



Oral English Proficiency Program Newsletter

Purdue University
Office of the Provost
Department of English

Volume 2, Issue 1
Fall 2008

The Importance of the OEPT Practice Test

Prof. April Ginther, Director, OEPP

Many of us will soon be welcoming new international graduate students in to our programs. A good number of these students are being considered for teaching assistantships and will need to take the Oral English Proficiency Test (OEPT). Students often ask for advice on how they can prepare for the test. By far, the best means of preparing is for students to go through the on-line OEPT Tutorial and Practice Test.

The Tutorial is an introduction to the instructional context of Purdue, and the varieties of TA opportunities available to international students are presented. In addition, international students freely discuss their experiences—both good and bad—as teaching assistants.

The separate OEPT Practice Test presents a complete practice test and includes the rating scale. Characteristics of the computer-based administration are explained.

“It is essential for departments to do all they can to make sure students know what is expected of them and why.”

Understandably, many students are apprehensive about taking the OEPT. It is essential for departments to do all they can to make sure students know what is expected of them and why. For example, even students with excellent spoken English skills will benefit from knowing the test is computer based and that they will be speaking into a microphone instead of directly to another person.

Finally, departments should make sure that students who have just arrived in the country have at least 48 hours to review test prep materials and to recover from jet lag before they are scheduled to take the test.

I encourage you to help your students do their best on the OEPT. Be sure they understand how important it is for them to take the OEPT tutorial and practice test.

Access the OEPT Tutorial and practice test by going to: <http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~aginther/>.

New Procedures in Place for Banner Registration

Jennifer E. Redden, Program Coordinator, OEPP

Historically, the OEPP has handled the registration for ENGL 001 (now ENGL 62000). This ensured that only students who have taken the Oral English Proficiency Test (OEPT) and received a score of 3 or 4 were registered for the class. We then placed students in course sections with others at the same score level. When needed, we could set aside a section for a special purpose, such as our professional development section for students who are already certified. Another consideration is priority. We have always done our best to ensure that those students whose departments wish to hire as teaching assistants as soon as possible receive first priority for the course, especially in the fall semester when the demand for the course is very high.

Now that students will register for courses themselves beginning this fall, we were unsure of how we would be able to manage our course enrollment in order to offer the same level of instruction as in the past. To meet this challenge, we met with a group of seven department liaisons from various academic areas to brainstorm new procedures. The meeting was a great

success and yielded some good ideas that we have put in place for fall. Here is a brief summary:

- Departments now prioritize students for the course as they register them for the OEPT using a simple “A, B, C” scale. Thus, students who are not certified by the test are placed on the course waiting list in priority order.
- Departments are encouraged to register only their highest priority students for the August test administration. Students who are not immediately needed to TA should be tested later in the semester. This will cut down on the number of lower priority students (those who can wait until spring or summer to take the course) who are eligible to register for the fall class, making the registration process more efficient.
- Registration instructions for students have been e-mailed to departments and are also posted on our website.

Visit www.purdue.edu/oepp for information on registering students for the OEPT and ENGL 62000. Thank you for your patience as we all learn new ways to best serve our students in the new Banner registration system.

Bias for Best

Prof. April Ginther, Director, OEPP

Many language testers believe that tests should be developed, administered, and scored in ways that allow test takers to present their best performance. In developing the OEPT, the OEPP embraced this perspective. However, ensuring "bias for best" depends upon test takers' ability to understand the characteristics of the tasks, the administrative setting in which the test will be taken, and the characteristics of the scale used to rate performance before actually taking the test. Allowing test takers to create reasonable expectations about all aspects of an exam's administration and use means that when the test is taken, there are no surprises, and the test taker's performance can be assumed to be representative of his or her performance under comparably favorable conditions in the "real" world.

Purdue's Oral English Proficiency Test was specifically developed to assess prospective international teaching assistants' oral English proficiency in an academic teaching context. All of the items require the ability to effectively and efficiently use English for common everyday tasks in which all teaching assistants are involved.

For example, OEPT tasks require test takers to summarize information presented in departmental memos, compare and contrast different points of view, offer an opinion, explain and interpret a graph, provide personal information, offer advice, understand and relay a simple telephone message, and comprehend the casual spoken speech of undergraduate students and graduate advisors.

(...Continued on page 4)



Not all TAs teach. Some assignments do not involve direct contact with undergraduates and are appropriate for both certified and non-certified teaching assistants.

Teaching Assistantships for Non-Certified Students

Jennifer E. Redden, Program Coordinator, OEPP

In general, it is not a good practice to plan on using a non-native English speaking graduate student in a direct student instructional contact position unless they have already demonstrated oral English proficiency through test scores (see chart, left), or certification through ENGL 620 (001T). Do not allow your program to be caught off guard if a newly admitted or continuing student does not pass the OEPT and is therefore ineligible for the teaching assistantship you had in mind for him or her.

Not being certified, however, does not mean a student cannot hold any teaching assistantship. On the contrary, there are a variety of positions that are quite appropriate for students who have not yet been certified. For example, non-certified students may work as lab assistants, provided they are not the only instructor in the lab. That is, they should always be

accompanied by another instructor or TA who is a native speaker of English. Students may also work in help sessions as long as a native speaker is also present. Students who have not yet been certified may work with faculty on research projects, do lab set-ups, perform computer or web design projects, be paper graders, or work in administrative positions.

The key to determining if a position is appropriate for a student is the phrase

"direct instructional contact with undergraduate students." This means that a non-certified student may not be the instructor of a course, lab, or recitation, or work in other instructional

positions, unless a native speaker of English is also present to offer assistance as needed. If you are ever unsure if a TA position is appropriate for a non-certified student, or if you have a special situation, please call the OEPP for assistance.

"There are a variety of positions that are quite appropriate for students who have not yet been certified."

Methods of Oral

English Certification

- A score of 5 or 6 on Purdue's Oral English Proficiency Test
- A 50 or 60 on the TSE
- A score of 27 or higher on the speaking section of the TOEFL iBT
- International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score of at least 7
- Certification through ENGL 620 (001T)

TOEFL, TWE, and SPEAK scores (from other institutions) are not accepted for certification purposes. Visit the OEPP website for more information.

OEPP Volunteerism benefits ITAs *and* Undergraduates

An important component of preparing international teaching assistants (ITAs) to be effective classroom instructors is to help them become familiar with the undergraduate culture at Purdue. It is important for ITAs to receive practical experience interacting with undergraduates, and to help ITAs understand what Purdue students are looking for in a teaching assistant. Likewise, is important for undergraduate students to be aware of the considerable effort ITAs put in to becoming effective instructors and the considerable talent and knowledge that they bring to Purdue.

As a method of achieving these goals, the OEPP recruits undergrads to take part in the following activities.

Oral Presentations

Undergraduates observe as ENGL 620 students give brief oral presentations. They then complete a brief written evaluation on what was good and where improvement is still needed.

Roundtable Discussions

Undergraduates and ITAs are brought

together in an informal atmosphere to discuss such topics as what students are looking for in a TA, homework, and undergraduate life at Purdue.

One-on-one conversation

This lively exercise is set up in a "speed-dating" type of format where conversation partners change quickly.

Not only do these activities help ITAs gain experience speaking English in a classroom setting, undergraduate students are exposed to ITAs who are working hard to prove they can be good teachers. Our volunteers' written evaluations indicate that the participants are often quite accepting of having an ITA for an instructor.

Students who volunteer at least 10 hours over the academic year earn an OEPP certificate of appreciation. In addition, some instructors offer their students extra credit or other incentives in exchange for volunteering for the OEPP. Others offer these activities as one of many volunteer projects a student may complete as part of their course curriculum.

Encouraging undergraduates to volunteer in OEPP activities is a win-win situation. If you would like to promote this opportunity to your students, we are available to make a brief PowerPoint presentation to your undergraduate classes to explain our program. More information on volunteer activities is also available on our website. If you have questions or would like more information, please contact us at oepp@purdue.edu.



An OEPP Instructor offers advice as an ENGL 620 student carefully plans his oral presentation.

An undergraduate volunteer evaluates the presentation, providing feedback on what was good, and where improvement is still needed.



Plan ahead to Avoid Graduate Student Funding Issues

Not every graduate student arrives on campus with funding in the form of a teaching assistantship. Some are admitted with a research assistantship or fellowship, and others arrive without funding. Some forms of funding are guaranteed for a limited time with the expectation that when this funding expires, the student will have developed an adequate proficiency of the English language to qualify for a teaching assistantship. Sadly, this is not always a realistic expectation. For example, many RAs are quite busy with demanding coursework in addition to the hours they spend working in research labs. Their co-workers are often other students from their home country with whom they speak only their native language. Students may actually be quite isolated from native speakers of English and may not improve their language skills as quickly as expected. Students in these situations may find themselves without good prospects for funding when their temporary funding ends.

It is important that departments have a plan for all of their

non-native English speaking graduate students who were admitted without a guarantee of funding over the full course of their study. Departments can help their students be better prepared to qualify for an assistantship by registering them to take the Oral English Proficiency Test in their first or second semester at Purdue. If the student does not pass the OEPT, they are placed on the course waiting list and will have the opportunity to take the class before their funding runs out. Keep in mind that some students need more than one semester of ENGL 620 to become certified. By testing early, a student is better prepared to seek alternative sources of funding should it become necessary.

Students who are currently funded should be given priority code "B" on the OEPT registration form. This indicates that should the student need the course, he or she can wait until spring or summer semester to be enrolled. Remember, students may only be registered for the OEPT at the request of their academic department, so plan ahead.

Bias for Best (...Continued from page 2)

No special "outside" content or cultural knowledge is required to respond to OEPT items; that is, test takers can easily use available information in order to formulate an appropriate response, and test takers are allowed to take notes and may take up to three minutes to prepare their responses. In addition, all audio-only prompts are presented twice. By presenting all test takers with items that represent a variety of everyday language, providing generous amount of time to prepare and respond, and allowing test takers to take notes, individual responses are elicited across equally favorable administrative conditions.

One criticism that can be leveled against our efforts to bias for the best test performance is that the performances elicited by the OEPT may overestimate an international student's ability to perform in actual teaching contexts—contexts that require language use that is much more

complex and difficult than that associated with any task appearing on the test. Indeed, international students will probably never be able to take notes while engaged in a conversation, and undergraduate students cannot be expected to repeat everything they say two times, or to wait three minutes before their instructors construct a response. For these reasons alone, we consider the certification of oral English proficiency through the OEPT a necessary but insufficient requirement for effective teaching, and we apply the rating scale conservatively. By requiring a minimal score of 5 for certification and by providing instructional support for prospective ITAs who are not certified after taking the OEPT, the University allows the greatest opportunity for both international teaching assistants and their undergraduate students to be successful in diverse educational settings across the university.

Oral English Proficiency Program
810 Young Hall
302 Wood Street
West Lafayette, IN 47907-2108

Phone: 49-49380
Fax: 49-61139
E-mail: oepp@purdue.edu
<http://www.purdue.edu/oepp>



Deliver to:

Please share this newsletter with others in your area who may be interested.