



August 21, 2008

To: L&S Chairs and Directors
L&S Department Administrators

From: Nancy Westphal-Johnson, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education

Re: Spoken English Proficiency of non-native English Speaking L&S
Teaching Assistants

Again this fall, I am writing to remind you that UW-Madison campus policy and UW System policy require that all departments have in place a plan for assessing the English proficiency of potential non-native English speaking teaching assistants. Such proficiency must be demonstrated before non-native English speaking TAs are allowed to assume classroom-teaching duties (Regent policy 91-13).

Most departments in L&S use the SPEAK test for this purpose and the guidelines are as follows (**Note: The fall semester SPEAK Test schedule is available at <http://www.english.wisc.edu/esl/speak.htm>**):

- 1) Students with a score greater than or equal to 50 may teach with no further English language testing requirements.
- 2) Students with a score of 45 can perform instructional duties that require spoken English only if also enrolled in a program to improve English skills.
- 3) Students with a score lower than 45 cannot perform instructional duties that require spoken English.

If your department does not use the SPEAK test scoring guidelines to determine eligibility, you are required to develop and submit a comprehensive substitute plan. Simply having a faculty member interview a prospective TA or assuming that a graduate student who has previously studied in the United States is proficient in spoken English is

not adequate as a plan. **If you use a substitute plan, you will need to submit that plan to me by September 8th and include assessment results from that plan for any first-time non-native English speaking TA.** As a reminder, all departments are expected to have procedures in place for student complaints about teaching assistants and this plan needs to be publicized to students (see L&S Handbook, <http://www.ls.wisc.edu/handbook/ChapterThree/chIII-10.htm>).

If your department uses the SPEAK test and has used supplemental screening mechanisms to determine that a TA should be eligible to teach despite a sub-50 score on the SPEAK test, please submit the following for each such teaching assistant to me by September 8th:

- 1) the SPEAK test score;
- 2) the format and results of the supplemental assessment;
- 3) information about the TA's ESL course registration;
- 4) the plan for follow-up on the TA's proficiency and progress.

After the semester is over, we will be following up with you and will be asking for results of student and faculty evaluations of TA performance for each TA in this category.

Graduate students who are not proficient in spoken English cannot be allowed to serve as Teaching Assistants. In some cases, this may mean that a department will need to find alternate support for a graduate student on a support guarantee or it may mean the termination of such a guarantee. If you have such a situation in your department and you do not have alternative support available for the student, please call Brian Bubenzer or me to see if we can determine some short-term solution. Also, please call us if you are uncertain whether an individual graduate student would or would not be considered a native speaker of English; we will likely consult with Director Sandra Arfa of the ESL Program on such questions.

While we all value the contributions that international graduate students make to teaching and to our campus as a whole and also recognize the responsibility of our students to understand English spoken with a variety of accents, English proficiency of non-native English speaking instructors can be a highly visible issue for the University. It is incumbent on us to take all steps possible to ensure that our TAs have met reasonable

standards of spoken English proficiency before allowing them to teach. We need to do this to ensure that our teaching assistants can be successful in the classroom and that our undergraduates have the best possible educational experiences. Thanks much for your cooperation. If you have any overall concerns or questions, I would be happy to speak with you.

xc: Dean Gary Sandefur
L&S Associate Deans
Dr. Brian Bubenzer
Director Sandra Arfa, ESL Program