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International teaching assistants' experiences in the U.S. classrooms: Implications for practice

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Abstract: Recently, a number of studies have examined the lived experiences of the international teaching assistants (ITAs) in the U.S. classrooms. The findings show that the ITAs face many challenges such as classroom management, instructional, linguistic, cultural, and social challenges. Following this line of research, this interview-based study examined the lived experiences of a group of ITAs using qualitative methodology. The paper aims to: (1) to provide insights into the ITAs' perspectives on their first semester of teaching in the U.S. including determining the challenges they face and (2) to consider possible revisions to existing ITAs' preparation programs based on the ITAs' own perspectives and a review of the available literature. This study contributes to the field by presenting information that has the potential to prompt future empirical investigations into educational cultures as they apply to novice instructors in international contexts and to inform and renew curricula for ITAs' preparation programs at the U.S. universities.

Keywords: international teaching assistants (ITAs), qualitative approach, educational cultures, international contexts, sciences

“Unfortunately, I have those students who don't know what they are doing because they don't even know the basics of chemistry ...” (Irina, an ITA from Russia)

“A student came to see me and asked about why I deducted some points ... and then things got out of hand ... He was being rude ... He used the words like “You are full of crap.” ... I was maintaining my composure, but he lost his cool. So, managing and adjusting to every student is important. How the students will behave and how you will react. Because if somebody says: “You are full of crap,” there are various thoughts running in your mind...” (Michael, an ITA from China)

The comments above, one from an international teaching assistant (ITA) in chemistry from Russia and the other from an ITA in computer science from China, indicate the kinds of challenges that ITAs face on a daily basis in the U.S. classrooms. Even though many of the challenges are encountered by beginning instructors independent of their national origin, ITAs face the additional task of adopting the skills of cross-cultural competency in order to successfully communicate with U.S. undergraduate students (Smith, Meyers, & Burkhalter, 1992). A recent review of existing research shows that ITAs as new instructors in an unfamiliar instructional context encounter specific instructional, cultural, and linguistic challenges (Zhou, 2009). This study aims to contribute to the existing body of literature related to ITAs' development of professional expertise (e.g., Aubrey, 1991; Gorsuch, 2012; Lin & Yi, 1997;

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LoCastro & Tapper, 2006; Stevenson & Jenkins, 1994; Trebing, 2007) by exploring the ITAs' own perspectives on the nature of their experiences in the U.S. classrooms, the kinds of challenges they face as instructors in an unfamiliar instructional context, and their perspectives on how the ITAs' preparation programs and respective departments can better support them. This study thus draws attention to the ITAs as important members of the U.S. academic communities and raises awareness of their unique contributions to the system of the U.S. education.

That said, the purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) to provide insights into the ITAs' perspectives on their first semester of teaching in the U.S. including determining the challenges they face and (2) to consider possible revisions to existing ITAs' preparation programs based on the ITAs' perspectives and a review of the available literature. This study will contribute to the field by presenting information that has the potential to stimulate future empirical research into educational cultures as they apply to new teachers in international contexts and to inform and renew curricula for ITAs' preparation programs at the U.S. universities. The study will pursue the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by the ITAs in the U.S. classrooms?
2. How does the U.S. educational culture compare to the ITAs' home countries' educational cultures?
3. How, from the ITAs' perspective, can the ITAs' preparation programs better prepare and support incoming ITAs?

I. Theoretical Framework

Novice teacher learning (including ITAs) can be conceptualized through the prism of the situated learning theory grounded in social constructivist perspectives on learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1984). According to this perspective, a more experienced teacher is conceptualized as an expert, whereas the novice teacher is conceptualized as an apprentice who learns to teach through participating in activities related to teaching and whose participation patterns change from peripheral to full (Wang & Odell, 2007).

Within this theoretical framework, learning is viewed as participation in the social activities of a given community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Situated learning involves learning ways of doing certain things in certain contexts and appropriating the discourse and values of a given community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). At the same time, gaining legitimacy in a given community of practice is not necessarily easy. For example, Warhurst (2008) showed how in a research-oriented UK university new lecturers were oftentimes provided with an insignificant amount of feedback on their teaching due to the fact that their mentors were focused on the research element of their academic work. Limited feedback and lack of mentoring made the newcomers feel isolated, and these factors inhibited their professional growth.

Lave and Wenger (1991) also propose that situated learning involves a process of identity re-construction on the part of learners. In Maynard's (2001) study, during a school-based teaching practicum student-teachers felt that they needed to fit in; i.e., they imitated the mentors' practices in an effort to get the children to respond to them. At the same time, the student-teachers did not want to give up their own idealistic notions about teaching or being themselves in the classroom. In other words, they wanted the children and the mentors to see them as competent educators, but they also "wanted their own personalities to come out" (p. 45). The novices tended to see these two outcomes as mutually exclusive or at least in tension with each other. Thus, many of the student-teachers experienced an inner conflict on this basis. In regard to

the identity development of novice teachers, it is necessary for each novice teacher to develop an identity that is “personally satisfying as well as institutionally fitting and productive” (Bullough & Knowles, 1991, p. 123).

Overall, then, the situated learning model of teacher learning reflects many of the aspects of the process of becoming a teacher and, therefore, can be applied to our understanding of ITAs’ experiences during their first semester of teaching in the U.S.

II. ITAs’ Experiences in the Literature

Recently, a number of studies have examined the lived experiences of the ITAs in the U.S. classrooms. The results of these investigations show that the ITAs face many challenges such as classroom management, instructional, linguistic, cultural and social challenges (Bresnahan & Cai, 2000; Kuo, 2002, 2011). In relation to the classroom management issues, the ITAs admit that the lack of information about the U.S. grading and testing system makes them feel anxious and frustrated (Lin & Yi, 1997). In addition, many ITAs complain about the U.S. undergraduate students’ use of bad language, early departures and late arrivals, and eating and drinking during the class (Bresnahan & Cai, 2000). And even though issues related to classroom discipline are common for novice teachers regardless of their country of origin, the ITAs, particularly those who were educated in Asian countries, are used to more compliant students’ behaviors (Bresnahan & Cai, 2000) and, therefore, may have to put in more efforts to cope with such misbehaviors. In regard to the linguistic challenges, international graduate students reported on difficulties associated with the necessity to actively orally participate in class discussions since in their home countries they were expected to merely listen to their professors rather than be more actively involved (Aubrey, 1991; Kuo, 2011). Along with linguistic challenges, many ITAs (in particular, the ITAs of Asian backgrounds) reported on the instructional challenges they face in the classrooms such as feeling frustrated over having to change their teaching style (Torkelson, 1992) and having to deal with students who interrupt them to ask questions during the class (Kuo, 2002). In relation to the cultural challenges, the ITAs admitted feeling uncomfortable when called by first name and having to call their professors by first names (Bresnahan & Cai, 2000). In addition, many ITAs found it difficult to adapt to the more informal relationship common between the U.S. students and their professors (Kuo, 2002). Finally, in regard to the social challenges, the ITAs reported on having a hard time making friends with Americans. In some cases, the ITAs prioritized their obligations to their home communities and, therefore, had less time to afford to developing relationships with the U.S. students (Smith, 1993). In order to address the social and cultural challenges, a Buddy program for ITAs has been successfully implemented at Michigan State University (Altinsel & Rittenberg, 1998; Kuo, 2002). Within this program, an ITA is paired with a U.S. undergraduate student for an entire academic semester, allowing both groups of students to learn more about each other’s academic and social experiences.

Overall, while a number of studies have addressed the challenges and issues the ITAs encounter in their daily experiences while teaching in the U.S., fewer researchers have proposed ways to address these challenges (Altinsel & Rittenberg, 1998; Kuo, 2002). Following this line of research, this in-depth, interview-based study, centered in the sciences at a U.S. higher education institution, explores the lived experiences of a group of ITAs using qualitative methodology and suggests possible revisions to the existing ITAs’ preparation programs. It focuses on the ITAs from several distinct educational and cultural backgrounds, thus

highlighting the diverse nature of the teaching experiences of the ITAs during their first semester of teaching at a U.S. university.

III. The Study

A. Methodology

Grounded in the qualitative methodology approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), this study is based on three semi-structured interviews with each of the participating ITAs. The goal of qualitative research is to “understand the nature or the meaning of the experience” of the ITAs (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 11) and “to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide for action” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12).

Responding to the urge to accommodate the needs of a growing number of incoming ITAs at U.S. universities, this study involved a detailed content analysis of the interviews of the participating ITAs at a southwestern U.S. university. The transcripts of the three interviews were read and re-read repeatedly by the researcher throughout and upon the completion of the data collection period. Each interview was divided into topics, coded, and sorted into themes. In repeated reviews of the data, themes were scrutinized and either collapsed or created, as further investigation suggested (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A series of subsequent email exchanges with the participating ITAs served as a member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2004) and was integrated into the data analysis below. Therefore, the data analysis reflects the collaborative and co-constructed interpretation of the interviews with the participants, which strengthens the validity of the final analysis.

B. Participants

Table 1 presents the six participants in the study (see section Limitations of the study addressing the number of the participants). In order to preserve confidentiality of the findings, all the participants were given pseudonyms. The ITAs in computer science were three male (two from India and one from China) and one female (from India) graduate students. In chemistry, there were a female student from Russia and a male student from Nepal.

Table 1

Participants

Background Information

Michael is a male Master of Science (Computer Science) student from China.

Madhav is a male Master of Science (Computer Science) student from India.

Pia is a female Master of Science (Computer Science) student from India.

Vickey is a male Doctoral (Computer Science) student from India.

Irina is a female Doctoral (Chemistry) student from Russia.

Saleh is a male Doctoral (Chemistry) student from Nepal.

The ITAs were recruited during the ITAs’ training workshops offered at a southwestern U.S. university in the summer and fall semesters of 2013. During the period of the data

collection, all the participants were in their first semester of teaching in the U.S. Their teaching responsibilities included grading students' work, leading laboratory sessions, supervising student group work during class meetings, and holding office hours.

C. Instructional Context

The ITAs' training workshops are offered twice throughout the academic year (the summer and fall semesters). During the workshops, the ITAs discuss topics related to the U.S. educational culture, the characteristics of interactive teaching, the discourse of teaching, and the issues relating to office hours. In addition, the ITAs participate in daily practicum experiences. For example, they are required to present a concept or term from their respective field of study or explain a problem and its solution, applying the principles of interactive teaching discussed as part of the ITAs' preparation workshop.

D. Data Collection

The data were collected during the ITAs' training workshops offered at a southwestern U.S. university. The ITAs were interviewed about their teaching experience in the U.S. at the beginning, middle, and end of their first semester of teaching in this context. The interview questions are provided in Appendix A.

E. Results

Research question 1: What are the challenges faced by the ITAs in the U.S. classrooms? In this study, similarly to the earlier research (e.g., Bresnahan & Cai, 2000; Kuo, 2002, 2011), the ITAs identified the following challenges: classroom management, linguistic, instructional, and cultural challenges. The bold text in each data set demonstrates the linguistic instantiations of the ITAs' perceptions and understandings with regards to the various challenges.

Classroom management challenges. In regard to the classroom management issues, the ITAs shared that many U.S. undergraduate students do not review the course syllabus prior to the class meetings and, therefore, are not prepared for a particular class activities. In addition, two of the ITAs said that some of the students do not clean their desks and equipment after a laboratory session, do not pay attention during the class, and do not take notes from the board. In Irina's own words:

You should not expect them to be adults. You should treat them like kids. **They will not clean up after the lab, unless you tell them. They will not look at the syllabus what lab section they will have.** You should tell them everything.
(Interview 3)

In addition, one ITA reported on one of his student's use of bad language and being disrespectful during an office hours' meeting. Michael, an ITA from China, recalled:

A student came to see me and ask about why I deducted some points and then things got out of hand. **He was being rude. He used the words like "You are full of crap." I was maintaining my composure, but he lost his cool.** So, managing and adjusting to every student is important. How the students will behave and how you will react. **Because if somebody says: "You are full of crap," there are various thoughts running in your mind. . . .** (Interview 2)

When probed by the researcher as to how the ITAs attend to the inattentive students, two of the ITAs shared that they call their students by name to attract their attention. In addition, one of the ITAs (Irina) stated that she provided the weaker students with correct answers to the items on the quizzes that they did not complete. Furthermore, she admitted that she was lenient in grading the students' assignments. As for dealing with students' use of bad language, Michael commented that maintaining his composure was crucial in this situation.

Overall, while experiencing certain classroom management challenges, the ITAs were at the same time developing strategies to deal with the issues they encountered. Yet, some of their instructional decisions seem arguable (e.g., being lenient in grading) and, therefore, developing and implementing the mechanisms of ongoing support and assistance (e.g., mentoring by more expert peers or professors) from the ITAs' respective departments is necessary. Additionally, interestingly, despite being provided with the information about possible students' use of bad language during the ITAs' preparation program, one of the ITAs still found this difficult to go through, particularly due to the potential racist basis of the student's remarks.

Linguistic challenges. In regard to the linguistic challenges, all of the ITAs admitted that undergraduate students speak fast, use short sentences and informal language, which many international students may not know. For example, Saleh, an ITA from Nepal, offered this account:

I think language. **Students use more informal language, like slang. Like “fishy.” It’s something unclear or unconvincing. So ITAs may not know them . . . and they don’t like to talk in long sentences like international students. They prefer short sentences.** (Interview 3)

In addition, one of the ITAs admitted that discipline-specific concepts were hard to explain and that she felt the need to increase her fluency and expand discipline-related vocabulary. Two other ITAs reported on miscommunication problems due to accent.

When queried by the researcher as to how the ITAs deal with the linguistic challenges they encounter, two of the ITAs explained that as the semester progressed they were able to better communicate and understand American English. Besides that, another participant stated that chatting with his students informally before and after his class helped him learn a number of informal expressions.

Overall, developing one's language ability is not an easy endeavor and it takes a long time. Furthermore, it requires an ITA to be patient, willing to try and learn from, for example, his or her students.

Instructional challenges. In relation to the instructional challenges, all of the participants pointed to their lack of knowledge in regard to the academic level of the students. Two of the participants noted that the students were not always ready to learn because they had not received sufficient relevant education at an earlier point in their schooling. For instance, Irina, an ITA from Russia, commented that “Unfortunately, I have those students who don't know what they are doing because **they don't even know the basics of chemistry.**” (Interview 2) The issue related to the need to know more about the academic preparedness of the students was further exacerbated by the fact that the U.S. students were less academically prepared than the same-level students in the ITAs' home countries. For example, Saleh, an ITA from Nepal, expressed his reaction:

I teach labs and most of the students are not chemistry majors. Sometimes they may not understand a chemical term. And sometimes they are not familiar with equipment . . . **and undergraduate students have less knowledge as compared to my country . . .**

they don't even have some basic knowledge of chemistry and some of them are not so attentive. (Interview 1)

Further, two of the ITAs reported that they had experienced difficulty in terms of matching the level of knowledge of their instructors. As part of their teaching responsibilities, the ITAs were required to supervise group work in their instructor's classroom. While the instructor worked with other groups, the ITAs were required to supervise the work of several remaining groups of students. The ITAs were concerned that they lacked the ability to provide the students with a level of instruction comparable to that provided by the course instructors. Finally, one of the ITAs was concerned about developing additional techniques for teaching in the lab as it is difficult to be interactive in this environment. Even though he was consciously aware of the need to apply a more interactive style of teaching in his classroom, he was not always ready to actively apply this knowledge in a classroom setting.

In regard to the strategies the ITAs utilized in order to address the instructional issues described above, the ITAs admitted that as the semester progressed, they had developed a better understanding of the level of their students' academic preparedness. Furthermore, they expected to do a better job when re-teaching the same course in cooperation with their professor or on their own (depending on their instructional responsibilities) during their second semester. At the same time, one ITA was still unsure as to how he could create a more interactive classroom environment for his students in the lab settings. Such statements reflect the idea that becoming a successful ITA takes time and perseverance. In addition, the findings shows that an ITA can be passively aware of the expectations the U.S. students hold for the teaching approach, but may need a longer period of time to implement new ideas.

Cultural challenges. Finally, in regard to the cultural challenges, one of the ITAs related a story having to do with the negative attitudes towards international instructors exhibited by the U.S. undergraduate students. In Irina's own words:

I heard this story from my husband. A student came to his first class and said, "**Oh, I am so glad I got an American TA**" but then he turned to her and said that he was actually an international instructor **and then she never came back to his other classes.** He doesn't know why for sure but that may be the reason. (Interview 3)

In addition, another ITA admitted his having to adapt to the different rules with regards to the physical contact between teachers and students. In Saleh's own words, "**In our country, you can touch students. Here, you can't do this.**" (Interview 1)

Interestingly, three other participants stated the necessity to "blend in" with the U.S. students, while maintaining their own cultural identity (Indian) by celebrating national holidays, attending family's and relative's gatherings, and preparing ethnic foods.

Despite the fact that the ITAs encountered certain cultural challenges associated with the U.S. students' negative perceptions of the ITAs and having to learn the different rules in relation to physical contact between students and teachers, they expressed a willingness to adapt to the U.S. cultural norms, while maintaining their own cultural identities.

Research question 2: How does the U.S. educational culture compare to the ITAs' home countries' cultures? All the participating ITAs noticed that the U.S. classroom culture was less formal when compared to the classroom culture in their home countries. For example, the students were referred to by their first names, could eat in the classroom, arrive late, and wear jeans and other informal attire. In addition, all the participants admitted that even though at first they felt less comfortable with regard to the differences described above, as the semester

progressed they were able to gradually adapt to the U.S. culture. In part, this may be due to the participants' prior relative familiarity with the U.S. culture. For example, two of the participants reported that they had visited the U.S. before on a tourist visa and four others reported that they had a level of familiarity with the U.S. culture gained from the mass media and interactions with friends and relatives already residing in the U.S.

In addition, all the participants reported that technology is used more extensively in classrooms in the U.S. than in their home countries. For example, Irina noted the following:

I have a good impression of the U.S. classrooms. They are very organized. And there's a lot of equipment available for undergraduate students. **Even undergraduate students will use the equipment that we didn't have in my home country.** (Interview 1)

Along with the overall greater use of technology in the classroom, two of the participants commented on how the availability of technology impacted the instruction provided to the students. For instance, Saleh, an ITA from Nepal, shared the following account:

It's really easier to teach here because professors can take notes, guides, books. **But in my home country professors are not allowed to bring laptops or anything in the class.** Professor needs to remember everything and present in a systematic way. Otherwise, the students will have a negative conception of this professor. (Interview 2)

However, at the same time, one of the participants expressed some concern about the use of PowerPoint presentations in the classroom: "Here, professors use a lot of presentations, **but I am not sure this is a good approach because it's easier to follow explanations from the board and the slides can contain too much information.**" (Irina, an ITA from Russia) In addition, all of the ITAs pointed to the better facilities, such as the library and computer laboratories, available to both students and professors on the U.S. campuses.

Finally, all the participants noted that they considered faculty members in the U.S. to be more friendly and approachable than those in their respective home countries. Additionally, the ITAs pointed to the more interactive approach to teaching characterizing the U.S. professors' classroom style. For example, according to one ITA:

The professors here are closer to students. They use more interaction with students in the classroom. It's not only comprehension checks. Here, students have to respond. In my home country, students could sleep in class. (Irina, an ITA from Russia)

In addition, one of the students admitted that the professor he worked with served as a good role-model for him, especially in terms of responding to students' questions:

My professor doesn't usually say: "No, this is incorrect", but he says: "This may be true, but I am not sure." And for the exam he brought some food and drinks. **So, he is caring. And I can learn from him.** (Saleh, an ITA from Nepal)

Overall, besides a more extensive use of technology in the classroom and a more relaxed classroom atmosphere, the ITAs noted that compared to the faculty in their home countries the U.S. faculty members were friendlier and more accessible and pursued a more interactive approach to teaching.

Research question 3: How, from the ITAs' perspective, can the ITA preparation programs better prepare and support incoming ITAs? All the participating ITAs commented that they would be interested in learning more about the differences between the classroom culture of the U.S. and

that of their home countries. Four of the participants also suggested inviting professors from their respective fields of study to give demonstration lessons during the ITA training workshop. In addition, one of the ITAs was interested in learning more about the phonetics of English in order to improve his pronunciation. At the same time, another ITA was concerned about learning additional techniques for teaching in the lab as it is difficult to be interactive in this environment. Finally, one of the ITAs recommended bringing “real” students to the ITA workshops in order to play the office hour role-plays, for example, one playing a really aggressive student or another asking “silly” questions.

F. Limitations of the Study

Clearly, major generalizations about ITAs cannot be made from this research due to the limited sample (six participants). In addition, only four countries are represented: India, China, Russia, and Nepal. Furthermore, the participants were studying in two areas, computer science and chemistry. In the future, a larger and more diverse sample and a longitudinal study that includes, for example, classroom observations of the ITAs’ teaching might be a worthwhile research endeavor.

In addition, while the study proposes certain modifications (see Figure 1) to the existing ITAs’ preparation programs based on the participants’ perspectives and a review of relevant research, solicitation of feedback from the ITAs and ITAs’ preparation programs’ faculty on these changes seems a worthwhile research endeavor in the future. Also, while many of the issues that the ITAs encountered (e.g., identity formation) are reflected in the situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), some others (i.e., cultural, linguistic) are not.

IV. Discussion and Implications

Overall, the ITAs in this study valued the opportunity to teach in a new instructional context and learn from the experience. Yet, in accord with the findings of other research (Bresnahan & Cai, 2000; Kuo, 2002, 2011), they experienced classroom management, instructional, linguistic and cultural challenges. Consequently, ITA preparation programs and respective departments clearly need to do more in order to support the international instructors.

First, some of the participating ITAs mentioned lack of knowledge with regard to the differences between the U.S. general and educational culture and their home countries’ culture. From the situated learning theory perspective, we can expect the participating ITAs to develop the necessary cross-cultural skills through participation in the actual activities and contexts of teaching. At the same time, additional support from the ITAs’ preparation programs can help facilitate this process. For example, ITAs can be provided with opportunities to experience teaching “real” content to “real” students during the ITAs’ preparation course. Such early hands-on experience can provide the ITAs with initial insights into what they might expect once they start their work as ITAs. As for the undergraduate students, some U.S. universities involve U.S. undergraduate students in an intercultural training course (Ross, 2007; Trebing, 2007), which helps this group of students to be more open to other cultures and less ethnocentric. Increased contact between the representatives of distinct groups (e.g., the ITAs and undergraduate students) does not by itself help resolve misunderstandings or break barriers due to, for instance, the power variables. Therefore, educating each group about the characteristics of the other represents a viable instructional strategy.

Secondly, some of the ITAs reported on the difficulties associated with language use. In regard to the linguistic challenges, some ITA preparation programs endorse a component on English as a global language, which increases the overall tolerance for world Englishes and helps to shift away from the deficit construction of the ITAs (LoCastro & Tapper, 2006). Furthermore, LoCastro and Tapper (2006) argue that less attention should be paid to pronunciation training and more to teacher training, which, however, may contradict the ITAs' own perceptions of their needs. Linguistic challenges are closely related to the problem of cultural adaptation. While the students in this study were interested in developing bi-cultural identities, they were at the same time cultural "outsiders" in the teaching as well as the broader U.S. cultural contexts. The students' development and negotiation of comfortable identities both inside and outside the classroom is a process, which, according to the situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), emerges "in the contradictions and struggles inherent in social practice and the formation of identities" (p. 57). Perhaps, introducing the ITAs to the ideas related to global Englishes can help them develop more comfortable bi-cultural identities and gain greater confidence in regard to their linguistic proficiency.

Third, the participating ITAs, similarly to all novice instructors, encountered difficulties with maintaining classroom discipline. From the perspective of situated learning, the ITAs need to adopt the practices, values and beliefs of the given community of educators, which can be promoted through greater engagement of the more expert members of this community of practice in their learning. Therefore, in relation to the instructional and classroom management challenges that the ITAs encounter, there seems to be a need in greater involvement and collaboration of the respective ITAs' departments and the ITA preparation programs. This idea was explicitly suggested by four of the participating ITAs. For example, professors from the ITAs' respective fields of study can be invited to give demonstration lessons during the ITA training workshop. In addition, ongoing instructional support and meetings with other TAs and mentors are necessary for the ITAs' successful adaptation to the U.S. educational system due to, for example, debatable decisions of the ITAs in relation to grading student work.

Figure 1 summarizes the proposed changes for revising the existing ITAs' preparation programs, as viewed from the perspective of the participating ITAs and a review of relevant research. Figure 1 describes the changes in three domains: (1) community, (2) instructional contexts, and (3) ITAs.

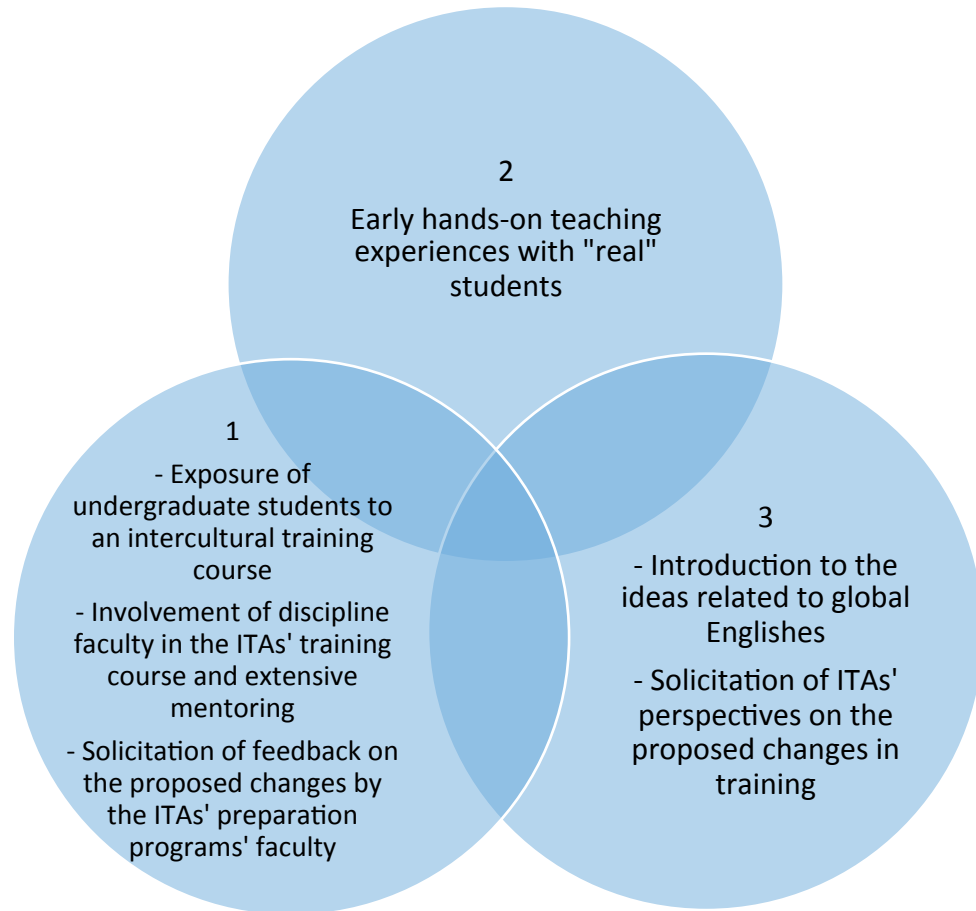


Figure 1. Proposed changes for the existing ITAs' preparation programs.

Despite a limited sample of participants, this article contributes to the data-driven accounts of the ITAs' experiences in the U.S. classrooms and calls for further longitudinal ethnographic studies of ITAs. Such research is needed to help renew and revise the ITAs' preparation programs at the U.S. universities. In addition, this study raises readers' awareness of the importance of ITAs as critical members of U.S. academic communities and urges the ITAs' preparation programs and respective departments to provide greater ongoing support to this group of international educators and search and implement additional measures to assist the ITAs.

Appendix. Interview Questions (adopted from Trebing, 2007)

Personal Information

1. Name: _____
2. Nationality: _____
3. Native language(s): _____
4. Knowledge of other languages: _____
5. Major: _____ Degree sought: MA PhD

6. Gender: Female Male

Departmental Information:

7. Please specify the department you have worked for/are working for: _____

- a. Which courses have you taught?
- b. What are/were your specific responsibilities?
- c. How long have you been teaching?

Previous Teaching Experience:

8. Did you have teaching experience before coming to the U.S.? If so, please describe.
 - a. Where did you teach (country, institution)?
 - b. How long did you teach (time, semesters)?
 - c. Please describe your students (gender, background).

Proficiency in English:

9. How do you feel about communicating in English?
10. How do you feel about your proficiency in English?

Teaching Experience:

11. What was your first impression of a U.S. college classroom?
12. What are the differences and/or similarities between teaching in the US and in your home country/the place you grew up?
13. What do you enjoy most about working with (teaching) the U.S. students?
14. Have you faced any difficulties or challenging situations in the classroom?
 - a. If yes, what kinds of difficulties or challenging situations have you faced?
 - b. If yes, did you solve these difficulties alone or did you seek help? From whom?
15. Why do you think these problems and challenging situations occurred?
16. What do you expect from your U.S. undergraduate students?
17. How do you prepare for your teaching? Do you have enough time?
18. How do you teach in the classroom? Specifically:
 - a. What specific teaching behaviors or techniques do you use in the classroom?
 - b. How do you approach teaching?
 - c. How do students address you in your classroom? (first name, last name, etc.)
19. What are some aspects of your teaching that you especially like? What are some aspects of your teaching that need further development?
20. If you are teaching this course again next semester, are you planning to make any changes to your teaching approach? If so, what changes will you make? If not, why not?
21. If you were teaching the same course in your native language, would it be different?

How?

22. What are the characteristics of a proficient TA?

Other Relevant Information:

23. What are your personal goals for teaching in the U.S.?
24. Do you have any advice for new ITAs coming to the U.S. from your country?
25. How did your department help you to prepare for teaching in the U.S.?
26. Are there things that your department could have done to help you teach more effectively? What are they?
27. Did you learn anything during your teaching experience this semester that you wish you had known before you started teaching in the U.S.?
28. Do the U.S. students approach international instructors differently from how they approach the U.S. instructors?

29. How are ITAs perceived by the U.S. undergraduate students on campus?
30. Is there anything else that you think is important for new (or returning) ITAs?

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