

# Is There a TA in Your Future? Upper-Class Teaching Assistants in the EFL Classroom

**T**eaching assistants are quite common in universities around the world. During my time in graduate school in the United States, we called them “GAs” (graduate assistants). A GA may be a teacher of a section of a class, usually for first-year students; in this article, though, a teaching assistant—often referred to as a “TA”—is defined as an upper-division student who assists the teacher, typically during regular class time, in a lower-division class.

The use of TAs in English as a foreign language (EFL) settings is rarely discussed in the literature. Shi (2010) used TAs in a similar way at her college in Zhejiang province, in the People’s Republic of China, and has a useful framework from which to compare notes with the approach I describe in this article. Also, Maddalena (2002) used higher-level students within the same class to assist lower-level students.

Most graduate school–trained English teachers stress communicative competence, encouraging their students to do three things: practice, practice, practice. But—how can you give upper-level students more practice? Is class time enough, or the weekly English Corner, or an occasional movie showing, or a speech contest, or articles written for the student magazine, or any other extracurricular activity? Without an immersion environment, how can you give students ongoing opportunities to use their language skills in “real-world” ways,

and how can you give them practice being teachers?

The purpose of this article is to show how English teachers can set up a program to use their most advanced upper-division students as TAs in lower-division classes. This program can be implemented in oral or listening classes, as well as other subjects. The article discusses program goals, implementation, supervision, rewards, and possible tasks for TAs. The ideas are based on my work at the College of Arts and Sciences: a medium-sized private school allied with Sichuan Normal University (in the suburbs of Chengdu in south-central China).

The article shows that the program benefitted the TAs, the students in the classes with TAs, and the teachers. The program was seen to provide the essential requirement of all oral classrooms—increased oral practice—while also raising the confidence levels of the TAs.

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### GOALS AND USEFULNESS

#### Goals of the Program

Generally, the goals should be that TAs work directly with and assist teachers and students, and that the program should improve TAs' language abilities, along with their sense of confidence in dealing with students and others. The program should also give TAs experience in using modern language-teaching strategies and practice in being teachers themselves. Additional goals are that TAs provide models of being responsible language learners and help students stay on task. Furthermore, TAs will enhance the classroom environment through their presence as an additional caring person interacting with students, and by giving students more opportunities to ask questions, get clarification, and receive general feedback in a "safe" manner.

A maxim should be that TAs are generally not to do clerical work and that they speak English with the students and their supervising teacher. For our school, the latter turned out to be feasible in some classes but not in others. Some students, especially non-English majors, have limited English skills, and their international teachers may even need an interpreter, but generally the speak-only-English rule is a good one and puts appropriate, productive pressure on the TAs.

#### Usefulness of the Program

Several questions about the usefulness of a program like this will come to mind: Can students only one or two years older be useful and helpful to younger students? Would the recipient students accept the TAs as mentors or aides in the classroom with such a small

age difference? Can the TAs be trusted? Would they take on responsibilities that would genuinely help the supervising teachers? Would it be more work for their supervisors than it is worth? Would the TAs improve the recipient students' abilities/competencies in some way? And, most importantly, because one goal of this approach is to improve the TAs' language and professional competency, would the TAs learn to fill their roles as mentors to the younger students, and would they grow in confidence for their later jobs as teachers?

After a pilot program and two years of experience at our school, the answers seem to be "yes" on most counts. Is there a TA in your future?

### IMPLEMENTING A TA PROGRAM IN EFL CLASSROOMS

#### Setting Up the Program

At the beginning of our program, we really didn't know if this would work; there was a leap of faith by all concerned, from the department director and fellow teachers right down to the recipient students themselves, and no doubt you will encounter similar uncertainty due to the uncommon nature of this approach. Because of my familiarity with the TAs from having already taught them oral English for at least one year, and getting along well with them, I had some confidence that I could trust them. And we were really open to learning from the first year's trial. It will probably be best if you also have experience with the students likely to be TAs, at least in a general sense, and approach this new idea with the same sense of experimentation and willingness to learn from early experiences.

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### ***Recruiting TAs***

Teachers can begin at the end of the previous year by requesting all interested sophomore and/or junior English majors to apply to be TAs in the following academic year by writing an essay—"How I Can Be a Helpful TA" or "Why I Want to Become a TA"—and answering a few questions about thorny problems that have come up in classes (e.g., How would you counsel a student who has missed many classes and seems uninterested?). The essay can give supervising teachers ideas about the applicant's attitude and English ability (even though, at least in our case, high proficiency in writing was less important than high oral proficiency). Applicants' grades from their sophomore/junior oral classes can be used for evaluation—oral-class grades are generally based on how active the students are in class as well as on their language competence.

A good tool is to make a priority list of applicants, showing their oral-class scores and/or teacher recommendations. However, when it comes time to actually pick the TAs, the main problem and limiting factor will likely be matching the teachers' and TAs' schedules—possibly time-consuming and thorny, but necessary.

Our class sizes varied quite a lot, from around 35 students in each to more than 70. In the first year, we began with four teachers participating, using 22 to 30 TAs. The second year had the participation of six teachers, native English speakers and local teachers teaching mainly oral classes, and 27 TAs each semester. Virtually all of our TAs worked for the entire year they signed up, from six to 36 class-hours per semester.

Finally, teacher involvement was completely voluntary, and I would recommend this approach to others.

### ***TA Agreement Form***

You could also develop, as we did, a TA Agreement form, signed by the TA and the teacher, that spells out a general overview of the program, responsibilities, possible tasks, meeting requirements, and disciplinary procedures (see the Appendix).

### ***Student Feedback***

If feedback from the recipient students is desired, a questionnaire and/or evaluation form can be administered after the semester is finished. These can provide information on how well the TAs are being accepted and help you identify possible problems to be addressed.

### ***Negotiating with the University Administration and Participating Teachers***

One conflict that might come up is that the administration may want only the very best students to be admitted into the program, but the supervising teachers may want to use more TAs to help with large or non-English major classes. They may also want to let TAs benefit from the teachers' classroom experience and education. Again, experimentation and collaboration between teachers and the administration will decide these limitations. However, several factors go into choosing how broad to make the program, including funding for stipends (if available), number of target students, number of prospective TAs, prospective TAs' language abilities, support—both financial and academic—of the department chair and/or dean, and the coordinator's energy.

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### **Stipend for TAs**

At our school, TAs were rewarded with a very modest semester stipend from department funds (about enough for two or three months of cell phone use!) and a certificate (see Figure 1). We always discouraged students from joining the TA program for the money, and none expected much; however, they were able to put on their resumes that their positions were paid!

More important to most TAs was the certificate they received at the end of each semester/year—nicely printed and signed by their teacher(s), the coordinator, the dean, and the department chair and showing what they had done during the program. The TAs could also spell out their classroom responsibilities on their resumes.

### **Training and Giving Feedback**

Individual teachers are asked to inform their TAs of the program goals, the teacher's goals, and necessary preparation for each specific class. This preparation occurs during the ten minutes or so before classes, and feedback is given immediately after class. Some of our teachers took their TAs to lunch or dinner and chatted about classes and individual students, although obviously not all teachers and TAs would be comfortable with this arrangement.

The coordinator/administrator can also take on the role of trainer, and this training can be done at an occasional group meeting held a few times throughout the semester. One helpful exercise is asking the TAs to role-play talking to a student who is speaking their native language but then responding in English. Also, you can make suggestions on how to encourage students to speak English during group activities in class. Having the TAs share their experiences in the classroom and their interactions with

students is another important exercise that can help everyone involved. Other ideas are to send general emails reinforcing the program's goals and rules, and holding small-group or one-on-one conferences with the TAs.

## **RESPONSIBILITIES AND POSSIBLE TASKS OF TAs**

### **General Responsibilities**

Likely the most important function for a TA will be to act as a role model on how to be an *active learner*. Responsibilities might include walking around the classroom as unobtrusively as possible, even when the teacher is talking, making sure students are on task. At first, in my own classes, most TAs were unwilling to move around the room when I was speaking, but little by little they began to accept their roles as mentors and focus on the students, check homework, etc., without interrupting the lesson. This was a huge change for some of them, if you can imagine typically shy students taking on new roles in the classroom.

Additional general responsibilities include the following:

- Encouraging students to ask questions—after all, seeking answers to questions you have is one of the best ways to learn;
- Giving advice, suggestions, and help (in our experience, students *will* ask fellow students, especially if they are unwilling to initiate interactions with the teacher in English);
- Improving student attendance by talking to students who miss classes and communicating that they are expected to attend class;

<p><b>CERTIFICATE FOR TEACHING ASSISTANTS</b></p> <p>[School Name]</p> <p>[Faculty/Department]</p> <p>&lt;TA'S NAME&gt;</p> <p>The above-named student has successfully completed one semester as a Teaching Assistant (TA) in the classroom of the below-named instructor. Under close supervision of instructors, TAs work directly with students in their assigned classes. Tasks include reading and <b>giving oral and written feedback</b> on student notebooks and homework, <b>supervising</b> rehearsals of oral presentations with student groups, <b>overseeing</b> class speaking games and movie discussions (in pairs and small groups), <b>encouraging</b> students to take on more responsibility as appropriate, <b>writing and grading</b> class vocabulary quizzes, and writing class materials. TAs help instructors improve class activities and student work. Most importantly, they act as <b>role models</b> to help all students do better work and achieve higher competence in language study. This experience enables the TAs to become more confident and self-assured in the classroom environment.</p> <p>The above-named TA worked _____ class hours this semester.</p> <p>DATE: _____</p> <p>SCHOOL SEAL (affixed)</p>	
<p>DEAN: _____</p> <p>COORDINATOR: _____</p>	<p>DEPARTMENT CHAIR: _____</p> <p>INSTRUCTOR: _____</p>

**Figure 1. Sample template for the certificate awarded to TAs upon completion of the program (with space for signatures at the bottom)**

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouraging all students to do the assigned homework and urging those who are able to take on more challenges and volunteer for extra activities;</li> <li>• Checking that students are taking notes in English;</li> <li>• Giving students feedback on how they are doing in class and relative to other classes; and</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Correcting individual students' pronunciation, fluency, and intonation, to the extent they are able.</li> </ul> |
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- Specific Tasks**
- In addition, instructors can consider assigning more-specific tasks, depending on their needs and the abilities of the TAs:
- Working with pairs and small groups during speaking games and discussions in class;

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## An important aspect is keeping in touch with all TAs and making sure things are running smoothly and that communication is open between all concerned.

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- Assisting students during rehearsals of class presentations before class;
- Giving feedback to the teacher to assist in evaluating student performance;
- Helping mark student work, such as checking homework for completion (with instructor's oversight);
- Preparing lessons and materials for class, such as vocabulary games (like crossword puzzles), quizzes, and images for review of vocabulary; and
- Being available to help students outside of class times, during what could be called "TA Office Hours."

### REQUIREMENTS, LIMITATIONS, AND SUPERVISION

A requirement of a program like this is the creativity and flexibility of the supervising teachers. TAs must be given different opportunities, tasks, and assignments to show what they can do (see above for examples), and individual TAs will be more talented in different areas than their peers. *This means that supervising teachers must at first put in more time to find the best ways to train and use TAs.* Shortly, however, teachers will be able to be more effective in the classroom because of the TAs. And to the extent that some TAs can prepare materials for class lessons, some time may be saved.

In addition to training and supervising TAs, teachers will need to fill out an evaluation form for each TA at the end of the term and let the TA coordinator know if problems arise. These steps are important and can prove invaluable for the supervisor.

TAs can be asked to keep their own time sheets for later submittal to the coordinator. At our school, a recordkeeper among the TAs was assigned to gather and collate all forms and keep a phone/email tree to facilitate messaging from the coordinator. We also appointed an "executive committee" of the most responsible TAs to give feedback on the program as well as give advice on items like logistics and discipline. TAs are often the hardest on their fellow students!

The program coordinator, besides setting up the schedule of classes and being one of the teachers using TAs, will want to produce occasional reports for the administration and fellow teachers.

Another sensitive area is supervision. In our program, as I said, I knew the TAs well, and there was often a personal bond, but this may not always be the case. There may be times when TAs do not come up to expectations (being late for their assignments, missing meetings, preparing poorly, etc.) and need feedback and consequences. Often, for a TA at our school, a stern talk with a teacher went a long way toward dealing with these difficulties, but sometimes other measures can be used; these include withholding certificates, providing different stipend amounts, and the direst: raising the possibility of being dropped from the program. But because the program is selective and most TAs feel it is a privilege to be admitted, these problems rarely occur. Also, TAs are agreeing to more hours of work each week with little or no pay.

Further, in a program that involves several teachers and many students, scheduling problems and coordination among various administrative units need a firm hand at the helm and frequent, effective communication.

The potential of “A” to become a successful TA really emerged at the end of her sophomore year when she and three classmates reenacted a scene from the movie *Hitch*. She did such a good job of impersonation that I invited her to apply to be a TA. She did, and she was tough! She put her training into practice by being a strict TA, but she also encouraged students to do better and take chances and try new tasks. And, because she was a good student herself, she was hard on the students in her charge. During a final exam that she was helping to proctor, I could see she was upset about something. When I asked what was wrong, she hissed, “They’re cheating!” She learned a lot because she put into practice my recommendations and felt confident enough to try out ideas of her own.

“L” definitely had her own ideas and was not afraid to disagree with me on curriculum points or teaching methods. I could see a scowl come over her, and I knew I was in for some slight criticism. But this did not bother me in the least because she would listen to my explanations and consider whether my reasons were valid, and, anyway, she always had good ideas. When I asked a few TAs to help me consider disciplinary measures for other TAs, she gave suggestions and helped find the best alternatives.

“K” was diffident, often in her fellow TAs’ shadow because “L” had so much self-confidence and came into the first class ready for business. But little by little, by chatting with me, “K” built on the strengths of those around her until by the end of the year she was one of the few to volunteer to speak to a group of the next year’s prospective TAs, telling them what to expect from the job. I was proud.

**Figure 2. Three anecdotes—examples of what you might expect**

It is not enough to simply fit students into teachers’ schedules and sit back and let nature take its course. You do not want to see the program fail because of a small problem that got out of control, such as missed TA assignments, negative student feedback, complaints of any nature, or scheduling conflicts. It is necessary to meet frequently with your own TAs and encourage all teachers to do the same; even chatty lunches can be helpful. The message should be that TAs are to be treated as a separate group of students with special needs and responsibilities. An important aspect is keeping in touch with all TAs and making sure things are running smoothly and that communication is open between all concerned. In our program, a colleague coordinated with me, and I often filed reports with her and the department chair throughout the semester.

## CONCLUSION

The article describes a pilot program that consisted of TAs helping classroom English teachers and their students. After a trial semester followed by two years of experience with this program, we found that the TA program was successful. Therefore, I encourage English teachers to consider setting up similar programs that offer selected upper-division students opportunities to serve as TAs in lower-division English classes.

Our experience showed that the TAs became more confident in their use of English and more aware of some gaps in their English. One student summed it up by saying, “You know, before I was a TA, I thought my English was pretty good. But after talking with the teacher and working in the classroom, I see



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my limitations.” That is a profound shift in attitude that one can only hope to achieve in a normal classroom situation. Many TAs had similar experiences, as when they were willing to perform a role play in class or even in a faculty meeting, introduce a movie to a large hall, or act as proctors during an exam.

Overall, the most heartening remark, heard from many of the non-TA students, was, “How can we become TAs next year?” That was truly inspirational because it spoke to our greatest anxieties going into the program as well as highlighting the usefulness of the program and the naturalness with which students accepted TAs, even though none of them had had experience with TAs before. For this teacher, that was the proudest moment. (To get a glimpse of what you might expect to experience while working with TAs, please see the three short anecdotes in Figure 2.)

So, can you set up a program like this at your school? Absolutely, but you cannot go into it necessarily expecting to be freed from repetitive classroom tasks or expecting to do less work. If you are willing to try new things, though, and if you can listen and accept what students are saying about you and what you are doing, and if you are able to learn from your own mistakes and encourage that attitude among your students, a TA program can be a powerful pedagogical tool. With your help and support, the TAs will likely grow into their roles and make the best of their natural abilities. And, most importantly, they will be role models for all the other students at your school. Is there a TA in your future?

### REFERENCES

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# APPENDIX

## Sample Teaching Assistant (TA) Agreement

(to be signed by the TA and instructor at the beginning of each term)

I understand that I am required to attend each class for which I am scheduled. In unusual situations, if I am unable to attend, I will find an appropriate substitute from among the other TAs. I must arrive *at least* ten minutes early and remain after class long enough to help any students who need assistance and give the instructor feedback on the class. If I find that there is a scheduling conflict with another of my classes, I must take care of this myself or give the instructor contact information for the other teacher.

Generally, I will respond to direction given to me by the instructor to the best of my ability, and I have read and understood the list of tasks that the instructor has given to me. *I understand that my primary responsibility is to speak English with the students the entire time I am working in the capacity of a TA.* If I have any difficulties, I am to encourage the student to ask the instructor for help, or I can ask for help.

I will keep my own time sheet and be responsible for getting the instructor's signature after each class or other class activity (movie discussions, tests, etc.). I will attend any meetings called by the instructor or coordinator (about five per semester) and will read and respond to any emails or text messages sent out by the instructor or coordinator.

If I fail in any of these responsibilities, I understand that I could be disciplined—by losing pay for one of my classes or having my hours reduced or being asked to leave the program. Upon successful completion of each semester as a TA, I shall receive a certificate that shows I have been trained for this job and performed my general responsibilities.

TA: \_\_\_\_\_ Instructor: \_\_\_\_\_