

'Eh? What was that again?'

Language barrier hurdled

Apparently foreign professors and graduate teaching fellows are not presenting the University with the same problems that colleges in the rest of the nation are facing.

At some Universities, students are complaining because they can't understand the English of non-national professors and GTFs.

But not at the University, where an estimated 10 to 15 percent of the staff and faculty are non-nationals.

At least, not very much or very often. Some students do admit they have problems understanding a professor because of his accent, but they usually just transfer out of the class or go talk to the professor about the problem.

Department heads in the hard sciences, where most of the foreigners are concentrated, say they don't let foreigners teach unless they are competent in English.

For example, math GTFs usually teach courses, but foreign ones may assist a regular professor for a term before they teach on their own. "We assess whether the person is doing well before we assign a regular course," says Theodore Palmer, head of the math department.

"Many of the students have problems with (the foreign GTFs)," he admits, adding that the department has only had to remove one GTF from a teaching position and that person was also having problems with graduate studies. He says they have less than one complaint a week about specific communications

problems with GTFs and they average about five complaints a week about general concerns.

If the department receives even one complaint about an instructor, Palmer will make the person aware of it with either a phone call or a note. If they receive several complaints, he will have a faculty member sit in on the class to judge the accuracy of the complaints.

"Sometimes the complaint seems totally unjustified and sometime it seems absolutely on the mark," says Palmer. "The language difficulty can be a barrier, but it can be surmounted in many cases."

Palmer says the department has to consider the academic part of a graduate student's career as well as teaching ability. "We want to get the very best graduate students we can and sometimes the better ones are from overseas." He adds that the foreign GTFs may not be "among the very best (in teaching), but they do an adequate job."

Jim Tattersall, head of the economics department, agrees. "There are a lot of foreign students who want to do graduate work in the United States and there's no reason why they shouldn't compete for those positions," he says. "We've had very few complaints."

The economics department has two different types of teaching situations for GTFs which may help to lessen the problem. Usually they start out teaching Economics 199 classes under a professor's supervision before teaching a regular three credit lower division course.

The economics department requires that the applicants show they can "handle English pretty well" judging from their performance on the Test of English

as a Foreign Language. (TOEFL)

"If students have a problems with instructor they shouldn't hesitate to take the problem known to the faculty supervisor and department chair so corrective action can be taken," he says.

Foreign professors and GTFs themselves don't seem to perceive a great problem either.

"The language barrier is not there," says Iraj Fooladi, visiting assistant economics professor from Iran. "The subject is very technical. Experience says if students do not understand, it is not the language, but the concept."

Fooladi, who has been in the United States for five years, says he presents his lecture in "different wording than an American professor," but adds that that is "not vital in understanding the material for the students."

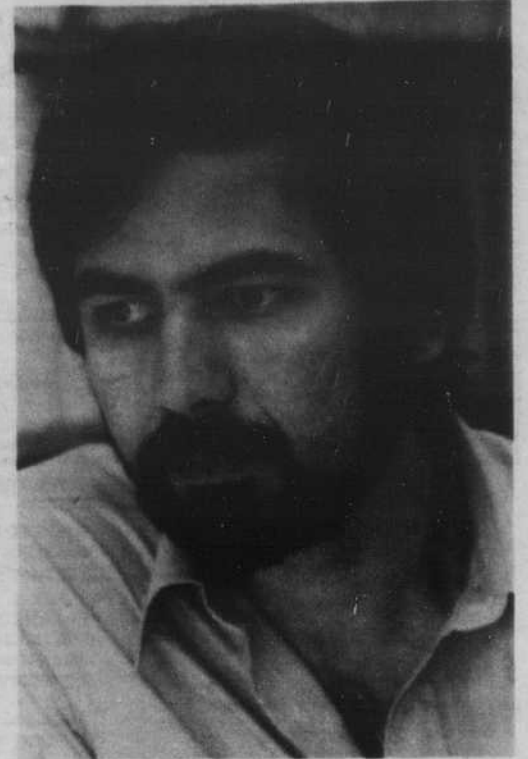
His students seem to have few complaints about his teaching.

"Sometimes I have to really listen, but I usually understand," says John Barton, a pre-business major in Fooladi's Econ. 375 class. He doesn't think he would be doing any better with an American professor.

"It (his communications skill) does create problems, but you learn to adjust to it," says Becky Talcott, a pre-business major in Fooladi's Econ. 375 class. "You have to listen more carefully which might help in the long run."

Talcott does not think she could do any better with an American professor either. She says she is getting about the same grades as in previous economics classes.

Former Soviet Sergey Yuzvinsky, associate math professor, says he has had "no problems" with students not understanding his lectures. "They sometimes ask again, but the subject is



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international," he says. "I know beforehand what the questions will be."

"In my first lecture, I ask people to correct me (on pronunciation)," he says. "Usually no one does."

Stephany Freeman, math major, also says she has had no problems understanding Yuzvinsky. She did have trouble with a GTF last year, but took another class from her this year and found her English much improved.

Hsing-Yeh Wu, a GTF in chemistry, has only spoken English for one year, but "I practice a lot," she says. A recommendation from a professor at New York State University wrote a recommendation of her English ability so she could be accepted here.

"The students are very friendly," says Wu. "If it's difficult to explain, I show how to do it and write it on paper. Some students like an international education. They like to come and talk (about China)."

Story: Sandy Johnstone

Photography: Mark Pynes

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