

International Students Facing the Speak Test

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One of the things that international students face when arriving at many universities is the task of taking and hopefully passing The Speak Test required by universities that feel it is important to know the level of the graduate students who will be placed in positions of importance in the learning of undergraduates. For students who are given the opportunity to spend any time in the role of instructor, whether it be in front of small lab sessions or larger classes, the need for both an understanding of English and the ways to convey it are critical in American academia. Lab sections and classes filled with domestic students have to be provided with instructors who are able to present the technical information in a manner that will keep the course's students comfortable and provide a reasonable atmosphere for learning. It is also critical that the teaching assistants be able to function within an atmosphere that is conducive for their own learning to continue.

Over the past years entering international graduate students in the Department of Mechanical Engineering at XXX who have been assigned to jobs as teaching assistants in the various required laboratory courses in the department must first perform at a reasonable level on The Speak Test. If they are able to respond verbally to a variety of questions and scenarios, they are then deemed suitable to perform as instructors. If they do not quite reach the level of acceptance, they can petition for a face-to-face speak appeal. If the results are much less than desirable, then they must wait until the beginning of the next semester to try again. This puts the department that expected them to be in the lab for their first semester under the pressure of finding something else for them to do that does not require contact with undergraduates. This makes it very hard for a department to be completely comfortable with incoming international students. Will they be able to carry on the tasks or not? When one considers this dilemma it is important to create a problem definition and carefully focus on what is actually occurring and the solutions that can be enacted to eliminate or lessen the problem.

This paper seeks to look closely at the underlying problems of incoming graduate students who are expected to communicate well with undergraduate populations. It focuses not on the inadequacies of speaking English but more on the ways in which a department can refocus the speak test requirements from what is perceived to be inadequacies to simply addressing relatively easy fix elements. The paper will address graduate student performance, methods to help the incoming graduate student, the speak test rationale, and the graduate students reaction to the communication requirements of the university.