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The use of an increasing number of foreign TAs now complicates the use and development of TAs themselves. The problem calls for more than a quick "language fix."

Rethinking the "Foreign TA Problem"

Michele Fisher

The late 1940s and the early 1950s saw the establishment of the TA as a permanent member of undergraduate instruction teams at American research-oriented universities. The 1960s and the 1970s witnessed the proliferation of training programs for these TAs. The 1980s seem to be the decade of a new TA challenge: the foreign or non-native speaking TA.

For some universities, this challenge is already several years old. A few have responded with special, usually voluntary, screening and training programs. Others have not only failed to face the problem but also have abandoned promising remedies. In either case, universities overwhelmingly are treating the "foreign TA problem" in isolation rather than in the context of general policies concerning foreign students, on the one hand, and TAs, on the other. Until such general policies are adopted, unfair and costly burdens will continue to be placed on foreign TAs, a group already struggling to adjust to an alien and demanding environment. For as long as this situation persists, the same burdens will also fall on universities themselves.

The Problem

Why is there a sudden concern about foreign TAs? And—more ominously—why do they now seem to represent a problem that needs to be addressed? The issue of foreign TAs is only one result of a significant shift in the demographics of foreign and native graduate students in the United

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States. Foreign graduate students not only are continuing to come to American campuses in large numbers but also have become vital to certain institutions and to whole fields of advanced study (Goodwin and Nacht, 1983). As a result, foreign graduate students, who are often most numerous in the very fields American undergraduates are now flocking to, have had to be thrust into the TA role in great numbers. The difficulties that were avoided for years by assigning foreign students to research assistantships or grading must now be faced. Thus, on campus after campus, there have been loud complaints from undergraduates about the language and teaching skills of foreign TAs (Bailey, 1982b; Brekenkamp, 1981; Hinofotis and Bailey, 1980; Mescenhausner, 1980; Smith, 1982).

In response, many universities have found themselves scrambling to ensure what the graduate admissions process has never pretended to address—that foreign students who are admitted, and who may later be assigned to teach, speak English adequately to perform the task. Given the pressing nature of the problem, it is hardly surprising that universities have been responding mainly with remedies that attempt to “fix” foreign TAs who are already here. Important as screening and retraining remedies are and may remain, however, they should not preclude attention to the larger issue: the need for each institution to develop a general policy on foreign graduate students.

Long-Term Solutions

A long-term policy of this kind must begin with re-examining the institution's educational, research, and community goals, as well as the part that foreign graduate students play in the realization of these goals. Then, very practical considerations must be weighed: How many foreign students can different parts of the university absorb and provide financial aid and other services for? What should these latter services be? What do they cost? Do these costs place additional burdens on the institution? Should this be reflected in differential tuition rates? Should absolute numbers of foreign students be allowed to continue rising? What about proportions within various departments and schools? There are dangers to such institutional self-study. It may oversimplify a complex problem or run the danger of arousing ethnocentric prejudices. Nevertheless, Goodwin and Nacht (1983) argue that despite such risks, the benefits far outweigh the costs; failure to come to grips with the issue may be far more risky.

Institutional self-study has another result essential to any real solution of this problem: It fosters the identification, coordination, and mobilization of staff and administrators concerned with foreign students. As it is now, Goodwin and Nacht found, high-level administrators who must make decisions concerning foreign students rarely place a high priority on the issue. Moreover, staff who are the most knowledgeable—usually foreign-student advisers—rarely have the power to shape decisions or coordinate resources. All those

who can contribute should be drawn into the decision-making process. Thus, in short, if immediate solutions are not to become costly and permanent burdens, then institutions must initiate the self-studies necessary to establish financial and staff commitments to foreign graduate students.

Programs for Screening and Training

Let us turn now to some of the immediately useful programs that universities may want to develop as they start bringing the problem under control and helping TAs who already are being pressed into service.

Screening. Many institutions are beginning to realize that in the long run, a smaller amount of specialized assistance will have to be provided if all foreign graduate students who may become TAs are tested early for their spoken English. Screening could even begin with the admissions process, by a requirement for all such applicants to take a Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) supplement, such as the Test of Spoken English (TSE). Those who fail could be rejected outright or admitted only conditionally. At the very least, foreign graduate students should be screened as soon as they arrive on campus, and their English should be diagnosed for areas of weakness. Prospective TAs could then be tracked immediately into already existing English for Foreign Students (EFS) courses or tutoring programs. This kind of early action seems all the more advisable for the high percentage of Asian students among the TAs. Not only do Asian students report very little pronunciation work in their home-country study of English, but they also exhibit accent patterns that some American undergraduates seem to find particularly difficult (Hinofotis and Bailey, 1980, p. 128; Sarkisian, 1983, p. 6). Since improvement in pronunciation is a very slow process, screening will not guarantee flawless English, but it will give prospective foreign TAs the maximum amount of time to work on their language intelligibility, at no extraordinary expense to themselves or to their institutions.

One problem with an early screening program is that, unfortunately, no one accepted and established test of English is a sure indicator of success as a TA in the classroom. Bailey (1983b, pp. 33-35) has pointed out that it will be very difficult and complex to develop a test that can capture the spontaneous, interactive quality of the language used in teaching. Until such a test is developed, however, use of the TSE, or of some variant developed on campus, seems vastly preferable to letting foreign TAs wait until the last minute to prepare for their responsibilities.

Of course, a screening program will be effective only if the recommendations from the screening are enforced. The major adviser, who probably is in the best position to double-check a foreign student's course of study, may well share the student's resentment of the additional burden that EFS coursework represents and may allow a student to delay or neglect the coursework. The university's self-study eventually should decide who will coordinate foreign-

student services and therefore follow up the screening. Until that decision is made, the graduate dean's office may need to take on this responsibility.

Training Programs. A screening program can make the problem of foreign TAs more manageable by eliminating those with serious problems and seeing that those who need some help get it through existing channels. In the short run, however, such a program does little for foreign students who are already on campus and may need immediate preparation to teach. Even in the long run, screening will not be enough for the foreign TA who has learned very good English but knows too little about the culture of the American classroom or the psychology of the American undergraduate. In the latter two situations, universities may want to adopt a variety of training programs—orientations, workshops, or courses on teaching. Some of these activities may be as brief as a day, and others may last for a semester or even longer.

The format a university chooses will probably depend on its financial and personnel resources, but it also should depend on a closer look at the specific problems its TAs are having in the classroom. These could be determined by student questionnaires, selective classroom observation, interviews, and so on. Fortunately, a very useful study has been done at UCLA and was based on observation as well as on student evaluations (Bailey, 1982b). The results of this study indicate that, beyond a certain minimal competency in English, the success of foreign TAs depends most on their ability to facilitate classroom interaction with their students. The five following areas seem particularly crucial: knowledge of American rules of conversation and discourse management; use of such re-enforcing nonverbal behaviors as eye contact and hand gestures; flexibility and appropriateness in such informal speech acts as greeting and leaving-taking; ability to combine commentary with boardwork, rather than having to separate speaking from writing; and effective receptive skills, such as an understanding and replying to students' questions (Bailey, 1982b, pp. 153-165).

If other campuses discover that their foreign TAs need work along similar lines, then short-term training, while still useful for other purposes, hardly seems sufficient for learning the repertoire of behaviors under question. A whole course, with the opportunity to learn the necessary behaviors under close observation over as long as three months, seems the most desirable kind of program and already exists at many leading research-oriented universities, thirteen of which report semester- or quarter-long courses (Bailey, Piattorsi, and Zukowski-Faust, 1984, pp. 43-50).

What do such courses look like? For those courses reported in other literature thus far (Cake and Menasche, 1982; Franck and DeSousa, 1980; Hinojosa and Bailey, 1980; Landi and Perry, 1980; Mestenhauser and others, 1980; Parsons and Szclagowski, 1983; Sadow and Maxwell, 1982; Sarkisian, 1983) the answers vary, but strongly similar elements also emerge, as discussed below.

Performance Component. In most courses, students give presentations as often as once a week. These are audiotaped or videotaped and critiqued by teachers (and often, according to established guidelines, by fellow students).

Some programs are even able to arrange for undergraduates to be an occasional audience (Franck and DeSousa, 1980, p. 5). Ideally, the presentation is varied enough to include practice in lectures, discussions, reviews, and introductions to lab work. Whenever appropriate, prospective TAs are encouraged to achieve significant student participation. The presentations are frequently followed by question-and-answer periods, so that TAs can also work regularly on their receptive skills.

Lectures, Tapes, and Demonstrations of Teaching Skills. These give the course participants tips on preparing and delivering material and provide the opportunity to see examples of what is considered effective teaching by American standards.

Culture of the American Classroom. Prospective TAs are given information on various aspects of American campus life: norms of politeness; teacher/student expectations and roles; and guidelines on local customs or rules that concern grading exams, holding office hours, counseling students, working with faculty, and balancing coursework with teaching responsibilities. TAs seem to benefit especially from role playing, enacting typical or difficult interactions with students and then discussing the results. Role playing reveals the often considerable gulf between foreign TAs' expectations of student responsibilities and undergraduates' notions of their own rights.

Language Practice. Most courses contain sessions on pronunciation improvement, stress, intonation, and the vocabulary of teaching. As much as possible, however, since problems of accent and stress are idiosyncratic, help in these areas is provided on an individual basis. Students are encouraged to work on their own particular problems through work in the language laboratory or with a tape recorder. Exercises in the vocabulary of teaching seem a better use of in-class time, since most students need to increase their precision and flexibility.

Above all, the course must prepare foreign TAs to make a transition more difficult than the one native-speaking TAs must undertake when they move from being learners to being teachers. The foreign TA not only has to face all the typical challenges but also must worry about how students will react to the language problem, whether to say anything about this problem, whether it will be possible to understand and answer students' questions, how to avoid doing the wrong thing because of not yet understanding American culture, and sometimes whether exasperation with American informality and ethnocentrism will be too evident.

Still worse, the foreign TA must learn to handle the ambiguous status and authority of the TA position. For many if not most foreign students, there are no TAs in the home-country institution; there are just powerful professors and powerless students. There is usually little classroom interaction. As TAs, suddenly foreign students have to act as intermediaries between students and professors, have to guide discussions, or have to get students to respond during reviews—all processes that they rarely may have witnessed.

To help with this transition, then, any course for foreign TAs must provide a participative, welcoming environment that the students may not know

how to respond to at first but will probably grow to enjoy over time. Within this environment, moreover, issues of interaction must be frequently pointed out and discussed. Students must be allowed to express their perplexities and discomforts and to practice encouraging and responding to interaction. As mentioned, role playing can be especially helpful in getting students to act out situations that may still seem strange and intimidating.

Even then, foreign TAs should be warned that, whatever their preparation and training, the transition may not go smoothly. Undergraduates may still be slow to accept a foreign accent and "difference."² One of the most outgoing, verbal, and accomplished teachers in the foreign TA course at Stanford reported that he had trouble at first winning his students' trust and confidence. Some of his students did not bother to hide their disappointment at not having a native-speaking TA, and most held back from asking questions or coming to office hours. This TA eventually felt that he had won his students' confidence; even then, students needing help had access to himself as well as to a native-speaking TA and always went to the other. Fortunately, he did not take their preference personally. He understood that they simply had more confidence in the native speaker's ability to understand and answer their questions.

Any concrete help the course can offer foreign TAs in making their transition to teaching and dealing with undergraduates will help build confidence and contribute to success. The course can certainly help TAs try to see things from the undergraduate point of view, especially when the problem is the tremendous pressures undergraduates face to do well and their consequent discomfort with a TA whose English may not be as flexible or precise as a native's. Undergraduates can be invited to talk about their situation to the TAs, or tapes can be shown of undergraduates discussing their expectations of and experiences with TAs in general.

Beyond these steps, foreign TAs can be armed with useful strategies for the classroom. They can be encouraged to acknowledge the language problem to students and be given a chance to practice this acknowledgment until they feel comfortable with it; TAs whose acknowledgments seem too apologetic or too belligerent can be advised to try a slightly different tone. TAs can also be coached to use the blackboard and/or handouts frequently so as to minimize any language-based misunderstandings. TAs with really serious problems in fluency and vocabulary can be encouraged to set up small-group work for their students, if appropriate to the subject, so that instead of lecturing they can circulate as consultants and engage in easier types of communication. In fact, foreign TAs can be introduced to a type of interaction they are generally unused to—brainstorming—by asking them to identify their potential teaching problems as well as an array of possible solutions. The TAs will be much more likely to see the value of interaction if they have experienced its benefits for themselves.

The establishment of a foreign TA course also means, however, that possibly vexing administrative decisions on its nature must be resolved early. Should the course be voluntary or compulsory, graded or pass/fail, credit or

no credit? If a university has set up the course after a general self-study of its foreign students, then such decisions—particularly those involving budget commitments—will be easier to reach. If the aim is to ensure that every foreign TA who will teach has been fully prepared to do so, then the course should be compulsory for everyone whose screening results showed serious weaknesses. While anything that is compulsory does create motivation problems, the university should be no more hesitant to require effort in this direction than it is in requiring successful completion of qualifying exams, orals, and a host of other hurdles. If the course is also offered for credit and without cost, participants will be well aware of the institution's seriousness and strongly influenced by its commitment.

The question of whether to grade the course is perhaps the trickiest. While assigning grades may seem still another important way to signal institutional seriousness, as well as to let departments know about the competency of their students who have completed the course, grades can present pitfalls. When we introduced a grading system at Stanford, we conceived it mainly as a way to help departments gauge the readiness of their students for successful teaching. An A meant that the student could be expected to teach successfully; a B, that the student might experience some problems in teaching and should probably be evaluated by the department at mid-quarter; and a C, that the student needed additional work before taking a TA assignment. At the beginning of the quarter, students were thoroughly informed about the system and its variance from the way they were probably accustomed to being graded. We found, however, that our foreign students were so used to striving for and achieving A's that, in our course, they regarded a B, not to mention a C, as a calamity. Some were frantic to perform at an A level, even though the kinds of changes required for them to deserve such a grade were major indeed. As a consequence, we reverted next quarter to a pass/fail option, with highly satisfactory results. Students continued to work hard, but to better their own performances rather than try to ensure good grades; departments wanting more information on their students' readiness to teach could simply request informal evaluations from our course's instructors. Certainly, it should also be possible to set up a system whereby departments would regularly receive written evaluations on their students' performances in the course, in addition to their pass/fail grades.

An ideal training program, then, would be centered around a compulsory, well-staffed semester- or quarter-long course on teaching. Other training formats, such as fall orientations, one-day workshops, or handbooks for foreign TAs, might also be desirable but should be seen as complementary to, not substitutes for, the comprehensive course. These other activities could cover additional areas of information or provide follow-up assistance to the TAs. At Stanford, we offer a workshop for foreign TAs as part of a general orientation for all new graduate students, but it is in no way a substitute for our quarter-long foreign TA course. Several manuals for foreign teaching assistants are listed in the references.

Thought must also be given to providing for students who do not pass the course. In many cases, a department can support a particular student only through a teaching assignment. If the student cannot be given one, then his or her entire course of study will be jeopardized. Some departments may feel that they have to make the assignment anyway. To prevent such assignments, the graduate dean (or whomever else the institution's self-study has designated to coordinate foreign student policy) should offer to negotiate with departments to provide other, temporary sources of support to the student involved. Obviously, if steps are not taken so that departments are not given such bailouts frequently, then they will have little incentive to encourage their students to take the foreign TA course seriously.

Follow-Up

Thus far, few institutions seem to have developed well-thought-out continuing or follow-up support to the graduates of foreign TA courses. At a minimum, all campuses must begin to consider tracking these graduates, so that the results of the training can be assessed and the recommendations acted on. At least one recent study discusses the fate of graduates one year to fifteen months after training (Landa and Perry, quoted in Bailey, Platorsi, and Zukowski-Faust, 1984); many more of these kinds of studies are still needed. Institutions should also consider doing what the Harvard-Danforth Center for Teaching and Learning has done: to bring their graduates back after they have begun their first teaching assignments and ask them to discuss how their training helped and what, if anything, it did not cover (Sarkisian, 1983, pp. 1-2). Institutions may also want to incorporate a strategy we use at Stanford: A whole session of the course is devoted to ways in which foreign TAs can and should monitor their own progress by using campus resources; as a result, foreign TAs do use these resources for self-help after the course is over.

Good follow-up can also be facilitated by faculty under whom the foreign TAs will work. The TAs, for example, can attend weekly meetings with professors about courses and sections; these meetings could prove even more vital than such meetings normally would be. Professors can emphasize in advance the most important topics to be covered, giving foreign TAs more time to identify the vocabulary and territory that they will need to have under control. Professors can also make grading policies very explicit. If such matters are settled in detail beforehand, foreign TAs will feel more confident grading students and handling student complaints. They will also avoid the experience of a foreign TA at Stanford who, used to the British tutorial system, had made few written comments on his students' papers, expecting that they would come in to his office to talk. Instead, of course, the students were upset that he had written little except their grades. There were several complaints and some ill will before the TA was able to clarify his real intentions.

Faculty, especially, should re-examine the impact on foreign TAs of a

laissez-faire attendance policy for sections. If students are free to choose their sections—or, indeed, whether or not they will attend—foreign TAs may find themselves with small sections or steadily dwindling ones. While this can happen to any TA, and would demoralize anyone it did happen to, it is especially dismaying for foreign TAs. They may have had to put a great deal of time into acquiring vocabulary or preparing outlines or even complete texts of their remarks. If few or no students show up, they probably will not want to take such pains in the future. A foreign TA may also find that students leave as soon as they discover that their teacher has an accent. Such defection not only makes a successful teaching experience impossible for the foreign TA but also may end up unfairly burdening native-speaking TAs.

Faculty may adopt an open-section policy in the first place, of course, because they would rather have disgruntled or anxious students find a TA whom they like than have to deal with complaints about a foreign TA. The faculty may even genuinely like and respect their foreign TAs, but feel resigned about their accents, their limited vocabularies, or any other real or imagined problems. Certainly, there is no easy way out of this dilemma, since many foreign TAs need a large time investment from others to be successful, and faculty may not have the time to give. Only a long-term policy, which tries to identify language problems early, provide relevant coursework, and offer training in how to teach, seems to be a way out. The difficulty is to convince faculty of the need for such a policy, when they are used to solving the problem in ways that are much more makeshift but often successful in the short run.

Faculty are unlikely to do anything special for their foreign TAs unless otherwise encouraged by the administration or department chairs. Faculty primarily view their foreign students as researchers, not teachers. Indeed, at many universities, foreign students are again and again identified as the best students, the most diligent researchers, and the least demanding advisers. Under such circumstances, faculty are all too often eager to wink at or gloss over any inadequacies foreign TAs demonstrate in teaching. Only persistent pressure from an interested dean, probably working through department chairs, will motivate faculty to identify foreign TAs who may have problems and see that they get the help they need.

Institutions may also want to prepare the undergraduates whom the foreign TAs will be trying to teach (Bailey, 1983a, p. 310; Bailey, 1982b, p. 167). Can these students can be encouraged to be more appreciative of cultural diversity, more patient about adjusting to accents, more tolerant of alien viewpoints? Can sessions be scheduled into class orientations to allow foreign graduate students to talk about themselves and their contributions to campus life? Can foreign graduate students also be invited to speak in dorms or to attend undergraduate gatherings and mingle with the undergraduates informally? This is an area that institutions have not explored very much. It may well be the slow route to the kind of changes necessary, but it does deserve attention.

Ultimately, however, the real issue in any follow-up program is whether foreign TAs will be subjected to continuing scrutiny once they have finished their prescribed training and been assigned to teaching. At most institutions, they will not be. (In this way, they become much like native-speaking TAs, who may also have received some training for their classroom responsibilities but who are also neither evaluated for how well they actually do nor helped if performance falls short.) Essentially, then, after all the effort by institutions to "fix" foreign TAs, they end up in the classroom with no more to reward their effectiveness or detect and remedy their weaknesses than any other TA; and that is very little indeed.

Reconceptualizing the Problem

Surely—rather than asking foreign TAs to undergo screening and training and perhaps additional tutoring (all on top of a normal graduate load), with no more stake in their eventual success in the classroom than with those who are not so burdened—institutions should reconsider their expectations of all TAs. TAs have become an important and permanent part of the instructional staff of all our larger research-oriented universities, but in most cases their teaching is not monitored or evaluated, as the faculty's instruction now must be. It is time to consider policies that will extend compulsory training to every TA; follow up in each case with midquarter, semester, and/or end-of-quarter/semester evaluations; and provide consultation or other assistance whenever such help is indicated. Such procedures will not only complete the professionalization of a large and essential class of instructors at our universities but also provide the last and most important step in a fair and lasting solution to the "foreign TA problem."

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