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The Spoken English Proficiency of International Graduates from California MATESL Programs

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The master's degree is generally acknowledged to be the "industry standard" in the field of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). The English proficiency of all ESL teachers with an MA in TESL is thus generally presumed to be high in all four skills: reading, writing, listening comprehension, and speaking. However, the spoken English proficiency of a recent international graduate from a California master's in TESL program was recently called into question when she was denied employment at a California community college because her spoken English proficiency was too low. While this is as yet an isolated situation, it is one that is likely to become more common in the near future. This case is important because it points out a potential weakness in the graduation standards of our MATESL programs.

Survey of MATESL Programs

In December, 1989, as CATESOL College/University Level chair, I sent a survey concerning the issue of spoken English proficiency to all 18 MATESL programs in California and Nevada. The part objective, part open-ended questionnaire asked for demographic data concerning the average number of domestic and international students for the 1988-89 academic year, the program's admission and graduation requirements, and opinions and solutions concerning the issue of spoken English proficiency. Every program responded, two-thirds of the respondents being directors or coordinators of the MATESL programs, and all but one of the remainder professors in the MATESL program.

The survey revealed that the number of international students in MATESL programs is increasing and that concern for the spoken English proficiency of the nonnative speakers of English is growing in proportion to the number of international students in these programs. Thirty percent of the programs—invariably those that had

higher numbers of international students—considered it to be an increasing or a major problem. The remaining 70% thought that it was only a minor problem because (a) most students were already fluent, (b) the MATESL program itself provided sufficient opportunity to improve spoken proficiency, and (c) most international MATESL graduates return to their native countries.

Some of the programs seem to have solved or at least reduced the problem by increasing their admission standards for international students. Eighty percent (15) of the programs require a TOEFL score for admission. Of these, 1 requires a TOEFL score of 500, 10 require a score of 550, 3 require a score of 600, and 1 has just raised its minimum admission score from 550 to 570. Those requiring a 600 score unanimously agreed that spoken proficiency was either not a problem or at most a minor one. However, these all have a relatively small percentage of international students, and, despite the potential solution that the 600 TOEFL admission score suggests, it would probably not be acceptable to programs with a high proportion of international students as it might reduce enrollment. None of the programs required a Test of Spoken English (TSE) score and only 2 of the 19 programs surveyed use an oral interview in the admission process.

In responding to the notion of increasing the spoken proficiency requirement for graduation, many of the respondents thought that it would reduce the enrollment of international students or that it might lead to a bottleneck of students who had completed everything but the spoken proficiency requirement. One pointed out that it might be discriminatory to make international students take a test that native speakers were not required to take. Another suggested that a two-fold program might be the answer: (a) an MATESL for native speakers of English and (b) a TESL certificate for people returning to their home countries.

Finally, the survey asked the participants to respond to four proposed solutions. The responses, from the most positive to the least positive, were: (a) a required score of 250 on the TSE for graduation, (b) passing a departmental oral examination, (c) passing a high-level course in spoken proficiency, and (d) achieving a Foreign Service Institute (FSI) rating of 3+ or higher.

Issues Raised at the CATESOL College/University Rap Session

Responses to the Survey Results

The results described above were presented at the CATESOL College/University Level Rap Session held in Los Angeles in March, 1990. Some of the participants at this session agreed that many foreign students were indeed already fluent but that this was not the case for all. They also agreed that the fluency of some of the students

did indeed improve in the course of their studies. However, some participants stated that the MA program was not the place to improve spoken English proficiency because a prospective international student should have developed spoken proficiency prior to entering such a program. These divergent views illustrate the conflict that is bound to arise between the desire to increase the size of a program and the desire to increase (or maintain) admission and graduation standards. Although many international MATESL students do return to teach in their home countries, it was pointed out that the MA degree contains no limitation to its use, no statement that says, "Valid only outside the U.S." An MATESL must be honored wherever the bearer applies for work. In light of this, the proposal to introduce two tracks, a MATESL for those with advanced spoken proficiency and a TESL certificate for international students returning to their native countries seemed an attractive idea.

The proposed solutions preferred by the questionnaire respondents did not generate ready agreement by the session participants. The TSE was criticized as being a poor indicator of spoken proficiency because the testee has to speak into a tape recorder without engaging in a realistic conversational exchange. A high-level course in spoken proficiency was found interesting, but some wondered if there was sufficient funding for such a course. Finally, the FSI rating of 3+ or higher, which the questionnaire respondents found the least practicable (probably because the majority were not aware of what it entailed), was favored by many of the session participants, especially when it was presented as a rating that could be independent of the MA degree and not necessarily a requirement for graduation. In other words, a potential employer could ask an applicant not only for an MATESL but also for an official FSI rating. This would remove the problem of discrimination in the MATESL programs and would allow the employer the option of setting spoken proficiency standards.

Analogy to the Problems of International Teaching Assistants

Because of the similarity between the oral proficiency required of MATESL graduates and that required of international teaching assistants (ITAs), in the second half of the College/University Level Rap Session, Janet Goodwin (UCLA) presented her work on the assessment of the oral proficiency of ITAs. Her work is a response to native-speaker student complaints about the lack of intelligibility of their nonnative-English-speaking instructors, complaints that led to California Assembly Resolution 41, Chapter 103 (1987), which requires teaching assistants at the University of California "to demonstrate competence in oral communication." Since international MATESL graduates and ITAs share similar needs for improved oral

communication skills, the procedure for assessing ITAs at UCLA shows promise for international MATESL graduates as well.

In response to Resolution 41, UCLA introduced an oral proficiency test for nonnative-English-speaking TAs in which four separate tasks are evaluated in seven subskill areas. The tasks include (a) reading aloud, (b) giving a spontaneous 1-minute presentation, (c) giving a prepared presentation, and (d) simulating office hours with informal discussion. Although not all are appropriate for every task, the seven subskill areas include (a) pronunciation, (b) speech flow, (c) grammar, (d) vocabulary, (e) organization, (f) listening comprehension, and (g) question handling. A rating scale of from 1 to 4 points allows an assessment in each of the relevant areas. The test is administered by trained raters.

A Possible Assessment Instrument

The UCLA oral proficiency test generated considerable interest among the session participants. After a lively discussion, it was agreed that an adaptation of UCLA's spoken proficiency profile might be implemented. For example, a prospective MATESL graduate, whether native or nonnative, could be required to give an ESL lesson before a video camera. The detailed aspects of this lesson (e.g., the amount of spontaneous vs. prepared material, performance in a studio vs. before a live class, multiple "takes" vs. taped at one time) would have to be worked out, but the videotape could be evaluated using something like UCLA's speaking performance scale. A minimum standard could be established for graduation from a MATESL program, and a student who failed to pass would be directed to a class devoted to improving spoken proficiency at the graduate level and required to generate a new tape.

The advantages of such a solution to the spoken proficiency of international MATESL graduates would be that all students would have to generate a videotape, not just international students. This would remove the problem of discrimination. Furthermore, the videotape could serve as the basis for study and improvement in the graduate spoken proficiency course. Ultimately, a personal copy of the videotape might be given to each student for use in applying for a job. If this were to be implemented, a qualifying videotape might even come to be an accepted feature of application for an ESL position in California and Nevada, which might well become models for the entire country. ■