



International Students and Engineering Departments Facing the Speak Test

Mr. Craig J. Gunn, Michigan State University

Craig Gunn is the Director of the Communication Program in the Department of Mechanical Engineering at Michigan State University. He integrates communication skill activity into all courses within the mechanical Engineering program. He is editor of the CEED Newsbriefs and has co-authored numerous textbooks, including - Engineering Your Future.

Mr. Pavel M. Polunin, Michigan State University

Pavel Polunin is a Ph.D. student in Mechanical Engineering Department at Michigan State University. He obtained his M.S. in 2013 from Michigan State University. Currently, he conducts research in the area of nonlinear dynamics of noise-driven microresonators.

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Introduction

The quality of student learning was and still remains one of the crucial goals in contemporary educational system. Following ABET engineering accreditation requirements (EC2000), including continuous educational improvement, the accomplishment of high results in student outcomes is the central issue in higher education institutions due to constantly increasing demands of the job market. The success in achievement of this goal is determined by several factors including effective teaching, appropriate assessment strategies, and faculty expertise, to name a few. However, due to increasing number of students in a classroom, the quality of work of graduate teaching assistants becomes another important component that contributes to the student performance [Norris 1991]. Indeed, a large classroom makes it impossible for instructors to carry all teaching load alone, and departments assign graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) who help instructors to conduct recitations and lab sessions, proctor exams, answer students' questions, and so on. At the same time due to large proportion of international students in graduate programs, nonnative English-speaking teaching assistants (NNSTAs) represent the major cohort of teaching assistants in many US universities. In the Mechanical Engineering Department at Michigan State University, for example, each semester about 80% of all teaching assistants are international graduate students.

Researchers have analyzed the impact of NNSTAs on the performance of undergraduate students for more than two decades [Norris 1991, Rubin & Smith 1990]. The influence of communication skills is here of particular interest [Isaacs 2008, Hoekje & Linnell 1994]. As a result, institutions need to ensure that undergraduate students obtain their knowledge and acquire necessary skills with the highest efficiency through the interaction with teaching assistants. Because of that, many universities require NNSTAs to take and successfully pass on appropriate level special examination of their speaking skills. At Michigan State University in the College of Engineering, international students who are offered teaching assistantship face the *Speak Test*, a listening examination that checks the ability of students to respond verbally to a variety of questions and scenarios. If they do not quite reach the level of acceptance, they can petition for a face-to-face oral 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 paper looks 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. We start our discussion with the rationale for the Speak Test and describe the performance of graduate teaching assistants. Further, we analyze the data on the

reaction of international graduate students on this examination and discuss the benefits that undergraduate students can have working with international teaching assistants. Finally, we provide concluding remarks and specify the directions for the future work.

Speak Test: challenge or a benefit?

As we mentioned in the introduction, international students face an interesting dilemma when arriving at many universities, where in order to be able to perform as teaching assistants they must take and hopefully pass a form of exam in many schools called “The Speak Test.” It is required by many 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. Tests taken outside the country or even reports on the performance of graduate students who have spent time in the US still require a “taking of the test.” 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 MSU 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 lab 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 the semester under the pressure of finding something else for them to do that does not require contact with undergraduates. This begins a costly activity because the jobs that they can be assigned would be done much more easily by senior undergraduates, who also receive a significantly lower pay with no benefits.

Over the past six years, the Department of Mechanical Engineering has been spending more time looking at the difficulties associated with international students and the problems involved with the taking of a standard test that shows competency in English. It has never been a difficult test according to the test givers or anyone who speaks English as a first language. That would be an obvious assumption if one were not arriving from outside of the United States and facing a literal “do or die” exam focusing on English as second language. It is not quite that horrible, but the problem comes in the assumption of the student not in the test itself. Students arrive from around the world, uncomfortable with a new environment and strapped with an almost immediate need to perform in a language to which they may not be entirely at ease. Some students actually arrive on the day of the test and are given little time to even rest before they are plunged into the sea of

English. In years gone by, little thought was taken about why the students failed to do well on the test or even if they understood what was happening during the testing. Those who did fairly well, could follow an appeal process and pursue a face-to-face meeting with a panel to prove their skill in English or the lack thereof. Failure at this level meant courses in English proficiency to take and the inability to function as teaching assistants. Here is where the department started to realize that money was being expended to support students who could not function in positions that required proficiency in English.

In the early years, numbers reached as high as 50% failure of the speak test and it became a necessity to correct this problem or decide if students unable to speak English at a level necessary to be a teaching assistant would lose their funding. With changes needed, efforts were made to find out what the core problems were in the failure rate. Was it simply inadequate English skills or was there something else triggering the lack of performance on the speak test.

The importance of performing well on any tests, the stigma of doing poorly, and methods that could be used with incoming students to make them both comfortable with the test and address cultural issues were therefore investigated. One of the issues that arose was the simple act of speaking loudly during an interview. In some cultures it is not acceptable to speak loudly when in the presence of “elders.” This required intervention as the individuals literally spoke in whispers. Their English was very acceptable, but it could not be heard. This opens up a whole new area to investigate with next year’s incoming group.

With this, incoming graduate students were questioned on the difficulties of the testing and a number of issues were uncovered. These included the following:

- Students felt that they were ashamed of their English skills and went into the test feeling highly inferior, thus making them less likely to answer quickly.
- Students who had taught engineering courses in their native country, but believed that they were not as good as first-language speakers, performed as if they knew little English simply because they were no Americans.
- Students were fearful of what the questioner wanted as an answer.
- Students tried to find the “right” answer to every question and became muddled down in massive detailing that worked against them because of time constraints.
- Students spoke quietly because they were fearful of raising their voices.
- Students would not ask questions if equipment didn’t work properly or when there was confusion in instructions.

The above difficulties made it clear to the department that not only should something be done, but there was a distinct pattern to the behavior of international students taking the speak test. If the behavior could be modified, the hope was that the failure rate could be reduced and even if the student could merit an appeal, then there was a good chance that more graduate students could be deemed suitable to function as teaching assistants.

Plans were made to provide all incoming graduate students with materials to start the preparation for the speak test. Even if they were arriving at the last minute they would at least be better prepared than they had been in the past. The materials provided included sample speak tests, vocabulary helps, language issues inherent in understanding the ways of US English, suggestions of questions that could be used to test one's ability to understand questions and provide simple answers, and lastly examples of text to read (especially newspapers) to continue to practice English. But the biggest point made in the pre arrival on campus was to tell students that the test had only two goals: TO SEE IF THE STUDENT UNDERSTOOD THE QUESTIONS AND COULD PROVIDE AN ANSWER THAT ADDRESSED THE QUESTION. This was the largest problem that needed to be addressed from the conversations with the previous takers of the test. Well over 90%, when first questioned, responded that they were not sure of what the questioner wanted. If asked what was their favorite color, many thought much too long on what color they should pick – their favorite or the school colors. With too much thinking they lost time and were thought to not only misunderstand the question but unable to provide any answer.

The students at this point arrived with a little better understanding of the purpose of the test and were more likely to feel less intimidated and ready to show that they did understand the questions and could provide answers to those questions. At their arrival, meetings were set up to give them a chance to speak English, provide answers to personal and course related questions, and get comfortable with the surroundings of campus and the people who inhabit this place of higher learning. With the above goals in mind to understand and answer questions, efforts were made to provide as much conversation as possible in the time we had to prepare the students for the speak test. With the previous record in place of failure rates reaching 50%, the expectations were high for a change in the previous results. Fall 2013 saw the need for 13 new international graduate students to take the speak test. The goal for passing was either the speak test itself or the speak appeal if one did not do as well on the speak test itself. The final result – 7 students passed the speak test and 6 passed the speak appeal. We look forward to improved performance on the first taking of the speak test and a greater ability to help our students weather those first days in the United States without the speak test being any form of burden.

We have started the process of giving our incoming graduate students the necessary tools to take the speak test, to prepare for it before they arrive in the United States, and to talk with our current graduate students from the varieties of countries that are represented in our population about cultural issues. We have already seen improvement with the efforts that we have performed and expect that there will be less and less difficulties with the testing as we improve our techniques.

Conclusions

1. The assumed problem of international students not understanding English may be little more than a fear that those students have of performing badly.

2. Great strides can be made by simply explaining what tests are attempting to show and not assuming that everyone knows their purposes.
3. Being comfortable with test taking can be the difference being passing and failing a test.
4. Looking closely at cultural issues can help to provide assistance in preparing students to take the speak tests and appeals.

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