

InterSection:

Nonnative English-Speaking Teachers: Issues and Considerations

Presentation:

International Teaching Assistants: Challenges in and Outside the Classroom

I. Major Research Questions

- a. What are some of the challenges faced by ITAs in U.S. American college classrooms?
- b. What kind of acculturation processes do ITAs experience when adjusting to U.S. American college classrooms?

II. Theoretical Framework

Acculturation

- a. Berry's (1980, 1992) research on acculturation
- b. Ward's (1996) comprehensive acculturation framework
 1. This model also focuses on societal level variables such as political, economic, and cultural factors for both the native and host societies.
 2. It further looks at individual (e.g., personality, language fluency, training and experience) and situational (e.g., length of stay and amount of cultural contact, cultural distance) characteristics.

III. Methodology

- a. Southern Illinois University at Carbondale campus
- b. Study Participants
 1. ITAs teaching a variety of courses (e.g., lab sections, small and large lecture courses, discussion sessions) in several disciplines (i.e., Business, Chemistry, Economics, English, Mechanical Engineering, Microbiology, Psychology, Speech Communication, Foreign Languages)
 2. 15 ITAs on the SIUC campus with a variety of personal characteristics (e.g., gender, nationalities, majors, teaching experiences)
 3. The 15 ITAs came from Bulgaria, China, Germany (2), India (5), Indonesia, Sudan, Taiwan (2), Thailand, and Tunisia.
- c. Qualitative Interviewing & Data Collection (Patton, 2002)
 1. Unstructured interviews with interview guides
 2. Transcription of audio-recorded interviews and development of themes

IV. Findings

- a. Challenges Discussed by Study Participants
 1. Understanding the role of TA and TA-student interaction
 - A. Defining "teaching assistant" (e.g., assistant, instructor, friend, "ambiguous state of student and teacher")
 - B. Unfamiliarity with TA system from their home countries (e.g., "never had a TA, I don't know what the students expect; am I too strict too easy?")
 2. Understanding the relationship between TA and professors/supervisors
 - A. Not wanting to cause trouble for professors (e.g., have busy lives)

- B. Not wanting to get themselves in trouble (e.g., “asking for help shows you can’t handle the situation yourself”)
 - C. Not wanting to get students in trouble (e.g., “asking my supervisor means there is a paper trail and I can’t solve it myself for the student”)
 - D. But: about 4 ITAs said it was okay to ask for help; these were the most confident ITAs during the interview process
3. Lack of Confidence
- A. “Not ready for teaching”
 - B. “No guidance in preparing materials”
 - C. “Don’t have self-esteem because of English language”
4. Language Problems
- A. Formal/informal language use (e.g., “I learned proper English, not MTV English”; “I use the words literally, no casual speech”)
 - B. Pronunciation issues related to British/American English (e.g., “I thought something was wrong with me; I did fine in England”)
 - C. Lack of vocabulary especially in science (e.g., “don’t know what these devices are called in the lab, we didn’t have them in India”)
 - D. Difficulties with grammar features, abstract language and description (e.g., “It’s difficult for me, for example, what is ethos, it’s really hard for me to explain that”)
 - E. ITAs’ suggestions: communicate more, watch TV, talk to native speakers, ask for students’ feedback)
5. Student Behavior
- A. Unfamiliarity with students’ background (e.g., family or work responsibilities; curriculum at high school different from ITAs native countries)
 - B. “Strange” student behavior (e.g., leaving class early, socializing, chewing gum, sleeping in class, not turning in assignments, arguing about deadlines and grades)
 - C. Stereotypes/Discrimination (e.g., “they don’t respect me as an Asian woman;” “there’s this media stereotype of Asian women being submissive;” “think we are all terrorists;” “students asked me whether I majored in Chemistry to learn how to build a bomb”)
 - D. “The Look” (i.e., students’ facial expression when they learn their instructor is an ITA; “when they’re coming in, I know they feel a shock, it just makes you feel uncomfortable, like I can’t teach them well”)
6. Lack of Time
- A. Being a student and teacher (e.g., “It’s really tough to balance your own teaching and your own classes” – with the result that several ITAs spend more time on teaching than on studying)
 - B. Receiving teaching assignments (e.g., all ITAs received their teaching assignments the week before or sometimes during the first week of the semester)
 - C. Spending less time learning the culture (e.g., busy schedules keep you from socializing, practicing English with Americans, and learning about US culture in general – TV, travel, etc.)

7. Lack of Training

- A. Feeling “unprepared” despite the Graduate School/ESL training sessions
- B. Lack of support from specific departments (e.g., “oh yes, we had a training, it was 30 minutes before the semester”)
- C. Feeling that training sessions are “useless” (e.g., we are just talking talk, but while you are trying to put them into practice then you will know what the problem is;” “there was so much information I could not comprehend any more”)
- D. Not seeing the value of the training sessions (e.g., “I just need this program because I’m international; it was useless, there’s no point in telling me what happens in the schools that did not apply to me” – Later: “I need to learn more about where the students are coming from and what they learn at schools” – which shows that training content is good, but the need for it is not understood prior to the semester – shows need for contextualized training during the semester)
- E. Lack of Guidance throughout the semester (e.g., “they only said “go teach,”” “I feel like I am always fighting on my own”)

b. Acculturation Processes

- 1. Similarities across various cultural, educational, and linguistic backgrounds
- 2. Unconscious awareness of differences between home country and U.S.
- 3. Conscious verbalization of differences
- 4. Teaching as a learning process

Selected References

- Berry, B. L. (1980). Acculturation as varieties of adaptation. In A. Padilla (Ed.), *Acculturation: Theory, models and some new findings* (pp. 9-25). Boulder, CO: Westview.
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- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications
- Ward, C. (1996). Acculturation. In D. Landis, & R. S. Bhagat (Eds.), *Handbook of intercultural training* (2nd ed., pp. 124-147). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.