OSU’s foreign TA’s must learn English

By Karen L. Brown
Lantern staff writer

Helping foreign undergraduate students and teaching assistants learn conversational English is the main goal of two programs conducted at Ohio State.

Susan Sarwar, director of the Spoken English Program, said her program for teaching assistants helps them adapt not only to the language barrier but also to different cultural expectations.

"It helps them learn what a teacher should be, along with teaching skills and listening comprehension," Sarwar said.

The Spoken English Program was started in 1984 after an analysis study indicated the need for it. In 1986, the State Law Act was passed stating that in any state supported school in Ohio, all prospective foreign teaching assistants must be tested for conversational English before they can be certified to teach.

Sarwar’s program also provides this testing procedure for English proficiency. As soon as a teaching assistant arrives, the department in which they will teach sends them to Sarwar for testing.

The TA’s then take a version of the Text of Spoken English (TSE) called the SPEAK (Spoken English Proficiency in English Assessment Kit).

The tape recorded test is given in listening labs. Students respond orally on tape to the questions that they hear. Two listeners than review the test giving a score for overall comprehensibility plus scores for pronunciation, grammar and fluency, she said.

Sarwar said those tested are given a score from zero to 300 points and 220 is the minimum score allowed to teach.

"That is the number that most schools nationwide use to allow teaching," she said.

If students do not pass the SPEAK test with a score of 220 points or higher, they are required to take English 104 and 105 offered by Ohio State each quarter, Sarwar said.

After English 104, students take an exit test to determine whether they can continue on to 105. If they fail either course they must take it again.

After passing the classes they must pass the Mock Teaching Test before they are allowed into the classroom.

In this test the TA teaches to a panel of judges while being video-taped. The "audience" asks the TA questions they might be expected to be asked by students. The TA’s are judged on their teaching skills, delivery, and approachability, Sarwar said.

Sarwar said she believes the program has helped foreign TA’s cope with the expectations American students.

"Most of them (foreign TA’s) are grateful to have the chance to learn the teaching techniques. They leave the program better prepared to teach," she said.

Sarwar said she is very pleased with the results of the program.

"It has made a difference in the math, chemistry, and computer information departments where there are a lot of foreign TA’s. Student complaints have really dwindled," she said.

Phil Huneke, professor of mathematics, said the program supplements the efforts of individual departments.

"The program focuses more on pronunciation — we had not been very successful doing that before," he said.

"Any department expects their teachers to teach well. If they don’t know English, they should not be put in the classroom," he said.

While the Spoken English Program is geared toward teaching assistants, the American Language Program is designed to help undergraduate foreign students learn conversational English.

Kathy Romstedt, assistant director of the program, said the American Language Program is an intensive language study with training up to four and a half hours a day. The students stay in the program according to how well they progress.

Like the Spoken English Program, students are administered a placement test to determine how much assistance they need, Romstedt said.

Students in the program are usually referred by the OSU admissions office. Any foreign student is automatically sent a brochure by Ohio State if they are not able to speak English, she said.

Romstedt said, the program is open to any international student who has finished secondary school. However, they do not necessarily have to be admitted to Ohio State.

"We have fifteen teachers who all have a minimum of a masters degree in teaching subjects such as English or linguistics," she said. We also offer a very effective curriculum, she added.
The American Language Program at Ohio State offers English as a Second Language instruction in four formats:

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