined in the 1999 Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Students’ factual knowledge of terminology and details was expanded by their acquisition of new vocabulary terms, by their involvement in course specific group and pair work and by their participation in the collaboration classes. Through the acquisition of factual knowledge, students were encouraged to be explainers and active users of the new knowledge. The students’ conceptual knowledge of language classification, principles, and structures were demonstrated in their group work with their peers in the IEP courses and in their interactions with the domestic students both in the collaboration classes and during the Cultural Exchange Club. In respect to procedural knowledge, students learned how to use appropriate procedures in activities such as debates, oral presentations, and research papers. Lastly, students activated their metacognitive knowledge in their reflective journals and writer’s conferences. It is critical that students are “made aware of their metacognitive activity . . . to appropriately adapt the ways in which they think and operate” (Krathwohl, 2002, p.214). These four types of knowledge were activated in a student-centered teaching environment to develop the students’ language and learning skills.

Learners’ Evaluation and Assessment

To assess how well the students fared through a student-centered approach, the students were asked to focus on evaluation, specifically to share “what they learned from the program, their perceptions of it, and how they participated in it” (Richards, 2017, p.278). With these objectives in mind, I presented the students with reflective questions in the form of journal entries. In these journal entries, students revealed what they found to be good about these partnership meetings, memorable experiences, and favorite activities. Below are samples of the journal prompts the students responded to and student responses. For each prompt and student response example, I present a brief summary of the response and evidence of student-centeredness. These responses were selected because they represent the gist of most responses. The names of the students have not been used to protect their privacy. Furthermore, students signed a consent form to have their answers shared for research purposes.

Journal Questions:

1. What are your goals for this class? What do you wish to learn?

In general, the students' goals for the class focused on developing their language skills and increasing their academic knowledge of English. It was from these responses that content and materials were chosen and evaluated to meet the students' needs.

There are students' typical answers:

"Improving my language skills in reading, speaking and writing."

"Speak and write fluently."

"Communicate easily with other people."

"Develop literacy skills and opinion."

"Practice what I have learned in the English language."

2. How can I motivate you?

The responses to this question revealed the students' knowledge of self and goals. These answers also reveal the students' dependence on the teacher as facilitator and collaborator and not as an authoritative figure.

"I can be motivated by watching videos, listening to music, and participating in class."

"By getting something that is valuable for me."

"I am motivated by doing homework and learning new vocabulary."

"You can motivate me by giving me some piece of advice."

"You can motivate me by not letting me fall behind if I couldn't keep up with the progress of this class."

Questions 3-4 focus on identifying the students' language activities. For some of the students, these questions took some time to answer given that they did not experience a variety of academic activities related to language skills. The students' answers reflect their outside interests.

3. What is your favorite reading activity?

"It is story like a manga and book, and song."

"My favorite reading activity is just to improve my reading in despite of the activity."

**WELCOMING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS BACK THROUGH
A LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH**

“My favorite reading activity is to read about fashion and news. They are some of my interests that I extremely enjoy.”

“I don’t know, so I will find out.”

4. What is your favorite writing activity?

“It’s good for me to write about modern topics related with news.”

“I don’t know, so I will find out.”

5. What is your favorite language skill in English?

“My favorite language skill in English is speaking because I can discuss many ideas with others and learn a lot and share some knowledge also practice English.”

6. Recently, you have been exposed to new learning materials. What are your thoughts about these materials: mysnhu, Brightspace (SNHU’s learning management system), course created worksheets, textbook materials, and education videos?

Question 6 relates to the materials the students were exposed to in the course. All the materials were chosen with the students’ needs and interests in mind. The materials aimed to facilitate language learning and connect with the students’ goals and interests.

”Brightspace is [a] great tool to connect with professors and do homework and study.”

“mysnhu was a good experience and offers other stuff of SNHU.”

“Education videos are very helpful to practice Listening.”

“Course created worksheets are extremely organized. Every day we learn things in different ways which is exciting.”

“These materials are new. I must learn a little how to use them appropriately, and they can help me to improve my English and to achieve my goals.”

“I have experiences [with] some learning materials since I came to SNHU. In my university, I used material like Brightspace, so it is easy for me to use. The new material I was especially excited about is educative videos. It is easy for me to understand topic because the video is colorful.”

7. What would you consider to be our most noteworthy academic/learning experience so far and why?

Questions 7 was presented to the students in the middle of the semester to evaluate their language learning experience. From these examples, we see that the students are assessing their growth in

their language learning process and creating new goals to achieve in the remainder of the semester.

“It is a skill that I can talk about what I think and write in my opinion about every topic at the moment.”

“For me, my most noteworthy academic achievement is improvement of my skills in writing and my ability to make a good essay, despite the lack of vocabulary skills and fluency speaking.”

“When I looked at my goals, I feel that I have achieved a milestone in my English learning. I realized that I have been improving my vocabulary, grammar, and fluent speech recently. However, I still have a lot to do. There are many new words that I have learn and I need to be more fluent in speaking English.”

“At the beginning of the course, I put to become confident to write an essay and conduct create content quickly as my goal for this term. Speaking of which, it is getting faster to establish content for an essay but there is still [a] margin for improvement. Plus, it is difficult to construct [an] essay, so I will work on it on next term. I will also work on reading section especially vocabulary.”

Questions 8-10 related to the experiential experiences the students were involved in throughout the semester. Being that the students made a commitment to come to the United States to receive the full experience of studying abroad, it was important to create learning situations in which the students interacted with native speakers and experienced American culture in a safe and welcoming environment. These experiential learning opportunities also permitted the students to share their culture and expand their perspectives.

8. Last Friday, you met and worked with domestic students. You also got a chance to get to know them a bit. Please describe your experience and your hopes for the next meeting.

“The meeting was very interesting because there are some similarities between them and me. For example, one of my group members is my Japanese friend’s friend, and some of the students have quite close birthdays to mine. I hope we will get to know each other more next time.”

“My experience is that they gently welcomed us with kindness. They were easy going, [that’s]what made the meeting exciting. My hopes for the next meeting are that they will keep being kind and nice to us and I hope the next meeting will be more exciting.”

“Personally, the meeting with domestic students was a good experience for me because it was the first one, and it allowed me to improve my speaking English skills and to know new friends. For the next meeting, I hope to meet new students and to make other activities.”

“Meeting with American students was a great experience because I got a chance to hear American accent and it will help me to improve my speaking skill, and I also had a chance to find out more about American culture like cuisine; the most popular dish is burger and they recommend it to me some best American restaurant, and they introduced themselves and I got close information about them and their backgrounds.”

WELCOMING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS BACK THROUGH A LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH

9. You participated in the Culture Fair on Wednesday; would you please provide your thoughts on the fair and share any ideas that you have for next year's fair?

“Regarding Culture Fair, it was a great experience which gives us the opportunities to present our country and to talk about Morocco cuisine, culture, and iconic landmarks. I really enjoyed the moments, and we had wonderful conversations with Americans. Learning different cultures is one thing that really motivates me.”

“Personally, my participation in Culture Fair was [a] good and wonderful experience. It allowed me to know new cultures such as their food, traditions, and habits and also to share my culture with other individuals.”

10. On Monday, you had the opportunity to have a [another]special class with American students. Would you give me your opinion about this special meeting?

“During the partnership class, we started playing the game Two Truths and a Lie. It was an interesting game to train our mind which is the lie. In addition, we asked some questions regarding education, interest, and family. The talk was full of energy, and personally, I learned more things.”

“Last class meeting was perfect because we played a game called Two Truths and a Lie. It was really delightful. We spent a great moment with domestic students in my group. It was three boys, and we shared our answers and I discovered closely some of their life, families, and hobbies. It was a super experience because we had much time to be able to communicate and get to learn about each other and talk about our interests and some country events.”

The above responses reveal the outcomes of a student-centered curriculum, strong in student participation and experiential learning. The teaching context was created to nurture learning responsibility, self-growth, and increased language proficiency. “The ability of individuals to take responsibility for their own affairs (in this case language learning) will be largely determined by the context in which the learning takes place.” (Nunan, 1995, p. 147).

Also, the above quotes were selected for their descriptive nature of student experience. In essence, the feedback from the students was overwhelmingly encouraging. In fact, the students expressed a unanimous positive response to the collaborative class meetings.

Learners' Success

As confirmed by Arman (2018) in English language learning, “... students do not need just sheer explanation of language works, but they need to be given comprehensive exposure to the target language and they need to use and communicate with the target language in a stress-free environment” (p. 70). As has been presented, the IEP students experienced a learner-centered teaching environment where opportunities to maximize language acquisition to communicate in a culturally diverse environment took place. Specifically, students were exposed “to real communication,” such as informal conversation outside of the classroom environment; they were provided with opportunities to engage in authentic exchanges, which dealt with their own personal interests, and they ultimately, experienced meaningful communicative activities (Taylor, 1983, p. 72). Hence, conditions were created to provide students with a classroom culture that promotes language

learning and culturally responsive instruction “that respects and builds on the different cultural views characteristics of all learners and ensures that academic discussions are open to different cultural views and perspectives” (Blok, 2020, p. 9, p. 112). All these factors led to learners’ success, manifested in various learning achievements and experiences throughout the semester.

As explicated in the article, emphasis was placed on providing students with learner-centered experiences. These experiences came in the form of exposure to authentic materials, learner engagement collaborations, and opportunities for processing learning and acquiring knowledge both in and out of the classroom. Through a learner-centered framework, my students not only had various opportunities to strengthen their English language proficiency but also were able to create meaningful academic and social experiences, which I believe made them feel truly welcomed.

References

- Anderson, L. W., & Krathwohl, D. R. (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives*. New York: Longman.
- Arman, M. S. (2018). Student-centered approach to teaching: It takes two to tango. *Ahfad Journal*, 35(2), 64–71.
- Blok et al. (2020). *6 Principles for Exemplary Teaching of English Learners: Academic and Other Specific Purposes*. TESOL International Association.
- Blumberg, P. (2004). Beginning journey toward a culture of learning-centered teaching. *Journal of Student-Centered Learning*, 2, 69.
- Fach, M. (2006). Student-centricity no longer a choice, but an obligation. <https://evollution.com/technology/tech-tools-and-resources/student-centricity-no-longer-a-choice-but-an-obligation/>
- Graves, Kathleen. (2000). *Designing Language Courses*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Gutierrez, K. (2013). Six key ingredients of learner-centered eLearning courses. *Shift Blog*. Retrieved from <https://www.shiftlearning.com/blog/bid/301962/Six-Key-Ingredients-of-Learner-centered-eLearning-Courses>
- Krathwohl, D. R. (2002). A revision of Bloom’s taxonomy: An overview. *Theory into Practice*, 41(4), 212-218.
- Nunan, D. (1995). Closing the gap between learning and instruction. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29(1), 133–158.
- Nunan, D. (1986). *Seeing It Their Way: Learners and Language Curricula*. <https://search-ebshost-com.ezproxy.snhu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=ED273091&site=ehost-live>
- Richards, J.C. (2017). *Curriculum Development in Language Teaching*. 2nd. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Short et al. (2018). *The 6 Principles for Exemplary Teaching of English Learners: Grades K-12*. Alexandria, VA. TESOL Press.
- Taylor, B. P. (1983). Teaching ESL: Incorporating a communicative, student-centered component. *TESOL Quarterly*, 17(1), 69–88. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.snhu.edu/10.2307/3586425>

Appendix A

FALL 2021 Culture Fair Panel Discussion

Food-

What dish would you consider to be representative of your country?

What food reminds you of home?

Do you enjoy cooking? If so, what is your favorite dish to make?

Culture-

How would you describe your home culture?

What is one characteristic of your culture that you see in you?

**WELCOMING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS BACK THROUGH
A LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH**

What are some cultural values of your country?

Music-

How important is music in your culture?

When do you listen to music?

What kind of music do you enjoy listening to and why?

Education

What are your learning interests?

Why did you choose Southern New Hampshire University?

How much education does one need to be successful in your country?

Activities-

Name a well-liked activity in your country?

What are popular outdoor hobbies?

What are popular indoor hobbies?

* **Dr. RITA NAUGHTON**, an Associate Professor of TESOL, has taught at Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) since 2008. Courses taught in the SNHU Master of Arts (MA) in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) program include Listening, Speaking & Pronunciation, Language Curriculum Design and Implementation, and Reading, Writing & Vocabulary Techniques. Courses taught in the SNHU Master of Science (MS) in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) include Strategies & Techniques for Teaching Grammar, Evaluation & Assessment, Reading & Writing Techniques, and Aspects of Literacy for Multilingual Learners. Her ongoing areas of research are Teacher Education in the field of TESOL, Academic Reading and Writing for Second Language Learners, Learning Strategies, as well as Metacognition and Intercultural Education.