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Unclear on American Campus: What the Foreign Teacher Said

By ALAN FINDER

Valerie Serrin still remembers vividly her anger and the feeling of helplessness. After getting a C on a lab report in an introductory chemistry course, she went to her teaching assistant to ask what she should have done for a better grade.

The teaching assistant, a graduate student from China, possessed a finely honed mind. But he also had a heavy accent and a limited grasp of spoken English, so he could not explain to Ms. Serrin, a freshman at the time, what her report had lacked.

"He would just say, 'It's easy, it's easy,'" said Ms. Serrin, who recently completed her junior year at the University of California, Berkeley. "But it wasn't easy. He was brilliant, absolutely brilliant, but he couldn't communicate in English."

Ms. Serrin's experience is hardly unique. With a steep rise in the number of foreign graduate students in the last two decades, undergraduates at large research universities often find themselves in classes and laboratories run by graduate teaching assistants whose mastery of English is less than complete.

The issue is particularly acute in subjects like engineering, where 50 percent of graduate students are foreign born, and math and the physical sciences, where 41 percent of graduate students are, according to a survey by the Council of Graduate Schools, an association of 450 schools. This is despite a modest decline in the number of international students enrolling in American graduate programs since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

The encounters have prompted legislation in at least 22 states requiring universities to make sure that teachers are proficient in spoken English. In January, Bette B. Grande, a Republican state representative from Fargo, N.D., tried to go even further after her son Alec complained of his experiences at North Dakota State University. Mrs. Grande introduced legislation that would allow students in state universities to drop courses without penalty and be reimbursed if they could not understand the English of a teaching assistant or a professor.

"If a student has paid tuition to be in that classroom," she said, "he should receive what he paid for."

State lawmakers, however, balked, instead ordering education officials to assess how well state universities were training teaching assistants.

Many universities are trying to minimize the problem by creating programs to assess the English skills of international graduate students who are prospective teaching assistants and offering courses as needed.

But interviews with dozens of undergraduates at six universities over the last few weeks indicate that the problem remains acute, in some cases even influencing decisions about what majors to pursue.

Ms. Serrin said that she went to Berkeley thinking she might go to medical school but that she was now majoring in economics, in part because of freshman chemistry.

Myles Sullivan, a University of Massachusetts senior, twice dropped courses, once in astronomy and once in linguistics, because he could not decipher his teaching assistant.

"Both were brilliant men, but the language barrier was just too much for me," Mr. Sullivan said.

Some students end up spending hundreds of dollars to conquer the language barrier. Loyda Martinez, a senior at the University of Massachusetts, started subscribing to an online service that provides copies of notes from previous courses at the university when she had a hard time understanding teaching assistants in math, science and psychology classes. The service cost \$20 to \$75 a course, Ms. Martinez said.

Others in the academic world believe that the complaints are not entirely about the shortcomings of foreign-born teaching assistants.

"Is there some low-level carping? Absolutely," said Dudley Doane, director of the Center for American English Language and Culture at the University of Virginia. "Is it justified? At times it may be. However, we have some students who aren't used to stretching."

It is a point echoed by some foreign teaching assistants who, in addition to their own studies and the rigors of grading papers, overseeing labs and leading discussions, must deal with what they sometimes consider intolerant undergraduates.

"I had students come into my class mimicking the accent of a friend of mine, who is a teaching assistant in math," said Atreyye Phukan, a graduate student in comparative literature at Rutgers University who was born in India and raised in Bahrain and has a slight accent. "They thought it was hilarious to make fun of his accent."

But Ms. Phukan also thinks the university should consider requiring more graduate students to take rigorous classes in spoken English.

Many public and private universities have created programs in recent years to assess and train international graduate students. Most research universities require international applicants to pass a standardized test in written English for admission to graduate school. Many also set standards in spoken English for prospective teaching assistants.

Virtually every major graduate school has made a concerted effort to make sure that international teaching assistants have the language skills they need, said Debra Stewart, the president of the Council of Graduate Schools, but that does not guarantee that there will not be problems.

"American students are living in a global world, and there is value in making an effort to understand people who sound different from you," Ms. Stewart said. "That said, it is also an obligation of those of us in education, that if we put someone in front of students, reasonable people will be able to understand them."

At Stanford, for instance, about 200 foreign graduate students take a standardized test each year to assess their ability to speak English. About 30 of these students are required to take English classes, and others are encouraged to do so, said Philip Hubbard, director of the English for Foreign Students program there.

"I can't say there's no problem out there," Mr. Hubbard said. "It wouldn't be fair. But there hasn't been any significant problem here for a number of years."

At the University of Virginia each year, about 120 foreign-born graduate students who are prospective teaching assistants take a test in spoken English; those who need to improve are offered courses.

But many students said that despite such efforts the problems remained. They said they had adopted myriad strategies to get by, not all of them successful.

Alison Monrose, a junior at Rutgers, said she began sitting in the front of the classroom to "lip read." Ms. Serrin at Berkeley formed a study group with other students. Jacquem Winston, a junior at Rutgers, decided he would just ask questions in class until he did understand. "You can't be shy," Mr. Winston said.

But Mohammed Islam, who is also a junior at Rutgers, simply stopped going to his discussion section in a physics course. The professor who lectured to the large class was excellent, Mr. Islam said, but the teaching assistant who oversaw his small weekly discussion section "didn't speak English at all."

Mr. Islam, a ceramic engineering major from Brooklyn, paid a price for his decision. Homework, which counted for 25 percent of his grade, was supposed to be turned in to the teaching assistant. But since Mr. Islam had stopped going to the discussion section, he did not hand in any homework. He still managed to get a B-plus in the course, he said: "I broke the curve on the final."

Geoff Young, a junior at Rutgers, said he had not had problems understanding his teaching assistants. But he said many of his friends at Rutgers had struggled mightily.

"I've heard a lot of people complain about that," Mr. Young said, "saying things like, 'How many languages other than English have you learned while you were here?' "

Even dealing with the problem caused anxiety for some students.

"You don't want to be rude and say, 'Your English is no good,' " said Rhyshonda Singletary, a senior at the University of Massachusetts. "But you also don't want to suffer."

Michael Falcone contributed reporting from Berkeley, Calif., for this article.