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Speak the Language?

Just like many college freshman, I experienced the first shock of my college career as soon as I walked into my Biology recitation. I could barely make out a word that my teacher's assistant was saying. After this experience, I became interested in international teaching assistants and what has been done to better their language skills in order for them to be understood in the classroom. I also want to explore what barriers exist in the classroom between international teaching assistants and students. I feel that this topic is relevant to this campus and that many people face the same challenges in the classroom that I have. These topics have led me to my research question: What can be done to better the international teaching assistants of Purdue University?

For me, a logical place to start on this topic is to define the terms that are common when speaking about the ability of teaching assistants to speak, write, and read English. The first place that I decided to look was the Webster Online Dictionary. The first definition that I looked up was the word "literate." This word had more definitions than I originally thought that it would. The first definition was educated and cultured. This is the main idea that I get when I think of the word literate. The second definition is the ability to read and write. I was also familiar with this term and I feel that it is a common definition with most people. The third definition was to be versed in literature and creative writing. This definition rather surprised me because this definition does not connect with the word literate for me personally (Definition). In the following research, I believe that literate and literacy will refer to the ability to read and write the English language. This is an important place to start my research because I need to be able to understand the terms and the context of the terms that will be used in further articles and

research. Now that I have defined the terms being used and in what context, I will now move on to research that is more specific to start finding out about the topic in question.

The first academic article I came across was found on *Academic Search Premier*. The article is called “Foreign teaching assistant’s first test: the accent” and was written by Mark Clayton. This article was first published in 2000 in the *Christian Science Monitor*. The information in this article helped me to explore how students handle the differing accents that teaching assistants have. Clayton states that many students are frustrated about their international teaching assistants at many different schools and focuses on students who study at the University of Missouri at Columbia. Many students there are frustrated and stressed out about not being able to understand their teaching assistant (Clayton). Clayton talks about the final grades of students being taught by international teaching assistants, stating, “Undergraduate Americans in sections taught by foreign-born TA’s received lower final grades than those taught by native speakers – about 0.2 points lower” (Clayton). This figure is interesting because this shows that the speaking ability, or literacy, of the international teaching assistant does have an impact on the grades of the students being taught.

Clayton goes on to talk about laws that were enacted in the 1980’s to make sure international teaching assistants speak English fluently before ever entering the classroom (Clayton). This information is relevant to my research question and helps me to understand the laws that are already in place to make sure that all international teaching assistants are fluent in English. Clayton states, “It led to laws in 18 states and statewide mandates in four others requiring that university teaching assistants be able to speak English clearly” (Clayton). Clayton goes on to say that the number of international graduate students is increasing; it increased eleven percent the year the article was published. He also goes on to talk about universities that

have recently toughened their programs for international graduate students that wish to become teaching assistants (Clayton). These facts in this article helped me to understand some of the important topics of my research question, but I still need more information.

The third source that I used was an article by Cathy Gulli titled “Your course, lost in translation.” Gulli’s article was published in *Maclean’s* in 2006 and has relevant information that pertains to my topics. This article helped me to understand the way that students react to the international teaching assistants. Gulli talks about a student that could not effectively communicate with their Chemistry teaching assistant. The student states, ““They would give you zero when you actually got the question right because they couldn’t understand the words you used”” (Gulli). Many students find this irritating in the least. Many universities have responded to the opinions of the students in these situations and have implemented programs to better the international teaching assistants’ speaking and comprehending skills (Gulli). This helps me to understand that this issue affects many students and that universities are making advances towards improving the skills of the teaching assistants to help solve the problem as a whole.

I then decided to do some more general research on the topic. My fourth article is titled “The International Student as TA” by Sarkodie-Mensah Kwasi and has current and relevant information that pertains to my topic. This article helped me to understand the amount of people that have issues with their international teaching assistants. The article states, “The problem of international teaching assistants will continue to stir up debates, discussion, and controversies as long as American institutions of higher learning depend on nationals from other countries to fill the vacuum created by the lack of natives to teach undergraduates” (Kwasi 115). This has helped me to be able to understand that many people have been having the exact same problem

with teaching assistants for a very long time and that many more people are affected by this than I originally thought.

The article goes on to say that language is only one of the barriers that are faced in the classroom. In the beginning of the article when Kwasi is talking about the differences of international TAs and students, he states, “They lack understanding of the American culture and consequently of the classroom culture” (Kwasi 115). Kwasi goes on to say that many other countries that the teaching assistants come from have extreme authority in their classrooms and expect that the students that they are teaching will have total attention and respect for them as they teach. Unfortunately, many students do not give their total attention and therefore offend the international teaching assistants. These students are not trying to offend the teaching assistant, they are merely acting the way they have during their entire career as a student (Kwasi 115). This helped me to understand that the problem is widespread. The fact that some international teaching assistants do not understand classroom culture is a new idea to me, so I have decided to explore this topic some more with other sources.

The fifth source that I chose to use is also about the cultural issues between the teaching assistants and the students. The article is titled “Cultural Collisions,” authored by Anita Nahal, and was featured in *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* in 2005. This article brings up the hardships that international teaching assistants come across in the classroom. Nahal states, “ITA’s sometimes unfamiliar accents, teaching styles and cultural nuances can create an environment where teaching and learning become a challenge” (Nahal). She goes on to say that an ideal classroom could only benefit from cultural differences but in the real world these differences can cause confusion and irritation. These irritations can be from both sides of the table; both the student and the international teaching assistant can feel frustrated over the

differing customs in the classroom (Nahal). This helps my research because I have already discovered that students are frustrated by the situation with less than proficient teaching assistants, but I was unaware that the teaching assistants are also frustrated with the cultural differences in the class.

This article goes on to offer tips to better the international teaching assistants. One tip that the article offers is for the international teaching assistant to socialize with the students that they teach. The author claims that this will help the international teaching assistant to better learn the rhythms of speech and to better understand cultural differences and to embrace them (Nahal). This helps me to understand some of the solutions to my research question. The article goes on to suggest a four step method called the LAWS method (learn, appreciate, willing, and survive). These four words are used to help the international teaching assistant adapt and thrive in their new environment (Nahal). These tips have helped me to be able to understand that a solution to this problem is rooted in the international teaching assistants themselves. Now that I have explored some of the possibilities for solutions to the underlying problem, I will now try to further my research in this area.

The sixth source that I chose to research into has many possibilities for solutions. The article, titled "Teaching in a New Language" written by Wayne Wanta and published in the *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator* in 2003. Wanta offers possible solutions to the language barriers, such as presentations in their graduate classes (Wanta). This is a very good solution because this will make the international teaching assistant more comfortable speaking in front of many people before they begin their own classes. Wanta also goes on to talk about the fact that international students should make themselves aware of the differing teaching practices in the country that they wish to study in. He also warns that students in the United States tend to

be independent in the classroom and are confident in their critical thinking skills, which can make them more confrontational (Wanta). This is important because if an international student knows about this before entering the situation as a teaching assistant, they can be aware of the cultural differences and possibly not allow those cultural differences to be a barrier in the classroom.

Wanta also goes on to talk about the fact that professors should mentor international students in their teaching skills, in order to offer insight and help to the students that need help. Wanta suggests that professors should offer to be guest speakers occasionally in the teaching assistant's classroom in order to allow the international teaching assistant to learn from the experience (Wanta). This piece of advice seems like the best solution that I have come across in my entire set of research. If a professor monitors a teaching assistant and offers help and insight, their skills and confidence should improve.

As my final piece of research, I decided to once again research into possible solutions to my research question. The article "Accountability... But First, Preparation" was written by Beth Barnes and was featured in the *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*. Barnes talks about the fact that teaching assistants should be held responsible for their actions and the way that they teach their classes. She states that many teaching assistants do not take the time to prepare fully for the class that they teach (Barnes). If the international teaching assistant takes the time to prepare for the class that they decide to teach, then they will be more confident in their information that they present to their students. This information helps me to be able to understand another possible solution.

Now that I have researched fully into my research question, I have much more insight than when I began this project. I have learned that cultural boundaries can be just as negative in

the classroom as language barriers. I also learned about some laws that are in place to make sure that international teaching assistants can speak English fluently. Finally, I came across a couple ways that this problem could be solved. I am not sure that this problem can be solved by these mentioned solutions alone, but I believe that this problem can be handled and controlled by following the suggestions that I have mentioned. Purdue needs to make sure that they offer enough support and help to the international teaching assistant community to help defer this problem.

Annotated Bibliography

Definition of Literate. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. 19 Oct 2006.

<<http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/literate>>.

This source is an online dictionary and contains definitions of words in the English language. I looked up a definition and found it easily so I would say that the information was useful and credible. This source is very easy to use and many people can find this information easily.

Clayton, Mark. "Foreign teaching assistant's first test: the accent." *Christian Science*

Monitor 2000. Academic Search Premier. 5 October 2006.

<<http://www.search.ebscohost.com>>

This source is an academic article and overviews the experiences of international teaching assistants in the classroom. This article contained information about the amount of international teaching assistants and the laws in place concerning them. This information is credible and has up to date information. This article is organized very well and is easy to read and obtain information from.

Gulli, Cathy. "Your course, lost in translation." *Maclean's* 2006:48-49. *Academic*

Search Premier. 5 October 2006. <<http://search.ebscohost.com>>

This source is an academic article and is about the experiences of students with international teaching assistants. This article was somewhat hard to pull information out of, but contained relevant information to the effects of international teaching assistants on

the average student. This article could be used by anyone that has the time to go through a lot of information and pull out the important information.

Kwasi, Sarkodie-Mensah. "The International Student as TA." *College Teaching* Vol 39 Issue 3: 115-116. *Academic Search Premier*. EBSCO. 05 Oct 2006.
<<http://search.ebscohost.com>>

This article is an academic article and is about the cultural differences in the classroom. This article is easy to read and contains information that led my research into a totally different area, so I find it very useful. This article could be read by anyone and is interesting with the different view points.

Wanta, Wayne. "Teaching in a New Language." *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator* Vol. 58 No. 3: 210-14. *Education Full Text*. <<http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com>> 24 Oct 2006.

This article is a peer reviewed journal and contains information about increasing the confidence of teaching assistants in the classroom. I used information that I found to be a solution to my problem. These were very relevant and helped round out my information. This information could be accessed by anyone and was easy to read.

Nahal, Anita. "Cultural Collisions." *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* Vol. 22 No. 20: 41. *Education Full Text*. <<http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com>> 24 Oct 2006.

This article is an academic article about the ways that international teaching assistants can better themselves in the classroom. This article provided information and suggests ways for teaching assistants to be able to better their teaching skills. This article was

easy to access and was credible to my research. This article could be used by anyone and could find it interesting.

Barnes, Beth. "Accountability... But First, Preparation." *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*. Vol. 58 No. 3: 233-6. *Education Full Text*.

<<http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com>> 24 Oct 2006.

This article is an academic article about how accountability should be used more in teaching situations. This article contained credible information and was very easy to maneuver through. This article could be read by anyone that wanted to read it.