Prescreening Nonnative English Speakers (NNES) for TA Assignments: Finding Candidates Most Likely to Be Successful on the ITA Test

In response to requests from departments, the ICC has put together the following guidelines to help faculty more effectively prescreen nonnative English speakers, graduate or undergraduate, for TA jobs requiring interaction with students. Note that “TA” includes “CAs”, “graders” or any other title used in your department.

The problem: It is not uncommon for faculty to assume that if they can communicate with a student then that student has the fluency needed to communicate as a TA. However, this thinking is flawed. One-on-one conversation requires less language than does the extended talking required in teaching. In fact, one-on-one conversation with someone who knows the field can largely rely on the technical language of that field. However, communicating as a TA is very different: students are hearing the material for the first time, are often unfamiliar with technical terms, need simple and clear explanations, and expect examples that clearly illustrate theoretical concepts. This level of fluency is often a challenge for TAs who are NNES.

In working with ITA testing for over three decades, we have found that untrained raters frequently misjudge the fluency of NNES, and often end up rating their own ability to fill in and accommodate rather than the ITA candidate's level of fluency.

Some Basic Techniques

Look at the student’s language in the context of an authentic task. Some faculty have found it most effective to ask potential TAs to explain a concept (from the class they may TA, from their own research or area of interest, etc.).

Distinguish between “memorized” language and actual fluency. Many NNES can sound fluent when responding to issues they have talked about many times (e.g., “what is your area of research?”). Be sure to ask questions that require unprepared responses (e.g., “How would you explain gene splicing to students?”). Note if the speaker is sometimes much less fluent than at other times; this could reveal the gap between memorized language and actual TA fluency. Inexperienced raters typically fail to notice that students are over-relying on technical terms and jargon (and faculty who know the student's field well are especially susceptible to misjudging the actual level of fluency).

Look at the student’s ability to use robust academic English. Note if he/she has the fluency to talk about, explain, simplify and clarify his/her field, and to communicate in an academic environment. Do not rate the student’s proficiency based only on “social English”. Manipulate the conversation so that the student demonstrates the same kind of language skills that are required for success in TA assignments.

Be aware of the type of questions you ask. Untrained interviewers frequently over-use “yes/no” questions, or multi-choice questions (e.g., Q: “Are you interested in databases?” A: “Yes”, or Q: “Did you focus more on the hardware or software?” A: “Software”). These types of questions distort the evaluation by allowing the student to rely on the speaker’s breadth of vocabulary rather than on their own fluency. To get accurate samples of students’ true level of fluency, consciously incorporate open-ended questions (e.g., “Tell me about your academic
interests.”). Remember that you are assessing their ability to communicate in English and not your knowledge of the field nor your ability to simplify for second language learners.

**Test listening comprehension by varying the complexity of questions.** In other words, start by talking as you would to a native speaker, and then see how much you need to simplify in order to communicate. Note how many changes you must make before the question is understood, i.e., simplified syntax, reduced speed, rewording of idioms, etc. You need to determine if a student will be able to handle the listening demands of a TA assignment rather than the artificially slow and simplified language native speakers often adopt when talking with a nonnative speaker.

**Evaluate fluency separately from pronunciation.** Research shows that untrained raters tend to overemphasize pronunciation, i.e., rating a speaker with little “foreign” accent as more fluent than a speaker with the same level of fluency but with more accent differences.

**Make use of the TOEFL or IELTS speaking scores.** At best, interviews provide only a rough idea of speaking ability and cultural understanding (and untrained raters can easily misinterpret these skills). Always substantiate interview results by looking at the speaking scores on one of the two recommended language tests. The following chart, based on years of ITA test score data at CMU, can help:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOEFL speaking</th>
<th>ITA score – Restricted II</th>
<th>ITA score – Restricted I</th>
<th>ITA score – Pass</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>≥ 28*</td>
<td>Immediately</td>
<td>Immediately</td>
<td>Immediately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 – 27</td>
<td>Immediately</td>
<td>Immediately</td>
<td>Within 1st semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 – 25</td>
<td>Immediately</td>
<td>1 – 3 semesters at ICC</td>
<td>Can’t predict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 – 22</td>
<td>1 – 3 semesters at ICC</td>
<td>Can’t predict</td>
<td>Unlikely to Achieve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 18</td>
<td>Can’t predict</td>
<td>Unlikely to Achieve</td>
<td>Unlikely to Achieve</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note that ≥ 28 is indicative of strong / excellent speaking skills

Some caveats: 1) above correlations are less robust for students who retook TOEFL/IELTS multiple times within a few months, 2) speakers of other varieties of English sometimes underperform on the speaking section, and 3) students who took intensive prep courses may raise scores several points without a corresponding increase in actual speaking ability.

**A note on the ITA Test:**
Carnegie Mellon policy and the 1991 Pennsylvania law, “English Fluency in Higher Education,” requires that all nonnative English speaking students pass a language certification test before being allowed to teach (including recitations, review session, labs, etc.).

This is an oral exam that assesses a candidate’s ability to communicate orally with learners / people outside of their field. The test includes both a conversational interview on academic issues and a more formal presentation on a topic from the student’s field. A team of 3 - 4 raters assess the candidates on language skills such as pronunciation, grammar, the fluency to explain and define academic terms and concepts, and the ability to understand and respond clearly to questions. Candidates are not assessed on knowledge of their field or on teaching skills.