

# EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT FUND PROJECT

Foreign teaching assistant training and orientation pilot project.

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## BACKGROUND AND SETTING

Because the University of Hawaii at Manoa is the main campus of the UH system and because of its location in the Pacific, it attracts a large number of foreign students, particularly students from Asia. For instance, in the Fall semester of 1986, there were 1341 foreign students registered at UHM from Asia (1100), Africa (17), Middle East (9), Latin America (68), Europe (57) and the Pacific Basin (90). Fifty-eight percent (784) of these foreign students were classified as graduate students and roughly one-third of that group (about 260) received Graduate Assistantships -- a few as research assistants (RAs) and the majority as teaching assistants (TAs).

Bailey (1984), in her nationwide survey, found that the majority of Foreign Teaching Assistants (FTAs) at American universities were science majors and male. One out of three was Asian. Here at UHM, the situation is similar in that the majority of FTAs are male. Yet, there are also differences in that 1) five out of six of our FTAs are Asian, 2) our FTAs seem to be more evenly distributed across majors than the national averages and 3) here 33% of the total TA population is foreign, while nationally it is 25%.

The large variety of cultural groups that forms the student body at UHM further complicates the situation for FTAs. Rather than having one target culture and variety of English to adjust to, in Hawaii, there are many. At most mainland universities, the classes are much more homogeneous than at UHM where there are not only local and mainland American students, who speak differing varieties of English, but also students from many countries as described above. All of these students come with their own expectations of the role of an instructor and how classrooms should be run.

## DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM

There are several perspectives from which the general FTA problem on American university campuses can be viewed. Following the classifications in Bailey (1984), the FTA situation can be defined in terms of those who are involved: the institution, the students who take courses from FTAs, and the FTAs themselves.

To paraphrase Weaver *et al* (1987), it is in the University's best interest to accommodate a well-rounded international community of both students and professors. The UHM can then offer all students a competitive, stimulating and cross-culturally rich learning environment and experience. In an ideal situation, this would occur through the input of all parties involved (including FTAs) and all would benefit. The University would benefit by increase in reputation, the FTAs by employment and education, and their students from the experiences that only a foreign teacher can offer. However, the actual situation is far from ideal. Complaints from students nationwide reveal not only that ethnocentrism is a problem among U.S. students, but that there is sometimes a lack of effective communication between FTAs and their students. Moreover, the mounting costs of higher education have raised public expectations for quality education, and

universities which have relied heavily on FTAs to teach and assist in courses have come under increasing pressure to provide instructors who speak clear English in their courses.

The concern about this issue is broad-based as indicated by recent articles in the popular press and professional publications as well. For instance, in the Wall Street Journal, Earl Gottschalk (1985) complained that the nation as a whole would ultimately suffer due to "poor and incompetent" instruction at the undergraduate level due to FTAs. In one of the many articles on the subject that have appeared in the Chronicle of Higher Education, Scott Heller (1985) called for a national effort to deal with the issue. Bailey (1984), Bos et al (1980), Constantinides (1987), Shaw and Garate (1984), Turitz (1983) and many others have indicated that the field of English as a Second Language (ESL) must take note of the trend throughout the U.S. and institute FTA training programs as a solution.

The issue first came to the attention of the Department of English as a Second Language in December 1987 when Dean Thomas W. Gething, then in Graduate Division, requested that we study the FTA issues as they apply at UHM and come up with a solution. To that end, a thorough needs analysis was initiated to determine the dimensions of any "FTA problem" on the UHM campus and to suggest what might be done in the form of FTA training to ameliorate the problem. The needs analysis resulted in the implementation of a three week pilot training workshop in August of 1987 which was designed to address the needs of FTAs. Since an Educational Improvement Fund (EIF) grant supported some of these activities, the purpose of this document is to describe, evaluate and summarize what happened. The discussion will center around the FTA needs analysis, implementation of an FTA training workshop at UHM and evaluation of the resulting workshop.

## NEEDS ANALYSIS

Beginning in January 1987, four students in the ESL 630 course (Program Development in ESL) agreed to do a needs analysis and suggest tentative objectives for the August pilot FTA training workshop (supported by this EIF grant) as their course project. These graduate students (including one English as a foreign language teacher from the PRC, whose husband is an FTA) worked under the guidance of Professors Brown and Richards and produced an extensive analysis of the English language needs of FTAs at the UHM (Weaver et al 1987).

The first task was to investigate the existing situation at other universities across the U.S. This was begun through an extensive literature review and through correspondence with directors of existing FTA programs. The needs assessment team identified more than 15 universities and colleges that had existing programs for training FTAs. These institutions were contacted and responses were received from 10 of the universities. They sent useful information (see, for instance, Unruh 1986) on their course offerings, their general policies vis à vis FTAs, syllabuses, etc. This information proved very helpful in developing the initial interview procedures and questionnaires.

Next, the needs analysis team interviewed 30 of the foreign graduate students who were then TAs at UHM. The Graduate Division had provided a list of the 260 foreign students who were receiving some type of Graduate Assistantship during the Spring semester of 1987. A sample of 45 was randomly selected from that population. After contacting these graduate students, 30 (who were then working as TAs) were personally interviewed by members of the needs analysis team. On the basis of the random sampling, the 30 FTAs who were interviewed were assumed to represent a cross-section of countries and world regions that are represented here at UHM in the FTA population. The interviews were conducted in an open-ended format in order to elicit information about the pros and cons of their experiences as TAs, as well as any suggestions they might have for an orientation course for other foreign TAs (for much more detail, see Weaver *et al* 1987). Based on the general literature review as well as on a brief study of the FTA situation at UHM by Jones (1986), the questions were generally designed to cover three areas of concern to FTAs: language/communication difficulties, classroom differences and cultural contrasts.

In order to derive a balanced perspective from all sides of the issue, input from the current students of FTAs was also sought. During the interviews with the sample group, each was asked if they would allow the interviewer to come to a class and administer a short questionnaire to their students. Twenty-four of the FTAs interviewed allowed their classes to participate. The questionnaires were developed based on the work of Bailey (1984) and Jones (1986), as well as from the materials sent by various universities. Like the interview questions, items for the questionnaires focused on language, classroom management and cultural issues. The total number of questionnaires received was 171, drawn from a wide variety of classes and disciplines. In brief, most of the FTAs involved in the study received above average ratings from their students, particularly on questions dealing with the student's perceptions of their TA's knowledge of and enthusiasm for the subject matter of the course. On the other hand, the percentage of "Below Average" ratings greatly increased when attention was turned to language ability.

The information gained in the interviews and questionnaires was further analyzed, evaluated and organized into a set of tentative objectives for the August 1987 orientation workshop for FTAs. The overall purpose of the orientation workshop was to ease the transition of FTAs into effective instructors in UHM classrooms. The objectives that we felt would best help them to accomplish this transition are discussed and summarized briefly below.

## IMPLEMENTATION

Because most FTAs at American universities are selected on the basis of a standardized written English test (such as the TOEFL here at UHM) and since written test scores are not necessarily good predictors of oral proficiency, some of the FTAs selected may not be able to speak English well enough to do their jobs properly. The lack of spoken proficiency and general classroom management skills (in English) proved to be major factors throughout this project. Another issue of equal importance that surfaced was the extent to which cross-cultural differences between FTAs and their students, including those between educational systems, sometimes result in the use of

inappropriate teaching methods, unreasonable expectations, and miscommunications. Departments hire FTAs on the basis of their expertise in a given field and satisfactory scores on the TOEFL; the FTAs are then expected to assume class loads within weeks or even days of their arrival in Hawaii. Whatever introduction they are given to life in the U.S., and to the university system in particular, is usually cursory and has always been at the discretion of the individual departments. It is not surprising, therefore, that many of the same complaints heard at universities across the country are being voiced here at UHM.

During the period between May 18 and June 12, three lecturers in the Department of ESL (Dominique Buckley, Graham Crookes, and Gail Kimzin) each worked twenty hours per week planning, developing and coordinating a curriculum for each of three components for the August pilot workshop. This work was done under the guidance and supervision of three professors from the Department of ESL (Brown, Chaudron and Pennington). Each professor took primary responsibility for one lecturer and one component of the workshop. Brown was also responsible for the overall coordination of the project. During this four week work period, a complete curriculum was produced for the August pilot workshop including all lesson plans, materials, and tests.

Before the actual teaching began (August 3 - 7), the three instructors (Buckley, Crookes and Kimzin) and three professors (Brown, Chaudron and Pennington) worked together to finalize all last minute curriculum issues and prepare for the first week of teaching. The materials drew heavily on a pre-publication draft of Byrd, Constantinides and Pennington (in press).

The FTA training workshop took place over the course of nine days: August 12 to 15, 17 to 19, 29 and September 12, 1987. The workshop was divided into the following three subject areas:

#### Oral Skills

- Lecture style and appropriate level of formality
- Developing fluent and natural speech in English
- Improving and compensating for accent so that students can fully understand the content of instruction

#### Classroom Management

- Teaching style and approaches
- Responding to student questions and facilitating discussions and other forms of interaction
- Planning for efficient use of time both inside and outside class

#### Cultural Orientation

- The American university environment
- Classroom expectations of the American student
- General orientation to American culture in the Hawaiian context

Originally planned to accommodate all 75 of the anticipated new FTAs, the workshop drew only 14 FTAs. This was probably due to the fact that participation was not mandatory. It was left to the discretion of the departments as to whether individual TAs should participate. The workshop was offered in three sections which turned out to have no more than 5 students each. These sections were taught by members of the staff of the Department of English as a Second Language under the coordination of the Director of the English Language Institute. Classes met four hours per day, with only Sunday free, for a total of 36 contact hours as follows:

9:00 - 10:20 Session One  
10:20 - 10:30 Break  
10:30 - 11:50 Session Two  
11:50 - 12:40 Lunch  
12:40 - 2:00 Session Three  
2:00 --> Individualized Language Lab (optional)

Class time included lecture, discussion, group exercises, as well as audio and video taping of practice teaching activities. These activities were all geared toward helping the foreign teaching assistant acclimate to the new environment and prepare for teaching in an American classroom.

## EVALUATION

Following instruction, time was devoted to evaluation of the effectiveness of the pilot project and production of this report. Evaluation took a number of forms in the FTA workshop. The students' performance as TAs was assessed by the supervising professors by means of a pretest and posttest. Their participation and achievement in the workshop itself were evaluated by the lecturers who taught the workshop in a performance report format; the workshop design and the quality of instruction delivered by the lecturers were evaluated by the students through questionnaires. Each of these sources of information served as a basis for assessing the success of the current workshop and for improving such instruction on the UHM campus in the future.

Pretest/posttest assessment of FTA effectiveness. In advance of instruction, a procedure was worked out by Professors Brown and Chaudron for testing each FTA individually in terms of their ability to perform common teaching tasks in English. Each TA was given 15 - 20 minutes to plan a short presentation (e.g., "Please prepare a 5 minute explanation of the procedures and criteria you will use in your course to evaluate and grade the students. This may include explanation and discussion of important study skills or classroom participation"). This presentation was then given before a small audience of peers and instructors, who were encouraged to ask questions and respond to the explanation as if they were sitting in a real classroom. This procedure was administered both before and after instruction in the FTA workshop. Since the presentation was video taped, it was possible to do the ratings of each student's performance at a later time. The ratings were based on 16 five-point Likert scales that

fell into five categories: 1) organization and content, 2) nonverbal teaching behavior, 3) language ability, 4) interaction and 5) general evidence of acculturation. Ratings were assigned independently by Brown and Chaudron, who viewed the video tapes together.

Though there was apparently some improvement in the FTAs' performances after the workshop, only three conclusions could reasonably be drawn from the results of these procedures. First, the rating scale needs to be modified to eliminate the classification "general evidence of acculturation" because it was felt to be totally unobservable. Second, any pretest-posttest comparisons would be inappropriate at this time because the tasks required on the two occasions were different and because the raters knew which tapes were pretests and which were posttests when they were doing the ratings. Since both raters had a vested interest in the success of the workshop, it was clear that, no matter how they might try to be neutral, any gain between pretest results and posttest results would be suspect due to possible bias. Third, the reliability of the rating scale should be investigated, particularly when it is used by raters other than the test developers.

The exercise was certainly useful in that such testing could serve as a point of departure for any future FTA training program at UHM. At the very least, the students were afforded an opportunity to practice a realistic TA task. Moreover, the pretest tapes were specifically used for pedagogical purposes. Students all viewed these pretest tapes in class and each student's performance was constructively critiqued both by the lecturer and by peers. From a curriculum standpoint, the primary benefit derived from this test development project is that we now have a procedure which can be quickly modified and validated should the need arise to assess FTAs' oral proficiency at UHM.

Performance reports on FTA participation and achievement. Every FTA was rated for each of the three components of the workshop (classroom management, oral language skills and cultural orientation) on the basis of class participation, attitude toward the class and improvement. These ratings, along with information about attendance and a prose description of the student's performance in the workshop, were prepared in three copies: one for the student, one for ESL Department records and one for the FTA's department academic advisor. On the whole, this group of students fulfilled our expectations in terms of attitude and improvement. It was in the area of participation that some problems arose. Once the sections were formed, only four students attended every session, while others saw fit to miss between one and five days of instruction. This was probably due to the voluntary nature of this particular FTA workshop.

Questionnaires on workshop design and quality of instruction. After the last day of instruction, a questionnaire was administered to the FTAs and a meeting was held including all of the professors, instructors and students involved in the workshop.

The questionnaire consisted of three pages of open-ended questions (21 in all) and three pages of Likert scale questions (53 in all). Overall, the questions were designed to bring out what the students felt about the instruction that they had just received both generally and with regard to each specific objective of the three components. The

questions were posed so that the students would judge not only the effectiveness of each objective, but also its importance to FTAs and its usefulness to them personally. In general, they rated the importance of the various objectives for FTAs much higher than the effectiveness or usefulness of these same objectives. A pattern that appeared in several of the open-ended questions may help in trying to understand their responses. All of the students indicated that if a course similar to this workshop were offered, either 1) they would not take it, 2) they would not have time to take it or 3) they would take it only if they had "enough time." When asked if they would recommend such a course to other FTAs, however, they universally answered yes.

The meeting brought out further information. The students seemed to be open and frank in expressing views ranging from praise and admiration to condemnation. The one student who was very critical of our efforts was primarily faulting us for discriminating against foreign TAs by making them go through training that was not required of the American TAs. Since his participation was completely voluntary as far as we were concerned, we are not sure whether he felt pressure from his department or if he was simply misinterpreting the situation. This view must nevertheless be taken into account in planning any future efforts to train FTAs.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on what we learned in this pilot project, work was continued in the Fall semester 1987 on the curriculum design for a three-credit English Language Institute course (ELI 81) which was subsequently approved by the Curriculum Committee of the College of Arts and Sciences. This course was offered on an elective basis in Spring and Fall semesters 1988. With enrollments of 3 and 5 students, respectively, the course was dropped in both semesters. The Department of ESL has no current plans to offer this course again.

There are a number of possible reasons for this apparent lack of interest. For instance, on the questionnaire, the students in the FTA workshop clearly felt that such a course would be useful in the abstract (i.e., for other students), but not for themselves. In other words, it would not have a high enough priority so that they could fit it into their busy schedules. This notion is supported by the fact that only 14 out of an expected 75 new FTAs participated in the August 1987 workshop. Coupled with the fact that our FTA course, though offered in two subsequent semesters, did not generate sufficient interest to be run, there seems to be a clear indication that FTAs will not participate in training on a voluntary basis.

The Department of ESL was charged with the responsibility of developing training for FTAs. We responded to this call by providing a thorough needs assessment, by designing a three-part curriculum and all of the materials necessary to teach it, by delivering instruction in the August 1987 FTA workshop, and by offering a course in two subsequent semesters. It appears that the problems that we perceived in our needs analysis will not be solved on a voluntary basis. Should the Graduate Division decide

that some of the FTAs on our campus must be required to take further training, the ELI is in a position to deliver well-designed instruction to answer this need.

It seems clear to us that FTAs, their students, and the University as a whole would benefit from a training program aimed at minimizing or eliminating the problem areas which have been delineated in this project. The FTAs here at UHM deserve the opportunity to acquire the tools they need to function capably in their positions. Their students deserve competent, comprehensible instruction to help them further their educations. The University deserves a strong academic thrust at every level of the process. This project has taken the initial steps towards developing a course uniquely tailored to FTAs here at UHM. We are ready to implement this course again, whenever it will realistically serve university policy in a positive way.

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