

**International Teaching Assistants: A Case of
an American University**

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研究論文

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要旨

本論は、米国で学ぶ大学院留学生が、現地の大学でTA（教育助手）になるために必要な英語を身につけるプログラムの授業内容を分析している。同プログラムによって受講生が何を身に付けたいかなどに関するニーズ分析を行い、その結果と担当教員が受講生に身に付けてほしい内容について比較検討を行っている。

Keywords: international teaching assistants; training program; needs analysis

1. Introduction

In the recent past, the number of international teaching assistants (ITAs) has increased at universities throughout the United States. The problems related to ITAs have also increased because of their inadequate English skills. Gorsuch (2003) mentions that the increasing involvement of ITAs in undergraduate teaching causes concerns about ITAs' English ability and their acculturation to U.S. universities and classrooms. UCLA Newsletter (1987) reported two problems among ITAs. First, variation in the use of English among ITAs interferes with students' comprehension in the classroom. Problems such as having a foreign accent cause serious misunderstanding between the students and the ITA. Second, lack of the ITA's understanding of the U.S. educational system and crosscultural awareness cause ineffective teaching and learning. Bailey (1984) points out that ITAs' mispronunciation and systematic errors in English cause great difficulty of communication between students and ITAs. Bailey also pointed out that awareness of the ITA's problem is largely a result of students' complaints about non-native speakers employed as TAs.

ITA training programs, therefore, have an important role for ITAs to deal with their

responsibilities of the teaching task. Shaw and Garate (1984) suggested that ITA training should emphasize language (pronunciation, fluency, communicative competence), culture (American undergraduate students' behavior, the system of higher education in the U.S.), and pedagogy (course and lesson planning, classroom management skills). Among these categories, language, especially communicative competence should be considered to be one of the important elements of instruction for ITAs. The ITAs should be able to speak English well enough to convey the course materials to their students.

A northeastern U.S. university, one of the largest employers of ITAs, has specific programs for ITAs to enhance their spoken English skills. According to the graduate school handbook, all international graduate students must certify their proficiency in spoken English before entering into their graduate teaching associate instructional duties. The students are required to get a score of 28 or higher on the spoken part of the TOEFL iBT, 8.5 on the IELTS, or by scoring at the appropriate level on the oral proficiency assessment administered by the spoken English program. The international graduate students who fail these tests are required to enroll in the English course.

The English course focuses on several aspects in order to engage the students' needs such as fluency in speaking English, pronunciation like a native speaker, comprehensive skills, and cross-cultural understanding. The syllabus design of this specific course is based on these students' needs and the administrative expectations of the ITAs. Krahnke (1987) stresses that a skill-based syllabus is useful for Language for Specific Purpose (LSP) problems. This type of syllabus is designed with instruction on how to learn the specific language skill needed by the learner such as speaking, listening, reading, or writing. It helps the learner to improve the specific language skill that s/he is weakest in and focuses not on the learner's strengths, but on his/her weaknesses.

Brinton, Snow and Wesche (1989) introduced an LSP program as one of the useful models of a content-based syllabus. The learners require the language skill for real-world demands. The learners in the same course are usually involved in the same kinds of occupations, fields, or levels of study. This syllabus, therefore, can be created with the learner's own functional needs in mind. The syllabi mentioned above contain common aspects which focus on learners who have specific goals and needs and might be

applicable to the spoken English program for ITAs. However, few studies of the syllabus design for ITA spoken English programs have been conducted.

This paper attempts to investigate the syllabus of the English course for ITAs. The syllabus is designed to improve the spoken English fluency, pronunciation, and aural comprehension of these teaching assistants who are non-native speakers of English. The curriculum covers four broad areas—language, aural comprehension, public speaking, and culture. The aim of the present study is to: 1) outline the type and application of the syllabus implemented by the English course; 2) diagnose the learners' needs; 3) reflect on the extent to which learners' needs and expectations match those of the course and the instructor; 4) outline some of the similarities and differences in needs between the students and the instructor; and 5) make some relevant suggestions on all the issues discussed. For the purpose of this investigation, I interviewed one instructor of the English course. I also made a student questionnaire in an attempt to find out the degree to which the course is relevant to student needs and expectations.

2. Student Questionnaire Survey

2.1 Method

A total of twenty potential ITAs taking the English course were given a questionnaire that contained ten questions. The questions were designed to obtain specific information about items of the syllabus of the English course deemed relevant to the students.

Table 1 (Question 1 of the student questionnaire)

<u>Native language</u> of students	<u>Number of</u> native speakers	<u>% of students speaking</u> the language
Chinese	12	60%
Korean	7	35%
Japanese	1	5%

Discussion

Based on the results in Table 1, the majority of students in the class are native

speakers of Chinese, followed by Korean and Japanese. The instructor of the course has emphasized that in her instruction she focuses on the stress timing of English and intonation patterns which pose problems for Chinese students. The analysis of the above data helps to identify the highest percentage of students belonging to a particular speech community (Chinese in this case). Therefore, more time and effort can be allowed to overcome such problems relevant to the main body of the student population.

Table 2 (Question 2 for the student questionnaire)

<u>Students' major area of study</u>	<u>Number of students enrolled in the particular discipline</u>	<u>% of students enrolled in particular discipline</u>
Art Education	1	5%
Biochemistry	3	15%
Chemistry	1	5%
Economics	8	40%
Entomology	1	5%
Foreign Language Education	1	5%
Molecular Genetics	1	5%
Immunology	1	5%
Philosophy	1	5%
Plant Biology	2	10%

Discussion

Table 2 shows that there is great diversity among the major areas of study. The diversity among the different areas of study calls for a more general approach to the content selection in teaching ITAs. It is suggested that the instructor utilize a general syllabus for the teaching of skills mutually required for all disciplines; whereas, depending on the makeup of the disciplines in the classroom, may be better to devise activities of a more specific nature. Another good example of this suggestion is getting the eight Economics majors together for some specific activity (e.g., a small group discussion or a mini-lesson) to provide some help for their specific teaching needs. The

instructor should emphasize a general approach in the syllabus; in order to help the student's first obtain a general knowledge of skills needed to effectively teach in any discipline.

Table 3 (Question 3 of the student questionnaire)

<u>Length of student stay in the U.S.</u>	<u>Number of students staying in the U.S.</u>	<u>% of students</u>
0~1 year	16	80%
1~1.5 years	2	10%
More than 1.5 years	2	10%

Discussion

The majority of the students have stayed less than one year in the United States. Two students have stayed a little more than one year and another two students have stayed more than a year and a half. The data reveals that the majority of students have come to the U.S. quite recently. In fact 90% of the students have been in the U.S. for under 1.5 years. They have been naturally exposure to the English language for a very short time. According to Krashen and Terrell (1983), the time of exposing to the natural environment is an essential factor for language acquisition. Therefore, the instructor has to do his/her best to make the best use of this time period and to enhance it. For this purpose, the students of this course are provided with conversation partners who are native speakers of English.

Table 4 (Question 4 of the student questionnaire)

<u>Students' teaching experience in their native countries</u>	<u>Number of students who have the experience</u>	<u>% of students</u>
None	13	65%
0~1 year	2	10%
1.1~2 years	1	5%
2.1~3 years	1	5%

3.1~5 years	1	5%
More than 5 years	2	10%

Discussion

Sixty-five percent of the student population have no teaching experience in their native countries. Ten percent have up to one year of experience; whereas the percentage of students in all other designated time periods (see Table 4) comprise the other 25% of the total. Note that after one year of experience, all of the designated time periods are roughly equally divided in their percentage of students, and that the percentage of students is small. Obviously, the students have little or no teaching experience in their own countries, which could not possibly aid in their teaching of the same subject matter in another language such as English. Only one student, who is majoring foreign language education, had teaching experience in EFL.

Table 5 (Question 5 of the student questionnaire)

<u>Students' rating of the</u> <u>four skills areas</u>	<u>% of students</u>	<u>Instructor's rating of</u> <u>the four skills areas</u>
pronunciation	40%	most important
fluency	30%	most important
basic presentation skills	25%	less important
listening comprehension	5%	less important

Discussion

The four skills which the syllabus focuses on are viewed in a slightly different perspective by the students and the instructor. Most of the students believe that pronunciation is their weakest point and, therefore, it should be most strongly emphasized during the course. The instructor, on the other hand, is more inclined to give priority to both developing fluency and pronunciation. Moreover, all the people involved agreed that pronunciation and fluency were the two most important skill areas to develop. Also, all agreed that listening comprehension was one of the lesser important skill areas of the

four to develop. The instructor emphasized that she thought that the latter two skills were less important than the skills of fluency and pronunciation; however, she thought the relative difference in importance was smaller than the students did. Does this difference in perception result in less effective conveyance of teaching skills by the instructor to the student? More studies need to be made to address this question; however, this study does seem to show a small difference of perspective among the students and the instructor.

Table 6 (Question 6 of the student questionnaire)

<u>Types of activities</u>	<u>% of students</u>	<u>Instructor's rating</u>
interaction	40%	(All activities are effective.)
pair work	30%	
individual work	15%	
small group	10%	
role play	5%	

Discussion

The data suggests that the students give a high priority to the teacher-student (two-way) interaction where the instructor and student can work together on a one-to-one basis. Some students said that in this type of activity they feel less threatened and embarrassed and their listening comprehension is better because they can feel more relaxed and can concentrate better. The role-play activity is given the lowest rating which might indicate that the students are not used to expressing openly their ideas and values. Role play is probably given the lowest priority because the students' self perception hinders their ability to use this activity. Pair work is obviously an activity that is favored by the students and, therefore, this type of activity may be used more often in instruction.

Table 7 (Question 7 of the student questionnaire)

<u>Type of teaching materials</u>	<u>Students' preference of these materials</u>
audio materials	60%

textbooks	40%
video materials	40%

Discussion

Table 7 shows the students' preference for the use of audio materials over the use of textbooks and video materials. This preference appears to be related to the students' need to improve their pronunciation which was noted in another aspect of this course (see Table 5).

Table 8 (Question 9 of the student questionnaire)

<u>Degree of the students' preference</u> <u>for error correction</u>	<u>% of preference of</u> <u>error correction</u>
quite a lot	30%
a lot	45%
moderately	25%
not a lot	0%

Discussion

The data indicates a strong desire on the part of the students to be corrected in their grammar while speaking. This pattern is a reflection of the Asian culture, where the students are taught that they have to be corrected in order to learn better. The issue of fluency and the place of error correction might be another interesting topic of discussion between students and instructors in the course.

Obviously, this aspect of the research again stresses the need the students have for two-way interaction with a person whose skill is higher than theirs. This possibly shows further insight into the results obtained in Table 6, where the two most important classroom activities (70% of the total) were teacher-student interaction and pair-work. The teacher-student "one to one" interaction is important in both parts (see Table 6 & 8) of this study. The importance of pair work in Table 6 ties into the data of Table 8 by reflecting on the student's need to learn from his/her peers. There is possibly a

psychological need for this kind of interaction. More important is the fact that two people are more insightful in the learning process than one person. Moreover, another person can point out weaknesses that the other person cannot see in him/herself and perhaps correct them.

Table 9 (Question 10 of the student questionnaire)

Student comments on the course

- Error correction is useful. It improves my pronunciation.
- I acquired teaching skills by being exposed to many people.
- This course is useful to practice one's English fluency.
- This course provides me more opportunities to speak English.
- My pronunciation, listening comprehension, and speaking skills have improved.
- This course teaches me to learn how to self-monitor and speak like native speakers of English.

Discussion

It is obvious that the students find taking this course is of great value to them.

The comments were corrected when poor grammar was used.

3. Conclusion

I have made an attempt to investigate the syllabus for the English course which is offered primarily for international graduate students intending to take positions as graduate teaching assistants, and to make some useful suggestions. The course design of the English course has focused on the development of learner skills and practical use. The learners are expected to make use of the English language in their teaching positions as ITAs. Skill specification must be based on an evaluation of the needs of a particular student population in terms of present and future expectations. Based on the interview with the course instructor, it is clear that this particular course design has been created as an answer to the questions arising in the English course.

Some important implications can be drawn from the results of the investigation of

the English course. The course provides a sound framework for introducing unprepared students to the demands of the ITA positions they intend to enter into. Obviously, the students enrolled in the course appreciate the opportunity provided by the course with respect to improving their pronunciation, fluency, basic presentation skills, and listening comprehension. I suggested that the majority of the syllabus should be oriented to the development of the students' general skill areas, but a small portion of the syllabus should be devoted to the students' specific needs in their respective fields (see Discussion of Table 2). Some similarities and some differences were noted between the instructor's and the students' ideas in terms of the contents of the program. I felt that the latter area was worth further study, as it could be a possible field of miscommunication between the teacher and the students. I also found out about the lack of student knowledge of phonetic symbols, a concept that all students should have mastered. Discussion on these issues between the students and the instructor might bring about even more effective cooperation between all parts involved in this program.

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