

Oral English Proficiency Requirements for Teaching Assistants

This resource describes key English proficiency considerations for departments who are recruiting, admitting, and hiring international and non-native English-speaking teaching assistants. Graduate students will find important information about how they may fulfill Illinois' Oral English Proficiency Requirements for teaching.



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Achieving strong English proficiency is essential for effective teaching at Illinois and for your future academic career. Graduate students may demonstrate oral English proficiency in several ways, and Illinois offers a variety of resources to help students develop strong oral English skills for teaching.

University Policy Regarding Oral English Proficiency for Teaching

According to university policy and state law, international and graduate students for whom English is a second language must pass a prescribed oral English proficiency screening assessment and participate fully in a pre-semester training program to be eligible to teach **face-to-face** and **online courses** as well as hold **office hours**. Graders, however, are exempt from demonstrating oral English proficiency if they have no oral interaction with students.

This campus policy applies to all international students and to all prospective teaching assistants for whom English is a second language *regardless of country of origin, nationality, or the language of instruction in any high school, undergraduate, or graduate degree program they may have previously completed.*

Prospective TAs are strongly encouraged to demonstrate oral proficiency for teaching before first arriving on campus by achieving a qualifying speaking score on the TOEFL iBT or IELTS. However, students who arrive without a qualifying TOEFL or IELTS score may take the on-campus English Proficiency Interview (EPI), which is offered every semester.

Complete information about the EPI, including a sample interview video, score interpretation, upcoming interview dates, and registration procedures, is available on the CITL website: <http://citl.illinois.edu/citl-101/measurement-evaluation/english-proficiency-interview>

The following chart provides score requirements for TA consideration:

English Proficiency Test	Scores Required for TAs who are Non-Native Speakers of English
TOEFL iBT (speaking sub-section score)	24 and above
IELTS (academic exam, speaking sub-section score)	8 and above
EPI (on-campus only)	4CP*, 5, or 6

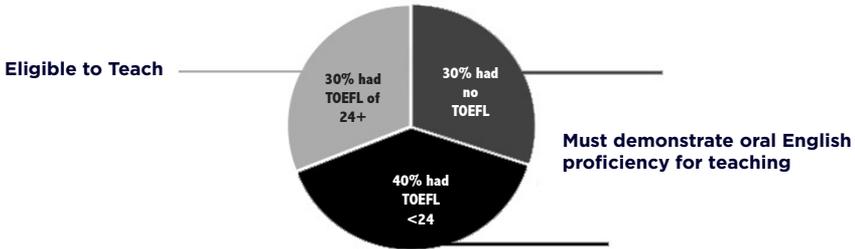
*Students who receive a score of 4CP on the EPI may teach provided they enroll in and successfully complete ESL 508: Seminar for International TAs. This course may be taken prior to or during the first semester of teaching.

English Proficiency Requirements Are Different for Graduate Admission and for Teaching

When evaluating applications for admission to Illinois, the **Graduate College provides TOEFL and IELTS exemptions** to students from 36 countries as well as to students who have recently completed one of the following in countries where English is the primary language: at least two years of a) professional experience or b) post-secondary education in English-medium institutions. The exemptions accepted for admission, however, do not apply for teaching.

About 30% of incoming international graduate students have obtained TOEFL or IELTS scores that clear them for teaching. The remaining 70% have received a failing score or have no TOEFL or IELTS score. Most students in this latter group who wish to apply for TA appointments must take and pass the TOEFL, IELTS, or EPI prior to teaching.

New International Graduate Students: Eligible to Teach?



Who Needs to Demonstrate Oral English Proficiency for Teaching?

The following chart is designed to help departments and graduate students determine who must demonstrate oral English proficiency.

Has the student attended English-medium schools continuously since age 13 (or younger) in Australia, Anglophone Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, or the United States?

YES

Exempt from demonstrating oral English language proficiency.

Must attend Graduate Academy before first semester of teaching.

NO

In the 2 years prior to enrolling in an Illinois graduate program, did the student obtain a qualifying speaking score (TOEFL \geq 24 or IELTS \geq 8)?

YES

Meets oral English requirement; EPI not needed. Must attend Graduate Academy before first semester of teaching.

NO

Must take and pass EPI, TOEFL, or IELTS to be cleared for teaching and attendance at the Graduate Academy.

Students Who Have Passed TOEFL, IELTS, or the EPI

Students who have obtained passing scores on the TOEFL or IELTS (within 2 years prior to graduate admission) or who have passed the EPI are required to complete a teacher orientation program prior to their first semester of teaching. Most students attend the Graduate Academy for College Teaching offered by CITL, though some units offer their own approved teacher orientation. The Graduate Academy is offered in August and January during the week before instruction begins. For more information, visit:

<http://citl.illinois.edu/citl-101/teaching-learning/conferences-workshops>

Even after they begin teaching, TAs may continue to build on their English proficiency and teaching effectiveness by participating in workshops and certificate programs offered by CITL. Visit <http://citl.illinois.edu/about-citl/calendar> and <http://citl.illinois.edu/citl-101/teaching-learning/teaching-certificates> for more information.

Students Who Have Not Taken the TOEFL or IELTS

Enrolled students who have not demonstrated oral English proficiency may still take the TOEFL or IELTS, but most students choose to take the EPI. Among students who are admitted without a TOEFL or IELTS score, ~45% typically pass the EPI on their first attempt.

Students With Low Speaking Scores

Students with TOEFL scores of 20 and below tend to pass the EPI at a much lower rate: about 10 to 30%. Similar data is not available for students who submit IELTS scores, given that only a small number take IELTS. To increase chances for success, students with low speaking scores may benefit from 1) waiting to take the EPI for one or more semesters, to give themselves time to adjust to an English-language environment; and 2) taking one or more ESL courses during their first year, prior to taking the EPI, so they can receive feedback and assistance on the aspects of oral English where improvement may be needed.

Illinois offers ESL courses and workshops designed specifically for prospective TAs. Information can be found at http://go.illinois.edu/ESL_for_TAs. Students may also hire, at their own expense, an approved tutor to help them develop their oral English skills and to prepare for the EPI. Tutors can help students at multiple points: before their first EPI attempt, as an oral English improvement activity should a student fail the EPI (described next), and at any time a student is seeking English-language assistance. The list of approved tutors can be found at http://go.illinois.edu/Approved_Tutors.

Students Who Fail the EPI

Students may take the EPI a maximum of three times, and no more than one time per semester. Students should not be alarmed if they fail the EPI on their first attempt. Each semester, as many as 50% of first-time examinees receive a failing score. Students can use this experience to re-commit to studying and speaking English as much as possible.



In order to be eligible to retake the EPI, students who fail the EPI must complete an English improvement activity in a semester after they last took the EPI. Students may choose one or both of the following improvement activities:

Option 1: Enroll in one approved ESL course (ESL 504, 506, or 510). Students may retake the EPI during the same semester they are enrolled in an ESL course. Students who plan to do this will be assigned an EPI date that is late in the semester, so they can complete most of the ESL coursework prior to their interview. Students must satisfactorily complete the ESL course in order for their EPI score to be considered official.

Option 2: Start working with an approved EPI tutor. If the student selects tutoring for the improvement activity, the following requirements apply:

- Students must meet with the tutor at least once a week for a minimum of 8 weeks.
- Students who received a 4 on the EPI must complete a minimum of 10 hours of tutoring.
- Students with an EPI score of 3 must complete a minimum of 20 hours of tutoring before retaking the EPI.

Students who receive a 3 on their second EPI attempt are strongly encouraged to arrange for an individual language assessment meeting with the ITA Program Coordinator in the Linguistics Department. This one-hour consultation is free of charge. At this meeting, the student will be given a diagnostic exam. Based on that exam, a study plan will be developed to guide the student's oral English improvement.

How Long does it Take to Develop English Proficiency for Teaching?

English proficiency increases at different rates depending on several factors. A key factor is how much a student is **using English on a daily basis**. Research repeatedly identifies extensive daily use of English as a top predictor for reaching higher levels of proficiency. Students who find themselves primarily interacting in their first language will experience limited increases in oral English proficiency, or may even decline, in spite of living in an English-language setting.

Another informative factor is the **score received on the TOEFL, IELTS, or EPI**. In general, the lower the speaking score, the more time needed to improve. This relationship is more meaningful the more recently the score was obtained.

A third factor relates to **which language features need to be improved**. Students who already have strong command of English pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary may need one to two semesters to develop sufficient fluency--the ability to easily and smoothly express one's ideas. On the other hand, students who find that inaccuracies in pronunciation or grammar or limited vocabulary range significantly interfere with intelligibility may need a year of instruction, and often more, to achieve satisfactory intelligibility for teaching.

An ESL instructor or approved tutor can help students identify their strengths and weaknesses and provide appropriate guidance on how best to achieve the level of oral English proficiency required for teaching.

Ways to Develop Oral English Proficiency

Second language acquisition research offers strong support for the following strategies for building oral English skills:

(1) Use English (a lot!) every day. Graduate students have many demands on their time, but attention to English language development should remain a priority during the graduate years for those who plan to teach and participate in the larger international academic community. Ways to build in daily English use include forming a practice or study group, finding a conversation partner, taking an ESL class, volunteering in the community, talking daily to colleagues and others, and making small talk at the coffee shop or in the office or lab. Learn to assess your language skills by making a video or audio recording of yourself giving a short lesson or presentation. Review the recording yourself and with a native speaker to obtain feedback. Watching English-language videos and using online resources to study are other excellent strategies. English language resources are listed in this handout and on the websites for CITL and the Linguistics Department.

(2) Take calculated English language risks. People who take good risks are more successful language learners. Good risks include asking questions when you don't understand, and talking to others in English even if you're nervous. Be curious about the surrounding language and culture: Be a keen observer of how native speakers of English communicate effectively,

pronounce academic and field-specific terminology, and organize and express their ideas.

(3) Make mistakes—and learn from them. Making mistakes is OK when using English. And in fact, mistakes are an important part of the language learning process. For everyday communication in English, focus on clearly expressing meaning (and a bit less on accuracy). To improve accuracy, students must build in daily practice time to focus on pronunciation, increas-

ing vocabulary and fluency, and learning to express ideas clearly. Over time and with constant and targeted effort, everyday English proficiency will improve.

(4) Work to understand others. During conversations, presentations, or when teaching, people who try to understand others are more successful communicators and language learners. Asking the other person to slow down, repeat something, clarify what they said, or give an example are all good ways to facilitate communication as well as advance language proficiency.

(5) Build listening skills. Being able to easily understand everything when interacting in English is just as important as strong oral proficiency. Strong listening comprehension also is critical in the classroom, for understanding and accurately responding to students' questions. How to improve listening comprehension? Ask someone to repeat what they just said, to make sure you understand. Listen to English-language videos without and then with captions to test listening comprehension. Meet regularly with a conversation partner.



ITA/EPI Fact Sheet

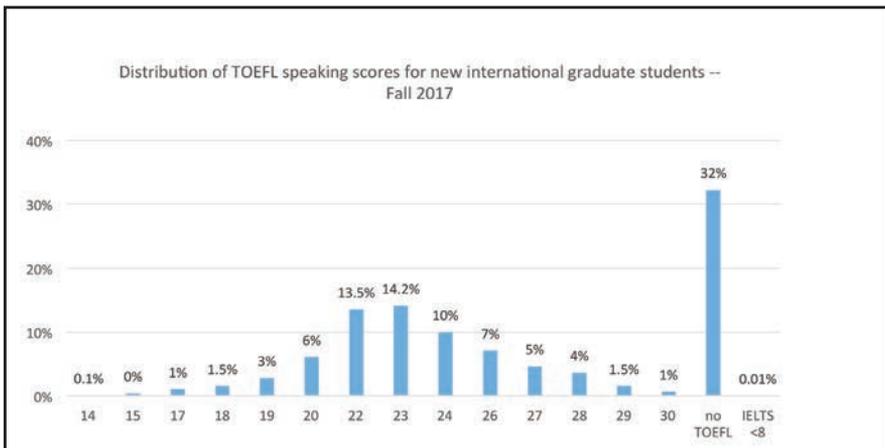
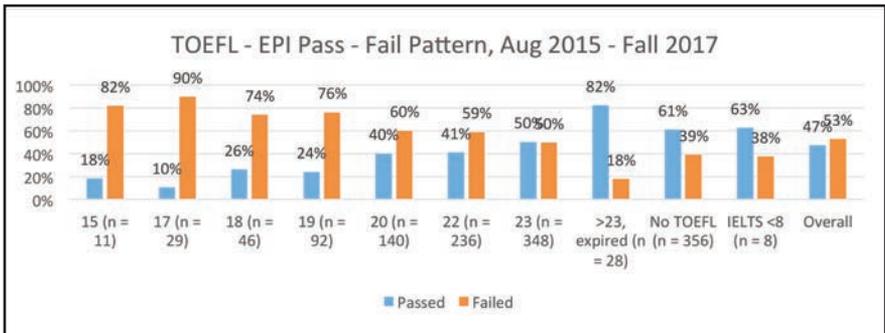
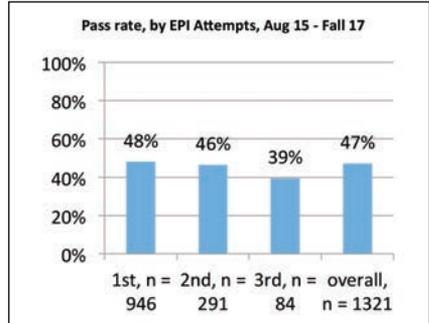
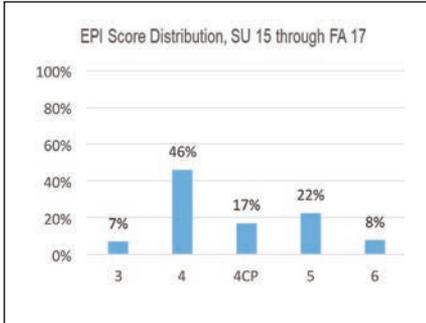
Sources: Graduate College, Academic Human Resources, and CITL

How many ITAs, on average, are employed on campus each academic year?

1085

How many Illinois graduate students, on average, take the EPI each academic year?

500



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EPI website: <http://citl.illinois.edu/citl-101/measurement-evaluation/english-proficiency-interview>

EPI FAQs for Departments:

<http://citl.illinois.edu/citl-101/measurement-evaluation/english-proficiency-interview/faqs-for-departments>

EPI FAQs for Students:

<http://citl.illinois.edu/citl-101/measurement-evaluation/english-proficiency-interview/faqs-for-students>

Teaching resources: Each semester CITL offers workshops on teaching effectiveness for all TAs and faculty. Additionally, the CITL Teaching Certificate Program is designed to meet the professional development needs and interests of teachers on campus.

Teaching Certificates:

<http://citl.illinois.edu/citl-101/teaching-learning/teaching-certificates>

Conferences/Workshops:

<http://citl.illinois.edu/citl-101/teaching-learning/conferences-workshops>

CITL Calendar:

<http://citl.illinois.edu/about-citl/calendar>

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The University of Illinois campus provides a variety of resources to support graduate students as they develop their English language and teaching skills. Visit the following websites to learn more.

ESL courses for ITAs: <http://www.linguistics.illinois.edu/students/esl/ITA.html>

List of approved EPI tutors:

<http://www.linguistics.illinois.edu/students/esl/AboutTutors.html>

Campus and community English language opportunities:

<http://www.linguistics.illinois.edu/students/esl/ESLopportunities.html>

Free high-quality online resources:

<https://www.duolingo.com/> and <http://www.englishcentral.com> can be used at any time you want to study or practice on your own, using a PC, tablet, or smart phone.