

Spoken Proficiency of English in the Classroom (SPEC) Test

All students for whom English is not a first language (as self-reported on their admissions application) and who have first-time appointments as graduate teaching assistants (TAs) are required to take a test to assess their effectiveness in speaking English before they are assigned assistantship responsibilities. This is based on a policy overseen by the Office of the Provost (see the [University of Iowa Policy Manual III-13](#)), which was derived from a Board of Regents mandate (see [Iowa Code 262.9 #24-5](#)).

Prospective TAs will take the Spoken Proficiency of English in the Classroom (SPEC) test. The SPEC test assesses TAs' ability to communicate in English in a classroom context in their own field of study.

What is the SPEC Test?

The SPEC test assesses how well test takers use English to perform a variety of functions related to classroom activities. There are two main sections: impromptu speaking and an interactive presentation. If a test taker qualifies for a shortened test, they will only take the second section of the test.

➤ Section 1

○ Task 1: Impromptu Response

- We will ask 1-3 questions about educational experiences. We will talk for up to three minutes. Follow-up questions (e.g. clarification) are allowed.

○ Task 2: Announcement of Changes

- The test taker will assume the role of a TA of an undergraduate-level class. In the context of this task, the professor sent information to the students earlier in the week. The test taker is tasked with announcing the corrections to test proctors as if they are students. Test takers have up to 30 seconds to prepare and then will have up to 90 seconds to present the information.

➤ Section 2

○ Task 3: Interactive Classroom Presentation

- Prior to the SPEC test, test takers should prepare an approximately 10-minute presentation on an introductory topic from their field. (For more information see Preparing for the SPEC test). During the SPEC, test takers will have ten minutes to present their chosen topic clearly,

in words that an introductory undergraduate class could understand, and to answer questions from the audience.

Qualifications to take the shortened SPEC test

Some students may be eligible to take a shortened version of the SPEC test (task three only). Possible qualifications include:

- Students with an official, valid (within the last two years) iBT Listening score of 25 *and* an iBT Speaking score of 26
- Students who obtained non-graduate degrees at institutions in which the language of instruction was English. This includes:
 - Undergraduate degrees and/or
 - Continuous attendance of English-language schools since the age of 12 (or younger)
- Students who served as teaching assistants at other institutions of higher learning in which the language of instruction is English
 - Must have been listed as the instructor of record for a course or led a discussion section in English for at least one year (either two academic semesters or three academic quarters)

The following are *not* qualifications for a shortened test:

- Students who come from a country where English is one of the official languages
- Students who are U.S. permanent residents or U.S. citizens whose first language is not English

Requests for exceptions regarding the SPEC test will be submitted for evaluation to a committee consisting of the Director of ESL Programs, the Associate Dean for Administrative Affairs in the Graduate College, and a representative from University Human Resources. **Requests for shortened SPEC tests must come from the department**, not the student.

Testing Procedures

- All SPEC tests are administered and recorded virtually via Zoom. Test takers will be allowed to share their screens during the presentation.
- Before each task, you will receive instructions from the proctor. Each task is timed. The time you will have to prepare and the maximum time you will have to speak will

be stated at the beginning of each task. If you finish a task before time runs out, it is not necessary to continue talking if you feel your answer is complete. During the test, examinees are not permitted to read from a pre-prepared script.

- The test will be recorded. If technical difficulties interfere with the recording, the proctor may interrupt, and if they cannot be resolved, the test may be rescheduled.
- Your score for the test will be based on this recorded speech sample. These recordings are evaluated by at least two trained raters. Recordings are saved on a secure University server for five years after test administration.
- The total length of the full test is approximately 25 minutes. The length of the shortened test is approximately 15 minutes.

How do I Prepare for the SPEC Test?

- You should familiarize yourself with the tasks on the test, practice speaking English aloud, and develop a presentation.
 - If you want to practice, use the practice test, record yourself, and listen to your responses.
- Before the test, you will prepare to clearly present a topic of your choice from your field of study in words that an **introductory** undergraduate class could understand and to answer questions which will be asked of you during your presentation.
- As you prepare for your presentation, please keep the following in mind:
 - Your lesson is happening sometime in the middle of the semester rather than at the beginning. You should not begin your presentation by saying, "Welcome to this course. My name is ..."
 - You should choose a topic suitable for undergraduates in an introductory level class in your discipline. You could explain a concept, define a term, describe a process or demonstrate a procedure. It might be helpful to look through some of the undergraduate textbooks used in your department for ideas. Most disciplines now have "open textbooks" online that you can access from home if you need ideas.
 - When you prepare your presentation, prepare enough material for at least 10 minutes. Be sure that it allows you to use enough language so that you can demonstrate your level of language proficiency. If the material you choose is too simple and does not allow you to use enough language, the evaluators may not be able to accurately determine your language proficiency level.

- You may share your screen during the presentation to display a whiteboard, PowerPoint, or other visual if you choose. You may use notes or a copy of the textbook, but do not memorize or read from a script.
- Members of your audience will play the role of students and will interrupt you with questions related to the topic you present. (The "Raise Hand" and "Chat" features will not be used during the presentation.) This may mean that you will not finish everything you have prepared. This will not impact your score.
- You can ask the audience questions during your presentation. This includes asking the audience to clarify questions that they ask you.

SPEC Test Results

- Rating your performance
 - The evaluators of your performance will be a trained team of professionals in the field of teaching English as a Second Language. At least two evaluators will rate each SPEC performance; if there is any doubt about the rating, an additional evaluator will view the recording.
 - Your performance will be rated using the [SPEC rubric](#) (see page 7 below)
- Getting your SPEC Test results
 - Results for the SPEC test are available within three-five business days. Test takers can access SPEC test results **through their departments**.
 - Test takers can access individualized feedback about their SPEC test performance **through their department** within 2 weeks after their test date. If more information is needed, test takers can also make an appointment with the ESL Programs office to discuss SPEC results.
- Result Forms
 - SPEC result forms contain:
 - the level of certification achieved by the examinee
 - the types of teaching assistant responsibilities the student has language proficiency to perform
 - TAPE program courses the student is required to complete
 - See results table below on page 8
- Retesting
 - Students who do not achieve the required passing score on the SPEC test can retest only if:

- they take one of the required TAPE classes (in which case they will be automatically retested at the end of the class), OR
- they wait an entire year (students may only do this once).

After the Test

➤ Orientation

- A four-hour orientation program is required of all students who have been certified at level A or B and are teaching a university class for the first time
- If this requirement applies to you, be sure to make arrangements with ESL Programs to attend the orientation during your first semester in the classroom.
- This orientation helps new teaching assistants understand the culture of the U.S. classroom and treats topics such as student expectations, teacher-student interactions, and understanding and answering student questions.
- Discussion focuses on suggestions for maximizing comprehensibility in spoken English.
- This course meets twice for 2 hours.
- ESL Programs will automatically give you permission so that you can register for the class in MyUI. If you are asked for a permission code when you try to register, contact ESL Programs.

➤ Classroom Follow-up

- The final component of the TAPE Program is the follow-up classroom observation for test takers who received an A or B-level certification. This is designed to provide TAs whose first language is not English with support and assistance during their first semester in a UI classroom. The observations are conducted in the fall and spring semesters, when the majority of teaching assistants are in the classroom.
- How it works:
 - An instructor from ESL Programs meets with a first-time TA after class to suggest ways to improve the TA's language or ways to use language compensation skills. The TA is invited to discuss problems or questions which have arisen during the semester. Finally, a written report of the visit is later sent to the TA.
- Recertification
 - In some cases, TAs who are certified at level B ("handle a discussion section or supervise a lab section with minimal supervision") will have

their certification level raised to an A ("take full responsibility for a lecture/discussion class"), based on the classroom observation. Students with a B certification may ask their department to contact the ESL Programs office to request a recertification observation with the hope of raising their certification to the A level.

SPEC Rubric

Feature	5	4	3	2	1
Pronunciation	Well-chosen pauses, emphasis, tone, pacing, and stress patterns are used to convey information <i>clearly and effectively</i> .	Pauses, emphasis, tone, pacing, and/or stress patterns convey information <i>generally effectively</i> .	Misplaced pauses, emphasis, tone, pacing, and/or stress patterns convey information <i>inconsistently</i> .	Misplaced pauses, emphasis, tone, pacing, and/or stress patterns make information <i>frequently unclear</i> .	Misplaced pauses, emphasis, tone, pacing, and/or stress patterns make information <i>neatly incomprehensible</i> .
Fluency	Individual words are comprehensible.	The <i>majority</i> of individual words are comprehensible.	<i>Some</i> individual words are comprehensible.	<i>Many</i> individual words are incomprehensible.	<i>Most</i> individual words are incomprehensible.
	Vocabulary is <i>precise</i> and demonstrates <i>wide</i> range. Minor grammar issues <i>never</i> interfere with meaning. Breaks in the flow of speech ¹ occur only when <i>considering complex ideas</i> and are <i>never distracting</i> .	Vocabulary is <i>generally precise</i> and demonstrates an <i>adequate</i> range. Occasional grammar issues <i>rarely</i> interfere with meaning. Breaks in the flow of speech are <i>rarely distracting</i> .	Vocabulary is <i>sometimes imprecise</i> and/or demonstrates a <i>limited</i> range. Patterns of grammar issues <i>sometimes</i> interfere with meaning. Breaks in the flow of speech are <i>sometimes distracting</i> .	Vocabulary is <i>often imprecise</i> and/or demonstrates a <i>narrow</i> range. Patterns of grammar issues <i>frequently</i> interfere with meaning. Breaks in the flow of speech are <i>frequently distracting</i> .	Vocabulary is <i>extremely imprecise</i> and/or <i>lacking</i> . Patterns of grammar issues <i>substantially</i> interfere with meaning. Breaks in the flow of speech are <i>excessive</i> .
Tasks 1, 2, and 3					
	2.5	2	1.5	1	0.5
Discourse	Information is framed, organized, and connected clearly in ways that are <i>easy</i> to follow. <i>All</i> functions ² of the task are addressed with <i>highly effective</i> language.	Information is framed, organized, and connected in ways that are <i>generally easy</i> to follow. <i>All</i> functions of the task are addressed with <i>adequate</i> language.	Information is framed, organized, and connected in ways that are <i>occasionally difficult</i> to follow. <i>Some</i> functions of the task are not addressed with <i>adequate</i> language.	Information is framed, organized, and connected in ways that are <i>difficult</i> to follow. <i>Some</i> functions of the task are <i>not addressed</i> .	Information is <i>not</i> framed, organized, or connected. The task is <i>not addressed</i> .
Audience Interaction	Language is <i>consistently responsive</i> to audience needs and the context. ³ <i>All</i> audience questions are <i>clearly</i> comprehended and addressed through successful interactive compensation strategies.	Language is <i>generally responsive</i> to audience needs and the context. <i>All</i> audience questions are <i>eventually</i> comprehended and addressed through interactive compensation strategies.	Language is <i>occasionally unresponsive</i> to audience needs or the context. <i>Some</i> audience questions are <i>partially</i> comprehended or addressed due to misuse or ineffective use of interactive compensation strategies.	Language is <i>often unresponsive</i> to audience needs or the context. <i>Some</i> audience questions are <i>improperly</i> understood or addressed due to a lack of interactive compensation strategies.	Language <i>fails to respond</i> to audience needs or the context. Audience questions are <i>misunderstood</i> or <i>unaddressed</i> with no evidence of interactive compensation strategies.

¹ Examples of breaks in the flow of speech include filler words like "um" or "er", hesitations, false starts, as well as repeated words.

² Typical examples of functions include giving examples, defining, describing a sequence, introducing a topic, evaluating information, and clarifying.

³ The audience is undergraduate students in an introductory course, so they do not have much familiarity with the subject. Language adjustments and circumlocution may be needed so information is conveyed effectively.

Score	Certification Level	Eligible Teaching Responsibilities	Required TAPE Course
	A	Take full responsibility for a lecture or discussion class The student's SPEC performance indicated that the student should be able to take full responsibility for a class.	TAPE:5330 TAPE Orientation
	B	Handle a discussion section or supervise a lab section with minimal supervision The SPEC performance indicated that the student's proficiency is at a level sufficient to teach a discussion section or lab with some faculty supervision.	TAPE:5330 TAPE Orientation
	C	Assist in a lab situation with immediate supervision or teach a foreign language class where the language of instruction is not English The SPEC performance indicated that the student's proficiency is at a level sufficient to assume duties such as assisting in a lab; however, immediate supervision of a faculty member is required. TAPE classes and an additional SPEC are required if the student wishes to raise their certification to the A or B level.	TAPE:5300 Presentation Skills
	D	Conduct office hours (one-on-one interaction only) The SPEC performance indicated that the student may assume teaching assistantship responsibilities which allow for one-on-one interaction with students, such as conducting office hours.	TAPE:5300 TAPE Pronunciation, Fluency Building, and Culture
	E	Grade papers or handle other duties that do not require direct contact with students The SPEC performance indicated that the student not be assigned duties that require direct contact with students.	TAPE:5300 TAPE Pronunciation, Fluency Building, and Culture ESL:4100 ESL Academic Oral Skills