

Pronouncing International Students' Names

"Must a name mean something?" Alice asked doubtfully. "Of course it must," Humpty Dumpty said with a short laugh; "my name means the shape I am - and a good handsome shape it is, too. With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost."

— Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

"We don't know when our name came into being or how some distant ancestor acquired it. We don't understand our name at all, we don't know its history and yet we bear it with exalted fidelity, we merge with it, we like it, we are ridiculously proud of it, as if we had thought it up ourselves in a moment of brilliant inspiration."

— Milan Kundera, *Immortality*

"I'd love to work with an Asian guy named Wu Hu, because just saying his name would get me all pumped up and excited."

— Jarod Kintz, *There are Two Typos of People in This World: Those Who Can Edit and Those Who Can't*

I call everyone 'Darling' because I can't remember their names. – Zsa Zsa Gabor

Why does this matter?

Names are an important part of everyone's identity. If someone pronounces your name correctly, you feel acknowledged and accepted. If someone mispronounces your name, you might feel misunderstood or marginalized. Because names are so personal, it is not a good idea to expect international students to adopt an American name – although some do so willingly.

Classroom Practices

In class, help students learn and practice using each other's names.

- Use an ice-breaker that involves learning others' names. For example, ask each student to explain what their name means, or how they got their name, etc.
- Model good practice by calling on individuals by name. (It's okay to ask for a prompt: "Remind me of your name again!")
- Explain the broader purpose: People are more at ease in a group when they know and use each other's names.

Strategies

To improve your ability to pronounce unfamiliar students' names...

- Ask! Most people care about how you pronounce their name, and would be happy to comply with this simple request: "Help me pronounce your name." It is also a good idea to ask, "What name do you want to go by?" Or, "What do you want to be called?"
- Check! Once you hear the name, repeat it and ask if you got it right. Don't be afraid to keep trying.
- Practice! Repeat the name to yourself several times aloud. Acquiring new sounds and sound combinations takes practice.

Pronouncing names from spelling

In many languages...

The **a** spelling is pronounced like the **a** in "spa," not like the **a** in "man" or "mate."

Examples: Abdul, Laa

The **e** spelling is pronounced like the **a** in "plate," not like the **ee** in keep.

Examples: Reenate, Joesé

The **i** spelling is pronounced like the **ee** in "keep," not like the **i** in like.

Examples: Dmiitri, Samira

The **o** spelling is pronounced like the **o** in "most," not like the **o** in "lost."

Examples: Noozomi, Koofi

The **u** spelling is pronounced like the **u** in "rude," not like the **u** in cut.

Examples: Umut, Srisucha

Pronouncing names from specific countries

This link from Cal Poly Pomona has sound files of common last names in these languages: Cambodian, Cantonese Chinese, Mandarin Chinese, Filipino, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Thai, and Vietnamese:

<http://www.csupomona.edu/~pronunciation/index.html>

Chinese names are different from Western names in that the family name is listed first. In Chinese, both names are used when addressing someone. In the US, some Chinese students want to go by their family name; others want to go by their given name. You can always ask! The following chart tells you how to pronounce some common Chinese surnames.

Pronouncing Common Chinese Surnames

| Pinyin Spelling | Sounds Like | Rhymes With |
|-----------------|---------------------|---------------|
| Ai | eye | high |
| An | on | con |
| Bao | bow (the verb) | cow |
| Cai | ts (its) + eye | high |
| Cao | ts (its) + ow (how) | cow |
| Chang | ch (cheap) + ong | long |
| Chen | ch + un | gun |
| Cheng | ch + ung | lung |
| Dai | die | high |
| Deng | dung | lung |
| Du | do | you |
| Duan | du + on | con |
| Fan | f + on | con |
| Fang | f + ong | long |
| Feng | f + ung | lung |
| Fu | foo | you |
| Gao | g + ow (how) | cow |
| Gong | g + oong | Jung (German) |
| Gu | goo | you |
| Guo | gu + awe | raw |
| Han | h + on | con |
| He | h + uh | duh |
| Hu | who | you |
| Hua | hw + ah | spa |
| Huang | hw + ong | long |
| Ji | gee | see |
| Jiang | gee + ong | long |
| Jin | Jean | mean |
| Kang | k + ong | long |
| Lin | lean | mean |
| Liu | lee + owe | owe |
| Lu | lou | you |
| Luo | lu + awe | raw |
| Ma | ma | spa |
| Mao | m + ow (how) | cow |
| Ni | knee | see |
| Peng | p + ung | lung |
| Qi | ch + ee | knee |
| Qian | ch + ee + en | men |
| Qiu | ch + ee + owe | owe |

| Pinyin Spelling | Sounds Like | Rhymes With |
|-----------------|------------------|---------------|
| Ren | wren | men |
| Rong | r+ oong | Jung (German) |
| Shao | sh + ow (how) | cow |
| Shen | shun | run |
| Shi | New Hampshire | sir |
| Song | s + oong | Jung (German) |
| Su | sue | you |
| Tang | t + ong | long |
| Wang | w + ong | long |
| Wei | weigh | day |
| Wu | woo | you |
| Xia | she + ah | spa |
| Xiao | she + ow (how) | vow |
| Xie | she + yeah | yeah |
| Xu | shoe | you |
| Yan | y + an (tan) | man |
| Yang | y + ong | long |
| Ye | yeah | yeah |
| Yu | you | you |
| Yuan | you + on | con |
| Zeng | dz (sudsy) + ung | lung |
| Zhang | j + long | long |
| Zhao | j + ow | cow |
| Zheng | j + ung | lung |
| Zhong | j + oong | Jung (German) |
| Zhou | Joe | show |
| Zhu | Jew | you |

Adapted from:

James R. Townsend and Richard C. Bush, Compilers. *The People's Republic of China, A Basic Handbook*. New York: The China Council of the Asia Society and the Council on International and Public Affairs. 1981

