

## ITAs' Perceptions of ITA Teaching and Training

### I. Major Research Questions

- a. What are the ITAs' attitudes toward and understanding of U.S. American undergraduate students and classrooms in general?
- b. What kind of acculturation processes to ITAs experience when adjusting to U.S. American college classrooms?
- c. How would ITAs improve/change ITA training?

### II. Theoretical Framework

#### Communicative Competence

- a. Canale & Swain's (1980) and Canale's (1983) model of communicative competence
- b. Spitzberg & Cupach's (1984) and Spitzberg's (1994) model of relational competence
  1. Interdependent nature of motivation (attitude), knowledge (cognition), and skills (behaviors)
  2. Relational nature of competence and influence of impressions
  3. Importance of appropriateness and effectiveness

#### 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. ITA training and support
  1. ITA training workshop (1-3 days before fall semesters)
  2. ITA testing
  3. ITA observations
  4. ITA course (Center for English as a Second Language, SIUC)
  5. ITA Listserv
- c. 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.

d. Qualitative Interviewing & Data Collection

1. Unstructured interviews with interview guides were used over the course of two semesters (e.g., focus on personal information, previous and current teaching experiences and approaches, proficiency in English, general perceptions towards ITA support and training at SIUC)
2. Transcription of audio-recorded interviews and development of themes

#### IV. Findings

a. U.S. college classrooms

1. Characteristics of college classrooms
  - A. “More colorful”
  - B. “Friendly atmosphere”
  - C. Informal and relaxed
  - D. “Mutual responsibility of teacher/student” – “interactive”
  - E. Too informal and casual – “interactive”
  - F. “Lowering of standards”
  - G. Specific aspects (e.g., syllabus, grading system, multiple choice tests)
2. Role of American teachers
  - A. Comparison between teachers ‘at home’ and in the U.S. (e.g., “unapproachable and unfriendly” versus “friendly/helpful”)
  - B. The U.S. teacher as entertainer
  - C. The U.S. teacher lacking respect
3. Attitude, motivation and behavior of U.S. students
  - A. The responsible, active student with high self-esteem
  - B. The student interested in other cultures
  - C. The “typical” student lacking interest, motivation, and respect
  - D. Knowledge of student characteristics
4. Different teaching approaches and activities
  - A. Use of interactive teaching approaches
  - B. Focus on student-centered classroom

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

c. Comments on undergraduate students' perceptions of ITAs on the SIUC campus

1. No knowledge ("No, I haven't heard about this.")
2. Denial (face saving strategies?) ("It's not that bad." & "Students just complain when they want higher grades, excuse then, is I can't speak English. It's not that bad after all.")
3. Evasion ("ITAs are necessary for diversity on campus.")

d. Comments on the ITA training program

1. Comments based on challenges experienced by ITAs
  - A. Lack of knowledge of an ITA's role ("Ambiguous state")
  - B. Lack of support (e.g., "Here is the textbook, go teach.")
  - C. Lack of mentoring relationships ("Fighting Alone" / "Not wanting to cause trouble.")
  - D. Lack of teaching materials, sample syllabi
  - E. Late assignments of teaching duties
  - F. Lack of self-esteem
  - G. Unfamiliarity with colloquial expressions and classroom jargon
  - H. Difficulty balancing teaching and graduate course requirements
  - I. Lack of training for teaching duties
2. Comments on how to improve the ITA training program
  - A. Being able to observe experienced teachers in the classroom
  - B. Meeting with other ITAs in order to learn how they were/are coping with their teaching assignments and to share experiences with each other
  - C. Sharing syllabi and teaching activities with other teachers (faculty, TAs, and ITAs)
  - D. Establishing a TA network within academic units
  - E. Offering more courses during the semester on classroom management skills, U.S. culture, and accent reduction ("self-esteem boosters")
  - F. Including more sessions on classroom strategies in the ITA workshop prior to the fall semester ("dealing with difficult students, with non-traditional students, etc.")
  - G. Receiving more guidance from the academic units and the college (e.g., how to fill out paperwork, deadlines for academic reports, taking the ITA exam)
  - H. Regularly visiting other courses to share ITA's experiences/points of view with undergraduate students
  - I. Providing better access to classroom, lab technology and training sessions on how to use equipment

e. Implications for SIUC ITA training program

1. Establishment of ITA networks and ITA/Student/Faculty mentoring relationships at the departmental, college, and/or university levels
2. Development of TA/ITA resource centers
3. More careful sharing of information on what the ITA program/training offers on campus (Development of ITA center?)
4. Involvement of undergraduate students in ITA training program and ITA testing
5. More courses with a focus on classroom management skills as opposed to pronunciation, for example.
6. Need for ongoing and contextualized ITA training
7. Requirement for ITAs to observe other courses in their fields of study/teaching

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