Graduate Students with Language Problems

It is not unusual for students to have language problems that can slow down their academic progress. This could include those students where English is a Second Language (ESL) (usually foreign students or recent immigrants), as well as native speakers who simply have bad oral and/or written skills. When lack of language skills appears significant, they should be handled as described below.

1 Improving Language Skills

For new students, the supervisor should try to determine as soon as possible if the student has significant oral and/or written language problems. While the supervisor is expected to mentor the skill development of the student for oral and written work, this can only be done up to a certain point as the language of our University is English.

Early identification is critical. If language will impede student progress and/or teaching, you should recommend that the student augment their skills with language improvement courses. The student is responsible for paying any fees, but the supervisor may decide to pay for it if they have sufficient funds (this is totally optional) and if their grant policy allows it. Two good resources are listed below.

- **Continuing Education** offers a broad set of courses for a modest fee. As of Fall 2004, these include various courses on English as a Second Language, Effective Writing courses, Expression (including fluency and presentation), and Canadian Pronunciation. A free placement test matches the student to the appropriate course level. See [https://dciwasp.admin.ucalgary.ca/webapp/ce_course/](https://dciwasp.admin.ucalgary.ca/webapp/ce_course/) and click English as a Second Language. Fees were $250 for a 50 hour course.

- **The International Students Center** is a place that caters to international students. They know of resources that may help students improve their skills, and are good because they have seen many other students in that situation. [http://www.fp.ucalgary.ca/ISC/](http://www.fp.ucalgary.ca/ISC/)

Student mentors (i.e., other students of the supervisor) are another resource. A good mentor can vet that student’s writing, can help them improve their oral skills by practice, and can preview their presentations. A good mentor will likely have more one-on-one contact time than you can offer the student.

2 Severe Cases

If no progress is being made, or if the student does not appear to be pursuing a program to improve their language skills, or if the problem is especially severe, then the supervisor should document the problem (see “Documenting Unusual Graduate Student Situations”) which will bring it to the attention of the Graduate Affairs Director. If new students have especially severe problems that seem unsolvable within the time frame of a graduate degree, then the department needs the opportunity to act upon this immediately e.g., to recommend student withdrawal, to withdraw funding, to remove them from teaching positions.
For students early in the program, we can support the supervisor’s recommendation of how the student should deal with a language problem. For students late in the program, we can only recommend – but cannot insist – that they withdraw from the program. Students have the right to submit their written work, and to defend their thesis in an oral. Supervisors are not required to revise theses to fix significant language problems.

3 Rationale

Many students need coaching to improve their language. If they receive advice early in the program to get this coaching, they will be improving their chance of success. At the same time, the department would like to catch difficult cases as soon as we can so we can deal with them effectively.