Standards for Approval to Teach

Approval to teach at Texas Tech University requires passing three tests: The ITA Presentation Test, the SPEAK Test, and the MELAB Listening Comprehension Test.

The ITA Performance Test is a teaching simulation test which is rated by two or more trained raters. ITA candidates must be scores of “4” on at least eight of the ten criteria. Thus a total score of 38 or more is required. A score of “3” or lower on more than three criteria reveals significant weakness in the classroom communication ability of an individual. This is enough to render an explanation of a concept unintelligible, and enough to fail at handling impromptu questions from students.

The SPEAK test is the locally administered and scored version of the iBT TOEFL test developed by ETS. A score of 50 is required, meaning that the learner is generally effective at communicating orally. For more details, here is a useful excerpt from an article on the topic of listener perceptions of speakers with various SPEAK scores:

The SPEAK test (Educational Testing Service 1996) is a standardized performance test which captures ITAs’ ability to respond extemporaneously to twelve tasks for between 30 - 90 seconds apiece. Scores on the SPEAK test range in increments of five from 20 - 60. An averaged score of 50 across twelve tasks is the generally accepted score to be approved to teach in the ITA education field (e.g., Kaufman and Brownworth 2006b). This score is interpreted as: “Communication generally effective; task performed competently.”

There is a large functional difference between ITAs who earn a 40, 45, or 50 on the SPEAK test. ITAs who score 40 lack the communicative competence to carry out the tasks needed to explain content and manage classrooms. It is hard for most native speakers of English to comprehend them. ITAs who score a 45 have somewhat more control over their spoken fluency and can occasionally communicate "generally effectively" (the level of 50) on tasks that are concrete, such as giving directions based on a map (one task on the SPEAK test). However, ITAs at this level cannot sustain effective communication on more complicated tasks, such as speculating on the implications of population growth in urban areas (another task on the practice SPEAK test). Listeners struggle somewhat to comprehend such speakers. ITAs who score 50 are intelligible much of the time to listeners (U.S. undergraduates), and have the communicative competence to consistently detect and self-repair communication breakdowns. Realistically, for an ITA candidate to move from a 40 to a 45 to a 50 SPEAK test score after arrival in the U.S. would take one year of ESL courses and intensive self-study.


The MELAB Listening Comprehension Test is a 50-item listening test designed to capture listening ability in academic settings, including conversations taking place in offices and other professional settings. A score of 34 is required.