



Exploring International Teaching Assistants Experiences in the U.S. Classroom:
Implications for Educational Practices and Training

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Keywords: International teaching assistants, U.S. classroom

Globalization has contributed to the steadily increasing international student population in the U.S. In 2012, international undergraduate and graduate student enrolment in U.S. educational institutions reached a record high of 228,467 (Open Doors, 2012). This led to an increased employment of graduate students as teaching assistants (Chiang, 2009). Graduate assistantships offered by U.S. universities have been a source of funding for almost 42% of all international graduate students (Open Doors, 2012). International graduate students with teaching assistantships are referred to as international teaching assistants (ITAs) (Gorsuch, 2012). Providing teaching opportunities for ITAs has a number of benefits such as increased programs' flexibility in offering multiple course sections on demand and providing excellent training opportunities for future educators. However, there also have been concerns associated with a growing number of ITAs in U.S. undergraduate classroom (Gorsuch, 2012). Differences in ITAs and undergraduate students' cultural background often result in various challenges (Chiang, 2009). A number of studies have examined these issues from the perspective of U.S. undergraduate students, including the role of ITAs' English language proficiency, U.S. student attitudes towards ITAs, ITAs' classroom management styles, communication patterns and barriers (Chiang, 2009; Gorsuch, 2012; Hertel & Sunderman, 2009; Jenkins, 2000; Luo, Bellows, & Grady, 2000). However, little research has been done on ITAs perspectives about their experiences in the U.S. undergraduate classroom (Gorsuch, 2012). Such investigation might be an important contribution to the literature and helpful for future ITAs and various university orientation programs that prepare ITAs as well as U.S. freshmen to create a better classroom environment for effective teaching and learning. The purpose of this study was to explore ITAs experiences in the U.S. undergraduate classroom.

To address the research purpose, a qualitative methodology was used. Individual in-depth semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. A total of twelve ITAs from a large mid-western university were interviewed. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling strategy. Interviews lasted one hour. Participants were from different countries (China – 4, South Korea – 3, India – 3, Africa – 1, and Russia – 1) and had at least one semester of teaching experience in the colleges of human sciences or liberal arts and sciences. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for analysis purposes. Interpretive method using coding and development of themes was employed first independently by the three authors and then themes were discussed and finalized collectively (Spiggle, 1994). As a result, four themes emerged and formed two topical areas.

The first topical area describes participants' experiences related to the preparation stage of teaching and developing the course content. Two distinct themes form this topical area. The first theme deals with preparation of instructional materials: development of lesson plans, lecture notes, handouts, exams, quizzes, etc. needed to teach the course. Participants emphasized importance of developing student conceptual knowledge relevant to the subject, but not developing certain skills. The second theme describes participant experiences related to putting

the developed instructional materials in the context appropriate for the U.S. classroom. Even though participants were competent in the subjects they were teaching, making them relevant to U.S. undergraduate students and putting into perspective proved to be a challenge. Because ITAs were not fluent in U.S. culture, traditions, history, and spoken American English, they had difficulties using relevant examples, terms, industry /education/ consumer practices, and current sport/pop culture events to relate to the course material.

The second topical area, delivering the content, consisted of two themes that summarized participants' classroom experiences. The two themes described discrepancies between ITAs and US students' expectations related to classroom environment, dynamic, and activities. The first theme deals with instructional strategies: ITAs primarily relied on lecturing the developed material, whereas students appeared to expect a collaborative learning environment that involved group activities and discussions. As a result, ITAs struggled to keep students engaged and interested in the course. The second theme describes a discrepancy in expectations in relation to classroom management. ITAs, at least at the beginning of their U.S. teaching experience, tended to practice an authoritative way of managing the classroom: they expected students to follow directions, did not encourage questions, discussion, and open student-teacher interaction. Analyses of the interviews showed that language barrier plays an important role in both topical areas as it affects all the themes.

This study explored ITAs perspectives of their teaching experiences in the U.S. classroom. In-depth accounts of ITAs contribute towards addressing growing diversity in U.S. universities. It is evident from this study that ITAs linguistic and sociocultural background affects their readiness to teach in the U.S. classroom. The findings of this study provide unique contribution to the areas of intercultural communication and provide important implications for ITAs training. Based on the themes and topical areas, strategies for preparing students and ITAs for successful teaching and learning experiences are discussed. Due to the relatively small sample in this study, no differences between ITAs experiences were discovered. Further investigation might involve a larger and more representative sample to examine differences in ITAs experiences in the U.S. classroom based on their cultural, geographical, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

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