Language Barriers in the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Summary
This campus boasts an international population which surpasses that of many public universities in the nation. With such a diverse body as this, it is not surprising to note that a problem of language barriers is prevalent within the community. In attempting to establish a thread of communication, one often finds that not many of the international students are proficient in speaking English. Over the years, various attempts have been made to increase resources available to facilitate the learning of the language. Realizing the importance of English as a means of communication, we would therefore like to investigate the multi-faceted problem of language barriers. In this report, we hope to address these various issues and propose a possible solution that would work best to help international students find resources to be proficient in oral English.

Introduction
Language barrier is a term used to imply all the problems faced by individuals as they try to communicate with a group of people who speak a tongue other than their own. It is prevalent in settings which involve the conglomeration of people from different cultures, speaking different languages. It is also used as a blanket term for all the difficulties associated with the learning of a foreign language (Wikipedia, 2006). Over the years, there have been various steps taken by administrators in both academic and business worlds, to facilitate this transition into an English-
speaking environment by providing courses, workshops and training. Yet, this problem is still persistent, if not widespread, in schools and universities across the nation.

With thorough understanding of the situation, we hope to find a solution that would overcome the lack of available scholarship on this issue and provide useful information in order to instigate further research.

**Problem**

In a campus such as ours, it is a common phenomenon that big groups of international students are brought together in classrooms. Even though this university has the lowest out-of-state population in the Big Ten (Elizabeth Santiago, Admissions Counselor), there is a vast number of students who face the problem of language barrier. On top of the numerous other issues that international students have to face, this is considered one of the primary reasons for their lack of motivation to excel in both the academic and social aspects of campus life.

**Purpose and Scope**

The purpose of this report is to investigate the prevalence of the problem of language barriers in the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and thereby recommend some changes to improve the situation. In this report, we will focus on the causes of language barriers, how they affect the academic performance of international students and the teaching effectiveness of international teaching assistants, the current systems of international student admissions and hiring of international teaching assistants, as well as the availability and effectiveness of campus resources and facilities.

**Assumptions**

We assume that our survey sample represents the composition of the campus fairly well. Even though for both our surveys, the samples are relatively small compared to the overall
composition of the campus, we have tried to include a range of subjects which is as diverse as possible. The students, both male and female, are from various departments and of different academic standing. For the surveys on international students, the sample consists of individuals from 13 countries. Thus, with such diversity, any results observed can be generalized to the university as a whole.

Limitations

For our interviews, we were limited to only a select few who were willing to take out time from their busy schedules for this purpose. This is not a representative sample since it is such a small number. However, we have opted for at least one individual from each category that pertains to our research. Therefore, we interviewed one international TA, one residential TA, one admissions counselor, and one ISSS advisor.

Causes of Language Barriers in General

Difference in accent

Very often, the problem of language barriers is due to the fact that international students are not familiar with the American English accent; this result is not surprising at all. This is because most of the international students usually learn British English, which is a little different from the American English in term of stress, intonation and pronunciation. To make the conditions more difficult, the United States is a very diverse country where people from different regions of the nation speak differently and, at times, do not understand each other. Hence, familiarizing with various American English accents could be extremely challenging for international students.

Phrases and Idioms

American English relies heavily on the use of phrases and idioms. Often, the meanings of these expressions are not obvious and sometimes can deviate completely from their root words. Also, some phrases and idioms are used commonly in spoken English only, not in writing. As a result, students with little exposure to these phrases and idioms would find them particularly difficult to
comprehend. “An international student is likely to be misled by ‘Give me a ring’, for example, especially if ‘Call me’ is more accurate and appropriate” (Wang, 2002).

*Structure of English*

Many languages in the world have structures different from English. For example, in Japanese, sentences are constructed in a subject-object-verb structure; a pattern very different from the subject-verb-object sentence structure in English. In some languages, there are suffixes which cannot always be converted into English. This has made communication in English very difficult for international students.

*Culture*

“Language reflects culture and tends to control or influence processes used to think and to perceive” (Wang, 2002). Thus, sometimes, the barriers are not due to the use of words in the language, but the way the speakers choose to express their thoughts or the manner in which the listeners perceive them. For example, an American student asking for help by saying that “I think I know how to do this problem, but I simply could not find the solution” might be viewed as hypocritical or egotistical by Asian students. In addition, cultures also shape the way students communicate with others. For example, Asian international students are particularly sensitive to the issue of “saving face”. In an attempt to provide assistance or instruction to an Asian student, if asked if the student understands, s(he) would likely respond that s(h)e does, even if that were untrue. Such an attitude would generate a barrier in communication (Wang, 2002).

*Slang*

“Slang refers to a small set of new and usually short-lived words in the vocabulary of a dialect or language” (Walters, 2005, p. 279). Many of these words are not defined in the dictionary and their usages are limited to small regions. Thus, it is very likely that international students are not exposed to these words. As a result, the students have to struggle to comprehend the context and meaning of these words.
Language style

The speaking style in American English is generally quite unique. In general, most of the Americans speak relatively fast. This, coupled with unfamiliar American English accents and different language structures, American English becomes even more unintelligible for international students.

Language Barriers and Social Interaction

Overview

Just under a half million international students enroll at American universities every year (Trice, 2004). Most of these students come to America to fulfill their academic goals without consideration of the social aspect of their educational lives. The problems that language barriers create within the social realm can lead to many destructive outcomes. For example, many researchers link feelings of anxiety, depression, and alienation to a lack of contact with members of the host nation (Trice, 2004). These conditions often lead to a difficulty in adjusting academically to the new environment, thus having a negative effect on the international student’s ability to receive an effective education.

Social Capital Theory

According to Trice, Social Capital Theory provides a reason why international students may feel overwhelmed and ultimately unsatisfied with their learning experience within a host nation. The theory states that there exists an unequal distribution as to the access of opportunities that exist within a given institution. Certain members can more easily tap into these resources than others. For example, students that have grown up learning the values and norms necessary to unlock certain doors will be better equipped to find job opportunities as well as other beneficial openings. Trice argues that international students who neglect to make friendship with students from the host nation will most likely miss out on many of the options that their university
provides. Studies show that international students that do socialize with members of their host nation have the greatest amount of fulfillment from their study abroad (Trice, 2004).

Survey conducted on international students

Questionnaire
The questionnaire used for the survey falls into four groups. (1) The background and nationality information of the student. (2) Student’s experience of language barrier and the possible causes. (3) The effectiveness of the current resources/facilities. (4) General comments.

Purpose
This survey aims at getting real insights and understandings of the problem of language barriers faced by the international community on campus. Through this survey, we hope to elicit the possible causes of the problem and at the same time, get some clues of the flaws within the current situation. With this, we hope to reach a conclusion which could be based on finding the possible changes to tackle the current problem.

Sample
Since the dominant group of the international community consists of students, we have made this group our primary subject for investigation. Our survey sample consists of 41 international students. Even though this number is relatively small compared to the total number of international students on campus, we have tried to make the sample as diverse as possible. The students came from various nations and speak different first languages. The largest group was from Malaysia and Singapore, followed by Korean, Japan, India and China. The remaining includes individuals from Indonesia, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Peru and France. The majority of them speak Mandarin, followed by Korean, Japanese, Indonesian, English and Hindi. Other languages include Cantonese, Malays, Spanish, French and Vietnamese.

Discussion
The prevalence of language barriers

In general, most of the international students faced some degree of language barriers. In response to the question “Do you have trouble communicating with Americans?” (choices including very often, often, sometimes, rarely and never), 17 students out of 41 answered sometimes, 2 said often and 1 very often. The remaining 21 selected rarely or never. It can be seen, therefore, that the problem of language barriers is quite prevalent, as almost half of the sample have reported to be experiencing trouble in communicating with Americans. Our surveys also disclosed that students from Korea and Japan are more likely to face language barriers than students from Singapore and India.

The causes of language barriers

The causes of language barriers identified from our surveys are quite consistent with our initial assumptions. Most of the students identified the American English accent as the primary cause for language barriers. Others included the use of phrases and idioms as something they fail to grasp, as well as the differences in the structures of English and their first language. Only a very small portion of students pointed out the fact that Americans speak too fast as a hindrance to communication. However, it should be noted that the causes of language barriers could be very complicated. Several students are unsure about the exact causes of language barriers. One student even noted that “I am just too lazy to talk to Americans to be proficient”. Perhaps in this case, it is the fear of losing their cultural roots that prevents them to be proficient in English.

The effect of language barriers on the learning process

Out of 41 students, 13 indicated that their proficiency in English has affected their academic performance. This figure is significant as it represents almost one third of the students in the sample. Our survey also showed that their academic performance especially suffered in courses such as rhetoric, business and technical writing and some other core classes, depending on the specific major.

The fairness of the TOEFL
Our university evaluates the admission of international students based on the TOEFL in addition to other general admission factors. It is generally assumed that with the requirement of 213 on the TOEFL, the students admitted will have fairly good command of the language and will suffer less from language barriers. In fact, this is relatively true as our survey has showed. However, our survey also found that judging one’s language proficiency based solely on the TOEFL may not always be accurate. The students revealed that there are flaws in the TOEFL such as lack of oral tests, too much emphasis on the vocabulary and listening over the structure of English, as well as the test being extremely long.

The effectiveness of resources and facilities

Our surveys showed that most of the international students are not aware of the resources and facilities offered by the university, besides courses like rhetoric and ESL which aims at English language learning. Only a very small fraction of students know about resources such as the Writers Workshops and Intensive English Learning Program and Adoption Program, information on which could be found on the internet, or through instructors, friends, campus handbooks and advertisements. As a result, most students think that promotions are the first step to improve the situation.

Suggestions received through open-ended question

The last question of the surveys asked students for any general comments. The responses received were useful and positive. Some students suggested that taking up the courage to talk and mix with Americans is essential to reduce the language barrier. Some thought that familiarizing oneself with the American culture and slang would be helpful. One of the students was very specific in his suggestion, where he said that “the first thing you should do is let us know what resources are available to us. For example, you can make ‘advertisement’ in the ESL class because every international student needs to take ESL class. Spreading news through ESL class
should be the best way”. Thus, students are in fact aware of the problem and they stress that steps can be taken to reduce it.

Survey 2 Analysis

*Questionnaire*

The questions used in this survey falls into four groups. (1) The demographic information of the undergraduate student. (2) Student’s experience of language barrier and the possible causes. (3) The effectiveness of the current Teaching Assistants. (4) General comments and concerns.

*Purpose*

The purpose of this survey was to find out the severity of the problems created by language barriers between native English speaking students and international teaching assistants. Through this survey, we hope to narrow down the problems the University of Illinois is currently experiencing as well as possibly locating some solutions to the problem.

*Sample*

Sixty surveys were completed by undergraduate students at the University of Illinois on the topic of language barriers within the classrooms. We administered our survey to 60 undergraduate students walking through or sitting on the main quad. This is a small percentage of all the undergraduate students on the university, but we feel that this survey is representative of the population because of the wide variety of students that responded. In this survey the students represented most of the colleges here on campus with LAS, Business and Engineering comprising the larger groups. Of the 60 respondents, 35 were female and 25 were male. The split between the academic years was pretty diverse, ranging from freshmen to seniors.
Discussion

Language barriers between native English speakers and International Teaching Assistants

46 out of 60 respondents said that the teaching abilities of their international teaching assistants were acceptable, good or excellent. This leaves 23% of the undergraduate population unsatisfied with the teaching effectiveness of their international teaching assistants. This is a lower percentage then our group had originally thought, which means that language barriers here on the university, between native English speaking students and international teaching assistants, are not as severe of a detriment to education as we had previously believed. This does not mean that the issue of language barriers can be ignored, due to the 23% of students that felt that their teaching assistants were unsatisfactory.

The causes of language barriers

The cause of the language barriers between native English speaking students and international teaching assistants as seen from the student’s point of view is their teaching assistant’s lack of command of the English language. Fifty-six percent of our respondents said that they have problems communicating with their international teaching assistant as a result.

The effect of language barriers on the learning process

In our survey we asked two questions that were meant to gauge the effect of language barriers on the overall learning process. The first question was: Do you feel that your overall education is threatened due to language barriers between yourself and your TA? This question had five choices ranging from definitely to no. Of our 60 respondents we found that four answered definitely, 10 probably, 22 maybe, 16 doubtful, and 8 no. These responses show that the
University of Illinois students are concerned with the effects that language barriers incur with their teaching assistants that may be hindering their overall education. The second question focused on hindrances of grades. This question had a similar distribution as the previous one. Students at the University of Illinois are concerned with their education and grading with respect to language barriers. Thirteen students even said that they switched out of a discussion section just to avoid the communication problems that they would have incurred had they stayed in the section.

*Suggestions received through open-ended question*

Our last survey question asked if the University of Illinois should change its process of hiring international teaching assistants. 25 students, out of the 60 that responded, said yes. Following this was a general comment section in which we received many useful comments ranging from, “My TA sucks because I do not understand what he is saying” to “International TAs usually have good notes. So, I think this has compensated for their low proficiency in English”. Comments like the second were more common. Most students recognize that there is a problem with language barriers, but they understand that their teaching assistants are trying to work with them in order to create solutions. One of our questions asked student how hard they think their teaching assistants are working in order to achieve better oral proficiency. All but five of the responses were either hard or very hard. This shows that for the most part there is not hatred between students and international teaching assistants, but instead a relationship where it is understood that there are obstacles to a shared goal.

**Teaching Assistant Interviews**

Two teaching assistants were interviewed in order to gain more insightful feedback and knowledge about their experiences as either international teaching assistants or teaching international students. Fortunately, we were able to interview both an international teaching assistant and a teaching assistant who has had experience working with international students in the classroom. The object was to find information pertaining to experiences encountered,
surrounding the topic of language barriers. Additionally, it was important to understand how language barriers affected the teaching and/or learning experiences.

Subject 1

The subject being interviewed is a teaching assistant from the Psychology Department; he is Chinese-American and is in graduate school studying Clinical Psychology. Because the subject has requested anonymity, throughout the content of this document we will refer to this subject as M1, ‘M’ stands for male and the number ‘1’ stands for the first subject.

Discussion

M1 is teaching courses in Asian-American Studies, Educational Organization and Leadership, and also in Educational Psychology. Since he teaches dialogue courses, he requires the students’ participation; this is because a huge part of their grade is strictly on participation. In some of his classes you can find diverse students of different cultures, additionally, you can find international students. Due to some of the students learning English as a second language, there are times that their accent is strong or that they are not able to communicate as well, which causes native English speakers to not understand them all the time. M1 does notice this language barrier problem, but he encourages students to ask a lot of questions if they are having problems. He also encourages group work because he feels it helps their interaction, but he pointed out that it is also dependant upon who is in the group (Interview, M1).

M1 also added that even though he was born in the United States and does not have an accent, the first day he walked into his class, he felt that the students seemed to be concerned about him being an international teaching assistant. When he started talking without an accent he saw some students that seemed relieved. Through this experience he has felt that students who have these stereotypes are not surrounded by diverse populations, or have very few experiences in their background with different cultures. Because of this he feels the university can help students overcome some issues with language barriers and decrease the stereotypes of international students by having mandatory courses that expose students to different backgrounds and culture
(Interview, M1). Also M1 feels that, “This would promote culture, understanding, and tolerance,” (Interview, M1) for students.

Analysis
In reference to the first subject, M1, it is evident that although his opinion could be biased due to his encounters or experiences with a certain population, it is noteworthy. It is an important observation to point out that maybe some of his students that are native speakers might not be used to certain backgrounds or cultures. It could be true for any group of people from different cultures, because many times it has to do with the community one was raised in.

It was also interesting that M1 noticed how the students reacted before even hearing him talk; all he had to do was walk into his classroom. This is interesting for a couple reasons; one is that students might have some bad preconceptions about teaching assistants from other backgrounds. Two, it is easy to point out that M1 may have had experiences like this before, which leads us to the idea that language barriers occur, at times, between both teaching assistants and students.

Subject 2
The teaching assistant was born in Korea and attended college in the United States in the late ‘80’s and early ‘90’s. She obtained her bachelors degree in Indiana University, and she received her masters at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. In the time between getting her bachelors and masters degree she went back to Korea for a couple of years and taught English. She came back to the states in 1997 and now resides in the area. Due to the subject’s request to withhold her identification, this subject will be F2; ‘F’ will stand for female and ‘2’ will stand for the second subject.

Discussion
As briefly mentioned above, F2 has had previous experience working with students who are learning English as a second language, in fact, she was also a student who had to learn English as a second language. Currently, F2 is a teaching assistant for both Psychology and Educational Psychology. She has mentioned that, to her knowledge, students do not seem to have a problem
with her English, but she says the only time she feels she is not teaching as effectively as possible, is when she has not had much experience with the material being discussed. Since she mostly has graded papers and dealt with other teaching assistant tasks, she has not particularly held discussions with the students, except for one class she teaches now. This class covers topics and material that she has had previous experience with and prepares for vigorously. Again, in this class she has not experienced many instances where her language or accent was an issue in her classroom, and when international students did need help they would come to her office hours. She mentions that it seems as though their main problem is not so much their language but rather their writing style when having to write papers (Interview, F2).

Some interesting issues she brought up were that she did not feel language was so much of the problem in learning and/or teaching effectively. In her opinion, she felt as though if native speakers would prepare for class, instead of skimming through the readings, they may be able to understand discussions or lectures that are given by international instructors. Also she mentioned that she has asked other international teaching assistants if they would be willing to be more involved in helping the language barrier issues that they may encounter at the university. She added that unfortunately, some international teaching assistants do not find the time or money to invest in such opportunities. But F2 did add that she would be further interested in eliminating language barriers at the university since they do exist. She also provided information about the university in regards to the courses that are offered for international students and teaching assistants to, not only, assess their abilities and language skills, but also to guide them through their college courses (Interview, F2).

Analysis

Another important observation and comment made by F2 is that she was quick to point out that language barriers are a problem, but at times others forget that there could be more factors than just the language barrier that affects students. For example, F2 mentioned that if students do not properly prepare for the material in class, it will be difficult for them to follow along in the first
place; she also said the same about teaching assistants. But, of course, one cannot definitely say that all native speakers skim through readings while all international students try their hardest and vigorously prepare for the material. It would be interesting to investigate the study habits of native speakers and compare them to international students’ study habits. This could absolutely be a very valid point that F2 is making, and it was surprising to hear because it is rarely a comment that one hears when talking about language barriers in the university. The controversy always surrounds the language barriers and the lack of the English language on behalf of international students or teaching assistants. It is easy to blame their accent or language because it is sometimes obvious, but people overlook other factors that may contribute to the consequences typically stated about students’ achievements and learning and/or international instructors teaching effectiveness.

**Conclusion of both TA interviews**

It is important to note that both, M1 and F2, have had a similar experience. That is, when they walk into their classes for the first time, they feel as though the students already have bad stereotypes or bad preconceptions about them because of their different culture or ethnicity. Since both subjects are from an Asian background, M2 being Chinese-American and F2 being Korean, it is easy to see the connection with Asian teaching assistants. Is it that students feel most Asian teaching assistants may have a problem with the English language or have an accent? Or could it be that there is a bigger population of Asian teaching assistants on campus, and students are just more likely to have TA’s from an Asian background? Since only two teaching assistants, one international and the other a resident, were interviewed, it is difficult to make either assumption. But it is significant to mention because it could encourage further investigations into those specific topics.

**Conclusion of surveys**

Overall, the findings of the survey suggest that students do believe language barriers exist in the university, but many feel it is because of the accent, phrases and idioms. Usually international
students seem to have more difficulties in some core classes or writing courses. It also seems that some resources are not being taken advantage of whether it is because students are unaware of them; they do not have time, or just simply do not want to. A majority of students are happy with their TAs. But that does not mean that there are no concerns with the language barriers interfering with their education. In fact, due to this fear, some students drop courses or switch discussion sections. Students feel that for the most part, teaching assistants are aware of this issue as well and are more than willing to make improvements and adjustments that are within their reach. But the students still feel that because of the language barrier issues that do exist, the university should be stricter when making decisions concerning the hiring TAs.

**ISSS Interview**

We have also had the opportunity to speak with one of the advisors at the ISSS (International Student and Scholar Services) Office. She gave valuable information as to what academic and social services are available, as well as the steps taken by ISSS to ensure an agreeable campus experience for both incoming freshmen and current students from overseas. Being in a position where she interacts with numerous international students, she felt that it would be wise to keep from disclosing her name, fearing that some students might consider it a breach of their personal information.

*Discussion*

There are currently a wide range of activities offered by ISSS to all international students. The initial orientation at the beginning of every academic year introduces various speakers who provide students with an overview of campus life; this includes setting up of bank accounts, tips on how to deal with advisors, information on visa and immigration formalities, and most importantly, what to expect in classrooms and how to interact with professors and other students. In order to further facilitate the transition process, ISSS offers various other programs during the school year such as field trips to neighboring cities, career and resume workshops geared
specifically towards foreign nationals, tips on what to expect from US employers and how to give oral presentations in both the classroom and the workplace. There are also various Student Diplomats who are native speakers of English, currently enrolled as undergraduates in the university, who volunteer to organize social and cultural programs with the newcomers in order to make them more at ease with the new environment.

The main focus of ISSS lies on not only international students, but also the instructors themselves. There are several workshops for professors, teaching assistants, and other staff members that provide them with demographic information, as well as clues as to what international students expect and how they work. This is an extensive session where over a hundred faculty members are trained and informed. These workshops are organized in order to bridge the gap between instructors and international students so that they better understand each others’ needs. It is important to note that regardless of the amount of effort put in by students to grasp a second language, there is always a need for proper guidance support from their teachers. Through these informative training sessions, ISSS strives to create this rapport between instructors and their students.

The main issues that need immediate attention on the part of ISSS are those regarding immigration and visa documents as well as financial proofs. It also addresses problems with advisors mainly at the level of differences in communication. There have been various cases where students have complained about poor academic results due to lack of proficiency in the language, rather than the material itself. ISSS strives to address these issues as well by imposing a mandatory English Placement Test for those who do not have a sufficient TOEFL score. If the student does not pass with sufficient results, he is required to take ESL (English as Second Language) courses. Another problem that arises from the lack of communication between the student and his respective advisor is the failure to register for the proper courses, which may cause degree requirements to remain unfulfilled on time.

*Analysis*
This interview led us to the conclusion that despite all the services offered by the university, international students are, nevertheless, prone to facing problems dealing with their proficiency in English. It is wrong to assume that the administration is unaware of this problem and that it is merely an abstract representation. It is a concrete phenomenon that is a daily reality for certain individuals as they strive to live in a foreign land, speaking a foreign tongue. Despite the fact that there are a wide variety of services offered by ISSS, this problem still persists, alluding to the notion that it ultimately depends on the individual himself to bring about a notable change in proficiency and adaptation. There is only so much that outside resources could do, it is the international students’ responsibility to make a constant effort to stay informed and be vigilant in his or her learning and mastery of the language.

**Secondary sources**

As we endeavored to suggest several strategies that could be implemented in order to facilitate the learning of English, we came across some scholarship that proved to offer a remedy. One such book stresses the importance of letting go of the rules and simply speaking it, even if it is ungrammatical or incoherent (Brown, 1941). It compares language to a game of tennis, where the more one focuses on simply the rules, the more (s)he is likely to lose. This highlights the problem of getting immersed in grammatical rules so much so that one loses the patience and fluidity needed to learn a language, and merely hesitates to speak it. An interesting point made by this author involves the fast language acquisition capacities seen in children. The key to this is a “subconscious effort” (Brown, 1941, p. 30) and a focus on communicating the overall idea rather than analyzing every sentence to make sure it is syntactically correct. They are “less inhibited linguistically than adults” (Brown, 1941, p. 33) suggesting adults are generally more self-conscious.

Since our research deals with the proficiency in English among students and instructors at college level, one particular quote is especially relevant:

> Failure among adult second-language learners is frequently due to our perverse knack for letting ourselves be overwhelmed by the enormity of the task lies before us, by all the
sounds and words and rules and conventions we are going to have to learn. (Brown, 1941, p. 32)

This underlines the fact that adults engage in a conscious effort to speak a language, which merely hinders the flow of their words and makes them less proficient. Another example provided by the author stresses the notion that it is vital for students to gain a lot of practical skill; the classroom provides ample scope for them to indulge in the grammar and structure of the language, yet it may not necessarily give them an equal opportunity to utilize these various facets in the course of their everyday lives.

Multilingualism is a common phenomenon in almost all corners of the globe. Finding a stringent solution to increase proficiency in a common language is not entirely plausible in a setting such as a college environment, where hundreds of different languages are spoken on a daily basis. As mentioned by Müller, “language symbolizes [a] culture and is the most obvious external sign of [the] unity as a group” (Müller, 1992, p. 40). It is, therefore, extremely difficult to enforce the learning of English in such cases where most individuals may not be too willing to do so in the first place. This resistance may either come from a feeling of loss of cultural roots or simply that English proves to be too difficult to learn. The advisor from ISSS whom we interviewed, mentioned this active notion prevalent among the population of international students, “some of them simply do not wish to be proficient in English” (Interview, ISSS advisor). In response to a question which asked for her opinion on whether international students tend to group up together with their ‘own kind’ (i.e. race/ethnicity), she mentioned how some individuals tend to do so, especially if they are new to this campus. The reasons behind this sort of behavior could be either that they simply want to, or that going back to their native speakers at the end of a long day of classes acts as a relief from speaking in English.

A language serves as a window to a culture. Keeping this in mind, it is therefore easy to see why certain individuals consider it an intrusion of their common ground when they are required to learn another language; they feel that they are in the process of losing their heritage. This is, however, highly debatable since in today’s world, where globalization is becoming an
increasingly powerful phenomenon, individuals with command over merely one language are considered to be inefficient and lacking in volatility. Fred West exemplifies this nature of ‘self-defense’ in his book, where he relates various anecdotes as justification. He shows how, in East Asian cultures, age is a symbol of great reverence, thus justifying the fact why most women would find it a great compliment to be called an ‘old woman’ (West, 1961, p. 54). This would be highly unacceptable in the American culture where it is improper, if not rude, to address a woman in this manner. This shows us how differences in cultures affect the respective languages as well. Attitudes influence speech, rendering an individual never fully proficient in a foreign language; this is because biases and opinions from the native culture are transferred as the individual learns the second language, and hence he merely translates what he deems is the correct way to convey a particular idea. Thus, knowledge of both customs and words is necessary to succeed in grasping the essence of a foreign language, and use it to convey messages on a daily basis and not merely as a classroom activity.

**Conclusion**

Through our primary and secondary research we have uncovered many of the causes of language barriers here at the University of Illinois. We have also explored the severity of these problems as viewed from both students and faculty. Our research clearly indicates that the student and faculty population is aware and concerned about the effects that language barriers create.

**Conclusion of both TA interviews**

It is important to note that both, M1 and F2, have had a similar experience. That is, when they walk into their classes for the first time, they feel as though the students already have bad stereotypes or bad preconceptions about them because of their different culture or ethnicity. Since both subjects are from an Asian background, M2 being Chinese-American and F2 being Korean, it is easy to see the connection with Asian teaching assistants. Is it that students feel most Asian teaching assistants may have a problem with the English language or have an accent? Since only two teaching assistants, one international and the other a resident, were interviewed, it
is difficult to make this assumption. But it is significant to mention because it could encourage further investigations into this specific topic.

Conclusion of surveys
Overall, the findings of the survey suggest that students do believe language barriers exist in the university, but many feel it is because of the accent, phrases and idioms. Usually international students seem to have more difficulties in some core classes or writing courses. It also seems that some resources are not being taken advantage of whether it is because students are unaware of them, or because they do not have time, just simply do not want to. A majority of students are happy with their TAs. But that does not mean that there are no concerns with the language barriers interfering with their education. In fact, due to this fear, some students drop courses or switch discussion sections. Students feel that for the most part, teaching assistants are aware of this issue as well and are more than willing to make improvements and adjustments that are within their reach. But the students still feel that because of the language barrier issues that do exist, the university should be stricter when making decisions concerning the hiring of TAs.

Recommendations
We argue that teaching assistants should continue to be open-minded and willing to make modifications in their classrooms to better suit those who have problems with language barriers. International teaching assistants, as well as students who have problems understanding the material clearly, should make sure to take the time and better prepare for classes, by reading the required material before class, asking questions when feeling lost or something is unclear, or make an effort to attend the teaching assistant’s office hours when needed. Also students should be aware that although there may be some bad preconceptions about international TAs, they should keep an open mind and work with the TA or international students instead of assuming the worst out of the situation.
We came up with a few actions that could be taken to help lessen the effect of language barriers. Initially, it appeared that there were limited resources for international students to use in order to aid their assimilation into the University of Illinois environment. After a bit of research it became quite apparent that there were many services offered by the University to combat the problem of language barriers. These services, although plentiful, go underappreciated and are often not used or even known about by their intended users. The university needs to make a greater effort to promote these programs and locate them where international students can attend. If information about the language barrier problem was available in university housing then more students would have an opportunity to go. Every international student should be aware of all of their options. Many programs exist that can offer help either academically or socially.

Other suggestions include the creation of a course aimed at familiarizing international students with the American accent, phrases, and sentence structure. Many international students come to the University of Illinois with a good command of formal written English, but have not been exposed to the English language the way it is spoken by American college students. This incompatibility can lead to misunderstandings between international students and native speakers. One of the responses we received from the “general comment” section of our international student survey mentioned that watching American films can be a good way to familiarize with the English language. The university could use this idea and select certain films that would be most beneficial to learn American language.

An oral test should be given as a supplement to TOEFL. Many students that score high on the TOEFL test show relatively weak spoken English skills. This supplement could be used to determine what level of class would be appropriate based on the student’s command of the English language both written and spoken. Only students that show a high proficiency in both spoken and written English will be able to proceed to the more advanced writing courses. This oral test would ensure that no student is getting in over their head. Ultimately, it would help eliminate frustration on the part of instructors and international students.
Our final suggestion involves every student both international and native speaking to attend a mandatory presentation on language barriers and their effects. Although we did find that for the most part students and faculty work together outside of the university’s guidance, a mandatory presentation would bring greater understanding to the issue. In the end, the benefits that can be gained through student interactions far outweigh the consequences that might result. The main goal of this institution should be to try to limit the negative effects that language barriers have here at the University of Illinois without losing any international presence.
References


ISSS Advisor (personal communication, April 19, 2006) endorses this view.


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