

## Teaching Tips for International Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs)

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### Introduction

Teaching in a foreign country using a second language can be a challenging experience. The expectations of American students, methods of organizing material, and classroom format can be very different from what you have been accustomed to in your native country. With these issues in mind, the following sections of teaching tips may be helpful to you as a GTA:

- Communication Skills for the Classroom
- Asking Others for Assistance
- Improving Your Spoken English
- Resources

### Communication Skills for the Classroom

1. Use visual aids as much as possible. Writing on the board, using an overhead projector, presenting with power point or providing handouts are excellent ways to communicate with students. If students have difficulty understanding your pronunciation, they can read the information from the visual aid.
2. Organize your main ideas so that each teaching lesson has a beginning, middle and an end. A general outline for teaching consists of: introduction (tell the students what you are going to teach them); body (teach it to them); conclusion (remind them of what you taught them). See Appendix A for a sample outline.
3. Give students a basic outline of what you will cover in class. List any key terms or difficult to spell words on the visual aid. Make it a habit to point to the key term or word the first several times that you say it. That way, the students can connect the way that you pronounce the word with the term that you want them to know. Also, point to each main idea on the outline as you begin to teach it.
4. Use transition words or phrases to let the students know when you're moving to the next important point. For example, use phrases such as: "The second point I want to make is..." or "Now, let's move to the next idea..." Summary words to let the students know you are completing the lesson may include: "In conclusion..." or "The important points to remember are..." These verbal markers help to keep the students' attention focused as you move from one key idea to the next one.
5. Use plenty of examples to explain or demonstrate your main ideas. Students need examples that they can relate to in order to really understand the material. Think about the activities and subjects that your students know about and use real life examples to illustrate your ideas. Make sure the students know you are giving examples by using phrases such as: "Let me give you an example..." or "To be more specific..." Whenever possible, use three-dimensional objects to demonstrate your main ideas.

6. Explain your jargon or field-specific vocabulary. Every discipline has unique terminology that is referred to as jargon. Make sure that you explain in simple terms what you are trying to teach. Remember, you're not trying to impress your students with your terminology-you want them to know what you know. Teach them the jargon in simple terms and refer back to the simple terms when they seem confused.
7. Ask questions of the students throughout your teaching lesson. Don't wait until the end of your lesson to learn if the students understood you. Pause at the end of each main idea and ask them a few questions to see if they can apply what you've taught them. Ask them to provide an example, to work a sample problem or to supply some missing information.
8. Wait after you ask a question. Don't expect students to respond immediately. Students need time to process your question, formulate an answer and then indicate their willingness to respond. So, after you ask them a question, wait at least 5-10 seconds for a response. If they don't respond, then you might give a clue as to the correct answer or rephrase the question.
9. Explain to your students that you are a second language user. Encourage students to ask you for clarification if they don't understand your pronunciation. Make them feel comfortable about asking you questions during the class. Say things such as: "Good question..." or "Who has another question." If students know that you are willing to help them, then they will be willing to help you if you make pronunciation errors as you teach.

### **Asking Others for Assistance**

1. Talk to experienced GTAs in your field of study. They can be great sources for advice about teaching. You can talk with American or international GTAs to get practical help with many of your questions about teaching. Most will be glad to help because they remember what it was like to teach for the first time. You might ask them to observe one of your classes and make suggestions on how you could improve.
2. Observe others who are teaching the same or similar subject as you are. Ask another GTA or professor if you can attend their class for several days. Take notes on how they present the material, deal with student questions and use visual aids. Model the good teaching practices that you observe.
3. Ask questions of your supervising professor. Prepare your specific questions in advance and make an appointment to see your professor. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Even your professor was a beginning teacher at some point in time.

### **Improving Your Spoken English**

Many international students have spoken English for ten or more years. If you learned to say a sound or word incorrectly, then you have been practicing it incorrectly for many years. Therefore, it will take many hours of practice to retrain your mind and mouth muscles to say the word correctly. But, with diligent practice, it can be done.

1. Speak English as much as you can every day. It sounds like simple advice but many GTAs only speak English when they are teaching a few hours a day. There won't be much improvement in your speech if this is the only time you are speaking English. Try to extend the amount of time you are speaking English - a goal could be 80% of each day.

2. Compile a list of sounds (consonants and vowels) that you or your students identify as problem sounds for you. Practice each sound until you can say it correctly in isolation, in words and sentences. There are many pronunciation improvement resources such as computer software and sites on the Internet.
3. Practice a list of keywords as preparation for teaching a class. A keyword is defined as a word that you will be using multiple times during your teaching lesson to explain your main ideas. The idea is this: if you say the keywords many times throughout your lesson incorrectly, your students will not be able to understand your main ideas. Through correct practice of the individual sound pronunciation, number of syllables and syllable stress in a keyword, your students are more likely to understand the main ideas in your lesson. See Appendix B.
4. Use a mirror while you are practicing a difficult sound. It seems awkward at first, but it's important to make sure that your teeth, lips, and tongue are in the correct position when practicing. Remember, you have to retrain your speech organs to make the sound correctly.
5. Plan opportunities to speak English or listen to English. Making an American friend is a wonderful way to improve your English and learn about American culture. Attend campus social functions where you can meet American students. Listen to the radio and watch television. Try to imitate the speech rate (fast or slow speed) and intonation patterns (high and low pitch) of the speakers. Notice their hand gestures and facial expressions.

#### Resources

1. Computer software:  
Pronunciation Power 2 (available for purchase on the Internet)
2. Internet sites for improving your speech:
  - <http://international.ouc.bc.ca/pronunciation>
  - [www.uiowa.edu/~acadtech/phonetics](http://www.uiowa.edu/~acadtech/phonetics)
  - [www.soundsofenglish.org/pronunciation/index.html](http://www.soundsofenglish.org/pronunciation/index.html)
  - [www.eleaston.com/pronunciation](http://www.eleaston.com/pronunciation)
  - [www.marlodge.supanet.com/wordlist/index.html](http://www.marlodge.supanet.com/wordlist/index.html)
  - [www.bartleby.com/61/](http://www.bartleby.com/61/) - American Heritage Dictionary
3. Internet sites for GTA handbooks:
  - [www.utexas.edu/academic/cte/taservices/](http://www.utexas.edu/academic/cte/taservices/)
  - [www.id.ucsb.edu/IC/TA/ITA/title.html](http://www.id.ucsb.edu/IC/TA/ITA/title.html)
  - [www.umass.edu/cft/handbook/](http://www.umass.edu/cft/handbook/)

#### References

- Grant, Linda. Well Said: Pronunciation for Clear Communication. 2nd ed. Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 2001.
- Ronkowski, Shirley. The International Teaching Assistant Handbook. Santa Barbara: University of California, 1999.

**Appendix A**

**Lesson Outline**

**INTRODUCTION**

Topic \_\_\_\_\_ (write this on the board)

Review questions \_\_\_\_\_

Attention getting question \_\_\_\_\_

Thesis (purpose of lesson) \_\_\_\_\_

Main points: \_\_\_\_\_

**BODY**

Transition word + main point \_\_\_\_\_

Explanation (reasons, examples, demonstrations, details) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Question for students about this point

\_\_\_\_\_

(Repeat as needed: transition word + main point and questions for students)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**CONCLUSION**

“In conclusion” + thesis

\_\_\_\_\_

Review main points

\_\_\_\_\_

Question and answer:

- Use when asking for first question: “Are there any questions?” or “Do you have any questions?”
- Use when asking for additional questions: “Are there any more questions?” “Do you have any other questions?” “Do you have another question?”

## Appendix B

## Keyword List

After you plan your teaching lesson, make a list of at least 10 keywords. A keyword is any word that you will use often in your lesson to explain your main ideas. Look up the word in the dictionary and mark the syllable stress and number of syllables for each keyword. Include the phonetic transcription under the word. Write a sentence that you will actually say in your teaching lesson that contains each keyword. After you complete this list, practice your pronunciation by following these suggestions:

1. Practice correct word pronunciation from the web site: [www.bartleby.com/61/](http://www.bartleby.com/61/)
2. Record the words and sentences on an audiotape at least 10 times each.
3. Listen to your pronunciation and keep recording until you can say the word correctly.
4. Record your sentences. Listen to your sentences for correct rate of speech (not too fast or too slow), appropriate pitch jumps (high and low range of voice) and pausing between phrases.

<b>Keyword with syllable stress mark</b>	<b>Number of syllables in keyword</b>	<b>Sentence</b>
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		
10.		