

Venkata Ganti (Vish)

CA-514

Altman

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Fluency of English Speaking for Teaching Assistants

The quality of education and resources for research provided by American Universities is higher than the Universities in other countries. International students generally go to high school in their home countries where the language of instruction is their native language. Students communicate in their native language at home and school and rarely in English. This condition creates a barrier for students who intend to pursue higher education at an American University. Western Institute of Technology (WIT) is a well known University for the advanced degrees in technology and management. WIT has a vibrant cosmopolitan student population mostly intending to pursue undergraduate, graduate or post doctoral degrees. Most international students work on campus to earn their living expenses. They are employed in various jobs ranging from cashiers, clerk, computer technicians, website developers, student assistants, tutors, and teaching assistants (TA). Professors hire graduate students to assist them to teach, test and grade students pursuing undergraduate programs. Although the International Graduate Students meet with the University's English proficiency requirements to study but they are not tested for proficiency to work as a Teaching Assistant. This communication gap misleads students that studying and teaching require same level of competency in English. WIT should make the TA selection process stricter by testing students for their English speaking and writing skills.

Teaching requires TA's to speak fluently, clearly and without a heavy accent. Students often complain that they cannot understand the pronunciation of certain words by a non native English speaker. A comic situation was quoted in an article titled "Classroom Chronicles, instructors' accents make lessons hard" published in the San Francisco Chronicle on 27th November 1999. A professor at University of California at Berkeley mispronounced the word "authoritarian" as "auto-Italian". Students in his class kept wondering what auto-Italian meant and finally when a presentation was displayed in class, they learnt about the word being authoritarian. A situation like this in a well reputed institute like University of California at Berkeley demonstrates the need for teachers and their assistants to go through a training process and testing to meet the basic communication requirements for teachers. University of Minnesota sponsors a program of assessment for prospective international teaching assistants and sets a higher spoken language score than many of our peer institutions. At University of Minnesota a two-credit classroom communication course is offered for students with lower scores to help them improve their English skills. These teaching and communication courses address the practicalities of pronunciation, word stress, clarity, fluency and the rhythm and intonation of U.S. English. The courses engage TAs in practice teaching and discussions of cultural topics. The goal of this program is that international TAs develop the skills required for clearly organized, fluent and comprehensible communication.

English as a Second Language (ESL) training is important for any international student. English is the primary language of the USA and except for specific classes in other languages, academic studies at all levels are carried out in English. It is needed for everything from reading street signs to writing a dissertation, and the faster a

student acquires a firm grasp of English, the easier his studies and life in the US will be. Students believe they will very quickly learn the minimum amount of English necessary to enter a school and, after that, things will take care of themselves. The "minimum amount of English" usually means a score or between 450 and 500 on the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), a test which does not necessarily measure a student's actual academic ability. The reality of the situation is that the TOEFL lasts only about two hours, while college will take up to six years of a student's life. ESL training is offered by many different institutions, including colleges and universities, high schools and private language schools. Most of these will offer some kind of initial exam, such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System). These tests help place students according to their needs and skill level. After the ESL level is mastered, students can pursue English for Academic Purposes, or EAP. The EAP program is designed to help students attain the level of English necessary to excel in academic reading and writing.

In 2008 a study conducted by the Center for Teaching and Learning at University of Minnesota which looked at student satisfaction with the overall teaching ability of TAs who had taken required courses on English, teaching and U.S. culture. More than four out of five undergraduates in the study reported they were satisfied or very satisfied with their TA's overall teaching. Departments hiring TAs must continue to monitor the language proficiency of their international graduate students and refer those who need additional help to the ongoing training and classroom support services available through the teacher training programs. Professional development training can be required by departments for all TA's.

Some students feel it's demeaning to take proficiency tests in English to prove that they have the required language skill to teach. They argue that meeting with the University's English requirement to study is enough for them to teach. The WIT Foreign Student Association stood against the new policy of WIT Student Association to require all TA's to pass an additional test to be able to work as teaching assistants. This new rule will result in some international students to losing their TA positions. WIT should not compromise the quality of education offered for undergraduate students just because few graduate TA's will lose their jobs. Before joining WIT, all international students need to establish that they have sufficient funds to complete their education. They can be funded for their education by their parents, other members of the family or student loans. The University admissions department does not take into consideration the funds which are derived from on campus employment for granting admission. The excuse of not being able to pay the tuition fee or living expenses due to loss of employment doesn't not have substantial validity.

Apart from being useful for finding TA jobs, the additional English speaking and writing training would help students after they graduate and work in a professional environment. Many companies feel that international graduate students lack the skill needed to write professional reports and documentation. Companies would prefer a non- native graduate who has undergone additional training in English to a student without any special training. This emphasizes the need for students for focus on English development as much as on their regular course curriculum.

As an International graduate student at Western Institute of Technology, I would prefer to take an additional test to prove my proficiency in English and establish that I have the necessary skills to be hired as a teaching assistant. In spite of taking additional training and courses if the University feels that I do not meet their requirements to be a teaching assistant, I will consider looking for other jobs available on campus to finance my living expenses and lower the burden on parents. I would be glad that WIT has given me an opportunity to polish my English communication skills by taking up additional courses. I strongly believe that the skills that I have acquired in the process of preparing for teaching assistant position will help me at a later stage in life. I am confident that WIT will find a student who is more deserving and talented than me to fill in the TA position.