


Spring 4-15-2019

RICH POINTS IN BETWEEN CULTURES,  
LANGUAGES, AND PEDAGOGIES:  
EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES OF  
INTERNATIONAL TEACHING ASSISTANTS  
IN THE USA

Natalia V. Rud  
*University of New Mexico*

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Natalia V Rud

*Candidate*

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Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Studies

*Department*

---

This dissertation is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication:

*Approved by the Dissertation Committee:*

Carlos LopezLeiva, PhD , Chairperson

---

Pisarn Bee Chamcharatsri, PhD

---

Holbrook Mahn, PhD

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Sylvia Celedon-Pattichis, PhD

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Charlotte Gunawardena, PhD

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**RICH POINTS IN BETWEEN CULTURES, LANGUAGES,  
AND PEDAGOGIES: EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES  
OF INTERNATIONAL TEACHING ASSISTANTS IN THE USA**

**by**

**NATALIA V RUD**

Specialist, Linguistics and TEFL, Tyumen State University, 2006

MA., English, Washington State University, 2010

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**  
**Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Studies**

The University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

**May, 2019**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank every single individual who helped me in completing this dissertation. I am thankful to my dissertation advisor – Dr. LopezLeiva – for utmost patience and resourcefulness in guiding me along the way. My gratitude is extended to my professors and dissertation committee members. Many thanks are to my “community of practice gurus” - Dr. Chamcharatsri for igniting my research interest and Dr. Gunawardena for enhancing my knowledge about the said concept. I am also thankful that Dr. Mahn kept me engaged in Vygotsky research and convinced me to follow the sociocultural theory path for this study. Finally, I cannot stress enough how helpful Dr. Celedon-Pattichis’ detailed feedback and advice have been from the conception to completion of this dissertation work.

I acknowledge all the study participants and all the people who helped me conduct the research. I value your time, input and all the stories I have learned from you. I also would like to thank my friends who have been continuously encouraging me, especially, Svitlana Volkova, PhD and Irina Kopaneva, PhD.

My heartiest appreciations go to my incredible family who played an immense role in the success of this dissertation. My dear mama and papa (Valentina and Vladimir Rud), thank you, for providing your love and support throughout this journey and taking care of my family and me. My special thanks to my mother-in-law for helping too. My beloved husband Farooq Ali Khan, thank you, for being my “therapist”, my “cheerleader”, and a great family man all along. My sweet little son Eli, thank you, for being my inspiration and for being so understanding that I had to miss some of our precious time together. I love you all! Thank you for believing in me.

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**Natalia V Rud**

**SPECIALIST, LINGUISTICS AND TEFL, TYUMEN STATE UNIVERSITY, 2006**

**MA., ENGLISH, WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY, 2010**

**PHD, LANGUAGE, LITERACY, AND SOCIOCULTURAL STUDIES**

**UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO, 2019**

**ABSTRACT**

This study presents a qualitative, multiple case, instrumental case study which explores experiences and positionality of International Teaching Assistants (ITAs) in the US academia. Drawing from, first, the earlier research which focuses on ITAs' language, culture, and pedagogy with, mostly, a "deficit" perspective and, second, from recent publications which concentrate on exploring ITAs' identities and perceptions, this study investigates how ITAs approach differences and similarities (rich points) during everyday discourses in their various communities of practice. The conceptual framework is represented by Agar's (1996, 2006) vision on rich points (differences and similarities); Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of community of practice (CoP), and the notion of narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Simons, 2009). The

theoretical framework is informed by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, specifically, by the concept of *perezhivanie* (lived through emotional experience).

Two cases of ITA communities which are bound to certain university settings (in the Northwest and Southwest of the US) were analyzed. Purposive (snowball) sampling was used to find focal participants. Eight ITAs took part in a semester-long data collection. The study utilized an electronic survey; one informal conversational interview; one semi-structured interview; one to two observations with debriefings; and collection of artifacts and visual data. The findings revealed that there are five major ways for ITAs to mediate rich points, namely, via **ITAs' multiple identities, ITAs' self-analysis, ITAs' internalization of politics and policies, ITAs' internalization of others' actions in the US academia and, ITAs' teaching evolution**. Rich points are observed as a vital aspect of ITAs' development. At the same time, mediation of rich points is always unique and dynamic and presupposes a combination of several navigational techniques.

The significance of the study is predetermined by the necessary contribution into the recent research on ITAs' identities as the opposition to the previously projected "deficit theory" in respect to ITAs. Also, the study explored ITAs' various communities of practice while the recent research tends to focus on ITAs' classroom as their only major environment. It is suggested that ITAs' experiences should be researched further, especially, for providing more meaningful practices for ITAs' socialization in the US academia.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>LIST OF FIGURES.....</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES.....</b>	<b>xii</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Introduction .....	1
Problem Statement .....	2
ITAs: Background and Context .....	4
ITAs: Definitions .....	6
Statement of Purpose and Research Question .....	11
Overview of Methodology.....	16
Rationale and Significance of the Study .....	16
Researcher’s Positionality and Assumptions .....	20
Organization of Dissertation .....	22
Conclusion .....	24
<b>CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>25</b>
Introduction .....	25
Literature Review: Existing Research in Regard to ITAs .....	26
Assessment of ITAs .....	27
ITAs’ Trainings .....	30
Language, Culture, and Pedagogy: Fixing “Problems” and Improving Practices ....	33
In Search of a Different Perspective in ITA Research .....	35
ITAs’ Identities, Communities of Practice, and Perceptions .....	38

Conceptual Framework .....	45
Community of Practice as a Pathway to Exploring Identities .....	46
Rich Points, Languaculture, and Frames ... ..	51
Narratives as a Keystone to Understand Identities .....	55
Theoretical Framework: Vygotskian Concept of <i>Perezhivanie</i> in Sociocultural Theory.....	61
Conclusion .....	73
<b>CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>74</b>
Introduction .....	74
Rationale for Research Approach .....	74
Research Settings .....	77
Establishing Research Sample .....	81
Participants .....	92
Data Collection Methods .....	104
Data Analysis: Methods and Insights .....	113
Trustworthiness, Limitations and Delimitations .....	129
Conclusion .....	134
<b>CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH FINDINGS .....</b>	<b>135</b>
Introduction.....	135
Main Findings: Answering Research Question .....	136
Translating Rich Points via Navigating ITAs' Multiple Identities .....	138
Variations Across Cases .....	142



Translating Rich Points via Self-Analysis/Self-Reflection .....	148
Translating Rich Points via Adherence and Internalization of Politics and Policies ....	151
Variations Across Cases .....	156
Translating Rich Points via Internalization of Others' Actions in ITAs Various	
Communities of Practice .....	158
Variations Across Cases .....	170
Translating Rich Points via Teaching Evolution .....	171
Variations Across Cases .....	173
Summary of Findings .....	177
Conclusion .....	181
<b>CHAPTER 5 ANALYSIS .....</b>	<b>183</b>
Introduction .....	183
Discussion of Findings within Theoretical Framework .....	184
Rich Point Narratives: A Grading Conflict (Alex, NTU) .....	184
Rich Point Narratives: Alone Under the Stars (Astro-Gal, NTU) .....	187
Rich Point Narratives: Forced to be a Teacher (Selda, NTU) .....	188
Rich Point Narratives: An Invisible Professional (Ahmad, STU) .....	190
Rich Point Narratives: A Teacher's Compromise (Guillermina, STU) .....	192
Rich Point Narratives: Living the Reality (Malek, STU) .....	194
Rich Point Narratives: Learning to be a Teacher (Aloha, STU) .....	196
Rich Point Narratives: Language Games (Mary, STU) .....	199
Discussion of Findings: Rich Points and Identities .....	206

Discussion of Findings: A Different Perspective on Language, Culture, and Pedagogy –	
What Can be Changed? .....	211
Suggestions for Future Research .....	223
Conclusion .....	226
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	228

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. A picture of an artifact (Astro-Gal). This photograph illustrates a drawing made by Astro-Gal's child, which is kept in the participant's office and reminds the participant of her family. ....	107
Figure 2. A picture of an artifact (Mary), This photograph illustrates a bookshelf which is organized in such a way that it demonstrates the participant's multiple activities: teaching as an ITA, researching and studying for her advanced degree. ....	107
Figure 3. A picture of an artifact (Guillermina). This photograph demonstrates a souvenir (an owl) which belonged to the participant's grandfather and it reminds her of where she comes from and of her family intellectual tradition (the owl means wisdom). ....	108
Figure 4. A picture of three drawings (Guillermina). This photograph illustrates how the participant sees herself positioned as a progression from the past (left) to the present (center) to the possible future (right) as a teacher. ....	110
Figure 5. A picture of two drawings (Alex). This photograph illustrates how the participant sees herself positioned as a progression from the past (left) to the present which is also her imagined positionality as a teacher in the future (right). ....	110
Figure 6. Reduced data. This photograph illustrates how the initially coded data was reduced to five-page color-coded files for each participant. ....	121
Figure 7. The "Spiral of an ITA's movement". This picture illustrates how the coding of ITA's rich point stories was approached. ....	123
Figure 8. "Dancing with the data". This picture illustrates the process of coding (from top left to bottom right). ....	129

Figure 9. Navigational ways through the rich points. This picture illustrates the findings of the study.....	178
Figure 10. A Grading Conflict (Alex, NTU). This picture illustrates a rich point development.	186
Figure 11. All Alone Under the Stars (Astro-Gal, NTU). This picture illustrates a rich point development.....	188
Figure 12. Forced to be a Teacher (Selda, NTU). This picture illustrates a rich point development.....	189
Figure 13. An Invisible Professional (Ahmad, STU). This picture illustrates a rich point development.....	192
Figure 14. A Teacher's Compromise (Guillermina, STU). This picture illustrates a rich point development.....	193
Figure 15. Living the Reality (Malek, STU). This picture illustrates a rich point development.	196
Figure 16. Learning to be a Teacher (Aloha, STU). This picture illustrates a rich point development.....	199
Figure 17. Language Games (Mary, STU). This picture illustrates a rich point development...	201

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Gender Distribution Among Survey Participants .....	87
Table 2. Age Distribution Among Survey Participants .....	88
Table 3. Survey Participants' Country of Origin .....	88
Table 4. Survey Participants' Languages Spoken/Used .....	89
Table 5. Survey Participants' Duration of Being ITAs (in semesters) .....	89
Table 6. Survey Participants' Advanced Degree Programs.....	90
Table 7. Survey Participants' Level of Satisfaction Working as ITAs .....	90
Table 8. Survey Participants' Field of Study/Discipline .....	90

## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

### **Introduction**

This study demonstrates a qualitative multiple case study about International Teaching Assistants' (ITAs) experiences in the US academia via discussing focal participants' ways of mediation of surprises and discoveries as they construct their teaching experiences outside their native language and culture. Their immediate environment, which is represented by various communities of practice, is thoroughly studied in order to see how those moments of discoveries help shape international teaching assistants' identities. The discussion highlights the significance of the research project for the overall field of ITA-related research as it explores ITAs not only in the classroom, as the most of studies have done, but in their other communities of practice. Also, the research project is significant in that it contributes to a new approach to ITA-related research, which aims to understand ITAs' identities and experiences rather than just evaluate ITAs' language, culture, and pedagogy within the academic settings, which has been a prevalent approach in the said field for several decades. The following chapter underscores the aforementioned statements while setting the background for the undertaken research and identifying research questions.

## **Problem Statement**

It is not a secret that the US academia employs a variety of educators – from tenure track professors to graduate students who also teach classes. The latter – graduate teaching assistants – represent a complex but unique group of educators as they pursue their advanced degrees while working as teachers. In fact, the presence of “graduate assistant” academic force in the US is rather prevalent. The reliance on graduate assistants performing educational duties cannot be claimed as a new tendency as it “has been a part of American higher education since John Hopkins University was founded and the research university was born” (Smith et al., 1992, p. xvii), which happened as early as the 1850s (Storr, 1953 in Kaufman & Brownworth, 2006). At the same time, there are references to tutors at Yale in the 1700’s as one of the possible earliest indications of teaching graduate students (Lewis, 1993). Nevertheless, the graduate students-as-teachers did not only survive in the twentieth and the twenty first centuries but their numbers have grown.

For instance, American Association of University Professors points to the fact that “the number of graduate students who also serve as classroom instructors rose by 35% from 1975 to 2000” (Arnesen, 2007, p. 541). According to Bureau of Labor Statistics of United States Department of Labor, 126,030 graduate teaching assistants worked at universities nationwide in 2014 (Bureau of Labor Statistics of the United States Department of Labor Graduate Teaching Assistants (n.d.). To compare, the same source suggests that as of 2014 the US higher educational system had 1,313,000 other postsecondary teachers including, both, full-time and part-time faculty (Bureau of Labor Statistics of the United States Department of Labor Postsecondary Teachers (n.d.). Also, while privately funded colleges can have only about 2% of graduate assistants fulfilling teaching roles, graduate students comprise 41% of all instructional

staff in publicly funded research universities when compared to 28.9% of tenured, tenure-track, and full-time educators all together (Great College Advice (n.d.). The aforementioned statistical sources do not, however, specify the demographics of graduate teaching assistants, which makes it problematic to account for the diversity of graduate teaching assistants working for American higher education.

However, the diversity among graduate teaching assistants should be accounted for, at least, one simple reason. The United States, as majority of other countries, could not escape globalization, shifting of borders and immigration. The US's higher educational system has been welcoming students from all over the world for quite a while. The trend has been set since the middle of the last century and the numbers of non-domestic students in the US has been steadily growing. In fact, in the year 2013 alone "the United States hosted more of the world's 4.1 million international students than any other country", which is 19% of the overall international student population around the globe (Zong and Batalova, 2016, para. 1). What is more, the data collected by the International Institute of Education shows that in the academic year of 1949-1950 there were 26,000 students from overseas whereas in between 2009 and 2015 the number grew to 975,000 international students (Zong & Batalova, 2016).

This is a general picture though. The education in the US welcomes both undergraduate and graduate students. If one looks closely at the data, it becomes obvious that within three recent decades the population of **graduate** international students rose from approximately 100,000 to 350,000 students (Zong & Batalova, 2016). Speaking of the graduate level of education, de Berly (1997) highlights that if in 1960 there were only 1,976 doctorate degrees awarded to foreign students, in 1989 the number of PhDs increased up to 8,195 and by the mid-1990s 48,727 master's degrees and 11,130 doctorate degrees were granted to the international



students. It is important to take such statistical data into consideration since international graduate students, when compared to their international undergraduate counterparts, have an opportunity to support their studies as *Graduate Assistants*, *Research Assistants*, and *Teaching Assistants*. Given that the numbers of international graduate students are rising and, most likely, will continue to rise, it is vital to observe such foreign graduate students as active participants of the educational processes, specifically, a part of “graduate teaching assistants” group. This is the point when diversity becomes rather evident among the overall population of graduate assistants since the international individuals in this group are being differentiated by a title of “*international graduate teaching assistants*” or “*international teaching assistants*” as opposed to “domestic graduate teaching assistants”.

### **ITAs: Background and Context**

As one might guess, this niche for *international teaching assistants (ITAs)* has appeared as soon as the influx of international graduate students in the US started increasing. Since the end of the 1980s, references to ITAs have been making an appearance in research and literature. Kaufman and Brownworth (2006) note that as soon as the population of international students almost doubled between 1976 and 1996 it “undoubtedly provided a strong impetus for further promoting the ITA paradigm” (p. 1). The US academia attempted to accommodate the growing numbers of international graduate students who, also, worked as instructional staff. As a result, in the early 1980s, ITAs were heavily criticized as valid teachers (Smith et al., 1992; Tapper & Kidder, 2006). Colleges around the US were bombarded with American undergraduate students’ complaints about ITAs. Dissatisfaction with being taught by international graduate students, who spoke with an accent or performed teaching duties in different ways, quickly spread among

parents too who, eventually, pressured university authorities to tackle “the problem” with ITAs (Kaufman & Brownworth, 2006; Smith et al., 1992).

As a result of such a disappointment, “18 states either have passed laws or implemented system-wide mandates to assess the language skills of ITAs” by 1992 (Smith et al., 1992). By 1993, *TESOL Convention* officially established an interest group which aimed to explore “issues related to ITAs acculturation and professional development” (Kaufman & Brownworth, 2006). Separately, administrators of universities across the nation started concentrating on university-wide and department-specific trainings for ITAs. All these policies served as a ground for increasing interest towards international teaching assistants. Therefore, majority of research conducted in the 1990s concentrated on investigating assessment practices for new ITAs and on evaluating ITA training programs nation-wide. Three major themes in connection to the ITA “problem” emerged from such research endeavors: ITAs’ language abilities or linguistic awareness, ITAs’ cross-cultural competence as educators in the US, and, finally, ITAs’ pedagogy and instructional methods. In other words, since the end of the 1980s – beginning of the 1990s the research was mostly preoccupied with solving or helping to solve ITAs’ *language, culture, and pedagogy* “problems”. The diversity among graduate teaching assistants became a point of division where ITAs were treated from the deficit perspective as educators who needed help in order to fit in the mainstream vision of the valid teacher.

Entering the new millennium, the research on ITAs, which was initiated in the 1990s, has not changed drastically. Language, culture, and pedagogy as well as ITAs’ assessment and trainings have remained key concepts in the discussion of ITAs’ experiences, although, certain authors voiced concerns about the prevalent approaches in regard to ITAs (Mead, 2007; Jia & Bergerson, 2008). The end of the first decade marked the era of a new approach to ITAs which

meant to oppose the normative paradigm in the research. ITAs' identities and narratives began to shift to the center of the research which aimed at exploring diversity among ITAs as individuals rather than a deficiency labeled group of people (Ashavskaya, 2015; Hebbani & Hendrix, 2014; Li, 2007; Williams, 2007, 2011; Zheng, 2013). This approach, which, mostly, is claimed to be post-structuralist, has been steadily growing but there still remains space to explore and contribute.

### **ITAs: Definitions**

As I have mentioned in the introduction, ITAs have formed a unique niche in the teaching force called “graduate assistants”. In order to get to know the nature of this niche, as defined by the US academia, one needs to look at the definition of ITAs. So, who are ITAs? In this task, it is necessary to look precisely at all the concepts encrypted in the abbreviation. The least confusing, probably, is the last part “teaching assistants” because this job title, when applied to the university or college reality, identifies a graduate student who possesses certain expertise and skills to perform a range of teaching duties under the guidance of a professor or a supervisor. It is also possible that a graduate student can potentially be trained for such duties if they lack pedagogical background but have enough knowledge in the field. Being accepted into a graduate program, in majority cases, presupposes that the student is already qualified enough to be an expert in a particular discipline, thus, with appropriate trainings they can deliver undergraduate courses fully or partially.

The range of duties depends on a multitude of factors, such as a vision, policies, and a budget of a certain department, graduate program/school, and university as well as each faculty's approach to their graduate assistants or specifics of teaching in a certain discipline. Some

graduate teaching assistants can be asked to teach and grade the entire seminar, others can be just selected to grade students' works or lead a lab for the class. The department and/or supervisors predetermine whether the graduate teaching assistants can design their own syllabi, modify previously used ones or simply follow the prescribed template of a syllabus for a certain class. As a rule, graduate student assistants are asked to teach or help in teaching lower division undergraduate courses which are fundamental or basic classes in the discipline. Some graduate programs, however, may allow their doctorate students to teach higher level classes, especially, closer to the completion of the degree.

It is vital to remember that the word 'assistant' presupposes a certain level of guidance, either from a faculty or a specific supervisor in the department/program. This means that the scale of supervision, guidance, and help will vary too and will depend on multiple factors. For instance, department's regularity and willingness to hire graduate assistants, faculty's readiness to work with their aides, a placed system for teaching assistants' training, a size of a program and the ratio of faculty members, part-time hires, graduate students and undergraduates, and individual patterns of social interactions within the department hierarchy can be named among the few. Nonetheless, graduate teaching assistants are, ultimately, linked to other, more experienced members of the academic discourse with the purpose of providing help and being supervised in their teaching.

The word 'international' in the abbreviation "ITA" is, in fact, what makes the discussion more complex regarding the title definition. How does the university define 'international'? Do the legal documents predetermine the international status? Is it somebody who is foreign-born but currently resides in the United States? Is it a person who is studying in the US on a visa? Would an earlier immigrated individual who obtained the citizenship or Green Card qualify for

being called domestic? How would a person from another English-speaking country, for example, Canada, India, Singapore or New Zealand qualify? Is it the individuals' different language and culture which label the student "international" so the teaching assistant becomes "international" teaching assistant?

Existing literature on ITAs reflects this confusion, to some extent. Jia and Bergerson (2008) in their discussion of the training system for international assistants highlight: "For example, some institutions consider ITAs as students with non-immigrant visas who hold teaching assistantships, regardless of their first languages (Smith et al., 1992) while others consider ITAs to be non-native English speakers" (Penner, 1997; Plakans, 1997) (p. 78). It is crucial to know that majority of scholars suggest the "non-native English speaker" or "raised abroad" status as main features of ITAs (Bauer, 1996; Hill & Lakey, 1995; Jenkins, 1997; Okoth & Mupinga, 2007). Even though, the official TESOL Convention interest group, which studies ITAs' related topics, does not provide the explicit definition of an ITA, they suggest that the interest group is meant to explore issues linked to "non-native English speaking teaching assistants" (International Teaching Assistants Interest Group. (n.d.). Thus, one of the crucial factors to identify the word "international" in the abbreviation "ITA" is the student's usage of English as a non-native or foreign or second language.

The second characteristic which springs out of the definitions found in the literature is the "foreign" aspect of ITAs. People who are born abroad and/or have been raised in other than the US country are treated as "foreign" and, thus, they would have "international" attached to their title if they become teaching assistants. As I have emphasized earlier, an ITA who is a naturalized US citizen or a Green Card holder can, hypothetically, be put into both categories: he/she is a "foreign" individual because he/she was born outside the US but, at the same time, at

the moment of being accepted to the graduate school and given an assistantship, he/she has all legal documents to be seen as “domestic” even if he/she still identifies as a second language user of English or as a representative of other culture(s). In this sense, the US residency documents would serve as a factor which overrides the important “non-native English” characteristics; therefore, all diverse individuals qualify as domestic teaching assistants (TAs) not international teaching assistants (ITAs).

It appears that for this reason some definitions of ITAs, especially, when they are established within the boundaries of training programs at universities, underscore another characteristic which deciphers ITAs from their domestic counterparts. There are two types of visa documents – J1 and F1 student/exchange student visas – which solidify the concept of “foreignness” and characterizes “international” in the definition of ITAs. The non-immigrant visa status also showcases that the graduate student/assistant, most likely, has been exposed to a different system of schooling before arriving to the US to obtain a graduate degree. According to Jia and Bergenson (2008), such an exposure is a necessary distinction to fully identify whether an ITA fits into the criteria of being “international”:

in addition to the non-immigrant status criteria, the term ITA emphasizes the linguistic, educational, and cultural differences of certain international student population... only those holding teaching assistantship and having completed their K-12 and first postsecondary education outside of North America are considered ITAs” (p.78)

Therefore, the second solid characteristic of an ITA would be a presence of non-immigrant visas and, ideally, an exposure to another educational system prior to the involvement with a graduate program in the United States.

Jia and Bergenson (2008) highlight certain confusion in various existing definitions of ITAs. Research steadily positioned ITAs as a group of people “with unique socialization and transitional challenges” (Jia & Bergenson, 2008, p. 78) in which non-nativeness in English is one of the biggest factors, if not the biggest “problem”. In fact, Jia and Bergenson (2008) might be considered one of the few who employ a more detailed approach in identifying what makes an ITA an ITA at an American university. These authors suggest that different cultural and educational practices should be considered as more significant in the ITA’s experiences, rather than their English language abilities. Therefore, two first characteristics of ITAs – non-native English proficiency and visa status – can be challenged, especially, considering modern research in the language field such as the concept of Global Englishes (Jenkins, 2007; Kachru, 1985, 1997; Kramsch, 2009; Schneider, 2003). The said characteristics are not clear-cut. There are more questions and discussions in regard to identifying “international” in the definition of ITAs. Moreover, these characteristics force us to accept the earlier formed views on ITAs where researchers were mostly preoccupied with solving the “ITA problem” in regard to language, culture, and pedagogy only.

There is another prerequisite to qualify for the label ‘ITA’, which is not much discussed in the literature. Teaching assistantship, whether it is for domestic or international individuals, are meant to help graduate students to support their education. For example, Okoth and Mupinga (2007) emphasize this aspect in their definition by highlighting that foreign graduate students “finance their education through teaching assistantship awarded by university” (p.3). Thus, an assistantship becomes a desirable position for the graduate students; what is more, at times the only possibility to obtain the necessary advanced degree. After all, even if we put aside all the internal financial support which often comes with assistantships (tuition waivers or certain

student fee coverage), teaching is a job which is done in exchange for some earnings. This very factor should be considered too while defining who ITAs are, as well as, it can, potentially, contribute into a more multi-angled discussion in regard to how ITAs position themselves in the US academia and what role performing teaching responsibilities play in their professional, social, and financial environment.

Before wrapping the discussion up, it is necessary to highlight that each university in the US might have its own definition of an ITA which can vary from how literature defines ITAs. Nonetheless, summing all the said above up, most of the scrutinized literature positions an ITA as, mostly, *a foreign born or raised individual with J1 or F1 visa who uses English as a second language and fulfills teaching duties at university while completing an advanced degree.* However, after considering all single-time mentioned comments in the literature as well as the state of the current language studies and approaches, it is vital to add to the definition that an *ITA is a foreign born or raised individual who might identify as a second language user of English and who was prior exposed to different educational and cultural systems. This person finances his/her advanced degree at an American university by fulfilling specific teaching duties.*

### **Statement of Purpose and Research Questions**

What have we learned so far? First, it is critical to keep in mind that the US higher education is fueled by such a teaching force as graduate assistants who might be not visible from the first sight. Second, the full speed of globalization has been impacting the demographics in the US academia positioning international graduate students as both, learners and as teachers, therefore, diversifying the whole group called “graduate assistants”. Third, this diversity, however, often creates more of a distinction between the domestic and foreign-born assistants,



which places ITAs within the realm of the deficit perspective. Fourth, ITAs' language, culture, and pedagogy have been treated as "problems", especially in the early research, which was conducted in such a way that other participants of the educational processes were solving ITAs' "problems". Recent approaches began to shed light on the necessity of exploring ITAs' perspectives, positionality, and identities in order to have a full picture. Finally, according to the literature, usage of English as a second language, and F1/J1 visa status appear as the key characteristics to define ITAs, which can be disputed from the modern language research viewpoint.

It might seem that all the numbers, statistics, and abundance of existing literature about ITAs in the US academia should be enough to make a conclusion about the situation with ITAs. However, I argue that whatever we know so far about ITAs should prompt us to investigate ITAs' reality further, specifically, by stepping away from boxing them as "deficiency" educators due to their "otherness". As it has been shown, the definition of ITAs needs to be reexamined too since the focus on the non-native abilities to speak English as the essential feature of an ITA only perpetuates the stigma of ITAs as "the problem". Such a definition is divorced from current research in multilingualism and Global Englishes. It appears that there is space for more contribution in regard to representing ITAs' experiences which can help move forward in order to create a dialogue with equal opportunities for both parties – ITAs and the American academia – in which ITAs can share their perspectives rather than being forced into certain identities by others. Hence, below are several reasons which appeared to be rather crucial for undertaking yet another study about ITAs.

First, **ITAs' numbers are on the rise; thus, such educators/students cannot be neglected.** According to the statistics presented in the first part of the chapter, it is undeniable

that international graduate students are highly present in the US higher education. Also, it is obvious that international graduate students contribute into teaching in the US academia by being a part of the prevalent graduate teaching assistants' workforce. Thus, such a category of international graduate student-teachers cannot be neglected as participants of the modern educational research. Even though, ITAs have been already intensively studied for about three decades, I argue that the growing numbers of working international graduate students at US universities as well as changing geopolitical, social, economic, linguistic, cultural, and educational situations around the world require a constant updated input from ITAs themselves.

Second, **there is a necessity to move from the old research approaches which stigmatize ITAs and contribute into the new ITA research field.** It is evident that ITA-related research is in need to continue to shift in perspective. The earlier stigmatization of ITAs as people who lack the appropriate skills and abilities, especially, in regard to language, culture, and pedagogy, and who need to be constantly evaluated and trained should be turned in a different way. While help and guidance are, unquestionably, essential to provide a more successful socialization of ITAs in the US academia, the process which just focuses on forcing ITAs to readjust to the new reality without establishing a quality dialogue between ITAs and the US academia will continue perpetuate the same olden days "ITAs' problems". There is an urge to support the new rhetoric, which has started during the first decade of the 2000s, when researcher turned to studying identities and sociocultural features of educational environment including ITAs in their research too (Ashavskaya, 2015; Hebbani & Hendrix, 2014; Li, 2007; Williams, 2007, 2011; Zheng, 2013). This turn has highlighted a further necessity to explore ITAs' experiences, identities, stories and positionality in order to move from projecting ITAs as "deficient". More studies are needed where ITAs are central participants exploring who they are,

rather than positioning ITAs' perspective at the background of the research while others (students, administrators, and faculty) discuss how they see themselves helping ITAs.

Third, **there is an urge to see theory moving into practice in regard to ITAs.** Shifting towards new perspectives about ITA research is the first step but the second step is to observe a certain change in practices in regard to ITAs. While I identify examining ITAs' personal perspectives highly critical, which my study was aimed at, I believe that the end result of my research project should be of a practical value. From my perspective, experiences of ITAs should be translated into promoting conscious awareness among all the participants of ITAs' everyday discourses in order to establish a safe place for the conversation and learning about each other. The essence of the implications I suggest in Chapter 5 is organization of the dynamic and continuous processes in which the US academia encourages ITAs to come forward and share their experiences in a certain type of a dialogue with others. The change in practice can be more feasible when ITAs are given a choice to discuss their lived experiences.

The fourth, **there is a need in reevaluation of concepts attached to ITAs' complex title as they affect ITAs' positionality within academic settings.** As it was shown in the discussion of the definitions of the title, there are nuances to how one identifies the ITA. In majority of cases, the identification stems from a particular university vision, which, most likely, would reflect and reinforce the old perspectives on ITAs as individuals whose language and culture are foreign. As described above, the title presupposes certain complexity and, if it causes confusion among scholars and universities, it can be inferred that the title and, hence, the duties, functions and expectations of the title "ITA" can be puzzling for ITAs themselves. In the long run, the complex and multiangled nature of what ITA is expected to be and what it really means

might affect how ITAs position themselves within the academic discourse, especially, if they have to function within just the prescribed institutional identity.

Having these reasons in mind, I planned and implemented a study about ITAs' experiences in the US academia. This research project was fueled by my aspiration to contribute into the aforementioned new approach which emphasizes ITAs' identities, perspectives and positionality in the US academia (Ashavskaya, 2015; Hebbani & Hendrix, 2014; Li, 2007; Williams, 2007, 2011; Zheng, 2013). I initiated this project relying on my personal conviction that "language, culture, and pedagogy" are not just the "ITAs' problem" which require to be solved, as it was perpetuated earlier, but, rather, are the points which might open up the discussion about other possible themes significant for ITAs' lives. Thus, the research, broadly, focused on examination of international teaching assistants' experiences in the US higher education. More specifically, I was curious to learn about how ITAs perceive their own positionality and development in their immediate communities of practice in the US academia based on dealing with unique moments of surprises, confusion, shock, or delight during interactions with other participants of their everyday discourses as ITAs. Those emotional moments of discoveries, collision in expectation between interlocutors, and struggles to fit and adjust certain instances to one's vision were viewed as *rich points*, a term coined by Michael Agar (1996, 2006), whose perspective I implemented in this research project. Thus, the study aimed at answering the following question: ***How do ITAs mediate the emergence and resolution of rich points in their communities of practice in the US academia?*** Since I presupposed a certain level of identity discussion, I, also, designed a sub question: ***What role do these rich points play in ITAs' identities evolution?*** These research questions served as the major thrust for the project to be conducted.

## **Overview of Methodology**

The study was a qualitative, multiple case, instrumental study. Two cases were analyzed within the scope of the project; each case was a case of an ITA community bound to a certain research site location (university). Overall, eight ITAs were selected via purposive sampling with the elements of snowball sampling. Three ITAs were considered a case from North Trails University (NTU) which is located in the Northwest of the US whereas five ITAs represented a sample from South Trails University (STU) which is situated in the Southwest of the US<sup>1</sup>. The study utilized the following data collection tools: an initial electronic survey, which served the purpose of the focal participant sample selection and, simultaneously, as a data collection method; one informal conversational interview with the artifacts collection; one semi-structured interview with visual data collection; one to two observations followed by the informal debriefing with the participant. The study used the within-the-case and across-the-case analysis of data while the most prominent data analysis method was concept (cognitive) mapping. The project started in late spring 2017 (after the IRB approval was received). Finding the focal participants and building a sample happened during the summer and fall of 2017. The data collection (the focal participants in both cases) was undertaken during the Spring semester 2018 (January 2018-May 2018) and the data analysis took place in the remainder of the year 2018 (from June 2018 to December 2018).

## **Rationale and Significance of the Study**

In order to understand the significance of the current research project, it is urgent to refer to the research question and explain the nature of certain concepts embedded in the question

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<sup>1</sup> These are not real names of the universities

*(How do ITAs mediate the emergence and resolution of rich points in their communities of practice in the US academia?).* To do so, it is essential to briefly refer to Agar's (1996, 2006) perspective and to the concept of community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which will be further described in detail in Chapter 2, in the conceptual framework section. Agar (2006) suggests that *rich points* can be seen as "those surprises, those departures from an outsider's expectations" which indicate certain differences in the individual's language and culture from his/her interlocutor's, as well as, these rich points "give directions to subsequent learning" (p. 2). Rich points happen in the process of communication. They require a dialogue set up in a certain environment. By addressing rich points, the individual modifies his/her language and culture (*languaculture* as Agar (1996, 2006) calls it), expands his/her perspective on the world and moves on in communication. If rich points are not resolved, the progress in communication slows down, rich points are labeled as "problems" or "deficiencies" which need to be eliminated in order to reach the prescribed standard.

This pattern of (mis)communication with rich points reminds me of the processes inherent to *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The participants' actions and interactions are shaped by one common endeavor or common practice in which *newcomers*, when compared to experts or *old-timers*, can encounter certain obstacles on the way to be fully accepted in their community of practice. While lacking the "appropriate" behavior and rules, newcomers can find themselves in the *zone of legitimate peripheral participation* (LPP). If there is no help or dialogue established by old-timers in order to *socialize* newcomers into practices, their *legitimacy* as members in the community can be questioned for much longer times.

As with Agar's (1996, 2006) rich points which lead to meaningful expansion of one's languaculture and, thus, continuing the meaningful interactions, socialization of newcomers in

communities of practices will not happen until more experienced members consciously, reach out for more comprehensive approaches and techniques. Newcomers' perceived inabilities or lack of experiences can be compared to emerging rich points which, if neglected or labeled as "their problems" by old-timers, can slow down the whole process of newcomers' legitimate movement inside the community of practice. Agar's (1996, 2006) theory and Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of community of practice presuppose having a meaningful conversation between all interlocutors of the discourse, while being aware and ready for discussing differences and similarities (rich points) as well as establishing equal, legitimate rights for all the participants in order to succeed together.

Agar's (1996, 2006) theory may also help explain why ITAs have been stigmatized as professionals who need help with their languages, cultures and pedagogies. Since his book was written in the 1990s, it provides a great example of the attitudes and perspectives which were prevalent at that time. Agar (1996) suggests that there is a certain deficit perspective when the communication stumbles upon multiculturalism and multilingualism. It is especially perpetuated by *number-one types* – people who observe differences between own and "the other's" languacultures as deficiencies. Number-one types conclude that if the individual lacks "the proper" knowledge he/she needs to be instructed on it. Such a perspective can be seen as one of the ways to explain why ITAs have been stigmatized since the 1980s and why they have been offered "the appropriate" help to function within the prescribed standards in regard to their language, culture, and pedagogy.

Positioning the research question around rich points and community of practice reflected my vision on the situation with ITAs and somewhat served as an explanation of the research nature. Employing the perspective which allows to observe ITAs' everyday lives via rich points

allowed the study to move the discussion towards ITAs' viewpoints and avoid just circling around the enchanted themes of language, culture, and pedagogy from the deficit perspective. It is rather crucial to emphasize at this point that the themes of language, culture, and pedagogy did appear and still were rather noticeable in the findings of the current project, but the discussion of their salience was positioned from a different perspective, which will be described further in Chapter 4 and 5.

Also, as Agar (1996, 2006) underscores, rich points, while helping in recognition of others' languacultures, lead to deeper understanding of social identities. Community of practice has been also seen as a realm to explore participants' identities. These concepts aided me not only in conceptualizing the study and the discussion of results in regard to the key research question but lead me to answering the sub-question. These concepts, also, played a vital role in underlining the significance of the study – ITAs' identities development have only been researched within the classroom as a community of practice but ITAs' rich points happen outside the classroom too as they are bound to face certain discoveries with their supervisors and professors as, at minimum, they are somebody's assistants; with other teaching assistants, their university friends, and administrative staff. By exploring ITAs' various communities of practice via rich points discussion, I managed to glance over the peculiar dynamics and ITAs' identity construction in such communities of practice. Such discussion of ITAs' various communities of practice enriches the overall significance of my study, which is a contribution in the new research approach in ITA-related field in order to shift the conversation about ITAs from the deficit perspective towards building a more encompassing and meaningful dialogue between ITAs and US academia.



## **Researcher's Positionality and Assumptions**

In the general sense, my positionality as a researcher lies within the aforementioned new research about ITAs, which is represented via scholars' attempts to provide ITAs a chance to voice their opinions and concerns, as well as, to explore ITAs' identities and experiences in a broad sense (Ashavskaya, 2015; Hebbani & Hendrix, 2014; Li, 2007; Williams, 2007, 2011; Zheng, 2013). Broadly, being a part of such an approach is about accepting plurality of worldviews in order to move away from the idea of the single narrative and single truth. It is about believing that the identities of a person are plural and approached as something dynamic, fluid, and changing.

I feel strongly that the majority of the earlier research about ITAs identify all international teaching assistants as one category or structure which needs fixing. ITAs' characteristics were predetermined and generalized. At the same time, I still assumed that language, culture, and pedagogy would make an appearance in my research project, which, in fact, happened. I, however, believe that the discussion of those said themes was positioned under a different angle. My role as a researcher in the current project presupposed diving deeper into the meanings of ITAs' experiences. I have approached ITAs as individuals who, separately, represent their own narratives, truths, and reality interpretations. The intent of this study was never to generalize; I have never positioned myself as a researcher who seeks the common truth about all ITAs. I see this project as a contribution into the collectively constructed knowledge about ITAs as individuals. Also, one of my fears from conception to realization of the study has been a doubt about creating redundancy of the topic about ITAs' experiences but, at the moment of data analysis I solidified my initial belief that my research can and will make a small contribution into that growing new research about ITAs.

Finally, it would be unprofessional and unfair not to mention that my own experience and background shaped my aspiration to undertake this study. I have been an international graduate student for more than a decade (including my Masters' degree education). Even though my background is in teaching English as a second/foreign language, my experience of using English as a second language in the US has impacted my professional vision of myself as a teacher. I postponed my doctorate education for several years due to the inability to secure an assistantship in the programs to which I got accepted. Having practical and theoretical expertise in my field as well as conferred international and US graduate degrees did not help me immediately land a teaching/research assistantship position in order to support myself financially for doctorate studies in the US. I finally had a chance to experience what it means to be an ITA in the US academia and those four years shaped my teaching and professional approach to education significantly. The departments I worked for as an ITA praised diversity in languages and cultures due to the specifics of their programs. My own experience as an ITA and the information I have been gathering about ITAs from literature have been both different and similar. It was different because my language and culture were not stigmatized but, rather, celebrated. It was similar because the pedagogy and some professional relationships had to be adjusted to the given "standard", which, from my perspective of an experienced teacher, sometimes made me feel "deficient" and "not up-to-the-mark".

These personal experiences, however, pushed me to reflect more about how my story can be different from other ITAs who are in other departments, with other professional, social, or cultural baggage, and in other life circumstances. It shaped my yearning to learn other ITAs' stories and represent them in a form of a research as, I believe, there is so much more than just fitting all ITAs under the label of issues with language, culture, and pedagogy or their training

and assessment. As a result, my real experiences as an ITA, the untold stories of my fellow ITAs as well as what I learned from the existing research pushed me to plan, design, and implement this study. I am aware that the aforementioned experiences influence my researcher's positionality and, simultaneously, work for and against me. As an insider, I have been capable to relate to certain ITAs' issues but, at the same time, I often harnessed my own subjectivity in order not to transfer my own biases into the study. At times, I saw myself more as an outsider because I did not possess the knowledge about certain details and intricacies of each department, program or a field of study so I learned new information in duration of the data collection process. This helped me keep my mind open in the research process. Finally, one of the cases appeared to be located outside my familiar academic settings, which, automatically, made me an outsider. As a result, it further distanced me from my subjectivity of "I know how the things work here in regard to ITAs". The data collection process (multiple methods of data collection) also helped me ensure constant triangulation of data, which, in the long run, aided me in avoiding transferring my own biases into the study.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation work is organized in the following way. Chapter 1 discusses the problem statement, statement of purpose, research questions, significance of the undertaken study, the role and positionality of the researcher, which can be summarized as the introduction into the study and its rationale from the personal and academic standpoint of the researcher. Chapter 2 is devoted to the detailed literature review of, first, ITA-related research, which is meant to be showcased as a process of a change in approaches in the ITA-related research; second, to the concepts which are seen as a foundation for the research rationale and questions, such as rich points, languaculture, frames, communities of practice, identity, and narratives; and,

third, to the theoretical framework which is built on the pillars of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and, especially, the concept of *perezhivanie* (lived through emotional experience). Chapter 3 contains details about the methodology of the research from its conception to completion. Chapter 4 presents the discussion of major findings (five main themes or ways the rich points are navigated by the ITAs in the study). Chapter 4 also helps set the context for the in-depth analysis which occurs in Chapter 5. Apart from the synthesis of the findings in the final chapter, the findings are observed within the boundaries of the theoretical framework (Vygotsky's *perezhivanie*); the discussion of rich points and identity evolution (the sub question specifics); the discussion of how the claimed "ITAs' problems" such as language, culture, and pedagogy fit into the findings of the study. Chapter 5 also shows existing literature, can help understand the findings. Finally, the suggestions for future research are provided as the study completes.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the general hypothesis for this research project was that an ITA is an individual who is positioned in the US academic settings and showcases a dynamic state of change due to conflicts and discoveries of his/her languaculture. Encountering rich points in his/her everyday communities of practice each ITA establishes his/her social relationships in unique patterns while molding various social identities in their immediate communities of practice. The significance of this research was predetermined by the fact that there is an urge to contribute into the growing research field which highlights ITAs' lived experiences and identities as a valid representation of their lives in the US academia while moving away from the deficit perspective. Also, the undertaken research is meant to explore ITAs' experiences not only in the classroom but in other applicable communities of practice. The researcher's positionality is showcased, on one hand, via self-reflection about her own experience as an ITA and, on the other hand, via taking a viewpoint of the research which is meant to uncover multiangled truth about ITAs without generalizing it to the whole ITA population. The brief summary of the research procedures is provided in the overview of methodology, which is meant to introduce the reader to the most essential information about the research project.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

### Introduction

The objective of the following chapter is to, first, provide detailed information in regard to the research about ITAs; second, introduce and explain the key concepts of the research question, and, thus, the study; and, third, discuss the theoretical framework which is utilized in the undertaken research project. The ITA-related literature review covers the evolution of the approaches. It starts from the prevalent “deficit” perspective which has been, mostly, preoccupied with ITAs’ language, culture, and pedagogy development via ITAs’ trainings, assessment and evaluations. Then, it moves towards research projects which questioned the status quo of such a “deficit” approach but, mostly, on the theoretical and philosophical level. Finally, the literature review demonstrates a new, recently-emerged approach of exploring ITAs’ identities and experiences, which is still rather sparse. The conceptual framework, which arrives next, places an emphasis on understanding of the crucial notions of the undertaken research. The literature review of such concepts as community of practice, rich points, languaculture, frames, identities, and narratives are presented and thoroughly discussed in application to the study. Finally, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory with the concept of *perezhivanie* (lived through emotional experience) is introduced in order to construct the theoretical framework of the current research project.

## **Literature Review: Existing Research Regarding ITAs**

Overall, the existing research on international teaching assistants can be placed in four categories: first, research which focuses on exploring ITAs' training programs and preparation courses; second, assessment and evaluation of ITAs', both, upon starting their teaching positions and during their performance as ITAs; third, discussions and practical suggestions on helping ITAs maintain their teaching within academic standards and norms, mostly, in regard to ITAs' language skills, cross-cultural awareness and pedagogy; and, fourth, a new growing research which explores ITAs' experiences and positions via other lenses, for instance, post-structuralism and postmodernism.

The first three thematic categories are usually focused on the discussion of the aforementioned "problems" with ITAs, namely, language, culture, and pedagogy. They are, also, studies produced from the perspectives of administrators, trainers, faculty members and students and, very rarely, from the ITAs' viewpoint. The fourth category is the research which attempts to acknowledge ITAs' perspectives in education or, at least, raise awareness of the fact that there should be a more encompassing discussion which accounts for diversity and multiculturalism in education in our dynamically changing and globalized reality. Chronologically, the first three categories are more prevalent for the 1990s whereas the fourth category sprang by the end of the first decade of the 2000s. However, it should be mentioned that, in the 1990s, certain publications presented their concerns with the common approaches to ITAs as well as the 1990s' rhetoric about "ITA problem" still pops up in the current educational research.

## **Assessment of ITAs.**

Assessment of ITAs in regard to their applicability to serve as educators in the US higher education has been a topic for the research, mostly, popular in the 1990s. This topic, in some ways, overlaps with the research on ITAs' training programs as some scholars discuss the assessment process for ITAs as a part of preparation courses for ITAs. There are several reasons why ITAs' evaluation became a popular research theme. First, it stems from the fact that universities were trying to solve the "ITAs' problem" as the authorities received students and their parents' complaints about ITAs' inabilities. Second, there was never a universal tool for ITAs' assessment as universities in North America were implementing various evaluation tools, tests and strategies to determine the level of ITAs' preparedness to teach at the university. It should be noted that this situation has not changed much since the 1990s as universities all over the nation individually decide how they assess ITAs and what entity at the university should be responsible for testing. Third, the scholars of the 1990s noted that ITAs' assessment was quite outdated as majority of universities employed evaluation tools which originated in the 1960s and 1970s (Smith et al., 1992). This very fact sharpened the researchers' interest towards ITAs' assessment in the 1990s.

During the last decade of the twentieth century the research focused on ITAs' language, culture and pedagogy so the assessment of ITAs centered on the same themes too. Certain universities concentrated mainly on ITAs' language skills evaluation. According to Smith et al. (1992), there were language tests such as *Test of English as a Foreign Language* also known as *TOEFL* (an official test for international students to be admitted into an American university), *Test of Spoken English* or *TSE* (designed in 1979 as an alternative to *TOEFL*), *The SPEAK Test* (an official product of Educational Testing Service – a monopoly company who has rights for



*TOEFL*, *GRE* and other standardized tests), or oral interviews (*Interagency Language Roundtable (IRL)* format or *American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)* format; both of which are the official US government tests for immigration/naturalization purposes).

However, testing ITAs' language skills as a separate ability has been argued by some scholars as not sufficient enough so the cultural and pedagogical aspects appeared as crucial in such tests. For instance, Halleck and Moder (1995) emphasize that "initial attempts at testing ITAs have ceded to practicality over authenticity, making use of widely available tests" like TOEFL or TSE, "which do not adequately sample all of the language skills... nor do they use authentic situational context" (p. 736). Briggs (1994) underlines that discourse, context and situational knowledge are rather essential when one's language is assessed. Papajohn (1997), providing a thorough description of the *TSE* assessment processes for ITAs, acknowledges that universities should be rather careful with interpretation of standardized tests scores, such as from the *TSE*, in order to place their ITAs properly in the specific educational environment and distribute roles and duties accordingly. As a result, this criticism of the standardized language evaluation prompted the emergence of so-called *performance assessment* tests.

Performance assessment test were (and still are) meant to create a more authentic environment to check ITAs' navigation within instructional responsibilities coupled with testing their language and culture awareness in the situation. *Teaching simulation test* is one of such tests in which ITAs show their pedagogical strategies together with language capabilities in a micro-teaching session. *Oral communicative performance test* is another assessment to evaluate ITAs' language in relation to their field of expertise: these tests "require the ITA candidate to perform the certain tasks that are thought to underlie the teaching skills needed in the classroom"

by “explaining a term or a concept, summarizing, discussing, or explaining a field-specific article” (Smith et al., 1992, p. 57). ITAs are usually rated by either faculty members or administrators, or both of them, in order to identify what type of pedagogical tasks the ITA can perform (teaching, grading or designing the syllabus). As an attempt to authenticate the testing environment, the *ITA Test* was developed by Smith, Meyers and Burkhalter (Smith et al., 1992) which asks ITAs to create and teach a mini-lesson in the classroom environment and answer questions. It was argued that the *ITA Test* works within specific to the university settings, which allows evaluators to have more effective assessment of ITAs in comparison to the results of the standardized test (Halleck & Moder, 1995).

The duration of ITAs’ assessment was another point of the argument. Without a doubt, the initial ITAs’ assessment for placement was seen as crucial, but there was an overall agreement between the 1990s’ scholars that ITAs have to be constantly assessed. According to Smith et al. (1992), all types of ITAs’ formal assessment can be summarized in three categories: end-of-term student instructional ratings, “in-class observational visits by the TA’s supervisor, staff from institution’s instructional development center, or faculty members” (p. 48); and, finally, end-of-term evaluations which are completed by ITAs’ supervisor in the department. Peer-evaluation and self-evaluation can be seen as other, less formal, way of measuring ITAs’ progress. In case the department implements performance testing for ITAs, it is expected that ITAs prepare mini-presentations or videotape their classes for evaluation together with their departmental supervisors throughout the semester. In order to maintain the evaluation of ITAs, quite often, ITAs would require or would be advised to attend and participate in conversational English classes, accent reduction courses or individual tutoring in English as a part of their

performance-based testing or as a separate measure (Briggs, 1994; Halleck & Moder, 1995; Ostler & Perimutter, 1993; Smith et al., 1992).

To conclude, the reviewed literature suggests that initial testing and ongoing evaluation of ITAs in regard to their language, culture and pedagogy sparked great interest in the 1990s and can still be seen as one of the topics for research in the modern-day academia as each university independently approaches ITAs' assessment and implements the same said tests and exams.

### **ITAs' training.**

There are two major subthemes which emerged after scrutinizing existing literature on trainings for ITAs. The first subtheme is meant to help understand the link between the components of trainings and ITAs' actual pedagogical practices. The second subtheme describes the types of current ITA trainings which, as the literature suggests, usually can be, either a general university-wide ITA's courses or specific trainings created and facilitated by a certain department. These subthemes, also, shed light on the questions and issues related to the organization of preparatory courses for ITAs. For instance, there is certain criticism of the existing ITA trainings regarding the question whether it is valid or beneficial to include domestic ITAs in the trainings for ITAs. There are also inquiries on how relevant the existing forms and materials of ITA preparation course are.

Based on the literature, the majority of these works, not surprisingly, mention three key components that ITA trainings are supposed to help ITAs develop: *cross-cultural or intercultural competence, pedagogical skills, and the English language competence*. Overall, there is an agreement that all three components should be promoted in combination during ITAs' trainings rather than separately developed competencies out of context. Given the history of complaints

about ITAs in academia, the English language competence was one of the most prominent features of earlier ITAs' trainings, before the 1990s (Hoekje & Williams, 1992), while works of the last two decades tend to question the language competence as the most influential element for ITAs' pedagogical success (LeGross & Faez, 2012). Instead, ITAs' intercultural and pedagogical competences came to the forefront, which also presupposed the English language use in the professional field.

Such a perspective, which underlines the interdependence of ITAs' development of all three competencies via ITA trainings, not just the language, is supported by the majority of scholars in their own interpretations (Cotsonas, 2006; Graham, 1992; Hoekje & Willams, 1992; Jia & Bergerson, 2008; LeGross & Faez, 2012; Okoth & Mupinga, 2008; Piñeiro, 2006). For instance, Graham (1992) supports this idea by suggesting that specially designed ESL classes for non-native TAs can target all the competencies development. Piñeiro (2006) believes that trainings that target all competencies will help ITAs produce a clear message to American undergraduates while LeGross and Faez (2012) emphasize that "ITAs need to develop linguistic and cultural competencies in their teaching discourse in order to be clear with teaching" (LeGross & Faez, 2012, p.12). The idea of a complex development of all three competencies is reflected by Jia and Bergerson (2008) who highlight the concept of the "organizational socialization" with "the mission of aiding ITAs in developing an understanding of the social, cultural, and academic norms they are expected to meet both as students and teaching assistants" (p. 82). Even earlier suggested ITA training models, which were mostly preoccupied with fixing ITAs' language problems, in a way, refer to the need of intertwining other competencies with the language development within ITAs' course preparation. For example, Shaw (1994), revising his earlier model for non-native TAs' training which previously did not include cross-cultural

competence development, recognizes the necessity of treating ITAs' language problems in connection to the specific discourse within the discipline, rather than just fixing the overall English proficiency. Culture, pedagogy, and language appear to be the most basic and necessary components for ITA trainings, which should be developed as competencies together.

The second subtheme of ITAs' training focuses on the question about what exact university division is supposed to be in charge of training ITAs. In the 1990s, it was not uncommon to accompany ITAs' trainings with *ESL classes for ITAs*, which further complicated the situation because they were only preoccupied with the language proficiency. Hoekje and Williams (1992) identified the challenge of the most appropriate establishment to train ITAs as they believe that "in the case of ITAs, oral skills cannot be separated from the context in which they are practiced, that is, in the teaching assistant role" (p. 245). The authors leave the question open but underline that two separate training bodies, in their case ESL courses and university teachers' training courses, cannot guarantee complete preparation for ITAs and embrace three major components of it, such as language, culture, and pedagogy. Graham (1992) suggests that if the ESL division is in charge, then, they should especially design ITAs' classes to target not only language skills but other needed competencies.

Briggs, Imber and Madden (1997) favor *the department-based ITA trainings* as they provide "perspectives that guide the trainees toward more realistic content and methods for their practice-teaching sessions" (p. 148). The authors, however, place emphasis on the close collaboration between the department and *university-wide ITA preparation courses* in order to avoid an overlap and redundancy of information provided to ITAs. At the same time, the article highlights that departmental trainings ensure ITAs' preparation for the specific classroom practices, whereas, a university-wide preparation course can be beneficial for covering broader

educational topics. Bauer (1996), also, recognizes the significant role of the department in training of ITAs, which should be coupled with the courses organized by the university. The main message Bauer (1996) tries to bring across is that faculty members can and should contribute into the preparation of their international assistants by adding “practice teaching” or “microteaching format” with undergraduates as the main participants to ensure authenticity of such practices (p. 88). Finally, Shaw (1994) concedes that “ITAs should be confronted in their training with samples of discourse from the classrooms in which they themselves will go to work” (p. 48), thus, it is assumed that the department or representatives of a certain discipline from a certain department should provide ITAs with an opportunity to get ready for teaching within the particular subject.

#### **Language, culture, and pedagogy: fixing ‘problems’ and improving practices.**

One of the biggest chunks of studies in regard to ITAs is centered on the idea of ITAs’ professional life and development once they are a part of the academia. The topic of ITAs’ trainings is often entwined with the topic of ITAs’ professional maintenance at universities. The majority of works are preoccupied with ITAs’ work life and are meant to help ITAs with improving their language, cross-cultural and pedagogical skills. It should be mentioned that such studies are produced from the perspective of faculty members, administrators, and university students and, sometimes, ITAs. The prevalent discussions are those which focus on helping ITAs (re)organize their teaching process and improve their pedagogical skills as well as ITAs’ communicative abilities within academia, whether with their students or with faculty members.

In the general sense, such books as *Communicate: Strategies for International Teaching Assistants*; *Professional Development of International Teaching Assistants*; *Ready to Teach:*

*Graduate Teaching Assistants Prepare for Today and For Tomorrow; Discourse and Performance of International Teaching Assistants; The TA Experience: Preparing for Multiple Roles* and *Working Effectively with Graduate Assistants* provide explicit practical information about teaching, strategies and ways of behavior in certain educational discourses as well as more academic discussions on theories, studies, projects and reflections in regard to approaching ITAs' specific issues and questions. There are teaching micro-scenarios, which are often accompanied by the prescribed phrases and vocabulary ITAs can use to ensure the successful practices.

Some researchers, while helping ITAs' competencies development, attempt to provide details on ITAs' specific ways of *intercultural communication* with other participants of educational context as well as suggest some possible strategies to avoid conflict and miscommunication for ITAs and faculty members (Jenkins, 1997; Nyquist & Wulff, 1996); ITAs and administrators/ trainers (de Berly, 1997; Petro, 2006); ITAs and undergraduate students (Chiang, 2009; Davies & Tyler, 1994; Panvini, 1997; Petro, 2006; Yook & Albert, 1999; Williams, 2011); and ITAs and other (I)TAs (Yule, 1994). Others concentrate on *language issues* and offer ways for ITAs to eliminate certain imperfections which range from pronunciation to syntax (Alsberg, 1997; Dickerson, 1997; Kozuh, 1993) while for some scholars ITAs' language and response within a certain discourse are more important than just mechanics of the language (this is represented by the entire section in *Discourse and Performance of International Teaching Assistants* by Axelson & Madden, 1994; McChesney, 1994; Meyers, 1994; Rounds, 1994; Tyler, 1994).

Overall, this topic of helping ITAs maintain their professional practices within the norms and standards of academia is quite researched but, as I have stated earlier, most of the works

attempt to address the question from others' perspective rather than from the perspective of ITAs. Such studies, also, consciously and subconsciously, represent ITAs within the deficit perspective as they highlight the urge of ITAs' language, culture and pedagogy to be readjusted to the only one possible standard. With respect to language and culture, the mythical norm of the "perfect native speaker" is perpetuated once again while expectations regarding ITAs' pedagogy fails to recognize the shifting values of the diverse student population on American campuses as well as general globalization trends. As a result, there has not been a sufficient amount of studies found which, specifically, represent ITAs' point of view or explore their side of the story.

### **In search of a different perspective in ITAs research.**

As it has been mentioned earlier, the first decade of the 2000s brought about a change in perspective in regard to ITAs. Certain researchers in education moved towards postmodern and post-structural views, thus, this shift slowly started emerging in the studies devoted to ITAs. ITAs have begun appearing as the central figures of the research. Before delving into the new research, which put ITAs forward as individuals in US academia, it is important to mention that the first signs of concerns were already produced in the 1990s. These concerns, however, were very sparse and, quite often, were limited to implications or possible future directions for research. For the current literature review, these publications are quite valid as they showcase a slow change in paradigms and perspectives in ITAs' research.

For instance, Graham (1992) emphasizes that a number of ITAs will become future professionals, academics, and teachers employed by the US and, thus, ITAs should not be treated as educators with "issues" but, rather, as sources of multicultural experience, which is beneficial for the society, in general, and for the academia, in particular. Hill and Lackey (1995)



hypothesize that ITA trainers should group ITAs based on their country/culture of origin or ethnicities. Ideally, new and experienced ITAs should be present as well as American undergraduate students. The aim of such grouping would be exploring “sites of conflict between the expectations of members of culture A and culture B” (Hill & Lackey, 1995, p. 10). As a result, a discussion on differences and similarities should be generated by ITAs of one cultural group, separately, and, then, collectively with the host students. Followed by more sessions during the semester and faculty’s involvement in this process, this approach, according to the article, would account for “a better conceptualization of intercultural communication, better ways to teach the subject, and better ways to solve specific intercultural problems” (Hill & Lackey, 1995, p. 12). The authors, also, suggest that the negotiated third culture in the classroom might help educators better understand the process of how culture is formed and evolved. Although their vision is very close to the concept of the third space, the authors call such an approach “genetic” referring to the process of hybridization of species.

Mead (2007), McDonough (2006), Golkowska (2012) and Jia and Bergerson (2008), while discussing training programs for ITAs, underscore the significance of ITAs being *socialized* in the educational environment. Jia and Bergerson (2008) argue that while training ITAs about culture, language and pedagogy, the strategy of socialization should be wisely adopted so ITAs do not feel “disconnected from important aspects of their cultural identities” (Jia & Bergerson, 2008, p. 82). Following observations, interviews with ITAs and administrators, and analysis of artifacts and documents, the article highlights five themes which emerged from the analysis. The training program was seen by ITAs as a way to build networks; improve presentational and teaching skills; share cultural differences; and familiarize themselves with campus and surroundings. Finally, the training evoked mixed feelings in regard to how it was

designed. The majority of these themes may be seen in connection to ITAs' professional identity via the socialization concept, although, identity is not the point of the discussed article.

McDonough's (2006) research, while shedding light on the alternative forms of ITAs/TAs' training, touches on questions of socialization and reflection on selves in academia. The study describes the action research seminar in which international teaching assistants were involved. According to the article, the majority of students were interested in the seminar for research purposes while only a few enrolled in the class in order to improve their teaching. As the end result, this action research project revealed "an immediate, positive impact on the TAs' professional development by broadening their perceptions about research, helping them recognize the value of collaboration, and encouraging them to implement new pedagogical practices" (McDonough, 2006, p. 42). This study, somewhat, challenges the idea of ITAs' formal training program as it suggests that ITAs might be socialized in practices via alternative classes which allow them to build stronger connections with the members of the given educational discourse. Also, the process of action research in the study involved such procedures as reflective essays and professional journals, which granted ITAs an opportunity to explore their own positions in their teaching.

Mead (2007) centers his qualitative study on exploring the relationship between the ITA training program and ITAs' professional values. However, this research targets helping with one of the ITAs' "problems", namely, pedagogy. This article is rather appreciated since Mead (2007) finds that there is a connection between ITAs' professional values implementation in teaching and creation of a dialogue with their mentors. Mead (2007) concludes that some "trainees have benefited from the day to day building a relationship with their mentor" while others "felt that there had been no values discussion or values had not been explicitly addressed in the mentoring

process” (pp. 317-318). Such results can be indicative of ITAs’ need to build a successful dialogue and efficient relationship with other members of the same discourse, which are prerequisites for ITAs’ socialization into the educational practices.

Finally, Golkowska (2012) proposes ethnography as an avenue which can help new international educators get socialized in the unfamiliar educational settings while improving their language and culture awareness. She emphasizes that a mini-ethnographic study or fieldwork can aid ITAs in fuller comprehension of their new settings: “Making students responsible for focused observation of sociocultural phenomena in the country they visit not only helps to build their language skills and knowledge of target culture, but also encourages self-reflection and openness to other perspectives” (Golkowska, 2012, para. 1). This short article which is published in the *TESOL International Teaching Assistants Interest Group* does not explicitly discuss ITAs’ identities; rather it suggests possible help for ITAs. Nevertheless, pointing to the benefits of ethnography and self-reflection for ITAs, Golkowska (2012) steps aside from only focusing on the mainstream tools for training ITAs for their positions in the academia.

These little snippets and concerns about alternative ways to approach ITAs’ language, culture, and pedagogy are quite valuable as they represent that slow but steady evolution towards the new approach which focuses on ITAs’ identities, positionalities and perspectives. At the same time, the aforementioned studies also show that it is quite challenging to completely move away from such enchanted themes as ITAs’ language, culture, and pedagogy.

### **ITAs’ identities, communities of practice, and perceptions.**

The key words of the title represent the new approach to ITAs: the research focuses on ITAs’ perspectives on their experiences, lives, and positionality within educational discourses,

and earlier identified “issues” of language, culture, and pedagogy (Ashavskaya, 2015; Hebbani & Hendrix, 2014; Li, 2007; Williams, 2007, 2011; Zheng, 2013). ITAs become the major participants in studies via expressing what their lived experiences in academia are. Such research is picking up its speed at the current point but there is still space for contributing more ITAs’ perspectives into the overall discussion. What is more, such an approach presupposes that experiences and positionalities of ITAs are unique so the more knowledge is gained in that direction, the more benefits for the ITA-related research can be reaped.

One of the most prominent articles is a work by Gwendolyn Williams (2007) which explicitly explores ITAs’ identities. The author of *Investigating the Influences on the Teaching Identity of International Teaching Assistants* underscores that her study can be considered “groundbreaking” because “it examined the international teaching assistants’ perceptions of themselves as teachers, instead of others’ perceptions of ITAs” (Williams, 2007, p. 321). Williams (2007) highlights that “the concept of teacher identity is an important idea to include in any teacher education program as teachers are taught to analyze teaching practices and beliefs” (p. 321) and such awareness becomes crucial for international teaching assistants.

In her qualitative study, the author interviews and observes twenty multicultural educators holding positions of teaching assistants across disciplines at an American university. The interviews focus on ITAs’ personal stories in regard to teaching values, philosophies and educational experiences while observations are conducted in the classrooms lead by ITAs. In order to analyze the collected data, the narrative analysis is employed. This technique helped the researcher link the data to the research question of teaching identities: “the act of positioning within the storytelling allows the narrator to construct a self that reflects the persona he or she wants to adopt for a specific situation” (Williams, 2007, p. 314). The findings suggest the

following themes for discussion: a role of the teacher, personal identity versus teacher identity, the negotiation of teacher identity, cultural differences, and teacher investment. Williams (2007) concludes that experience being an ITA plays a significant role in ITAs' clearer understanding of who they are in the educational settings as well as the more they are exposed to ITAs' occupation the smoother the cultural exchange goes in the classroom. Also, the study determines that participants' cultural values, via differences and similarities, shape the process of establishing and developing their teaching identities, and those cultural values vary greatly depending on the country of origin, ethnicity and other ITAs' cultural features.

In 2011, Williams produced another article in which she focuses mainly on ITAs' classroom negotiations. *Examining Classroom Negotiation Strategies of International Teaching Assistants* is not a direct discussion of ITAs' identities but, rather, a focused look on the discourse negotiation, which can be treated as a subtheme of ITAs' identity formation. However, it seems that the article unwraps one of Williams' (2007) findings (mentioned above) on how the classroom interaction is mediated between ITAs and their students. Therefore, her later article still appears to be relevant to the discussion as it reinforces the importance of exploring ITAs' perspectives on themselves, which leads to investigation of the ITAs' classroom discourses.

The recent study by Ashavskaya (2015) aims at collecting lived experiences of newly appointed ITAs (ITAs in their first semester teaching). The biggest question is linked to identifying what challenges ITAs face in the US academia. Two other research questions are meant to explore ITAs' perceptions about, first, how the US educational culture appears to be different from their own, and, second, what ITAs' suggestions are about improving ITAs' trainings. Implementing the concept of community of practice as the theoretical framework, this

qualitative study focuses on the experiences of six novice ITAs', which were collected in a form of three interviews. Later, the data is analyzed with the help of the content analysis.

Ashavskaya (2015) sums up that there are four challenges which appeared to be essential after interviewing ITAs: classroom management challenges, linguistic challenges, instructional challenges, and cultural challenges. As for the second question, ITAs identified the US educational environment different from their own as it was, first, less formal, second, more reliant on technology, and third, friendlier in regard to approaching faculty members. Finally, ITAs' mostly were preoccupied with learning more about differences of the US classroom and the educational settings they are coming from during their ITA trainings as well as having real professors from their department as speakers and guests. Discussing the results, Ashavskaya (2015) underscores that it is critical to involve departments, training agencies and ITAs themselves to eliminate the challenges which ITAs pointed out during the research. She calls for the collaborative action in order to socialize ITAs into the practices rather than just impose such knowledge. The explicit discussion of such topics as development of bi-cultural identity is suggested because it is seen as a quite beneficial possible tool for ITA trainings.

The dissertation by Zheng (2013) promotes deeper exploration of ITAs' identities at play. Zheng (2013) studied perceptions of three ITAs' regarding their own experiences as English professionals and College Composition teachers, which represents ITAs' understanding of their "translingual identity". This is an ethnographic study which utilizes the following data collection tools: video-taping and observation of ITAs' classes; audio taping and observation of ITA-student conferences; interviews with ITAs; a survey about ITAs' self-perceptions; and document collection. The collected data is analyzed via discourse analysis. Such concepts as community of practice, identity-as-pedagogy, and imagined identity serve as a backbone of the theoretical

framework. The findings suggest that all the participants considered that they developed as professionals in quite a positive way in their professional English communities. However, their non-native abilities of using English have been identified as one of the obstacles to recognize “their translingual identity as a resource” (Zheng, 2013, p. 4), which the author attributes to the “native speaker fallacy” factor. Since the study is produced with non-native English speaker teachers’ perspective in mind, Zheng (2013) underscores the importance of promoting awareness of benefits of translingual and multicultural identities among ITAs rather than seeing English as a second language from the deficiency point. Additionally, personal biographies and prior learning within the discipline have been seen as factors affecting ITAs’ positionality as educators in the particular field (College Composition), according to Zheng’s (2013) research.

The theme of “non-native speaker fallacy” intertwined with professional, linguistic, cultural, and institutional identities’ dynamics can be seen in the self-reflection produced by Li (2007). The author’s discussion of his own experience as a Chinese non-native speaker of English and a graduate student and instructor at a Canadian university focuses on the idea of an internal struggle to position himself within his professional discourse. Even judging by the title of the article *Identity Puzzles: Am I a Course Instructor or a Nonnative Speaker?* the reader can infer that Li’s (2007) professional identity as an ITA is highly influenced by his cultural and linguistic identities. He builds the narrative around post-structuralist theories which emphasize that identities are dynamic and fluid. Li’s (2007) self-exploration concentrates on how, first, the self is complicated by the shift of roles and variety of experiences; second, the self is constrained by first cultural beliefs and the native-speaker myth; third, the self is strained in cultural pluralism and language purism; and, finally, the self is molded into a critical scholar with a *docile* mind. Consequentially, the author sees the battle between all these different modifications

of selves as a site for his professional identity construction: “I was often caught in the middle, between the international trainee teachers and other native speaker colleagues, feeling awkward and uncertain to which group I belonged” (Li, 2007, p. 31). Nevertheless, his self-reflection, which is supported by the scholarly discussion on identities in the post-structuralist world, is quite valuable as it provides an example of narrative methodology implemented for researching ITAs’ identity.

Finally, there is an article by Hebbani and Hendrix (2014) which concentrates on ITAs’ perceptions towards US undergraduate students. The authors focus on the research question which aimed at clarifying what experiences ITAs have while being assigned to teach to the US undergraduate students. This study is rather valuable for the discussion of the new research in regard to ITAs as “previous research has primarily gathered voices of US American undergraduate students, or more recently, examined teaching training options while ignoring voices of ITAs themselves” (Hebbani & Hendrix, 2014, p. 62). This qualitative data collected and analyzed survey responses of twenty-five ITAs teaching within the discipline of communication. The analysis was performed with the help of Leximancer text analytic software which revealed that “master’s students reflected more about issues pertaining to their own public speaking and confidence while the PhD students were more concerned with the preparation and presentation of the course material” (Hebbani & Hendrix, 2014, p. 61). While discussing their findings, the authors explicitly suggest that such reflective studies, which provide an opportunity for ITAs’ voices, are essential in order to fill in the gap in the literature about ITAs as ITAs’ reflections are quite rare. The article, also, suggests promoting more critical awareness about multicultural and multilingual educators, such as ITAs, among all members and entities of the US higher education.



Before concluding the literature review about ITAs, I find it obligatory to briefly mention other types of research which, first, appear as additional guidance in deeper understanding of ITAs' (and other teachers') identities and communities of practice, second, appear useful in the further analysis and discussion for the research project, and, third, has impacted my perspective as a researcher for this study.

First, the previously mentioned “*non-native speaker myth*” is an essential topic to consider while addressing ITAs' positionality. Studies which explore the correlation between second language users' identities and communities of practice, even without explicit reference to ITAs, are highly valuable as they reveal the complexities, struggles, and dynamic transformation of individuals using multiple languages and cultures (Block, 2007a, b; Braine, 1999; Canagarajah, 1999; Cook, 1999; Illieva, 2010; Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Kramsch, 2009, Li, 2007; Liu, 1999; Morita, 2004; Norton, 1997; Reis, 2011). Second, a big chunk of useful information about teaching and personal identities at play can be found in multiple publications about other types of educators, for instances, teachers in schools, student-teachers, and teaching assistants in other educational establishments. Even though the participants are not always placed in the multicultural and multilingual settings, it is rather helpful to be informed about theorization, methodologies and analysis from the studies which investigate *teaching or professional identities*. The teacher's identity is fragmented and is comprised of multitude of other identities and voices, be it cultures or languages of the individual or social norms, power negotiation, personal experiences or biographies, to name a few (Beijaard et al., 2004; Coldron & Smith, 1999; Estola, 2003; Reybold, 2008; Rogers & Scott, 2008; Thomas & Beuchamp, 2011; Trent, 2014; Williams, 2007). These studies add to the overall awareness of the topic on teachers' positionalities, in general, but, due to the fact that they do not explicitly discuss the main

participants of the study - international teaching assistants, I limit myself to just mentioning such research.

In conclusion, all synthesized works about ITAs reveal that the new approach in ITA-related research has moved ITAs in the center of studies, but ITAs' lived experiences are still sparsely represented as valid. Moreover, most of the recent research focused on the classroom as a community of practice for ITAs though there are other environments and discourses which can be explored in regard to ITAs' everyday interactions. Undoubtedly, earlier ITA research has mostly concentrated on organization and development of ITAs' training programs; ITAs' assessment and evaluation within academia; and ITAs' work life and experiences from the perspectives of other discourse participants, mostly, in order to help ITAs' in teaching and their communication. These topics have been ultimately connected to scholars' task to solve ITAs' "issues" of linguistic skills, cross-cultural awareness, and pedagogy, which emerged as the central concern in the 1980s and 1990s among undergraduate students.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In order to understand the nature of the study more deeply, the main concepts which are used in the research questions have to be clarified. In Chapter 1, I introduced these concepts – *community of practice* (CoP) and *rich points* - to explain how they can help describe the tendencies behind the research conducted in regard to ITAs in the 1990s and how they can aid in the undertaken research project. In this section, I will also add a discussion of *narratives* as another important factor to understand identities in general, and ITAs' identities, in particular.

The following literature review, first, is meant to provide a description about the concept of community of practice and its interrelatedness to identity development. Second, Agar's

perspective on languacultures and rich points will be highlighted too as the notion of rich points appear as one of the key words in the research questions and needs to be fully discussed. Third, the narratives as a phenomenon to describe the identity research will be presented.

### **Community of practice as a pathway to exploring identities.**

The concept of community of practice (CoP) was introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991). According to the authors, “CoP implies participation in an activity system about which participants share understanding concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98). Osman, Cockcroft and Kajee (2008), summarizing Lave and Wenger (1991), describe the community of practice as “learning through the engagement in the context that is defined by its specialist skills, discourses and cultural knowledge” (p. 2). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) emphasize the idea of mutual engagement in a specific effort to reach the common goal as the key element of any community of practice. Finally, Block (2007a) underscores “a process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relationship to these communities” (p. 25). From all these definitions, it can be inferred that it is crucial to have, first, active participants, second, mutual involvement in the process; third, common goals; fourth, understanding of practices by all participants, and fifth, a learning process in order to have successfully functioning community of practice. At the same time, it is necessary to remember that such a shared activity impacts how individuals position themselves within the structure given that each member has his/her unique background and experience.

Since any community of practice has its own rules and structures, it is expected that there are people who are aware of how to act according to the rules: *more experienced members (old-*

*timers*). On the other end of the spectrum are those who intend to join community of practice and become accepted members. They are referred to as *newcomers*. Block (2007a) underscores: “However, communities of practice are not just collections of individuals engaging in particular practices, which people can join at all times. It is, therefore, worthwhile to consider the rules of entry” (p.25). The clear division between more experienced or more knowledgeable members and newcomers serves as a prerequisite for first, observing *power negotiation* between members of the community; and, second, establishing a necessity of a *socialization* process for newcomers. It presupposes that by active engagement between all participants of the community, newcomers start learning within the given structure. Such *situated learning* helps them “move toward fuller participation in a given community’s activities by interacting with more experienced community members” (Morita, 2004, p. 576).

Situated learning can be seen as an introductory process of integration of newcomers. Upon the entry to the community and beginning of the practices, newcomers usually find themselves in the zone of *legitimate peripheral participation* (LPP). The periphery status, however, is identified as a positive trend since it signals the start of newcomers’ journey within the community. Particularly at this point, it is vital for new members of the community to be fully engaged into practices, as well as, to be supported and accepted by old-timers. In reality, although, such full participation fails quite often and, thus, the legitimacy of new members is questioned in the community not only by more experienced ones but by the newcomers themselves. Without managing to legitimize their position in the community, new members strive to be accepted and recognized but often have to deal with their peripheral position in the community longer than they expect.

Socialization processes in community of practice, or lack of them, affect newcomers' positionality or development of their *identities* in connection to other participants of the social processes and practices. Block (2007b) emphasizes that "community of practices correspond to the different subject positions adopted on a moment-to-moment and day-to-day basis" (p. 865) whereas Mantero (2007) views a community as "the essential element of many identities coming together (or not) in hopes of presenting (or misrepresenting) themselves and others through situated, communal activity" (p. 375). May (2001) also underscores the significance of social structures, such as in community of practice, in regard to identity formation and renegotiation. Finding one's selves while being engaged in the shared activity within such structures manifests the crucial link between community of practice and identity development. Carving one's legitimate place within the community or an inability to leave the periphery of the structures lead to the significance of one's *positionality* and its influence on self-perception.

*Positioning* or *positionality* can be described via the "physical metaphors of position and location" (Block, 2007a; p. 18) when it is linked to identity within certain social settings. Given that members of communities represent different cultural and linguistic background, useful is Kramsch's (2009) vision of the multicultural subjects' positionality as it is a "way in which subject presents and represents discursively, psychologically, socially, and culturally through the use of symbolic systems" (p. 20). Thus, communities of practice become such places in which all members – newcomers, especially, due to the lack of the legitimacy – are faced with self-inquiry about what their positionality entails and how it affects the way they see and represent themselves in daily discourses and actions.

Positionality is, ultimately, linked to the individual's *presentation of self* (*performativity*) within certain discourses. Identities, then, can be seen not only as places within structures but as

performances (Block, 2007a; Goffman; 1959; Williams, 2007). Williams (2007) stresses that “performance identity may represent an idealized perspective of the situation as individuals tend to want to promote a better image of them self for society” (p. 308). Identities as presentations of self are formed under influence of societal norms, perspectives on specific social, ethnic, racial and other groups of people, and, certain environments (Block, 2007 a, b; Li, 2007; Williams, 2007). Li (2007) highlights this point by suggesting that “identities are constituted within *representation* because they are not about the question who we *are* but about questions of historical, linguistic and cultural resources” (p. 25), which shapes our vision of self. At the same time, actual identities as performances can be affected by the way newcomers imagined their community of practice would be (Kanno, 2003; Kanno & Norton, 2003). Nevertheless, mutual engagement and action, which is required in such a structure as community of practice, serves as an impetus for newcomers to represent who they are or who they are expected to be, thus, their identity development can be traced via performances within certain discourses.

Once facing this process of self-identification in regard to the position and (re)presentation of self, less legitimate participants of communities of practice find themselves in an ambiguous emotional state. The state of *ambivalence* represents contradictory feelings, uncertainty and doubts about specific things, including one’s positionality and/or self. Ambivalence, being an emotional condition, opens up another dimension of identity development – a steady connection to one’s emotional experience, especially, in regard to multilingual and multicultural individuals (Chamcharatsri, 2013; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, Kramsch, 2009; Pavlenko, 2002). Emotions, often, manifest a struggle, which originates from the question about one’s position within a certain discourse, settings, and/or community. The inability to fully identify with the specific group or a personal dilemma of recognizing (or not

recognizing) oneself through the assigned or chosen lens in a certain community of practice highlights ambivalence as one of the aspects of identity development. The aforementioned imagined communities (Kanno, 2003; Kanno & Norton, 2003) can add to the emotional helplessness to recognize oneself as a valid participant of a certain discourse, which affects individual's positionality and self-representation.

Ambivalence can also be seen in newcomers' struggles to renegotiate hierarchy and power of a certain community of practice, which brings the discussion back to the significance of *power negotiation* and the identity evolution within community of practice. Norton (1997) referring to West (1992), emphasizes this link: "People who have access to the wide range of resources in a society will have access to power and privilege... Thus the question "Who am I?" cannot be understood apart from the question "What can I do?" (p. 410). It boils down to the actions chosen by old-timers. Cummins (1996) suggests that the power can be either distributed in a collaborative or coercive way. If the former is selected as a pathway, then situated learning – a necessary element of newcomers' legitimization – is ensured within community of practice. If the latter is chosen, socialization in the process may become slow or even cease to exist. Quite often, newcomers are denied a comprehensive socialization process, which leads to their inability to legitimately move along in community of practice due to the lack of power, experience, or/and knowledge. Identity formation and evolution of those who are stuck in the zone of legitimate peripheral participation are strongly influenced by the actions of those who have power and privilege within the social structure or community of practice.

The concepts of community of practice appears to be fundamental for approaching the research question. First, it showcases the complexity of ITAs' interactions and actions which are found not isolated but, rather, within a certain structure or a community of practice. Second, the

interrelatedness of community of practice and identity development aided the research project in understanding how ITAs' lived experiences manifest their identities evolution, which was the sub-question for the project. Third, the concept of community of practice has been steadily associated with the new approach in regard to ITA research (Ashavskaya, 2015; Williams, 2007; Zheng, 2013) as well as it makes its appearance in other works related to identities development in educational environment (Duff, 2010; Flowerdew, 2000; Kanno & Norton, 2003; Morita, 2004; Matsuda, 2002; Reybold, 2008; Rogers & Scott, 2008; Trent, 2014). Most importantly, the undertaken research is meant to discuss multiple communities of practice within which ITAs move along and develop their identities (not only the classroom as ITAs' only community of practice). Therefore, community of practice is seen as a crucial piece in the conceptual framework for the research project.

### **Rich points, languacultures, and frames.**

In order to understand rich points, which appear as a key concept in the research question, it is necessary to delve into Agar's (1996, 2006) theory. First of all, Agar (1996, 2006) dismisses the traditional concepts of language (a combination of descriptive features) and culture (something a certain group of people possesses) as two separate independent instances and presents them as one flexible, living unity of *languaculture* (LC). It is important that languaculture is relational, which means that one observes other culture and language in relation to his/her own languaculture. Each individual's languaculture is highly impacted by the person's biography and is linked to multiple social identities. The person's languaculture shapes the way he/she perceives the world, which the author calls *frames*. However, for Agar (1996, 2006) the languaculture and the frames are not static. As soon as the individual interacts with another person, whose languaculture is, in some ways, different from his/her own, the individual faces



the encounter with *rich points*. Rich points can be seen as “those surprises, those departures from an outsider’s expectations that signal a difference between LC1 and LC2 and give direction to subsequent learning” (Agar, 2006, p. 2). Thus, in order to establish the further meaningful communication, Agar (1996, 2006) suggests that the individual needs to readjust his/her frames and, by doing so, add to his/her existing knowledge on the reality or, in other words, contribute into reshaping his/her own languaculture. Agar (1996) underlines

There are two ways of looking at differences between you and somebody else. One way is to figure out the differences are the tip of the iceberg, the signal that two different *systems* are at work. Another way is to notice all the things that the other person *lacks* when compared to you, the so-called *deficit theory* approach. (p. 23)

Quite often, the *number-one type* people, as the author calls them, do not see that the frames they have can be readjusted. This further perpetuates the deficit perspective in regard to people whose languaculture is different from the mainstream one. The rich points they encounter appear to be, rather, the problem of “the other”, who lacks the proper knowledge of reality.

The author explains this tendency by arguing that, first, people still address language and culture with the old-fashioned “traditional” perspective. It means that language and culture are seen as closed systems where language has been imprisoned in the circle by limiting it only to grammar, phonetics and other descriptive features and culture turns into something “those people” have and do. Agar (1996) highlights that culture can no longer be treated with the vision of isolated traditional communities. As soon as the culture comes into contact with others, the culture becomes *personal* as it constructs the relationship with the one who encounters it. It becomes *relational* rather than neutral or isolated. Second, Agar (1996) explains the prevalent deficit perspective via misuse of the clichéd word ‘multiculturalism’: “no one knows what to

make of it or what to do about it. The results are tragic. Rich differences are converted into threatening deficits” (p. 26). He argues that such a perspective can only lead to the ethnocentrism and that reconsidering one’s vision via critical exposure to other languacultures and readjustment of one’s frames can help escape such a deficit perspective.

At this point, Agar’s vision (1996, 2006) might seem too ideal. However, the author does emphasize that living with the languacultural perspective in mind and addressing differences and similarities as rich points would not provide a clear-cut and easy solution. On the contrary, everything will become messy. As a somewhat practical application, Agar (1996) suggests *MAR* (Mistake, Awareness, and Repair) process: “Step one is a *mistake*. Something goes wrong. Step two is *awareness* of frames and possible alternatives. Step three is a *repair*, tinkering with old frames, now brought to consciousness, and building new ones, until the gaps between you and them are filled in” (p. 242). People who develop MAR consciousness become “immigrants” or “sailors”, similar to those travelers who are out in the sea to explore but they start the journey from the native shore. When they come back to the native shore, they encounter their own languaculture again but not in its pure, initial form but, rather, muddied by whatever experiences they had during their travels. Their languaculture has expanded and transformed due to the relations these “sailors” have built to others’ languacultures while encountering rich points. MAR is a dynamic and a fluid process; it is not a conclusion but more of a resource to communicate in the globalized world, “a shift in human ecology” (Agar, 1996, p. 244).

Agar’s concept of rich points (1996, 2006) seems to be highly applicable to my perspective behind the research on ITAs. While performing their everyday duties in the US academia, ITAs encounter certain rich points as well as other participants of the discourse face their own rich points while interacting with ITAs. Judging by the predominant attitude to ITAs in

the existing literature, which underscores that ITAs need readjust regarding their language, culture, and pedagogy, it can be inferred that ITAs constantly find themselves in the process of reevaluating their frames and, thus, expanding their languaculture. It is unclear, though, to what extent other participants of the discourse do the same. It seems that instead of blaming the differences in culture and language for being the obstacle on the way to communicate, as it was done in the 1990s, identification of those rich points can help both sides to reflect on their own positionality and their own vision on the reality (frames). Recognition of how these rich points emerge, how they resolve, or how they transform in the course of communication can help identify the language and culture or languaculture as a foundation from which the person starts his/her journey in order to expand his/her worldview.

It is necessary to mention that I feel strongly about how concepts of rich points and community of practice are intertwined. ITAs do not perform their professional responsibilities alone. They are members of multiple communities of practice at once which can be observed via a myriad of interactions: the classroom where they teach, trainings they attend, evaluations they have to pass to qualify for teaching, informal and formal sessions with supervisors/professors they work with, meetings with administrative staff in the program, office hours interactions with students and/or other TAs/ITAs, to name a few. ITAs are carving their positions in such communities of practice while facing various power negotiations in each of them. ITAs' socialization patterns and speeds may be different in each of the aforementioned environments. What is more, in all these communities, ITAs' interactions, conversations, and actions are linked to various rich points. These rich points might emerge and be resolved or might appear and never be addressed. These rich points and the way they are treated by all the participants might position each individual ITA in the periphery or they might help him/her move along towards identifying

with the legitimate membership, which can be seen as ITAs' identity development. Nonetheless, establishing the conversation via such rich points seem to be a prerequisite for successful communication by all the members of community of practice.

### **Narratives as a keystone to understand identities.**

Central to the nature of the study is a representation of ITAs' perspectives and experiences; that is why, narrative is viewed as another conceptual element of the research. According to Simons (2009), "narratives aspire to capture the experience as it was "lived" in the particular context through rich description, observation and interpretation and to retain this connection in the telling of the story" (p. 76). Narratives are not only a technique to be used to interpret and represent the data, but they are the essence of the whole research; a phenomenon which tells a story about somebody's life through collecting the stories which are lived (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Simons, 2009). Thus, the narrative informs the vision behind this research methodology, specifically, how ITAs can represent their identity evolution and rich points development within their immediate communities of practice.

The new research about ITAs, represented by Ashavskaya (2015), Hebbani and Hendrix (2014), Li (2007), Williams (2007, 2011) and Zhang (2013), shed light on lived experiences as vital elements to understand ITAs' perspectives in the US academia, especially, in the classroom. Li's (2007) reflection on his own confused positionality as an ITA, non-native speaker of English, and a graduate student significantly stands out from that list as it represents the author's lived experiences in a self-reflective narrative form (described earlier in the chapter).

There is a substantial number of works devoted to exploring teachers' and student-teachers' identities (in a general sense) which can help dive deeper in understanding what forces

there are behind identity evolution in educational settings (Atkinson, 2004; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Estola, 2003; Florio-Ruane, 2001). Researchers view producing narratives, auto-biographies, and self-reflections throughout the whole research process as a beneficial way for teachers to gain better perspectives on who they are, what their positions are in in their educational discourses, and on how their relationship with other members of this discourse is structured. Therefore, educators in such narrative inquiries and studies obtain more chances to understand their own identities. Although the following works do not focus on ITAs but, rather, represent teachers and student-teachers' positionality through their lived experiences, I find it crucial to provide examples on how narratives behind the methodology can lead the research process in regard to tracing teachers' identities.

For example, Florio-Ruane (2001) "tried to investigate ethnic autobiography as a genre from which teachers might learn about culture, literacy, and education in their own and others' lives" (p. xxviii). The scholar's central idea is not only to understand what incentives educators have to teach and progress in teaching but, more importantly, to explore teachers' ethnic and cultural diversity which, ultimately, influence their positionality in educational settings. In order to do so, Florio-Ruane (2001) organized the autobiography book club for beginner teachers. This club served as a cultural foundation for the literacy course, which provided educators with the opportunity to investigate their own professional identities. Viewing teachers as cultural beings, this autobiographic approach revealed such themes important for understanding one's identity as professional practice, personal intellectual growth and participation in literacy as a culturally impacted practice. Teachers were able to identify their "possible" selves and "shifting" selves, the notions Florio-Ruane (2001) emphasizes in her book. Writing and sharing a narrative is seen as a crucial practice in order to trace teachers' identities: "narrative is imposed on the bits and

pieces of experience to create a coherent sense of meaning spanning past, present and future” (Florio-Ruane, 2001, p. 145).

The beneficial role of the narrative analysis is emphasized in Connelly and Clandinin’s (1999) book *Shaping a Professional Identity: Stories of Educational Practice*. The authors recognize identity of a teacher as “stories to live by” which happen within the “landscape” – a space, which is comprised of two different places, namely, the in-classroom practice and out-of-the classroom place. Connelly and Clandinin (1999) aim at exploring “the connectedness between teachers’ questions on identity” and “teacher knowledge” (p. 3). To tackle this task teachers and administrators were given a chance to tell their own stories, listen to and respond to others’ stories in research groups. While analyzing the data, teachers’ identities, first, curriculum making was seen as a connection: each teacher had his/her individual ways to respond to institutional discourses and practices and, thus, position himself/herself in the given environment. Second, professional identity was linked to the complex relationships, if not confrontations, between teachers’ “stories to live by” and changes in the educational landscapes and practices. Third, teaching identity was shaped by educators’ constant moving within time and space or, in other words, “landscape”. Such an observation demonstrates the complexities of the teacher’s identities as it highlights that teachers’ identities are not only bound to practices of the occupation. Dynamically shifting between the in-class and out-of-class spaces “teachers also cross a border as they consider how their actions will be storied by others outside their in-classroom places” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p. 103). In short, the narratives or educators’ “stories to live by” are viewed by the authors as vital episodes of how teachers position themselves within the boundaries of their profession and their personal lives.

Atkinson (2004) is another researcher who “investigates the forming of student teacher identities in initial teacher education” via “analyzing student narratives of school experiences” (p. 379). The study is based on narratives produced by two British student-teachers during their teacher education and training courses in England. Atkinson (2004) provides a certain background of standardized criteria for obtaining teacher’s status in England such as successfully passing standards in, first, professional values and practices; second, knowledge and understanding of profession; and, third, teaching strategies. The author argues that these standards represent the idealized view on teaching which can create an obstacle for the “real-world” effective teaching. The teacher is viewed by Atkinson (2004) as a reflective, reflexive and critical practitioner who constructs his/her professional identity within the aforementioned “prescribed” standards of teaching. Thus, narrative is positioned as an interrogatory tool to identify new teachers’ actual professional identity development. As a result, professional identity is located in the “ideological conflict within which this student teacher is struggling to form his identity as a teacher. Such conflicts hinge upon *preferred identities* and their related forms of practice and understanding” (Atkinson, 2004, p. 392). Therefore, the narrative, according to Atkinson (2004) is a method of identifying student-teachers’ sites of struggle in order to position themselves.

Estola’s (2003) research project does not only use narratives as a method for obtaining data but it, also, employs the concept and a metaphor of “hope” in those narratives. Estola (2003) explains that “teacher identity is seen as a narrative process and teaching as a certain kind of practice” (p. 181) whereas the metaphor of ‘hope’ “is oriented towards future events and actions” (p. 184). The methodology of this study is comprised of five stages of reading of thirty-five essays produced by Finnish student teachers (teacher education and early childhood teacher

education programs). The student teachers describe six episodes of their lives in which the participants explore the following topics: significant people who have had an educational impact on them; their ideal educator; a significant learning experience; a significant learning experience during the teacher education program; who they are as teachers; and what kind of teachers they want to become. The findings show that “although student teachers consider hope as an important part of teaching, they, at the same time, ‘apologise for having such an ‘unrealistic view’” (Estola, 2003, p. 181). This finding is rather significant for the researcher as it demonstrates that by using narrative the moral dimension of teachers’ identity – hope “as an overall source of meaningful work” and “an orientation towards the future” (Estola, 2003, p. 199) – can be revealed. Practice, experience and social relationships within educational environment are identified as key factors which impact student teachers’ professional identity in the present and future.

The concept of a narrative is identified as a crucial part behind the methodology of the current study. The data collection tools were designed in such a way, so they were able to elicit a reflection, or a story, or a narrative, which is based on the real lived-through experience of each ITA. I have employed such techniques as artifact collection, a process in which each ITA in the study is asked to bring five to ten objects which seem important for them. In the course of the informal interview, which meant to paint a more detailed and a vivid picture of each participant, ITAs themselves produced such narratives in which they reflected about themselves in certain discourses and boundaries. I also appealed to each ITA’s creativity and asked them to draw their positionality during the different stages of their ITA experiences, which, consequently, produced more narratives from ITAs. Given that the narrative, as it is discussed above, helps in reflecting on teachers’ multiple identities within various educational settings and interactions, it helped



identify their positionality in various communities of practice. With the help of the narrative educators – the ITAs - could express how they constantly create and recreate their spaces and positions as well as their own understanding of practices can collide with the proposed standards in educational systems. It also helped to have a deeper understanding of an “ideal” or expected positionality, which has been traced by Atkinson (2004) and Estola (2003) via teachers’ narratives as well as by scholars of imagined communities of practice (Kanno, 2003; Kanno & Norton, 2003).

Connelly and Clandinin (1999) note that there is a constant shift between social and professional spaces (in-class and out-of-the-class spaces) so the teacher’s identity via “stories to live by” provide a more encompassing sense on who teachers really are. Florio-Ruane (2001) highlights the cultural background of the educators as a significant aspect for identity development. At the same time, Agar (1996, 2006) connects various social identities and biography as a force affecting how the individual embraces rich points. Similarly, ITAs’ identities cannot only be bound to language, culture, and pedagogy alone. ITAs’ lived experiences embrace their multi-angled reality and showcase the complexity of who they are in their communities of practices at the moments of embracing rich points. ITAs, also, shift in time and space so ITAs’ narratives in the study, as it was assumed from the beginning, are essential for understanding ITAs’ real lived through experiences. It was expected that their biographies and their expanding languaculture would inform the research as well as help ITAs themselves to reflect on their dynamic positionality. The overall chosen conceptual framework – community of practice, rich points and narratives – appear to be complimenting and supporting each other in order to create a foundation for the study and to prepare the researcher for more meaningful exploration of ITAs’ positionalities in the US academia.

## **Theoretical Framework: Vygotskian Concept of *Perezhivanie* in Sociocultural Theory**

This is the point when a little pause is necessary to have a second look at all the concepts this research is attempting to utilize. It is obvious they all are interconnected but one needs to tiptoe to observe the linked elements within a certain theory. It appears that sociocultural theory suits the most to explain such a connection. Particularly, Vygotsky's concept of *perezhivanie* seems to be the most appropriate way to see how community of practice, identity development, rich points are manifested within ITAs' narratives.<sup>2</sup>

The name of the Russian scholar Lev Vygotsky and sociocultural theory are inseparable. In fact, Vygotsky is considered to be the "parent" of the sociocultural theory. In a nutshell, "sociocultural theory emphasizes Vygotsky's insistent focus on the *relationship* between the individual's psychological aspects and the social and the culturally produced contexts and artifacts that transform the individual's cognitive or mental functions" (Swain, Kinnear & Steinman, 2011, p. xiii). According to John-Steiner and Mahn (1996), "*Vygotsky conceptualized development as the transformation of socially shared activities into internalized processes*" (p. 192). In other words, social interactions embedded within certain environments and contexts have a direct impact on the development of one's identity as well as the characteristics of the person's identity are reflected in certain social environments and contexts. Identity development presupposes that emotion and cognition, as a unity, go through qualitative transformations in the course of its existence.

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that all the quotations from Vygotsky's texts as well as the dictionary articles (Ozhegov, 1983) were studied in the original (Russian) and translated by me throughout the whole document.

To understand the aforementioned definition of the sociocultural theory from Vygotsky's perspective, a few significant instances should be covered. Vygotsky's vision cannot be fully comprehended without applying a specific reading lens – *a dialectical approach*. Marx and Engels proposed that everything which exists goes through transformations and, then, perishes, thus, negates its own existence. As Novack (1969) highlights: “dialectics is the logic of matter in motion and thereby the logic of contradictions, because development is inherently self-contradictory”, hence, “everything generates within itself that force which leads to its negation, its passing away into some other higher form of being” (p. 72). An example of the flower is often used to demonstrate the laws behind the dialectics. When a seed of a flower sprouts, it ends the life of the seed as a form but continues the life of a flower in a form of a sprout. Therefore, the seed negates its existence in order to continue its higher form – the sprout. Then the time comes, and the sprout becomes a stem one can see the same process of negating the existence of the sprout but with its transformation a new, more advanced form of a flower comes to life. Subsequently, the buds on the stem signal about a new qualitative transformation of a flower, which later would be followed by the appearance of a blossom and disappearance of the bud. All these changes showcase the dynamic nature as well as significance of each stage as a transformational leap in the life of a flower. In other words, during each transformation one phase gives life to a new phase, thus, the unity in all phases of the flower transformation can be observed. One can't imagine a blossom without a bud or a sprout without a seed as each part of the flower life builds on one another. It is also significant to observe that during various stages of the flower existence the flower maintains its essence of being a flower although its appearance can contradict its essence - the seed is not a flower, yet it is a flower.

Why is it obligatory to understand the basics of dialectical approach in order to understand Vygotsky's vision and, consequently, sociocultural theory? There are two reasons which should be taken into consideration. First, Vygotsky happened to live and create his works during the establishment of Soviet Russia when, as the Russian saying goes, "even the air was filled with revolution". Marx and Engels' perspectives on dialectics were welcomed as an original philosophical avenue for building a new nation with new ideals. Vladimir Lenin – the leader of the October Revolution of 1917 – based his tractates on the historical materialism, which presupposed the inevitability of the revolution and a new regime in Russia as the developed capitalism (which, in fact, did not exist in pre-Soviet Russia), while perishing, was supposed to give a life to a new form - socialism. Exactly as in the example: as the bud dies it provides the life for the blossom. The Bolsheviks understood that dialectical laws governed all matter in motion and discovering those laws became paramount. Later, Marx and Engels' views on dialectics was further elevated in each and every sphere of life including science. Vygotsky's works were no exceptions. Even more, dialectics is such an integral and crucial part of Vygotsky's works that without the full comprehension of the approach this Russian scholar's works can be easily misunderstood and can be read as confusing if not contradictory.

Given somewhat unclear history of Soviet Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century, one might suggest that Vygotsky was forced to adopt that new, "ideologically right" view in his works. For instance, Zavershneva (2017) after the close examination of Vygotsky's personal notes and diaries suggests that it will always remain a mystery whether Vygotsky was a true Marxist or he learned to "mimic" the views. Also, the fact that Vygotsky's original manuscripts from the 1930s were manipulated in the later publishing (in the 1950s) to sound more "ideologically Soviet" and the fact that until now it is rather challenging to acknowledge all

the cases of censorship in Vygotsky's texts cast a doubt too. Nonetheless, Vygotsky's numerous works showcase a very evident dialectical approach which is used as a backbone for his innovative ideas. Moreover, the first two decades of the twentieth century Russian writers, artists, musicians, and various scholars were inspired by the idea of a revolution as a necessary transformation of Russia. They truly believed in a needed change and the dialectical approach was rather widespread. It is evident in Vygotsky's works as in works of other intellectuals of his time. Vygotskian scholars, in fact, place an emphasis on how ingrained the dialectical approach in the works of the Russian scholar: "throughout his work Vygotsky used the dialectical method to analyze, explain, and describe interrelationships fundamental to human development" (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 195). The juxtaposition between dialectical approach and formal logic in Vygotsky's works is underlined in Mahn (2003): "Vygotsky's dialectical approach contrasts with evolutionary, linear approaches that analyze incremental growth but do not explain the creation of new psychological structures" (p.121). Vygotsky's works speak for themselves – the dialectical approach is rather evident in Vygotsky's discussions with or without direct references to it.

The second reason why the knowledge of the dialectical approach is vital for working with Vygotsky's texts and, therefore understanding sociocultural theory is the skeptical reader. Skepticism and misunderstanding of Vygotsky's vision happens to appear due to the educational usage of prevalent philosophical approach of formal logic. Formal logic stands as an opposing theory to dialectical approach while being somewhat a mainstream vision in the Western world, which creates a hurdle in comprehension of the texts written with the dialectics in mind. To briefly cover the main but crucial differences I will refer to the concept of negation which is accepted in dialectics. Formal logic cannot allow negation as a rule for all existing phenomena.

Instead of looking at the dynamic unity in existence of a certain object (for example, flower), formal logic demands studying the existence of such an object via clear cut stages, which forgets about the transformational nature and unity of such stages in a life of an object. In other words, formal logic demands static universe while dialectics focus on the dynamics and fluidity of processes; formal logic sets precise, absolute, and undisputable laws while dialectics aims at showing that “everything necessary, naturally and reasonably turns into its opposite during the course of its existence” creating a unity, which “so perplexes and horrifies addicts of formal logic” (Novack, 1969, p. 71). Thus, it is extremely challenging for a reader who is used to formal logic to work with the text which is based on the dialectical approach. For the current research project, Vygotsky’s works and, consequentially, basics of sociocultural theory cannot be fully comprehended without the lens of the dialectical approach.

According to Mahn (2012), Vygotsky describes three key aspects to his approach: 1) the use of Marx and Engels’ dialectical approach; 2) analysis of complex systems by examining interconnections with other systems; and 3) analysis using units” (p. 103). Indeed, to demonstrate the dialectical approach in action in Vygotsky’s works, a closer look at “unity” and a “unit to be analyzed” is needed before I delve into the discussion of the concept of *perezhivanie* as a binding theoretical force for the research project. When Vygotsky discusses his analysis, for instance, about the development of thinking and speech as a unity or the developmental changes (crises) in childhood via the unity of “lived through emotional experience” (*perezhivanie*) and certain environments, he emphasizes the urgency of understanding what “unit” and “unity” mean. He purposefully juxtaposes an “element” and a “unit”. Vygotsky underlines that the analysis which aims at explanation of complex characteristics of a certain phenomenon by utilizing an approach of studying precise “elements” (of such a phenomenon) separately would not provide the full

answer. The “element”, when it is separated from the whole of the phenomenon for examination, loses the characteristics of the whole, thus, cannot demonstrate the complex nature of the phenomenon anymore. Instead, Vygotsky suggests that there should be a “unit to be analyzed” which is “such a part of the whole, which has all separate characteristics of the whole, at least in its embryonic form” (Vygotsky, 2001, pp. 36-37). Such a “unit” is capable of capturing the qualitative transformation of the whole. Thus, for finding the answers about the complex nature of a phenomenon, especially, regarding the development of human psychological functions, the scholar has to find such a “unit” and to observe the dynamic changes of the matter throughout its existence without breaking the phenomenon into separate “elements”. It appears obvious that the “element analysis” versus “unit analysis” is an evident argument between formal logic and dialectical approach, which is found in Vygotsky’s works throughout.

To support this claim further, the concept of *perezhivanie* should be introduced. First of all, it is vital to keep the word *perezhivanie* in Russian to fully understand the notion. In the process of translation from Russian into English, the original meaning of *perezhivanie* (“a lived through emotional experience”) became equivalent to just an “emotion”, which creates a certain roadblock to full understanding of Vygotsky’s logic behind selecting *perezhivanie* as a necessary unit for understanding the human psychological development.

Morphologically the noun *perezhivanie* can be chunked into the root or base *zhit’* which means ‘to live’ and a prefix *pere* which denotes a movement from one point or a state to another. The root is followed by the noun-forming suffix *an* and a noun-forming inflection *ie*. The word itself means: “a condition of a soul or a spirit or psyche provoked by strong emotions or impressions” (Ozhegov, 1983, p. 444). The verb *perezhit’* means, first, “to outlive somebody”; second, “to experience something in life”; and third, “to bear something” (Ozhegov, 1983, p.

444). Keeping the original word does appear important as it, first, highlights an emotional impact on the human and, second, the morphology of the word *perezhivanie* helps the reader understand a dynamic nature of the meaning behind this word, which is a transformation of emotional state due to the perception of one's immediate environment. Finally, it reflects one of the key statements of the dialectical approach: changes and transformations are inherent to the dynamic nature of an object or phenomenon in the course of its existence. Therefore, the concept of a "lived through emotional experience" has been preserved in its original Russian word form of *perezhivanie* not only in the present work but, overall, in the sociocultural and Vygotskian studies.

Analyzing the dynamics of the human psychological development, specifically, children, Vygotsky concluded that *perezhivanie* appears as that very "unit" to be analyzed which helps understand one's identities evolution within a certain social environment. He discusses the significance of a social environment (*sreda* in Russian) as a fundamental domain for the individual's psychological development. *Sreda* means, first, "substance which fills out space as well as bodies which surround something"; second, "something which is around; a combination of natural conditions in which human activity is happening"; third, "social and everyday life conditions as well as people who are connected by the social and everyday life conditions" (Ozhegov, 1983, p. 676). Vygotsky warns that environment is often misinterpreted as a static outer shell – a combination of disjointed characteristics such as financial state of a family and characteristics of the house if one investigates a family environment, for instance. Instead, he highlights that "dynamic and relative understanding of environment" is vital since the environment impacts the development of a human, in his discussions, a child, in various ways as well as the same environment can influence different people differently depending on the age,



the level of psychological development, and the level of interaction with the environment (Vygotsky, 2001, pp. 81-82). *Perezhivanie* serves as a unity between the individual and the environment but *perezhivanie* is not taken as an isolated concept which exists by itself; it is rather an inseparable characteristic of both, the environment and the individual. Vygotsky (2001) stresses:

Environment provides this or that impact on the child's development, which is different in different ages, since the child is changing and the relation to the certain situation (environment) changes as well. Environment impacts the child, as we have already mentioned, via the child's *perezhivanie*, i.e. it depends on what internal attitude to a certain instant or to a certain situation in the environment is chosen by the child.

Environment predetermines this or that development which is dependent on the level of child's perception (making a sense of) of a certain environment. (p. 81)

Given the quote above, it is obvious that Vygotsky emphasizes that key to understanding the complexity of human psychological development lies within studying the unity of environment, *perezhivanie*, and individual's personal characteristics while *perezhivanie* serves as certain unified intersection of the dynamic environment and the individual's ever-changing level of development. *Perezhivanie* is a unit

in which in the inseparable way, on one hand, the environment is being lived through – *perezhivanie* is always connected to something external (outside the human being) - on the other hand, it reflects how I am living through the emotions, in other words, all the characteristics of the personality (identity) and all characteristics of the environment are reflected in *perezhivanie*. (Vygotsky, 2001, p. 75)

In this case, *perezhivanie* can serve as a key for deeper understanding of the individual's psychological development within a certain social context. It should be noted that under "psychological development" Vygotsky understands a unity of the cognitive, emotional, and psychological. *Perezhivanie* is a part of this unification. Impressions and emotions from the environment can be linked to the concept of perception (in Russian – *vospriyatie*). The Russian definition highlights *vospriyatie* as "a unique affective understanding of reality in one's *soznanie* [*conscience; mind*]; an ability to understand, differentiate and learn phenomena/moments/occurrences of reality". The verb *vosprinyat'* means to understand and learn something. (Ozhegov, 1983, p. 89). From this definition one can learn that *vospriyatie* (perception) has a link to both, thinking and affective channels simultaneously. Since the perception or understanding of reality is interrelated with how one lives through a certain emotional experience within a certain social context, it demonstrates that *perezhivanie* is placed in such a domain that has a unity of emotion and cognition.

To sum it up, *perezhivanie* is a significant concept in understanding people's psychological development through a set of characteristics within certain social environments or, in other words, it identifies evolution within certain social environments. This concept is linked to the affect and cognition at the same time. Such scholars as Mahn (2012), Swain, Kinnear and Steinman (2011) and Zashihina (2014) among others emphasize the importance of *perezhivanie* in the meaning making processes and identity development. Moreover, the discussion of *perezhivanie* demonstrates the usage of the dialectical approach in Vygotsky's vision. Exactly as the approach demands the complexity of the phenomenon is studied as the whole and with the help of a "unit", which showcases the dynamic transformation of the whole at different stages. *Perezhivanie*, as Vygotsky underlines, is inherent to both, the individual's way of living through

the environment and the environment itself. It is a relation which presupposes that a lived through experience changes the environment itself. *Perezhivanie* is not a disjointed element which is studied out of the context the way formal logic does. Finally, *perezhivanie* presupposes that after perceiving certain reality the emotion will be lived through so by the end of such a process the transformation of the personality (identity) will occur, which in its turn, will be reflected in the social environment. The dialectical dynamics of nature is obvious in the process of *perezhivanie* as well as one can see how the completion of reliving a certain emotional experience serves as the beginning of the new transformed identity, which is one of the key statements of the dialectical approach.

It is time to return to the concepts which were utilized for the present research project and position them within the frames of the sociocultural theory, in general, and the concept of *perezhivanie*, in particular. An ITA is an individual who operates within his/her own languaculture as well as within a set of personal characteristics before he/she starts their job in the US academia. They have their own perception of reality as well as their own relation/attitude to how they perceive the reality due to the specifics of their psychological characteristics. Once they enter a new reality of being an ITA and find themselves involved in various social environments, their perception of reality together with that reality transforms. What is understood under the concept of community of practice is viewed as the social environment ITAs encounter (a new languaculture). ITAs are a part of communities of practice (social environments) and the way they perceive these communities of practice influences ITAs' identities. At the same time, ITAs impact those communities of practice (social environments) by their relation/attitude.

Community of practice presupposes social interactions with various people regarding various topics and subjects. It is an alive, dynamic and constantly changing interactive environment in which certain unfamiliar social situations provoke confusion, surprise, shock, joy, content, in other words, an array of emotions. These moments of emotional discoveries are rich points. Rich points serve as an opening for the emotions to flow in, get absorbed and, eventually, lead to a certain change in perception of one's languaculture. In the long run, such changes contribute in transformation of one's identity. In this case, if community of practice can be seen as what Vygotsky calls a social environment, the rich point can be, to some extent, seen as a process of *perezhivanie*. Then, those changes which happen with each rich point, whether it was resolved or brushed aside, appear to correlate with qualitative transformations which help observe the dynamics in the existence of a certain object or a phenomenon, according to the dialectical thought in Vygotsky's works. This is the evolution of a certain phenomenon or, in this case, the evolution of each ITA as an individual within their communities of practice in the process of living through emotions, which is provoked by various social interactions. Whatever ITAs live through in their social environment contributes into their development within that environment exactly as they impact that social environment via their transformed relation/attitude to the social environment. Therefore, the whole process can be seen as the process of *perezhivanie* as it is described in Vygotsky's works.

To support the fit of sociocultural theory as an overarching theoretical framework for the study, it should be noted that scholarly discussion of sociocultural theory, as a matter of fact, underline the connection to such theoretical concepts as community of practice, identity, and narratives. For instance, Swain, Kinnear and Steinman (2011) emphasize that "Vygotsky concerned himself primarily with the relationship between the individual and society with

respect to development of the mind” while community of practice demonstrates how “a group shapes the practices through a combination of formal and informal situations” (p. xv). Moreover, sociocultural theory and narrative go hand in hand. The major concern of the sociocultural theory is to trace the dynamic nature of individuals’ psychological characteristics, which requires a study through time. The narrative allows us to dive deeper in one’s experiences and, thus, “narrative tellings not only track development, but are sites of development themselves” (Swain, Kinnear & Steinman, 2011, p. xii). The narrative, then, serves as an avenue to see identities evolution while showcasing how a certain environment (community of practice) impacts the teller’s self. Narrating itself can be seen as transformational, as well as it is expressive, which means that the teller relives certain experiences over and over again in the process of sharing, therefore, shows those emotional instances which lead to rethinking his/her reality. In a way, the teller highlights those moments of *perezhivanie* and in the process of self-analysis highlights qualitative transformations in his/her identities development.

Placing all the said concepts within the frame of sociocultural theory helps this research project to answer the set research questions. Keeping the dialectical approach in mind the analysis of findings aims at showcasing the dynamics and complexity of such a process as ITAs’ identity evolution within certain social environments, as well as, it pays attention to the intricacy and ever-changing nature of such social environments. What is more, the emotional aspects of ITAs’ interactions and encounters should be examined keeping in mind the fluidity of “living through emotional experience” or *perezhivanie*.

## Conclusion

Chapter 2 aimed at providing a literature review and detailed background for the current study in three following directions: ITA-related research, major concepts which are used for the research question, and theoretical framework. A detailed account of ITA related research was presented in the first part of the chapter. The literature review showcased that ITA-related research experienced a certain shift in approaches – the predominant research, which positioned ITAs within the “deficit” perspective, moved towards highlighting ITAs’ identities and experiences; however, such a new approach is still rather dormant. A detailed account of how assessment, training, and fixing of ITAs’ ‘problems” of language, culture, and pedagogy was presented together with the thorough discussion of a new approach in ITA-related field, which mostly focused on ITAs’ identity development in the classroom. The second part of the chapter underlined the major concepts which are used for understanding the nature of the research question – communities of practice, rich points, languacultures, frames, identity, and narrative. The latter is discussed to emphasize the vision behind the project methodology rather than just a concept which is hidden in the research rationale. Finally, theoretical framework is introduced and the concept of *perezhivanie* (lived through emotional experience) as a part of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory is showcased. The last part of the chapter is devoted to the discussion of the sociocultural theory and its foundation – the dialectical approach, which enriches understanding of how the aforementioned concepts fit into the theoretical framework. It is concluded that *perezhivanie* is an appropriate theoretical lens to approach ITAs’ identities and rich points dynamics for the current research project.

## **Chapter 3 Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The following chapter is meant to present details about the research rationale, research settings and focal participant selection for the conducted project. Also, chapter 3 aims at providing a comprehensive discussion of how the data was collected and analyzed. Limitations and delimitations of the study are described in the end. Chapter 3 is organized in such a way that it underlines specifics of the study and all the said procedures while embedding other scholars' perspectives on how the chosen methodology – a qualitative case study – should be understood.

## **Rationale for Research Approach**

The undertaken research project was conducted as *a qualitative study*. More precisely, this research falls under such a classification as *instrumental multiple case (or collective) study*. Initially, the study was proposed to be conducted at one research site with the sample between three (minimum) and five (maximum) participants. Each participant was meant to be a *case*. However, in the course of participant selection in the anticipated location, I ran into difficulties of receiving a final confirmation for participation from a few preselected potential focal participants (I was waiting for the confirmation for almost the whole semester), which led me to trying out a different location for the research. I was more successful in finding focal participants in the second location, but my research journey took yet another turn. Those potential focal participants from the first location finally confirmed their willingness to be a part of my study when I already started the data collection in the second location. I decided that, even though, I already had enough participants to sustain my initial research plan, it would be rather valuable to obtain more data in order to have a fuller picture for answering my research question. Thus, I proceeded to collect data at two research sites. More details about the settings and participants will be provided further in this chapter.

As a result, I have collected data from eight participants all together – three participants were from the initially planned location and five were from the settings which appeared as a back-up location in the course of the study. Given the overall number, it no longer seemed to be rational to see each participant (an ITA) as a case since it would be quite challenging to analyze these many cases, especially, within the cross-case analysis stage. Instead, each case is seen as a community of ITAs from a certain location, which makes the study still *an instrumental multiple case study* but with just two cases (two ITA communities). If one looks at the definition of the



case study such as “a case study provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract theories and principles” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 289), the choice of case study for my research project seems to be quite appropriate. My intention to examine each ITA’s standpoint in regard to the research question still stood the ground, even though, I had to bind them together in a group. It should be noted that I am not generalizing their views to all ITAs’ views from a certain university; rather, I attempt to illustrate unique experiences of research participants who happened to work as ITAs in a certain geographic location.

It is important to look at these two cases (two universities) within the *boundaries* of a certain system (Creswell, 2006; Merriam, 1988; Simons, 2009; Yin, 2009). At the same time, according to Yin (2009), the researcher needs to position and study the case within its *context* as the boundaries of the case and context might be rather vague to be separated. The boundaries in each case in this research project are professional communities within a particular university, including classroom space, faculty and administrators’ environment, and structures which host formal and informal ITAs’ interactions. All two cases, ultimately, are bound by the location and time my research was conducted (all of the procedures for each case were completed within one semester timeline).

I see the fit of an instrumental case study to my project as each case I am investigating is meant to depict detailed unique stories of each ITA in regard to how ITAs approach the emergence and resolutions of ‘rich points’ in their professional community of practice, which means that those unique experiences happen within boundaries of a certain university environment. According to Stake’s (1994), classification instrumental case studies aim at “examining a particular case in order to gain insight into an issue or a theory” (Cohen, Manion &

Morrison, 2011, p. 291), which is precisely what I have been trying to achieve by conducting my research. At the same time, this research project is a multiple case study (or a collective case study) because each community of ITAs (or a single instrumental case) is meant to show specific unique features of the same issue within the boundaries of one particular system (one university). Multiple cases allow me to portray the same issue from different standpoints, which is one of the main characteristics of multiple case studies (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Creswell, 2006; Yin, 2003, 2009), though, without generalizations.

Choosing instrumental multiple case study as a format for my research, also, correlates with the fundamental vision of the study that there are multiple truths. Discovering layers of meanings is an essential part to interpret the reality. It is crucial to examine a certain issue from multiple sources of “truth” to showcase the complexity and fluidity of the issue. It is paramount to showcase the dynamics of the researched phenomena when sociocultural theory – the theoretical foundation of the present research project – is taken into consideration.

According to Simons (2009), one of the key points which unites multiple definitions of the case study is “commitment to studying the situation or phenomenon in its ‘real-life’ context” which takes its uniqueness and complexity into account (pp. 20-21). It is particularly applicable to studying “the system” or, in this case, examining the environment (various communities of practice) and the individual (ITAs) in that very environment. Hence, case study seems to be the most relevant research methodology to explore ITAs’ experiences in US academia.

## **Research Settings**

As aforementioned, the study took place in two sites which are located in two different regions of the United States – Southwest and Northwest. The preliminary location was the

university in the Northwest (**North Trails University** or **NTU**)<sup>3</sup> at which, first, it was challenging to confirm the preselected ITAs' participation but, almost a semester later after showing the initial interest in the research, those ITAs contacted me again and confirmed their willingness to participate.

North Trails University is a large state school which is located in a remote rural town. According to 2010 census, 91% of the population in this town was white (approximately 24,000 people reside there).<sup>4</sup> The state, in general, has, predominantly white, non-international population (90%). In Spring 2017 (the beginning of the research project,) there were 11,534 students studying at the university. These numbers appeared to be the same during the analysis stage (Fall 2018) as the website suggested 11,841 students admitted to North Trails University. Similarly, at the beginning of the study, the website showcased that during the academic year of 2014-2015, overall, 919 international students were admitted (8.5% of overall enrollment), which constituted 28% increase in international students' population when compared to 2013. Among 919 students, 211 students were identified as graduate. In Fall 2018 the international profile highlighted that 7.5% of overall student population was international: 762 international students with 275 people being graduate students. At the time when the research project ended, the website listed that there are 800 international students from 78 countries present on campus and, according to the global vision documentation for 2020 (open for public access on the website) the school plans to increase the international population up to 10%. International

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<sup>3</sup> Not a real name of the university

<sup>4</sup> All the references to the sources are omitted (throughout this section; for both research sites) in order to maintain confidentiality of the study participants, including their location

graduate students are granted teaching assistantship at North Trails University as there is a whole webpage devoted to describing the required seminar for International Teaching Assistants. Also, throughout the website there is information regarding the availability of teaching assistantships for different programs, which has to be checked with each department or college.

The initial selection of this school was predetermined by the fact that I was rather curious to explore experiences of ITAs who landed into such a remote area with quite homogenous local population. North Trails University is one of the biggest state universities and, as statistics show, has a decent number of international students. Before delving into the project, I had a certain familiarity with the location but on a personal level rather than on the professional. In fact, as a researcher, I was positioned as a complete outsider, which predetermined the challenge of finding the participants in the location. On the other hand, it minimized my biases as a researcher since I had no connections with the school and very basic understanding of the university structures.

When the said challenge of sampling occurred at North Trails University, I had to make a decision of a possibility to relocate my research project to a different site. For this purpose, I selected Southwest of the US as I was more familiar with the educational setting in the region. I chose **South Trails University (STU)**<sup>5</sup>, which immediately was more successful for me in regard to finding participants for the study. The school I have selected is, also, a state university and, similarly to North Trails University, appears to be one of the biggest higher educational establishments of the state. Contrary to the initial location, South Trails University is located in a large urban area with the population of a half million people. Although about 70% of the city

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<sup>5</sup> Not a real name of the university

dwellers are identified as white by race (42% white, non-Hispanic), the city is relatively diverse as it has a large Hispanic (Latino) community as well as indigenous peoples. South Trails University is proud to be a Hispanic-serving university. The overall number of admitted students is 24,393 (as of Fall 2018). International student population, which does not count in Latino population, fluctuated from 1,340 people in 2016 when the research project was still in conception to 1,210 in 2018 when the study was completed (roughly, 5% of the overall student population). Respectively, 753 students were listed as graduate in 2016 (12.5% of the overall graduate student population), while 660 individuals were identified as post-bachelor students in 2018 (11.5% of the overall graduate student population). The report from South Trails University highlights that international students come from 99 countries from all over the world. Given the numbers of international graduate students, it was expected that school offers certain assistantship. Indeed, the report suggests that about 40.5% of all international students get funding from the university. Throughout the school website one can find references to assistantships for international students (guidelines and requirements) as well as references to the seminar international graduate students can take to improve teaching (as ITAs) or to become ITAs. Hence, it can be concluded that South Trails University appeared to be an excellent opportunity for me to find the participants for the study while I had the initial struggle to recruit ITAs to participate in the research at North Trails University.

Eventually, as I have mentioned, several ITAs from the first location (NTU) contacted me to confirm that they would take part in my study. Thus, I proceeded to collect the data in the Northwest too while completing the same process in the Southwest. The backgrounds of both schools, as described above, correlate with the research questions and rationale of the study as both universities have international graduate students present as well as they grant teaching

assistantships to such students. The initial obstacle of recruiting focal participants at North Trails University, in fact, turned the project into a peculiar direction as the two aforementioned locations are diametrically opposite in regard to diversity. It is rather valuable for the study to explore certain experiences of ITA community representatives bounded within a remote rural area with predominantly white population in comparison to experiences of ITAs within a large urban multicultural environment. Hence, the selected research sites are justified as relevant for the current project and for the purpose of answering the set research questions.

### **Establishing Research Sample**

Before five ITAs from South Trails University and three from North Trails University agreed to become focal participants of the study, I had to undertake the following procedures to ensure ITAs' participation in the project. First, I received the Institutional Review Board (IRB) clearance to proceed for the proposed study, which happened in March 2017. IRB approval is an integral ethical part of the research processes, especially, in studies involving human subjects. The IRB committee serves to determine the ethical considerations of anticipated studies in order to protect human participants and eliminate any possible risks associated with the research. It, as well, ensures that the research protocol offers potential participants enough information to have their informed consent, as well as, it ensures the clear, detailed and orderly description of all procedures to be implemented during the research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Cozby, 2008; Simons, 2009). Also, I renewed my certification in Human Subjects Protections training as researchers included in research with human subjects are required to have their certification updated every two years.

I ensured that my IRB protocol reflected certain ethical considerations which are integral in planning, conducting, analyzing, and reporting the project. Creswell (2005) informs that there

are three major areas concerned with the ethics in qualitative research. First, the researcher must respect the rights of participants, which means that participants of research should be informed about the nature of the study (informed consent) and be aware of any consequences of such a research for them personally. Certainly, the major rule is that the planned research is meant to cause no harm to humans. Also, participants are free to withdraw from any study at any time, which is the direct responsibility of the researcher to notify them about. Although participants have the right to be awarded for contributing to research, the compensation should be moderate if the researcher feels it is needed. The researcher, also, should think about the ways to contribute back to the community. Throughout the research project, I adhered to those rules. For instance, the electronic survey was designed in such a way that all respondents were required to read the description of the survey (as a part of the study) and provide their consent to participate. They, also, had a chance to exit the survey at any point or skip the questions they do not wish to answer. After identifying focal participants for the overall study, each ITA signed a consent letter before the data collection started. They were fully informed about the purpose, nature, and structure of the research and about their rights to withdraw at any time from a certain procedure or the study. In fact, one of the focal participants – Selda – utilized such a right and decided not to participate in one of the interviews. She did not decline the participation in the whole study and, thus, was still included (according to the research protocol, having not less than 70% of data of anticipated 100% data was set as the cap in cases of incomplete data collection). I also ensured anonymity for the participants to protect their rights. Each individual chose a pseudonym and all personal data, including interview recordings, was kept as computer files with passwords. Any physical data, such as hard copies of the drawings or pictures of artifacts (printed) was kept in the cabinet with the lock. I never intended to compensate my participants for their participation.

My way of giving back to the community was, first, an opportunity for ITAs to discuss their positions at universities and consciously reflect on their immediate environment, which provided somewhat a “therapeutic” effect. Second, in the long-run, publishing an article about ITAs’ experiences based on the findings of the current research can be a benefit for the ITA community. Finally, raising a question about ITAs’ trainings at the US universities, and, potentially, contributing to a more comprehensive socialization system is a way to give back to the community too. Also, I reflected in my research protocol the importance of honoring research sites, reporting research honestly and researcher’s positionality as necessary ethical practices.

Once the necessary permission from the IRB office was granted, I proceeded to the second step. I worked on selection of participants via purposive sampling which also had characteristics of snowball sampling. Purposive sampling is a selection of participants who fit into the set criteria and possess specific characteristics necessary for the research. Purposive sampling is often associated with qualitative research and, more specifically, with case studies (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Cozby, 2008; Richards, 2003; Simons, 2009). Such a method of ‘hand-picking’ participants due to their specific for research characteristics shapes the case itself: “when so much attention is lavished on a particular case, selection is something which demands careful attention” (Richards, 2003, p. 21). The chosen sample includes only individuals which fit into the set criteria and of a direct interest to the study, which is seen as an advantage; however, it might also lead to biases in the research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Cozby, 2008).

Being aware of such a disadvantage as subjectively selecting the appropriate participants for my study, I found it crucial to consult with other people (informants) in order to help me identify my potential research subjects. I established a contact with the professor of the ITA



preparation course at NTU who became my main informant as she happened to teach and know ITAs every semester. However, it was paramount for me to ensure that I have more channels to find participants, so I also expanded my list of informants by contacting several people (personal connection) who happened to know certain faculty members and students at NTU. As a result, these people from the university redirected me to the appropriate audience (ITAs who fit my criteria) and other individuals who might be knowledgeable in this regard. In other words, I meant to find participants via snowball (or sometimes called chain) sampling. Such a procedure was chosen purposefully as it “draws on the knowledge of informants, as one contact leads to another until a suitable case identified” (Richards, 2003, p. 250). This method is listed as a valuable strategy in, particularly, qualitative research and, what is more, is advised for, first, reaching out to marginalized and minority individuals and, second, for establishing contacts in the less familiar networks (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). I transferred this awareness into practice as I found snowball (chain) sampling to be a crucial step before building the sample. First, ITAs can be categorized as individuals representing ‘the other’ or a minority group on campus at an American university and, indeed, it was rather tough to locate ITAs among mainstream domestic graduate students. Second, I, as a researcher, had little personal knowledge about networks within North Trails University, thus, it was obligatory for me to establish communication with various informants at the selected location. Hence, snowball sampling, in the long run, proved to be an effective tool in establishing the sample.

In order for me to be able to hand-pick the focal participants I needed to have a pool of potential participants. The actual procedure to do so was an electronic survey I created. The survey served two functions: first, it was used as a sample building tool (to identify the focal participants) and, second as a data collection tool (to elicit initial data about future focal

participants as well as to gather insight from other ITAs from the university). The latter function of the survey will be discussed further in the data collection section. The survey was finalized in April 2017.

The introductory part of the survey served as an instrument for participants preselection – finding people who fit the category for the research project (purposeful sampling). Since the main goal of the study was to examine the dynamics of how rich points appear and resolve in ITAs’ communities of practice on a daily basis and how it affects their positionality in such communities, it became evident that participants are required to have past experiences as ITAs as well as to be current ITAs. The minimum ITA experience was set up to be, at least, one semester. In this way, the respondents of the survey were required to report that they, first, currently work as ITAs, second, that they have, at least, one semester experience teaching, and, third, that they are pursuing their graduate studies at the university as a J1 or F1 visa holder. The latter requirement was necessary to pool aside only those ITAs who, institutionally, are identified as international since the title “International Teaching Assistant” is assigned by the university. However, such a prerequisite was selected to simplify the process of finding ITAs for participation and, as it has been comprehensively discussed in previous chapters, the visa status as an indicator of being international can be and should be challenged. It meant that those who self-identify as international but were labeled domestic by the university were excluded from participation. A more detailed discussion of such a discrepancy in the term “international” has been provided in Chapter 1 as well as it will appear further in Chapter 5.

The survey outline allowed to elicit, first, statistical data about respondents (gender, age, duration of the study and assistantship at the university, duties, and categories of people each respondent interacts with daily). Second, respondents were offered to answer open-ended

questions about their experiences as ITAs as well as to provide their rating of such experiences. Third, the survey aimed at eliciting data about educational, professional, linguistic, and cultural background of participants. Finally, the survey closing question was meant to identify potential candidates to participate in the full study so the possible sample can be created. As soon as the pool of candidates to participate in the study was established, focal participants were meant to be identified with the help of the key feature – diversity. The ideal sample of the focal participants was anticipated to represent diversity in regard to cultural, linguistic, professional and academic background, as well as, based on how they rated their ITA experience.

To initiate the sample building, I posted flyers about the research on campus at North Trails University. Then, the first email to my main gatekeeper at North Trails University was sent in April 2017. My gatekeeper - the professor of the ITA preparation seminar - forwarded my email with the electronic survey link to all current ITAs taking the class and to those ITAs who took the class in Fall 2016. The anticipated number of survey respondents was set to twenty in order to be able to hand-pick three to five of those who are willing to move further with the study. Unfortunately, only a few completed surveys got generated after the email was distributed. I referred to the snowball sampling technique once again and emailed to all possible university entities (graduate school, international office, and chairs of all colleges/departments at the university) with the same request. At the same time, I contacted a few people whom I knew personally and who knew certain professors and/or graduate students at North Trails University. This attempt to recruit more respondents provided me with a few more completed surveys. One of the limitations in finding focal participants was timing of the request as it was emailed to potential participants in summer 2017, which is a less active university season due to the summer break. I repeated the email redistribution attempt for the third time in Fall 2017 with my main

informant forwarding the email to the ITA class of Fall 2017. After receiving a couple more surveys I only had eight completed surveys with three participants willing to move further with the study. Upon the contact (via email), it became obvious that only two ITAs were ready to take part in the full research project, but even they did not confirm their participation.

At this point of my sample building in the Northwest (Fall 2017), I decided that I should have an alternative research site in which I should try to find potential focal participants for the study using the same sampling method (purposeful sampling with the elements of snowball sampling) and utilizing the same survey. South Trails University (STU) was identified as a potential research ground since I had established connections within the university and already knew people who could have fit the criteria of participants as well who could know possible respondents and participants. Similarly to the procedures at North Trails University, I forwarded the email with the link to the survey to, first, the people whom I knew (potential participants who fit the category for the sample), second, appropriate offices and entities at the university (the graduate school and international office), and, third, chairs of all departments. The flyer about the research was posted on campus too. Within three months the survey generated fifteen completed responses and ten ITAs showed willingness to take part in further research procedures. Below is the summary of the most pertinent statistical data from the survey (Tables 1-8) which helped me establish focal participants at both research sites.

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Table 1  
*Gender Distribution Among Survey Participants*

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<u>Research Site</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>
NTU	66% (6)	33% (3)
STU	62% (10)	37.5% (6)
Overall	64% (16)	36% (19)

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Table 2

*Age Distribution Among Survey Participants*

<u>Research Site</u>	<u>21-25 years</u>	<u>26-30 years</u>	<u>31-35 years</u>	<u>36-40 years</u>	<u>41-45 years</u>
	<u>old</u>	<u>old</u>	<u>old</u>	<u>old</u>	<u>old</u>
NTU	11% (1)	55% (5)	22% (2)	0% (0)	11% (1)
STU	12% (2)	31% (5)	25% (4)	25% (4)	6% (1)
Overall	12 % (3)	40% (10)	24 % (6)	16% (4)	8% (2)

Table 3

*Survey Participants' Country of Origin*

<u>NTU</u>	<u>STU</u>	<u>Overall</u>
India 22% (2)	India 12.5% (2)	India 16% (4)
China 11% (1)	Russia 12.5% (2)	United Kingdom 8% (2)
United Kingdom 11% (1)	Pakistan 12.5% (2)	China 8% (2)
Japan 11% (1)	China 6% (1)	Japan 8% (2)
South Korea 11% (1)	United Kingdom 6% (1)	South Korea 8% (2)
Nepal 11% (1)	Japan 6% (1)	Ghana 8% (2)
Ghana 11% (1)	South Korea 6% (1)	Iran 8% (2)
Iran 11% (1)	Ghana 6% (1)	Russia 8% (2)
	Iran 6% (1)	Pakistan 8% (2)
	Paraguay 6% (1)	Nepal 4% (1)
	France 6% (1)	Paraguay 4% (1)
	Brazil 6% (1)	France 4% (1)
	Egypt 6% (1)	Egypt 4% (1)
		Brazil 4% (1)

Table 4

*Survey Participants' Languages Spoken/Used*

<u>NTU</u>	<u>STU</u>	<u>Overall</u>
Hindi <b>14% (2)</b>	French <b>12.5% (5)</b>	French <b>11% (6)</b>
Mandarin, Cantonese, Welsh, French, Bangla, Japanese, Korean, Telugu, Nepali, Newari, Twi, Farsi <b>7% (1)</b> <b>each</b>	Spanish, German <b>10% (4)</b> <b>each</b> Hindi <b>7.5 % (3)</b> Urdu, Punjabi, Japanese, Russian, Arabic <b>2.5% (2)</b> <b>each</b>	Hindi <b>9% (5)</b>  Spanish, German <b>7% (4)</b>  Japanese <b>5.5% (3)</b>  Mandarin, Korean, Twi, Farsi, Russian, Urdu, Punjabi, Arabic <b>4% (2) each</b> Mandarin, Korean, Twi, Farsi, Guarani, Malayalam, Riasti <b>2.5% (1) each</b> Cantonese, Welsh, Bangla, Telugu, Nepali, Newari, Guarani, Malayalam, Riasti, Saraiki, Sanskrit, Ewe, Ga, Italian, Marathi, Portuguese <b>2% (1) each</b>

Table 5

*Survey Participants' Duration of Being an ITA (in semesters)*

<u>Research Site</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>10+</u>
	<u>sem.</u>	<u>sem.</u>	<u>sem.</u>	<u>sem.</u>	<u>sem.</u>	<u>sem.</u>	<u>sem.</u>	<u>sem.</u>	<u>sem.</u>	<u>sem.</u>	<u>sem.</u>
NTU	55%	22%	0%	0%	11%	0%	0%	0%	11%	0%	0%
	(5)	(2)	(0)	(0)	(1)	(0)	(0)	(0)	(1)	(0)	(0)

STU	12.5%	12.5%	19%	12.5%	6%	6%	0%	6%	6%	0%	19%
	(2)	(2)	(3)	(2)	(1)	(1)	(0)	(1)	(1)	(0)	(3)
Overall	28%	16%	12%	8%	8%	4%	0%	4%	8%	0%	12%
	(7)	(4)	(3)	(2)	(2)	(1)	(0)	(1)	(2)	(0)	(3)

*Note.* 16% (4) of all respondents have prior ITA experience at some other American universities. All 4 responses are from STU participants, which makes it 25% of the entire STU sample.

Table 6

*Survey Participants' Advanced Degree Programs*

<u>Research Site</u>	<u>Masters Students</u>	<u>PhD Students</u>
NTU	44% (4)	55% (5)
STU	25% (4)	75% (12)
Overall	32% (8)	68% (17)

Table 7

*Survey Participants' Level of Satisfaction Working as an ITA*

<u>Research Site</u>	<u>Very Positive</u>	<u>Positive</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Negative</u>	<u>Very Negative</u>
NTU	33% (3)	55% (5)	11% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)
STU	50% (8)	43% (7)	6% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Overall	44% (11)	48% (12)	8% (2)	0% (0)	0% (0)

Table 8

*Survey Participants' Field of Study/Discipline*

<u>NTU</u>	<u>STU</u>	<u>Overall</u>
Statistics 22% (2)	English 19% (3)	English 12% (3)
Physics 22% (2)	Linguistics 12.5% (2)	Statistics 8% (2)
Natural Resources 11% (1)		Physics 8% (2)

Geoscience 11% (1)	Educational Linguistics	Architecture 8% (2)
Biomechanics 11% (1)	12.5% (2)	Linguistics 8% (2)
Computer Science 11% (1)	Architecture 6% (1)	Educational Linguistics 8%
Architecture 11% (1)	Electrical Engineering 6% (1)	(2)
	Philosophy 6% (1)	Natural Resources 4% (1)
	Neurosciences 6% (1)	Geoscience 4% (1)
	French 6% (1)	Biomechanics 4% (1)
	Communication 6% (1)	Computer Science 4% (1)
	Economics 6% (1)	Electrical Engineering 4%
	Art 6% (1)	(1)
	Applied Linguistics 6% (1)	Philosophy 4% (1)
		Neurosciences 4% (1)
		French 4% (1)
		Communication 4% (1)
		Economics 4% (1)
		Art 4% (1)
		Applied Linguistics 4% (1)

By the end of Fall 2017 I finalized the list of focal participants at both research sites. In the Northwest, after the initial delay in confirmation two potential focal participants contacted me and re-confirmed their readiness to participate further. What is more, one of them redistributed my email to her international graduate friends and colleagues, which generated one more survey and a willing ITA to take a part in the study. Even though, I did not hand-pick the participants at NTU, I had somewhat a sample of participants who fit the selection category. Surprisingly, all three ITAs had peculiar similarities – they represented hard science fields, they never taught before they became ITAs and they all were females. Their cultural and linguistic background, though, was rather diverse as well as graduate program status.



In the Southwest, the survey generated a list of ten potential participants, which allowed me to hand-pick focal participants. One respondent, who wanted to take a part in the complete study, had to be excluded as she stressed in her survey that her immigration status was in the process of change and, hence, she expected that she would lose her “international” identification. I still was left with nine willing ITAs to participate further, who, in fact, also shared such similarities as being all from Humanities/Social Sciences and from PhD programs. I have mentioned before that diversity factor was set to identify the focal participants for the study, hence, I selected the sample which is meant to showcase ITAs of various linguistic, cultural, and professional backgrounds.

As a result, I had eight ITAs as focal participants: three from NTU and five from STU. I have explored ITAs as a community bound to a certain environment, however, keeping in mind that each participant has their own experiences, viewpoints on reality, and relationship with that very environment. The cross-case analysis was meant to demonstrate certain peculiarities produced within the case. Variation across cases were also anticipated but not to the point I can generalize the findings in a fully comparative analysis. Therefore, once the samples at both locations were established, I proceeded to data collection. The timeline of involvement in both settings happened to be in Spring 2018 (the whole semester) with a little earlier start at South Trails University.

## **Participants**

As it has been mentioned, I faced challenges trying to find focal participants at North Trails University. That is why I started working with the only three available ITAs – **Alex, Selda**

and **Astro-Gal**,<sup>6</sup> who were willing to take part in the entire study and share their experiences. Nonetheless, all three participants fit into the category for identifying focal participants. Their cultural and linguistic backgrounds appeared to be rather diverse as well as the graduate level. They also shared three similarities: first, all focal participants at North Trails University were females; second, all three pursued graduate degrees in hard sciences, and, third, all three had no teaching background prior to becoming ITAs at NTU.

**Alex** is the youngest from the sample (late twenties) and happens to be a MA student in Architecture. At the moment of data collection, she had one semester experience as an ITA as well as one semester of being in the graduate program. Even though she is just at the beginning of her MA degree, it would be incorrect to assume that Alex is a “newbie” in the field as she has several years’ experience working as an architect in Nepal which happens to be her home country. She, however, highlights that she never had any prior teaching experience as well as that she never had any exposure to the US educational system before joining North Trails University. Alex self-identifies as a Nepalese and Buddhist while reporting that she knows and uses such languages as Nepali, English, and Newari (a native language of her home country). Her overall ITA experience is positive and she emphasizes that she has already learned a lot from teaching Architecture classes during her first semester as well as she has been discovering new experiences in current teaching (Art subdivision of Architecture department). Indeed, her first teaching assignments were versatile in nature as she happened to co-teach a large 400 level class (150 students) with five more TAs while some of TAs from her program were also taking that class. During the same semester she also taught a 100-level class in Architecture, which was

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<sup>6</sup> These are not real names; the pseudonyms were chosen by the participants

solely her responsibility. The following semester (at the time of data collection) Alex was given two sections of a 100-level Art subdivision class to teach, which required her to explore her creative side more.

I remember my first impressions of Alex: she appeared rather humble and soft but the more we talked the more I could see a very passionate personality in her. It was especially obvious when she would talk about things which are important for her: for example, her desire to break the stereotype about “no sons” families in her culture as she happened to be from the family with only daughters. She passionately talks about her family and how supportive her father has always been in regard to her aspirations. Alex has a genuine attachment to her home culture and is very enthusiastic about representing Nepal and her traditions in the US and, specifically, at North Trails University. She sees herself contributing back to Nepal after graduating from the university as she is concerned about preservation of architecture in Nepal due to recent earthquakes and their consequences. In fact, Alex is the only focal participant across the whole sample who is eager to return home after graduation. When it comes to teaching, Alex is very reflective as she poses a lot of questions during interviews while attempting to find answers. She confesses that being an ITA is challenging but also beneficial – not only she feels more confident as a teacher in her second semester, but she sees noticeable personal improvements in regard to being more organized and independent. Although she started her ITA journey with no experience in teaching, she developed liking for the profession and even considers a possibility of teaching in the future. She, however, is inclined to work in the architecture industry in Nepal.

**Selda** – another focal participant at North Trails University research site – is a rather “seasoned” ITA as she has been teaching 200-level labs at Physics department for five semesters

at the moment of data collection. Selda is from Iran, speaks Farsi and identifies herself as a Persian. She is in her early thirties and appears calm and somewhat reserved – a person who needs some time to get to know an interlocutor to open up in a conversation. Selda is pursuing her Doctorate degree in Physics for more than three years and apart from teaching has experience in working as a Research Assistant (RA) at the same university. Research appears an integral part of her PhD and she highlights that her preference is to work as a research assistant rather than an ITA but due to financial aspect within the department she was assigned to run physics labs. Before becoming an ITA, she never had any teaching experience as well as she had no exposure to the US education prior to her graduate studies. That is why her first semester was rather challenging in regard to her languacultural experiences as a teacher. However, at the moment when I interviewed and observed Selda, she appeared rather confident, which she also emphasized in her interview: “in the first semester if I wanted to go teach, I was really stressed but now when I go I am really comfortable to go to the class and teach, to talk to the students” (Selda). Meeting new students, in fact, is one of the positive aspects of being an ITA, according to Selda. Another benefit of teaching is to keep herself updated in her professional field. In the survey she rated her ITA experiences as positive. Her goal is to help students see themselves as capable independent researchers. Selda considers the possibility of teaching after graduation but would prefer a researcher position at an American or international university. Selda wished not to participate in the interview with the artifacts, which was respected, and, hence, the data from her appears to be slightly incomplete. Yet, she still wanted to participate in other procedures and in the overall study.

The third participant at the northwest location was **Astro-Gal**, and her ITA experience stands out in the northwest sample as well as in the whole sample of ITAs. She rated her ITA

experience as neutral but, in reality, she had to deal with a lot of professional and personal challenges during her one-semester long teaching assistantship, which made her experience to be more negative than just neutral. Astro-Gal is a Ph.D. student in Astrophysics and has been in the program for five semesters when I met her. She self-identifies as a Global Citizen who is Indian by origin. She listed English, Hindi, and Bangla as the languages she speaks. As Selda, Astro-Gal is in her early thirties and, also, has prior experience as a Research Assistant at the same university. She had about five years of experience as a scientist in her native country (India), which is very evident in the way she passionately and expertly describes her PhD research.

Passion towards her professional field is not the only characteristic which became obvious during our interviews. Astro-Gal is self-reflective but her self-analysis sometimes borders with deep self-doubt, especially, when it comes to discussion of her international teaching assistantship which she considers “an isolated experience”. She is rather open but claims that she is not “a very sociable person”, who values genuine connection with people. Astro-Gal seems to have rather high expectations about the educational system and students, which stem from her native languaculture. That is why a lot of her difficulties in teaching and graduate life are related to the failures in expectations. Her family is very important for her and she glows when she talks about her child and appears very disheartened while mentioning that she has to live alone with her daughter in the US while her husband resides in India. Nonetheless, Astro-Gal tries to find some positivity in surrounding nature which soothes her troubled soul and attempts to keep in touch with her old friend in order to maintain high spirits among “fake relationships” with people around her.

While talking about teaching assistantship, which was not only forced on her as a department requirement but given to her several days prior the beginning of semester, she seems

rather sad, though, outspoken about her experiences. She had to teach a 100-level lab for the Astronomy course, which required to conduct lab experiments mostly outside, in an isolated area until 10 p.m. She dreads another semester of teaching, which she is obliged to have, according to the program requirements, and sees herself as a researcher in the future, most likely, in her home country. Even though her overall experience as an ITA leaves much to be desired, Astro-Gal shares that it brought certain confidence in her, especially, in regard to interpersonal communication. During the data collection, I could not conduct observations as Astro-Gal did not receive a teaching assignment in Spring 2018, hence, her data is also slightly incomplete but still very valuable as her experience and opinion about being an ITA are different from the rest of the sample.

As it has been mentioned previously, my electronic survey implementation at South Trails University generated more responses and more participants willing to participate in the study further. I had a chance to purposefully pick the focal participants based on the following category: the sample should represent diversity in regard to various aspects of an ITA life such as academic, professional, linguistic, cultural background and the level of satisfaction of being an ITA. That is how I met **Aloha**, **Ahmad**, **Guillermina**, **Malek**, and **Mary**<sup>7</sup>. Their striking similarity was that all ITAs were teaching in the field of social science and humanities (somewhat sharing expertise in language education), and all of them were PhD students.

**Aloha** – a PhD student in Communication in her late twenties – has been an ITA for six semesters, which is the same as duration of her pursuing the degree. She is originally from China and identifies herself as a Chinese but notes that, according to the US categories she is “Asian”.

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<sup>7</sup> These are not real names; the pseudonyms were chosen by the participants

She speaks Mandarin Chinese and English. Prior to the graduate studies at South Trails University, she received her MA degree from another American university, however, her past teaching experience was limited to cultural presentations about her languaculture to American students. Back home she worked as a private English tutor but once she started working as an ITA in the US she noticed stark differences in educational systems, students' attitudes, and the teacher's roles, which made her view the main role of an American teacher as an "entertainer". Aloha has taught a few different classes in her department including public speaking, intercultural communication, and persuasion in speaking. She had experience in teaching face-to-face classes and online classes as a part of her assistantship at the university and has a certain flexibility in choosing what to teach. She rated her experience as neutral. At the moment of data collection, Aloha was teaching intercultural communication.

Aloha creates an impression of a critical person and it might be both, a personal characteristic and a professional impact, because she has to deal with sensitive topics on a regular basis as a part of her class. Aloha is ready to share her thoughts and views about her ITA experiences in the US academia without "sugarcoating" and by providing shrewd observations in regard to cultural differences, assumptions about race, international status, and language biases. It is evident that she is aware of current academic concepts and theories to initiate and support conversations about critical issues in the US society, as well as, she shares her classroom/department observations in this regard. These topics, however, do not make her feel happy as an international student and a teacher since she feels that American values are forced on her as well as on other international people on campus. She particularly emphasizes that she faces a lot of "classroom drama" due to the essence of the subjects she teaches, which makes her feel overwhelmed and ready to conceal her true emotions. She does see her development as a

teacher and notes that she considers continuing her academic (teaching) career, most likely, in the US, although, if she would have to return to China, she would not be a teacher as her ITA experience has prepared her to teach only in the US. Aloha seems to become more open after several conversations, even though, she claims to be not very social. She stresses that being an introvert, she feels happy about teaching online classes as they are “healing” until she realizes she misses some classroom interaction. She would not mind having a research assistantship instead of teaching for the same reason. She appears to be happy to talk about her cats, travelling, and keeping in touch with her family and old friends.

Next focal participant is **Ahmad** who is in his early thirties and comes to South Trails University from Pakistan. Urdu, Riasti, English, Punjabi, Hindi, and Saraiki were reported to be languages and dialects in Ahmad’s usage and command. Although Ahmad has been pursuing his Doctorate degree in Education (Educational Linguistics) for eight semesters, his teaching assistantship started only three semesters prior to his participation in the study. Ahmad explains that he, an experienced university teacher from Pakistan (4 years), who also worked as an ITA at another American university, aimed at just receiving his PhD in the US but, later, changed his view and decided to obtain teaching experience at South Trails University in order to apply for professor positions in the US or other international location after his graduation. At the moment I met Ahmad for the first interview, he was teaching a 400/500-level class at the College of Education. While communicating with Ahmad, I noticed that he is very observant in regard to differences and similarities between his first languaculture and the languaculture of the United States. He compares things around him as well as points at how certain discrepancies change the way he perceives his reality in terms of religion, traditions, and family, which are significant features of his life. His initial expectations in regard to teaching changed over time and he notes



that he deviated from his humanistic and flexible teaching style towards more individualistic. Similarly to Aloha, Ahmad showcases deep understanding of urgent academic matters which pop up in his conversations about him as an ITA as he discusses biases in regard to his positionality within the department. As for the latter, Ahmad demonstrates certain dissatisfaction about not being included into the departmental teaching community, though, he still considers his teaching experience to be a beneficial learning experience which he rates as very positive. Ahmad seems to be of experimenting type as he joyfully discusses how he likes mixing and matching different things to create something unique. He is passionate about cars and finds cooking therapeutic.

**Guillermina**, the third focal participant from South Trails University, is a very open and talkative person who is ready to contribute her opinion and collaborate with others. She has provided me with twice as much data as any other focal participant as she was very enthusiastic to help my study and supplied me with as much details as she could. Guillermina's home country is Paraguay and she is a speaker of Spanish, English, Guarani, and French. She is in her late twenties and is a PhD student in Linguistics. Before she joined the doctoral program, she completed a MA degree in Linguistics at the same university via prestigious international scholarship. Her teaching as an ITA started only with the beginning of PhD program, which happened three semesters before her participation in the study. Guillermina rated her ITA experience as very positive. Interestingly enough, her teaching duties are split between two departments – she has been teaching a 100-level course in Linguistics (in the Department of Linguistics) and two sections of a 300-level Spanish Linguistics class in the Spanish Department. She constantly compares these two teaching assignments as they make her reflect about her professional, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds all the time.

Speaking about reflection, Guillermina appears to be a very thoughtful person who evaluates her experiences while trying to answer questions. She shows a lot of passion when she is discussing teaching as she sees her profession (she also had teaching experience in Paraguay) as a vital part of her life. Her goal in teaching is to spark students' curiosity for the subject and nurture critically thinking learners. It seems that her childhood obsession with reading and writing as well as cultured intellectual tradition in the family served as a foundation for her passion towards academic life. Although she finds it paramount to teach thinking critically, she is very cautious not to appear too critical about the US culture in front of her students as she is aware of her positionality as an outsider. She finds humor important in teaching as well as she values collaboration in her professional environment, which she does not observe at the moment. Guillermina intends to keep the link with her native languaculture via research although she is quite certain she will continue teaching in the US or in any other international educational settings.

Next participant - **Malek** - was selected due to his rather peculiar ITA position at the moment of research. Not only did he have an extensive experience of being an ITA at South Trails University (since 2011,) but he has been in charge of teaching an ITA preparation class on campus. Malek is in his early thirties. He self-identifies as Middle Eastern or Egyptian since his home country is Egypt. He listed Arabic, French, and English as languages he knows. Before starting his doctoral program in the College of Education (Applied Linguistics), which happened six years ago, Malek worked as a university educator in Egypt for more than 4 years and, then, came to South Trails University as an exchange scholar. Malek also has several MA degrees behind his belt – in Linguistics and Computer Science. It is interesting that Malek has been working as an ITA outside of his doctoral study program: previously, he was teaching Arabic in

the Foreign Languages department and, then, moved to teaching in the African Studies Department and, finally, started teaching a course for ITAs hosted by yet another university center. He rated his experience as an ITA as very positive.

Malek's teaching vision is based on the idea of positioning oneself as a responsible educator within not only a department but the whole university. It is also about assuming that an international teacher understands his role as an outsider but, additionally, becomes an insider. As previously described, participants from the sample, Malek is aware of the urgent topics and such educational impact is traceable in the way he is analyzing his teaching experiences. Malek creates an impression of a very determined and a confident professional. He emphasizes that, apart from his pedagogical experiences, educational background, and current research interest, his ITA experiences are affected by his personal involvement in human rights activism. Malek is very expressive in regard to how he has been trying to contribute into changing the sociopolitical situation in his home country and how such activism predetermined his inability to go back and continue working as an educator in Egypt. He says, "I feel like I am safer here to raise my opinions but it is also a lot of responsibility... since I am safer here I should be talking more about issues, I should be talking more about people who have been arrested or tortured every single day" (Malek). He feels that compassion, which is his personal quality, became nurtured in professional settings and having such a characteristic is important for the teacher. When the conversation turns into talking about family and religion, which are important instances for Malek, his face brightens but, at the same time, a certain worry appears in his voice as he is aware of biases linked to his religion (Islam) and home languaculture (Middle East) in the US mainstream media. Malek, however, highlights that people around him have been rather

understanding and open-minded and expresses hopes that he would not face any prejudice when he will continue his teaching career in the US or other international settings.

Finally, there is **Mary**, who is another very experienced ITA at the research settings. She has more than ten semesters of teaching at South Trails University, four semesters of teaching as an ITA at another American university (as a part of her MA degree), and short experience of teaching school students in her home country. Mary is from Japan but she notes that she has been residing in the US for a long time. In fact, she even completed her BA degree in the US. However, her link to her native languaculture is preserved via ITA experience as she mostly has been teaching Japanese at Foreign Languages department. At the moment of data collection, Mary has been in the doctoral program in Linguistics for more than five years. She also worked as an ITA in Linguistics. Mary self-identifies as Japanese, lists Japanese, English, and German as languages she knows and reports that she is in her early forties. Overall, she sees her ITA experience as positive.

Mary is very reflective and thoughtful. She values her time to be alone and a need for “a quiet space” to relax. While we were conversing, Mary referred a lot to art and creativity which come handy in class preparation. She is very keen on keeping various images which make her feel content – pictures of houses with the dark background but with lit-up windows, flowers, and anything which seem to reflect “sad but cute” or “funny cute” mood (she shares those images in social networks too). She values minimalism and simplicity as well as tries to keep her PhD life organized so it is not too overwhelming. When describing her happy memories, especially, family related, Mary appears very nostalgic yet joyful as she cherishes those past experiences. When talking about teaching, it is very evident that Mary takes a philosophic stance and she suggests that, even though, she is ready to meet and communicate with new TAs at the

department, she realizes that their initial eagerness for sharing experiences is just a phase of being a newcomer. That is why, she prefers to somewhat limit her communication with new TAs and maintain communication with her “older” friends (TAs) from the program. Mary is ready to follow the main pedagogical agenda of the department but she is not afraid to take a stand if needed. Her mantra, however, is to listen, absorb all advice, and make her own conclusion about any issue. In such a way she avoids interpersonal conflicts. Mary confesses that she does not imagine her returning home but, rather, sees herself involved in language education/linguistics as a professor in the US.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Once my sampling was completed, I proceeded to data collection (Spring 2018). As it was mentioned earlier, I implemented an electronic survey which served two purposes: first, to create a pool of potential candidates for focal participants (a sampling tool) and, second, to gather data about ITAs’ perceptions at the research site, including those who later became focal participants of the study (a data collection tool). I have already discussed the electronic survey as a sampling tool. My intention behind this survey (as a data collection tool) was to obtain general data before meeting with each focal participant as well as to have a glimpse at other respondents’ perspectives. I consider the survey to stand as an independent dataset (all the responses), which, potentially, can be used to provide a broader outlook on ITAs’ attitudes and views and which deserves to be discussed as a separate paper. However, for the purpose of the present research project, the survey was necessary in order to initiate the process of creating a fuller picture about each focal participant. Also, it served as a tool to triangulate certain coded data (the focal participants’ responses) – the survey provided a platform for the focal participants’ views and, hence, specific ideas were traced across multiple data sources in the process of analysis. Since

the electronic survey was administered without the researcher, it provided each participant with the anonymity to answer questions within the individually needed time.

The whole bulk of completed surveys (25) were coded by *Opinio* with the exception for open-ended questions. I coded answers to all open-ended questions using a traditional approach of finding codes, patterns and themes. Essentially, this process was the same as coding the qualitative data from the main part of the study, which I will discuss later in this chapter. While looking for codes, patterns, and themes in surveys I paid special attention to representing data as the whole and separately for each location.

After acquiring data through the electronic survey (the end of Fall 2017) and selecting focal participants based on the set criteria (December 2017 - January 2018), I proceeded to the second (main) stage of data collection. I designed two face-to-face interviews which aimed at exploring the key concepts behind the research question. Right before the first round of interviews, I provided each focal participant with the full description of my study and obtained consent from each ITA as they signed consent letters. The interview process started in Spring semester 2018 at both locations: at South Trails University in early January 2018 and at North Trails University in mid-February 2018. The first interview was organized in a form of informal conversational interview and utilized data collection via artifacts (visual data collection). I asked each of my participants to bring five to ten objects which represent who they are. I did not want to limit them by assigning certain topics but, instead, during the conversation I was prompting them to think about their cultural, linguistic and professional background or any other aspects of their identities which seem vital for them. During such an informal conversational interview I aimed at eliciting information about each artifact and its meaning to the participant. As a result, this process helped me, first, create a fuller profile for each focal participant and, second, it

provided me with some essential data about significant aspects of each ITA's identities. Each conversation was recorded with the help of a recording software (*Microsoft Voice Recorder*) and later transcribed with the help of *Google Voice Tool*. Pictures of each artifact were taken for further data analysis too.

According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011), artifacts are a useful tool for collecting data, especially, in terms of examining certain 'culture', for instance, the culture of a certain organization. The authors warn, however, that artifacts "are easy to observe but difficult to interpret" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 532). That is why I found it crucial to accompany the artifact investigation with a conversation in which the participant had an opportunity to explain what certain objects mean for them. The format of the informal conversational interview allowed me to maintain the conversation in a more natural way. It, as well, helped me establish the proper rapport with each participant. In such a type of interview the questions follow the flow of the conversation and appear to be more connected to the context of the discourse (Patton, 1980). This type of the interview resembles Simons' (2009) in-depth research interview description. The aim of such an unstructured and open-ended interview is, first, to find out the participant's standpoint about the topic; second, to ensure the beneficial involvement into learning about the issue by both parties; third, to exercise an opportunity to be flexible and, yet, being able to create a more intimate and detailed conversation when needed, and fourth, to discover hidden but significant emotional responses to the issue (Simons, 2009, p. 43). The overall purpose of this face-to face artifact session and an interview was to gain essential visual and oral information about each participant which further was combined with other data collected from each participant to start creating a fuller picture for each participant and

to ensure the triangulation. Figures 1-3 are examples of the artifact data which was gathered during the first interview.



*Figure 1.* A picture of an artifact (Astro-Gal). This photograph illustrates a drawing made by Astro-Gal's child, which is kept in the participant's office and reminds the participant of her family.



*Figure 2.* A picture of an artifact (Mary), This photograph illustrates a bookshelf which is organized in such a way that it demonstrates the participant's multiple activities: teaching as an ITA, researching and studying for her advanced degree.





*Figure 3.* A picture of an artifact (Guillermina). This photograph demonstrates a souvenir (an owl) which belonged to the participant's grandfather and it reminds her of where she comes from and of her family intellectual tradition (the owl means wisdom).

The next data collection tool was an in-depth interview with each participant in regard to exploring major concepts I use for the research question. The interview technique is widely used and recommended in qualitative research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Cresswell, 2006; Kvale, 1996; Richards, 2003; Simons, 2009; Yin, 2003) as it represents “a flexible tool for data collection, enabling multi-sensory channels to be used: verbal, non-verbal, spoken and heard” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 409). I chose a semi-structured interview protocol because it required a prepared set of questions in order to be able to organize the interview in such a way it elicits the information necessary for answering the research questions. Impromptu questions were equally important in these interviews as they allowed a natural follow-up for the instances which required clarification and explanation. For this purpose, I kept in mind Simons' (2009) techniques of the in-depth interviewing which I have mentioned in the previous paragraph while interviewing participants.

It should be noted that the second interview turned out to be the pinnacle of the data collection methods. On average, each interview lasted between 1.5 to 2.5 hours. I managed to gain deeper understanding of each participant's experiences as the amount of information

everyone provided was invaluable. The purpose of the second interview was to collect as much data about possible rich points ITAs encounter in their various communities of practice. As for the latter, I intentionally, asked participants about all possible environments and relations within those settings as one of the most significant features of the current research project is to see how multiple communities of practice work for ITAs. The structure of my interview reflected the chronological order – the questions prompted each ITA to recollect their past experiences, describe their present situations, and imagine their possible scenarios for the future. Even though the interview was divided into three sections, the conversations turned out to be rather organic. The chronological order reflected the intention of this research to explore ITAs' experiences as narratives. It was rather natural to discuss experiences from the past to future, which, in the long run, helped trace the dynamics of each ITA's identities development. At the end of each section, I asked each ITA to create a drawing (visual data) in regard to how they see themselves and other participants in their environments. The meanings of drawings were explained by the participants. I found that participants' own descriptions of their drawings not only added to each ITA's story, for instance, in highlighting certain rich points and describing communities of practice, but, also, revealed some hidden details. Also, the drawings were rather useful in later confirmation of certain themes from other datasets and, consequentially, data triangulation. As for the logistics, all drawings were collected and photocopied while the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed (with the same computer programs as previously mentioned). Figures 4 and 5 are the examples of the visual data which was collected during the second interview.

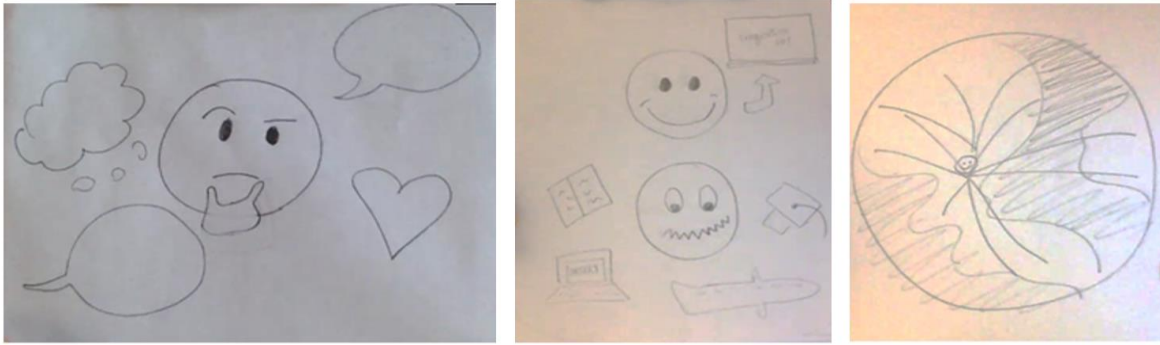


Figure 4. A picture of three drawings (Guillermina). This photograph illustrates how the participant sees herself positioned as a progression from the past (left) to the present (center) to the possible future (right) as a teacher.

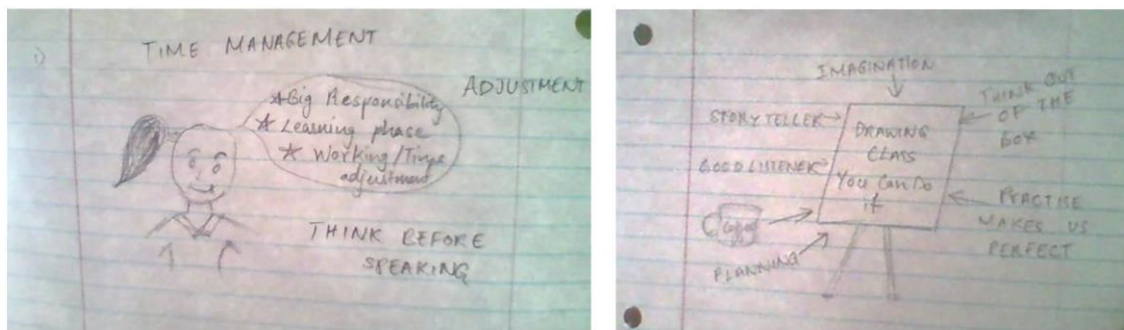


Figure 5. A picture of two drawings (Alex). This photograph illustrates how the participant sees herself positioned as a progression from the past (left) to the present which is also her imagined positionality as a teacher in the future (right).

During the round of second interviews, each ITA and I predetermined possible events and interactions to be observed. I planned observations of each participant in certain communities of practice (preferably, of their choice) as the final data collection tool. My goal for the data collection, overall, and for the observation, specifically, was not to limit my assumptions of what exact community of practices each of my participants would identify. However, I did have certain expectations while getting ready for the observations. During the second interview, I inquired from my participants which places they would like to invite me to conduct observation. The prepared guiding questions were “In what places do you feel self-conscious as an ITA?”, “What places provoke you to think that you might feel different?”, “What places make you feel

emotional about who you are in academia?”. In order to avoid confusion and selection of irrelevant events for observation, I prepared such a question as “Why would this place/event/activity/interaction be appropriate for observation in regard to showcasing your position and experiences as an ITA?”. Also, the criteria for the observation of the certain community were based on the main features of community of practice, such as power negotiation, presence of newcomers and old-timers, and possible socialization patterns with the peripheral legitimate participation or/and full legitimate participation. Thus, I aimed at observing a social interaction which involves other participants/members of the discourse (not just the ITA). Also, I hoped to observe how power is played and what roles are assigned for all members but from ITA’s point of view. However, I never intended to observe other people.

In actuality, in the process of the second interview certain communities were mentioned and revealed as significant, hence, it was a rather natural selection for participants. While proposing the study, I highlighted that I would like each of my participants to invite me to two places which represent their communities of practice which are contrasting or different in nature from one another. It turned out to be that I was able to have at least one observation of 50% of my participants while the other half provided me with the chance to conduct two or more observations. The major goal of the observations was to see each ITAs in various communities of practice as the research attempts to showcase that the classroom is not the only domain for ITAs and their identities are shaped in multiple settings. I also believed that observations would help me see emerging or resolving rich points. Indeed, observations were rather useful in regard to exploring ITAs’ communities of practice while I was not really able to trace and pinpoint certain rich points during the observations. However, I was able to discover certain rich points in the process of ITAs’ debriefing after each observation. More precisely, after each observation I

informally discussed the observed event with each participant since my aim was to elicit ITAs' understanding of their environment and relationships with other people. All debriefing sessions reflected the format of previously mentioned informal conversational interview. Choosing to debrief right after the observation allowed me to capture the immediate and fresh understanding of the situations from each ITA's point of view. All debriefing sessions were also recorded digitally and transcribed.

During the observations my role ranged from the complete observer, in which I was detached from the interaction, and the observer as participant, in which I found myself being involved in the actions and interactions in the observed community of practice. All my observations were semi-structured as I predetermined certain things I would look for but, at the same time, the manner I was gathering data did not follow any certain strict procedures. For instance, I focused on particular moments which illuminated the process of the participant's contribution into a certain activity and his/her consequent positionality and behavior or on instances which could have been potentially connected to rich points emergence and resolution. My goal, while observing and producing field notes, was to highlight certain emerging big ideas in the process. The debriefing sessions helped me clarify my assumptions as well as to receive immediate explanation of the observed event by the participant.

Needless to say, collecting data via observations appears to be an important tool in this research. First, observations have always been treated as one of the essential instruments in case studies alongside with interviews, questionnaires, artifacts collections and other methods (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, Simons, 2009; Yin, 2005). Observation provides rich data and an additional source to triangulate the data collected via other methods. In my case, the observation method directly pertained to answering the research question as I focused on sampling the

immediate communities of practice of each participant. In the long run, this data, combined with the data from previous interviews, helped me confirm and reject certain initial codes and see a more complete picture of each participant. There are certain risks which are involved with the observations, especially, if the participant has to deal with the person of higher power or ‘old-timer’ in their community of practice. Vice versa, the more powerful member of the environment might also represent himself/herself differently from ordinary interactions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Overt observations pose a certain risk of participants acting not naturally and even ‘staging’ their acts. That is why I consciously asked participants during debriefing whether my presence was affecting the observed event or not in order to avoid misrepresentation of collected data.

In conclusion, the data collection tools were utilized the way I planned and by the end of Spring semester 2018 (May 2018) I managed to collect rather substantial set of data for each participant. Two participants from North Trails University appeared to have incomplete datasets. I did not have a chance to observe Astro-Gal since she did not receive a teaching assignment in Spring 2018 semester. Selda refused to participate in the first interview, which is her full right according to the rules of human subject research. Nonetheless, more than 70% of data was collected in the aforementioned participants’ cases, which was predetermined as appropriate in my IRB protocol, hence, I did not exclude Selda and Astro-Gal from the focal participants.

### **Data Analysis: Methods and Insights**

When all data was collected by the end of Spring 2018, I moved further to the data analysis stage. It was necessary for the data to go through several stages of interpretations and synthesis. First of all, I started ‘tidying up’ the data as LeCompte (2000) suggests. More specifically, I spent Summer 2018 making copies of all collected data; creating computer files

(with dates) for each separate material (survey responses, pictures of artifacts, visual data in the form of scanned drawings; interviews, and field notes); storing and labeling any physical data (the original hard copies of the drawings); reviewing research questions, and clarifying if there were any missing points in the collected data. All the interviews were transcribed in order to have scripts to work with. I used the *Google* voice recognition software to create an initial transcriptions which, later, were completed by typing manually in order to avoid any errors in the final version of the scripts. Second, the data underwent the first cycle of coding in which all datasets (transcripts, field notes, visual data, and analytic memos) received preliminary codes embedded in detailed description, which, later, helped in finalizing the codes.

As advised by researchers, I started preliminary analysis while the data collection was still in progress not to feel overwhelmed while dealing with massive amounts of data once it is collected (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Simons, 2009). I mostly made notes (analytic memos) in my researcher journal while conducting interviews. Saldaña (2009) argues that analytic memos help researchers think about “coding process and code choices; how the process of inquiry is taking shape; and the emergent patterns, categories and subcategories, themes and concepts” (p. 32). Later, all my analytic memos were used as yet another source for coding as my reflections in the process of data analysis contained rich data too. My analytic memos were not only applied to interviews but other types of data such as visual data, field notes, and debriefing after observations.

Once the data was “cleaned”, I approached the whole process of data analysis in a rather traditional way via two major stages: first cycle coding and second cycle coding. In Fall 2018, I started from the within-case analysis where I treated each case “as a comprehensive case in and of itself” (Merriam, 1988, p. 194). Since my case is a bound system of ITA community at each

location, my goal was not to muddy up the uniqueness of each participants' experiences in the process of coding. I chose subsequent coding for data analysis – coding which is generated directly from the data (Simons, 2009). I intentionally avoided precoding as much as I could as I felt it was obstructing me from noticing unknown categories. However, I could not fully escape precoding as I expected that previously identified big themes in the research about ITAs – language, culture, and pedagogy – would make their appearance in the data. So, I kept my mind open in regard to recognizing other new codes. I also reminded myself that the process of coding is a systematic activity which aims at providing very descriptive explanations for further recognition of patterns in the data.

At the same time, coding is seen as a holistic procedure of examining the data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Cresswell, 2006; LeCompte, 2000; Simons, 2009) so interpreting the key ideas from the data became my first steps. To move through the massive amount of data more efficiently I followed LeCompte's (2000) finding items strategy which can be described as "sifting and sorting, somewhat analogues to sifting flour to remove weevils" (LeCompte, 2000, p. 148). First, it should be mentioned that under 'items' the researcher means any particular things which can be coded and seen as pieces of a puzzle to assemble the final research results. She suggests to systematically check for *frequency* (identifying items due to their frequent appearance in data); *omission* (identifying items which the researcher expects to see but they never appear); and *declaration* (identifying existence of items in data based on the facts declared by the participants) (LeCompte, 2000, p.148). Indeed, in my initial coding I ensured that all the printed transcripts had large margins and I started by, first, highlighting parts of the text and providing a thick description on the margins. At certain parts I could summarize the highlighted text in a form of a phrase which served as a draft version for the future code. Sometimes I would



choose a quote from the transcript which seemed to be precise in description of the highlighted part so, as a result, I would have an *'in-vivo' code* (Saldaña, 2009).

At this stage of coding, I found it crucial to establish the way to operationalize the codes so preliminary patterns can be found. Since the main research question is “How do ITAs mediate the emergence and resolution of rich points in their communities of practice in the US academia?” I attempted to piece all the data with preliminary codes in the following categories: first, *occurrence and resolution of rich points*, second, *teacher (identity) development*, third, *emotional experience*, fourth, *roles and relationships in communities of practice* and fifth, *other significant topics for ITAs (what else is important?)*. All these categories represented the concepts which help me build the rationale for the study and appear to be vital for answering the research question. They also constructed a foundation for understanding how the sociocultural theory and the concept of *perezhivanie* are observed in the collected data.

In short, *perezhivanie* (lived through emotional experience) is seen as an integral and indivisible unit which serves as bridge between the self (individual) and the environment in which the individual is placed. Hence, at the point of the first cycle coding, especially, when I was trying to reduce the data into a comprehensible categories and code-pattern chunks, it was also important to operate within the boundaries of what constitutes, first, “self” for ITAs, which is, broadly, their teaching identities; second, environment for ITAs (communities of practice including relationships with other members of such communities); and, third, those discoveries and conflicts which are rich points and which presuppose to be a ground for transformational emotional experience or *perezhivanie*.

In the process of working with the initially coded data, I established the following procedures. For the first category I collected all the anecdotal references to interpersonal

conflicts, surprises, discoveries, in which ITAs were involved whether those instances were mentioned directly or indirectly. I kept in mind that rich points are not only the instances of collision in communication, neither they are bound to only differences in “native” languaculture of an ITA and the US languaculture as languacultures shift and reshape, thus, ITAs’ rich points occur not only at the initial entrance into the US educational settings but, rather, all along. I was also on lookout for discoveries which happened without the direct involvement of other people. For example, a moment of realization or understanding of a certain phenomenon which seems alien to the ITA’s languaculture, yet, this phenomenon happened to appear in the ITA’s context and was noticed. Agar’s (1996) example of receiving an electricity bill in Austria and his discussion on how the whole procedure of paying it was a different experience can be a valuable reference (pp. 133-134). Also, I kept reminding myself, while working with this category, that not all the anecdotes and “a-ha” moments can be rich points since the end result is a transformation in perception of reality and the change in the “frames”. If it is just an isolated thought or an action which does not convey that a certain change is about to happen or happened it might be just an observation not yet a rich point. Also, sometimes, the data showcased a reference to the change in the languaculture but other parts of the process or story were not visible. In order for me to use such data but not misinterpret it, I decided to split all rich point references into two groups: *primary rich points* (the whole story is present) and *secondary rich points* (some parts are omitted). However, both groups were equally important for the coding process and subsequent analysis of findings. The result of this work was a list of all possible rich points (not the codes), which were grouped accordingly, and the page references in transcripts were recorded.

For the second category – *teacher (identity) development* – I focused on including those initial codes which pertained to tracing how an ITA’s teaching style, self- and other-positioning in the classroom, and teaching philosophy get affected. The instances when the participants reported about the way teaching used to be and how it is at the current moment, what influenced such a change or what lies behind of a “no change” situation (a routine or a stable course of teaching) were recorded into the second category. For example, such codes as a “forced teacher’s identity” or “becoming a responsible teacher” were included. This category emerged due to, first, an inherent assumption that teaching is one of the fundamental duties of ITAs since “teaching” is the key word for describing the job they do. Second, the research is aimed at answering the sub question about ITAs’ identities evolution, and teacher’s identity is what I could observe in a more evident manner during the initial coding stage. As a result, I tried collecting all the codes pertaining to the teacher (identity) development in each case.

The next category was *emotional experience*, which is significant due to its relevance to the key concept of rich points and to the concept of *perezhivanie*. First of all, rich points do not happen in isolation and they are accompanied by the range of emotional states such as confusion, anger, frustration, surprise, shock, delight and others. It was assumed that emotions would be involved in rich point emergence and resolutions. At the same time, rich points presuppose existence of dynamic emotional states, which correlates with the essence of *perezhivanie* in Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory. *Perezhivanie* presumes that the individual shifts from certain perception of reality to the another one while living through a certain situation or reacting to a certain context cognitively, psychologically, and emotionally. *Perezhivanie* is experience in the social situation of development which is approached through the fluid emotive status of the individual and which is, ultimately, linked to the psychological and cognitive state of the person.

Thus, I focused on tracing the references to emotions in codes and to picking those instances in data which mentioned emotional state. For instance, the initial codes in this category were “feeling stressed” or “fear of being too critical”. This process of categorization also helped me to confirm rich points instances I found in the data for the first category. The result was a list of emotions for each ITA, which stretched from his/her past through the present time and into the anticipated future.

The fourth category I concentrated on was about *ITAs’ roles and relationships within communities of practice*. Community of practice is a fundamental conceptual piece of the research question. It, as well, determines what constitutes the environment in the study. It is understood that ITAs are placed within certain settings – the broad boundaries are the US academia which hosts multiple versatile settings and contexts for ITAs to navigate. In the first chapters I have already emphasized that ITAs participate in several communities of practice, hence, having different positionalities, roles, and relationships depending on the community. The socialization processes and power negotiations within these different communities are not the same. That is why the significance of the undertaken research project is in showcasing ITAs’ experiences in multiple communities of practice, not only in the classroom community of practice. From the theoretical standpoint (the sociocultural theory), environment is a key aspect in understanding the nature of transformations which happen to the individual. *Perezhivanie* is a bridge which connects the self/selves and the environment; it serves as a unit which is present in both domains (self/selves and environment) simultaneously, Hence, it was rather important to have a more precise look at communities of practice and ITAs’ positionality while coding the data. In order to do so, I tried to accumulate all relevant initial codes into this category. The

examples of such codes are “supervisor/professor’s help and support”, “dealing with department community of practice hierarchy”, “a role of facilitator in class” and others.

Finally, I created the fifth category which was meant to answer the question “*What else is important for ITA?*” as I found that there were codes which I could not place in any aforementioned categories as I was not able to observe their code-pattern relationship at that point. Such codes as “a need for a different orientation” or “a need for respect” were placed in the fifth category. Certain less frequent codes were also indicated there. In the process of further analysis all the codes found their patterns.

Hence, I significantly reduced the data and was left with a five-page file (with categories and codes) for each ITA (Figure 6). Since my case study consists of two major cases which are predetermined by the ITA communities at a certain research location, my next step was to look at the reduced and coded data within the boundaries of a case. First, I worked with the data from North Trails University and determined the most frequent and salient codes in each category. I also noted down unique and single-mentioned codes which stood out in the process of coding. Meanwhile, I also created a short descriptive story of each participant to capture the essence of each ITA within the case. I repeated the same procedure with the reduced and coded data from the second location – South Trails University. During the process I ensured that I took into consideration all the existing analytical memos and coded them as well. At the end of yet another data reduction process I created two lists of codes assigned for each category within each case.

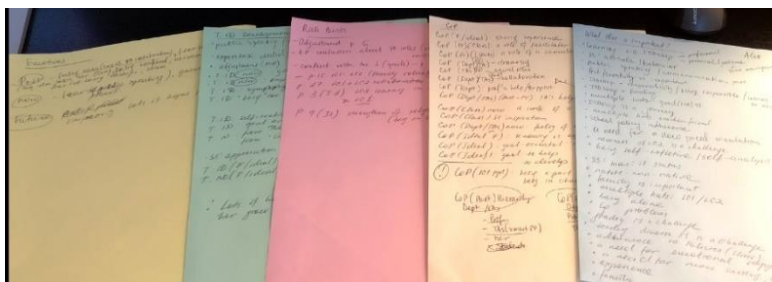


Figure 6. Reduced data. This photograph illustrates how the initially coded data was reduced to five-page color-coded files for each participant.

It is obvious that my qualitative study with eight participants lead me to meticulous work with a massive amount of data. Even though I placed all the codes within categories, it was initial understanding of the codes. My next move was to establish final pattern-code relationships. That is why, alongside with utilizing LeCompte's (2000) guide for initial coding (building a set of taxonomies which demonstrate semantic relationship between codes and their cover terms or taxonomic names, for instance, "X is a kind of Y"), I employed Simon's (2009) concept mapping. The key feature of concept mapping, which is sometimes referred to as cognitive mapping, is "modelling the data in the visual form, first to code and categorize the data, second to identify themes, and third to map the interrelationship and patterns between them visually" (Simons, 2009, pp. 122-123). Simons (2009) argues that, specifically, for case studies concept mapping, which is time-consuming, can be used as an analytical instrument as it provides an opportunity to systematically work with codes, themes and patterns as well as it can be produced in a form of a collage where some visual data is incorporated and accompanied by certain interpretations, ideas, and expressions of emotions. Figure 8 demonstrates the full process of the cognitive mapping for this project.

Following the description, I put aside all the categories I assigned previously and just worked with the list of the most salient codes in each case. I tried to position all codes on the white board and see whether there is any other connection between the codes besides the

categories. Next to them I wrote the research question and asked myself how each code helps me understand the rationale behind the research question. How does each code help me answer the research question? Are there moments in which the codes overlap? What does each code mean? What type of semantic relationship can be reestablished or confirmed based on the initial work? One of the concerning moments which occurred throughout the whole coding process, especially, at the point of accumulating all salient codes in a form of a list, is that enumerating codes, even within the pattern-code relations, did not reflect the vital feature of all research-related concepts and theoretical framework – fluidity and dynamics. Community of practice, identity development, rich points, and concept of *perezhivanie* - all presuppose the transformative nature, a dynamic, ever-changing state. If my task is to trace ITAs' mediation of emergence and resolution of rich points, it is critical to understand that “emergence and resolution”, by default, call for referring to a process of transformation.

This made me think about the fact that rich point is initiated via the departure from one's languaculture and readjustment of one's perspective or frames. It means that an ITA encounters a rich point because something triggered him/her to notice a certain difference between his/her and the other languaculture. To resolve the rich point an ITA has to find a new vision, readjust his/her understanding of that very difference. In other words, there is something or somebody in the environment which triggers or helps alter ITAs' frame. However, it is possible that resolution of rich point fails.

For deeper understanding I came up with one metaphor. I imagined that an ITA's experience is movement along the **spiral** (Figure 7): an ITA has a certain outlook on life (based on his/her languaculture) when he/she enters that spiral. There are certain expectations, values and assumptions which he/she brings along. In the course of movement, the ITA encounters

something new (new languaculture), which poses a certain challenge of how to react and deal with that newness. In order to readjust and continue the movement with this new information or experience, there is something or somebody in the environment which affects internalization of this new knowledge or, in other words, influences the resolution of rich point. The ITA readjusts his/her languaculture and resumes the movement along the spiral with modified expectations, values, and assumptions only to repeat the same process with a new rich point. In short, there is something which triggers the rich point appearance and something which impacts the rich point to be resolved.

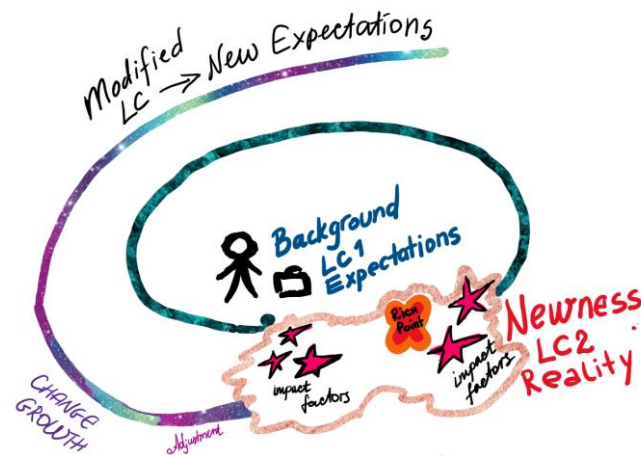


Figure 7. The "Spiral of an ITA's movement". This picture illustrates how the coding of ITA's rich point stories was approached.

Keeping this metaphor in mind I decided to reexamine, first, all instances of rich points I compiled (in each case) and, second, all salient codes in each case with the following question in mind: how does this very code play out in the appearance and/or resolution of the rich point? Or, in other words, is this a trigger for the rich point to emerge or a is it a prompt for the resolution of the rich point? Can it play both roles? What codes contribute in understanding of how the rich point is translated from the beginning to the end?



In order to trace the dynamics of rich points in ITAs' experiences ("the spiral" metaphor) and finalize the codes as well as code-pattern relationships, I coded all rich point instances (which was previously collected in the first category of the data reduction). I created a table which resembled "the spiral" movement: first, a nominal "name" of the rich point, second, languaculture 1 (LC1) expectations, third, the "trigger" of the rich point, fourth, emotions (at the moment of rich point), fifth, expected resolution (if applicable), and final the resolution itself (plus the corresponding code).

To illustrate this process, here is the example from one ITA's rich point collection (Astro-Gal). One of the students spits in front of Astro-Gal in her outdoor lab (rich point name). According to her LC1, the student acts disrespectfully as she expects students to be polite and show respect to the teacher (LC1 expectation). The trigger for the appearance of this rich point is "students' behavior/attitude" (this code comes from the list of salient and frequent codes which I have already created by crunching and reducing the data while trying to categorize it). Astro-Gal feels offended (emotion). Her expectation is that the conflict can be resolved with the help of authority - a supervisor or professor taking the charge in dealing with the student (an expected resolution). In reality, she reprimands the student and discusses this issue with her professor who assures her that some actions against this student can be taken (resolution of the situation in reality). Astro-Gal, though, confesses that during the talk with professor she realized that the student was, most likely, not trying to offend her: "I felt like... okay, he is just a 19-year-old child. It is okay, I can forgive him" (Astro-Gal). She also adds that she thinks that the situation was not really resolved and she just forgot it and moved on. Later on, she suggests that at the current point of her experience as an ITA she knows that American students mean no harm to her. Thus, the rich point did get resolved as Astro-Gal readjusted her frame as her expectations of

American students got modified. She, most likely, meant that the actual conflict between her and the student was never settled. The codes for the resolution of rich point here are “supervisor/advisor help”, “sympathizing with students”, and “critical understanding of environment”. Also, I could add here a code “adjustment through time and experience”, which appeared to be one of the most frequent codes throughout all data.

I repeated such a procedure for each focal participant’s data in each case (all the primary and secondary rich point instances/stories). As a result, I completed eight tables which helped me, first, see each point appearance and resolution (or no resolution) through the prism of the magnified glass, and second, confirm and finalize the codes in each case. I paid attention at the secondary rich points, as I have mentioned previously, they refer to either a change in languaculture or a frame readjustment but some pieces of information might be missing to be seen from the beginning to the end. At times it was, most likely, references to just emerging rich points or the process of readjustment in its very embryonic form. I coded such secondary rich points with caution because I did not want to make any assumptions and transfer my biases towards the data interpretation. Nonetheless, these references (secondary rich points) were equally necessary for the analysis.

Astro-Gal’s rich point story comes from the primary rich points instances. Below is the example how I approached coding of one of the secondary rich point stories. Malek highlights that he feels that despite the current US political situation most people in America celebrate diversity. From this statement it can be inferred that he, most likely, had an experience that made him certain that some American people welcome foreigners but, at the same time, there is a reference to the opposite. Indeed, in one of the interviews, he mentions that one the most enlightening experiences for him was giving talks in local churches about his culture and religion

and “people in churches... I found that they are one of the most compassionate and respectful people I’ve ever seen in my life” (Malek). Meanwhile, he states in another conversation that his “biggest concern is getting a job at the university which does not welcome, you know, like... non-white people. This is my biggest worry right now” (Malek). Even though, it seems like I can piece all this information together I am convinced that I might misinterpret this data to see this as a possible rich point. That is why, I approached such statements or references to certain languacultural instances very carefully. I collected them and coded them by analyzing the essence of the statement or a situation. In the case with Malek’s assumption the code was “critical understanding of environment”.

This procedure of coding rich points helped me made the following three observations. First, there are certain codes which can be only triggers for rich points to appear while others can only be seen as resolution prompts and there are codes which can be both depending on the situation. Second, the majority of primary rich points stories showcase a negative type of emotion (stress, fear, anxiety and discomfort), which is not surprising due to the idea that adjustment to something new is, as a rule, a challenge. There are, however, instances in which the rich points happen with somewhat a less negative emotion (skepticism or pleasant surprise) or even with positive one and is linked to having more exposure to LC2. Finally, all the used codes, after the close investigation, appear to reflect a connection to two big concepts – the self (the selves) and the environment. I initially observed the same link in the process of concept mapping after my first reduction of data, its categorization and coding. The same observation happened after rich points were coded. I noticed that all the codes manifest either, the internal understanding of self/selves in the environment or the external influence on the self/selves. The contextual domain of self/selves hosts such codes as “multiple hats”, “forced identities”, “self-

analysis” while such codes as “students’ behavior”, “(I)TAs’ advice and support” or “lack of diversity in class” fit the contextual domain of environment. The rich point itself appears as an “in-between state”. It, simultaneously, can be found in both categories, right on “the spiral” of ITAs’ rich points movement. These codes, also, showcase the process of transformation rather than just nominate a phenomenon.

Once I felt the codes started shaping in a more comprehensible picture, I moved to the second stage of the analysis which focused on the cross-case analysis. This stage also correlated with the second cycle coding of data. Scholars warn that the cross-case analysis presents a quite complex and challenging process for researchers in which management of data across cases can become overwhelming while there is a risk of superficial understanding of patterns too (Creswell, 2006; Merriam, 2007; Shank, 2006). My cross-case analysis was mostly impacted by the variable-oriented strategy described by Miles et al. (2014) in which the crucial part for the researcher is to identify major themes across the cases and assign them to certain families. This process is built on the scrupulous work with data in each case and across the cases after rounds of coding, patterns recognition and synthesis of all information. Such procedures relate to the nature of the second cycle coding as they are “advanced ways of reorganizing and reanalyzing data coded through First Cycle methods” the main aim of which is “to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization” from the data coded at the initial stage (Saldaña, 2009, p. 49). In other words, such reorganization can be also seen as what Saldaña (2009) calls the focused coding.

I have started with the focused coding as I needed to compress the bulk of codes even more. At that point I had a list of codes which, nominally, were assigned as triggers of rich points to appear or resolve or both. I also established two big conceptual domains (self/selves

and environment). My objective for the second cycle of coding was to finalize the code-pattern relationships recognition in each domain in order to find what the big themes are, in each case, and then across all cases.

In order to do so, I made a frequency table of all codes I found while coding rich points stories. I also ensured that I can visually see the comparison between the two research locations. Then I referred to the technique of concept (cognitive) mapping again and positioned all most frequent and salient codes on the white board. Each code was assigned a letter to indicate the conceptual domain, unless it was a code which indicated a transformation process (S for the Self/Selves and E for the Environment). I also color-coded the codes to visually identify those codes which appeared at one research site (case) but were not present in the other. By shifting the codes on the whiteboard, I was, first, trying to confirm the established semantic relationship (X is a part of Y) and, second, to cluster the codes together in order to visually observe a theme. Meanwhile, I was referring to the research question not to deviate from the task. Eventually, I saw five big themes emerging in rich points translation via, namely, **Navigating Multiple Identities, Self- Analysis/Self-Reflection, Adherence and Internalization of Politics and Policies, Internalization of Others' Actions in ITAs' Various Communities, and Teaching Evolution**. All the salient codes appeared to represent instances which serve as triggers for rich points to emerge and resolve, therefore, I decided to call them *impact factors*. Thus, at the end of the second cycle coding, which, simultaneously, served as across-cases analysis, I managed to find out five themes which showcase five possible (the most dominant) ways to navigate a rich point by ITAs across all cases. Each navigational way presupposes a number of impact factors, which either trigger the emergence of rich point or prompt the resolution of rich point (some impact factors can be seen as both). The most salient impact factors across all cases were

established as well as the variation within such impact points in each case was also pinpointed. A more detailed discussion of findings will be presented in the next chapter.

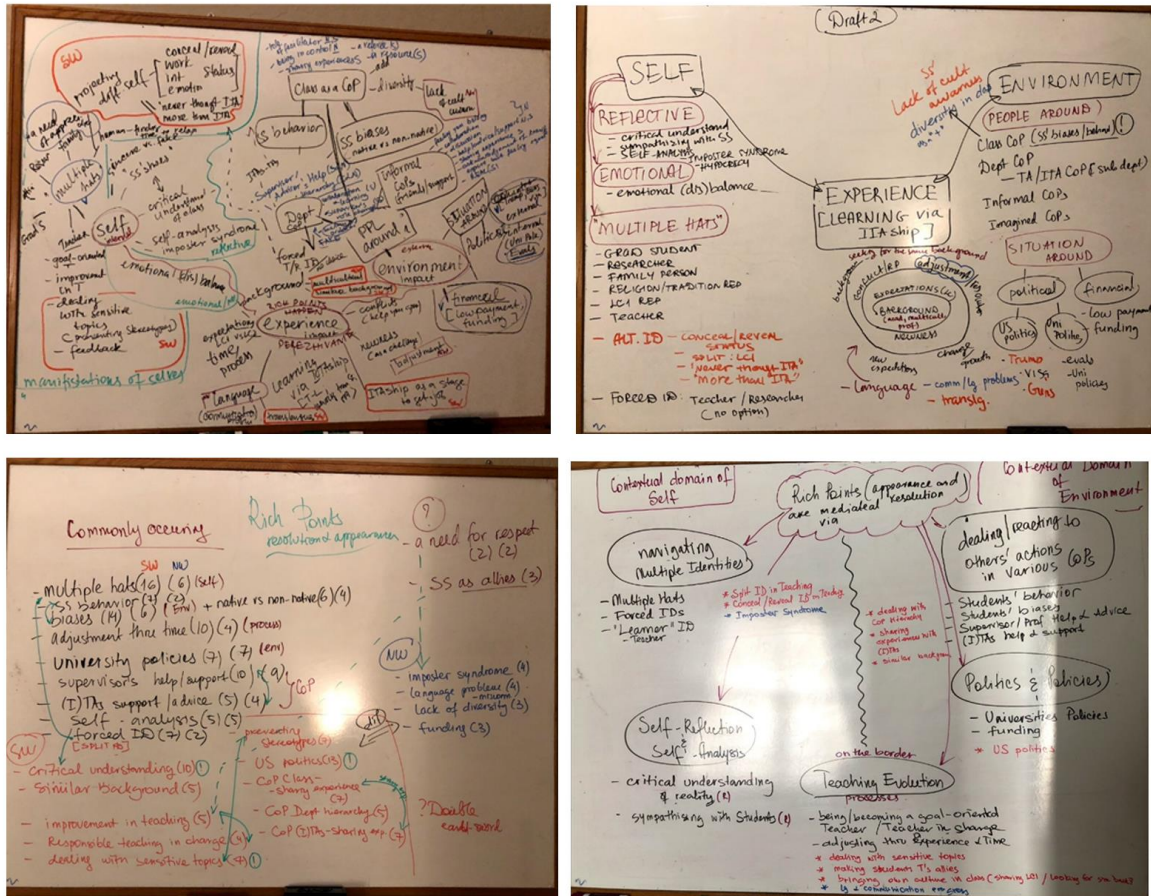


Figure 8. "Dancing with the data". This picture illustrates the process of coding (from top left to bottom right).

### Trustworthiness, Limitations, and Delimitations

I am aware that by choosing a case study as a format for the research I happened to face certain challenges or limitations. The generalizability of results is one of the common issues which is usually brought up by scholars (Nisbet & Watt, 1984; Yin, 2009). In other terms, it brings about the question of transferability of results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Generalizability in case studies is debatable, according to some researchers (Cresswell, 2006; Simons, 2009). Yin

(2009) highlights that the goal is not to replicate but, rather, to inform the field or contribute to the bigger theory. Miles and Huberman (1994) propose to check generalizability by questioning the representativeness of the sample while Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) emphasize that representativeness of the sample is the only significant for statistical generalizability.

The undertaken study was never focused on the statistical generalizability as the sample of my participants at each research sites were limited to a few ITAs. In such a case, the main concern for me appeared to be analytical generalizability which is, according to Yin (2009) and Simons (2009), centered on informing the field of study. I am inclined towards seeing case study research and my study specifically as something which is meant to contribute to the field, “help researchers to understand similar cases, phenomena of situations” and to observe “a logical rather than statistical connection between the case and the wider theory” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 294). I was never striving for the statistical generalizability of the study (in this case, I would be examining much bigger number of ITAs). Furthermore, Simons (2009) highlights that, on the contrary, “the aim is particularization – to present a rich portrayal of a single setting to inform practice, establish the value of the case and/or add to the knowledge of specific knowledge” (p. 24). Keeping this in mind, I conducted this research not with the purpose of it being replicated and considered to reveal the common truth about the situation but with the aim of informing the field, adding more to the topic of ITAs’ own perspectives in academia. Even though, I ended up discussing ITAs within two bound systems, which are geographically and culturally different, my goal has been not to generalize the findings to all other ITAs at the research site; rather, I have noted certain themes which appear to be more salient in a certain location with a certain sample of ITAs.

Also, it is believed that case study is prone to being subjective and even biased, however, initially is meant to be more reflexive (Nisbet & Watt, 1984; Walker, 1986). This issue can be avoided by the researcher's constant and cautious actions to insure the credibility of the research by utilizing multiple resources, providing thick descriptions, extended observations, peer reviewing and other activities which contribute to the so-called triangulation of data as well as researcher's own discipline and awareness in regard to transferring their biases in research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Simons, 2009). Thus, while I was planning my research project, I critically examined my own subjective opinions and biases in regard to the research question and the participants, as well as, I thought critically about my positionality in this research. I acknowledged that working as an ITA for four years of experience at an American university presents advantages of knowing certain intimate details in regard to the job and the field. This can also be seen as a disadvantage due to my personal subjective perspective on the issue, which is fueled by my individual experiences as an ITA. While conducting the project, I constantly checked whether my biases prevented me from seeing a different picture. When I was creating a sample, I noticed that, even though I have inside-out knowledge of international teaching assistantship, I am positioned as an outsider at North Trails University, thus, I was more cautious in making any assumptions about the place and my future research participants. On contrary, I felt rather detached from the research site as I lacked familiarity with people and university. When I decided to find focal participants at South Trails University, I realized that I was more subjective in regard to population, university activities, and structures as my familiarity with the research site provided me with the preset assumptions. To eliminate my biases, I relied on various data collection techniques, which helped me properly triangulate the data and, thus, avoid the trap of muddying-up data analysis and interpretation.



Validity is another feature which must be present in the case-study research. It is “concerned with how you establish the warrant for your work” (Simons, 2009, p. 127). Simons (2009) suggests two procedures to check the validity of one’s research: first, triangulation and, second, respondent validation. The main point of triangulation of data is examination of data from various angles and various resources, which has to happen from the early conception of the study. I collected data via multiple sources, which served as the main tool to triangulate the data in the current research. I found the repetition of certain codes in visual data, interviews, observations, observation debriefings, survey responses and in field notes. Initially, I planned to have a stage of participants verification procedures but due to the time constraints, I, unfortunately, failed to do so.

Despite the challenges presented in the previous paragraphs, case study has its beneficial features as well. According to Creswell (2006), through the embedded or holistic analysis of the themes, the researcher has an opportunity to understand the complexity or the uniqueness of the case (p.75). Extensive usage of various data collection tools, which helped with data triangulation, allowed me to gather substantial amount of information and created a more detailed description of each case, as well as, to trace the connection of findings with the theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Nisbet and Watt (1984) emphasize that case study is strong in the connection to reality and, as a rule, the results “are immediately intelligible; they speak for themselves”, partly, because they are “frequently written in everyday, non-professional language” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 293). Therefore, I believe that the selected format of investigation – a qualitative, instrumental multiple case (collected) study – proved to be the most appropriate method for answering the research question while all possible measures

were taken to prevent researcher's subjectivity and to ensure validity of the study via triangulation of data.

## Conclusion

Chapter 3 demonstrated all the nuances of the methodology of the undertaken research: from providing a detailed account of its rationale, description of the research settings and participants to a thorough discussion of data collection tools and the data analysis specifics. The chapter outlined that the study was conducted in two locations – North Trails University (NTU) in the Northwest of the US and at South Trails University (STU) in the Southwest of the US. The overall sample of focal participants were represented by three ITAs from NTU and five ITAs from STU. The research sites appeared to be rather different in regard to its sociocultural features and the overall population in the locations. Focal participants were selected via purposive sampling technique with the elements of snowball sampling. Data collection tools included an initial electronic survey, two interviews (with the artifact and visual data collection), one to two observations which were followed by debriefing. Data analysis was undertaken in two cycles: first cycle coding (within the case analysis) and the second cycle coding (across cases analysis). The main methods of data analysis were LeCompte's (2000) finding items technique (establishing semantic relationship between codes and patterns to identify themes) and Simons (2009)' concept mapping (multiple attempts in arranging data in a visual form). As a result, five main themes or ways to navigate rich points were found as well as triggers for emergence and resolutions of rich points were established (*impact points*). The chapter ends with the discussion about limitations and delimitations of the research project.

## Chapter 4 Research Findings

### Introduction

This chapter is devoted to a detailed discussion of findings. First, the findings which pertain to answering the main question of the study are discussed. Five key themes, which represent the ways ITAs mediate rich points emergence and resolutions, are displayed and discussed. These themes are **Navigating Multiple Identities, Self- Analysis/ Self-Reflection, Adhering and Internalizing Politics and Policies; Internalizing Others' Actions in Various Communities of Practice, and Teaching Evolution**. Depiction of each theme is centered on, presenting salient impact factors (triggers for rich points to appear and resolve) across all cases and, second, by showcasing variations in impact factors within each case. Examples from data are presented in order to support the main findings. The summary of the findings is meant to conclude certain significant features of how ITAs navigate rich points, which serves as a platform for the further synthesis and analysis in Chapter 5. Also, major discrepancies between two cases are explained.

## **Main Findings: Answering Research Question**

As it has been previously mentioned, the data analysis revealed five big themes, namely, **Navigating Multiple Identities, Self- Analysis/ Self-Reflection, Adhering and Internalizing Politics and Policies; Internalizing Others' Actions in Various Communities of Practice, and Teaching Evolution.** These themes were present in each case but, obviously, there were certain ways in which they were similar and different. The variations in each theme build-up constituted the across-cases differences and similarities, hence, they represented unique ways and variations across two ITAs communities (two cases). In other words, if I look at my research question once again “How do ITAs mediate appearance and resolution of rich points in their communities of practice?” the answer will be as follows: ITAs mediate the appearance and resolutions of rich points in their communities of practice via, first, navigating their multiple identities, second, performing self-analysis, third, internalizing others' actions, fourth, adhering to the politics and policies (in the environment), and finally, moving within teaching development. For the purpose of explaining I will call these five themes five *ways of navigating or mediating or translating a rich point*. Each way of rich points navigation contains several components which serve as triggers for rich points to emerge and prompts for rich points to resolve, which appears to be rather important in, first, understanding the whole nature of the rich point, and second, the variations in rich points in each case. For the purpose of explanation, I will call them *impact factors*, meaning that the rich point boundaries happen to be around such impact factors which either trigger or help resolve the rich point itself. It is also crucial to understand that rich points emergence and resolution happen not by taking one course of rich points mediation/translation, as well as, that rich points can be influenced to appear and to be resolve by several impact factors which are located within several ways of rich points navigation.

In other words, several impact factors can be evident in the process of changing the frame and readjusting the languaculture because an ITA tries a combination of navigation techniques over a certain time period.

Before I dive into a detailed discussion of the findings, I also find it paramount to mention that “appearance” and “resolution” of rich points should be clarified. Under “appearance of rich point” it is understood that there was a certain impact factor or a combination of impact factors which triggered something new to appear in the ITA languaculture. This newness (as it is previously discussed in Chapter 3, the Data Analysis section) emerges on the “spiral” of movement and it can be consciously or unconsciously noticed as the ITA finds himself/herself in the challenge of facing a different, new part of the environment or reality. This difference (Agar, 1996, 2006) is the emergence of the rich point. “Resolution of rich point” is a moment when the ITA is influenced by such an impact factor or a combination of impact factors which help him/her internalize the change as he/she shows certain modification in the original languaculture (or the original set of beliefs, a vision in regard to a certain aspect of reality). Such internalization is dynamic as it is a process of ITAs’ qualitative transformation within their environment. Also, it should be pointed that, at times, the rich point might seem to be not resolved, especially, when ITAs refer to a certain situation of not being resolved. However, here the differentiation between an unresolved conflict (an interpersonal conflict, for example) and resolution of rich point become rather crucial. If modification of the initial languaculture took place and the frames readjustment is evident, most likely, the rich point got resolved since the transformation is visible but, at the same time, an ITA might feel that “the conflict was not resolved” meaning that there was no formal closure of the interpersonal conflict. This distinction

is vital for the discussion of findings since it predetermines what rich points under analysis were or were not resolved.

Below is the discussion of five salient ways rich points are translated/mediated/navigated by ITAs (I use these verbs interchangeably in the process of description). For each navigational way I present the most dominant impact factors across two cases, which either trigger the emergence of rich points or contribute into its resolution (sometimes both). I also will showcase the variation between the cases, meaning, that I will demonstrate what impact factors are particular to a certain case. Due to the extensive amount of data, I will limit the number of examples to illustrate each impact factor. In Chapter 3 I have already referred to the initial process of unwrapping each rich point to find impact factors (the codes) so it can be referred to for details. Further, in Chapter 5, I will showcase eight examples of rich point narratives, which demonstrates the whole process of ITAs' movement along "the spiral" when they encounter a rich point.

### **Translating Rich Points via Navigating ITAs' Multiple Identities**

The first way for ITAs to translate rich points - **Navigating ITAs' Multiple Identities** – showcased that there are three main impact factors which play out in emergence and resolutions of rich points (across all the cases): first, **ITAs' "multiple hats"**, second, **forced identities**, and **teacher-as-learner identity**. In other words, it means that majority of rich points appeared around those situations where, first, participating ITAs feel entangled within their multiple identities, such as being a teacher, a graduate student, a researcher, a parent/child, a representative of a certain religion, and a representative of a certain country or languaculture. An internal conflict of identities, a sense of finding oneself amid multiple roles, hence, trying to wear "multiple hats" or "roles" simultaneously is important for understanding this impact factor.

For instance, in the case of North Trails University, one of Astro-Gal's unresolved rich points pointed at the "multiple hats" situation. One of her expectations from the university is to be funded for research, presentations, and conference attending. At the same time, she stresses that it is difficult to travel without her daughter as Astro-Gal has to take care of her child being alone in the US. Thus, she is convinced that the university has to support women-researchers by providing more funds to cover research-related expenses so she can bring her child along. While taking such a discussion to her department authorities she hears a resounding "no" to her request.

Unwrapping this rich point, which was not resolved (it did not modify her languaculture but was, rather, brushed aside), it is evident that one of the impact factors in this story is "multiple hats" Astro-Gal has to "wear" while being a member of university. She is a graduate student, she is a researcher, a mother, and a woman. Simultaneously, she has to address the issues of several identities and, ultimately, make a decision which identity would be given a priority. Astro-Gal points out: "You might miss one or two conferences but at some point, how many of them can you miss? You will have to sustain your research, you have to do your dissertation, right?" (Astro-Gal). Surely, "multiple hats" is not the only impact factor in her rich point but it is one of the factors of how she has to change her frame and her languaculture being a part of the US education.

In the case of Alex, another ITA from NTU, "multiple hats" was traced via the reference to one of her first classes (it is a secondary rich point story – an incomplete story). One of the discoveries she made during the first days of teaching that she had to co-teach a 400-level class which was also taken by her fellow ITAs and she was really confused how to behave since "everything and everybody seemed so professional here". Thus, her impact factor to figure out how to teach her colleagues/ITAs during her first semester of teaching is built around the



navigation between her multiple evolving identities: Alex as a new teacher and a co-teacher, Alex as a new friend, and Alex as a colleague. It is also Alex in the classroom with her fellow TAs and Alex outside the classroom with her fellow TAs. Ultimately, her languaculture is being modified not only by the first teaching experiences in the US but also by merging her evolving teacher identities with the identity of a co-worker as she figures out how to prioritize these identities.

Second prominent impact factor connected with multiple identities ITAs have is **forced identities**. This impact factor is about assigned roles and the identities ITAs have to take and follow. Forced identities, as “multiple hats”, present an internal conflict of accepting a certain role which is assigned to an individual. One of the most astounding findings which happened during the data collection is the fact that the majority of ITAs reported having their role of a teaching assistant to be assigned: there is no more other way of sustaining oneself in academia, that is why adhering to the role of an assistant is the reality which has to be accepted. The only difference is that the ITAs with the background in teaching (Malek, Guillermina, and Mary) saw such an ITA label allocation more of a continuation of their teacher’s development; those with no background in teaching but experience in research assistance (Astro-Gal and Selda) perceived the given teaching assistantship as forced; and those who did not have any background (Aloha and Alex) took it for granted but emphasized that it was a necessity to ensure their graduate studies financing. It was very prominent in the northwestern sample that all three participants never perceived themselves as teachers but they had to take this assigned role of a teacher in the US for the sake of the bigger purpose – their advanced degree. Two of the ITAs at NTU (Astro-Gal and Selda) even openly rebelled against such a forced identity but had to assume it anyway. Ahmad’s story (STU sample) stood out from the rest since he chose to try teaching assistantship

when he realized that his plans changed. The example of the forced identity I provided above can be perceived as a shifting power in each participant's languaculture. Even those ITAs who long ago assumed the teachers' identity – Guillermina, Mary, Ahmad, and Malek from STU - still had the "ITA" identity assigned as a part of their graduate studies pursuit package.

Another discovery which was made during data collection is also linked to the forced identity impact factor. One of the introductory questions in my interview was about how each participant understands his/her title "ITA". Half of the overall ITA sample (4 out of 8) challenged the title and their association with the title in certain ways. Alex (NTU) and Mary (STU) emphasized that they never thought of themselves as "international" and just assumed the title of "teaching assistants". Ahmad underlined that he does not consider himself as an "international teaching assistant" since his official title on the paper is "teaching associate", which is, in his understanding, higher in rank than ITA. Malek from STU, who did not disprove his title of ITA, challenged the nature of his assistantship instead. He stressed that he feels more like an autonomous instructor or a faculty rather than just an ITA because majority of ITAs do not have such flexibility as he does. In all these cases, the title of ITA was forced on them by me, the researcher. This was, in a way, a rich point between the researcher and participants. At the same time, it was also a rich point between the university/academia and participants as reflecting on their title provoked participants to think what role is assigned to them by the university and whether this role correlates with their own vision of themselves or not.

The third salient factor which appeared in data is **teacher-as-learner identity**. This impact factor usually is seen as a path to resolution since participants report that they learn how to deal with certain situations either from students or by observing others in their communities. They do not solely see themselves as just teachers, on the contrary, they position themselves as

somebody who learns by teaching, regardless of their experience and background in teaching. Participants from both universities report resolving rich points due to the fact that they learned how things work, especially in their classes and within their departments. Mary, for instance, highlights that her passion towards teaching can be explained via a possibility to learn something new even if it is about learning how to make presentations and design activities in the process of class preparation. Alex reflects that teaching helped her learn not only new concepts in her field but, also, learn time-management and organization, which is applicable to her entire life as a teacher and a graduate student. Ahmad's rich points, most of the times, are being resolved when he consciously observes his class, students, and other people around him. The most important, however, is the reference to "learning from students". All ITAs across the cases underline that it is a vital part of their experience and a factor which helps them navigate through potential challenges as well as to avoid some. Thus, developing such an identity as teacher-as-learner seems to be rather crucial for understanding how rich points are translated since ITAs internalize possible exits from certain new and challenging situations.

### **Variations across cases.**

As it was previously mentioned, there are certain impact factors which can be seen as variations across cases in the big theme of **Navigating ITAs' Multiple Identities**. These impact factors stood out as unique features of dealing with rich points emergence and resolution in regard to multiple identities and they appear as salient only for the specific case. Avoiding such findings would be incorrect as they point out at differences which happen across the cases. For instance, in the southwestern ITA community two more impact factors were discovered – **a state of concealing/revealing one's identity** and **a state of a split teaching identity**. The other participants' cohort (NTU) showcased **imposter syndrome** as one of the impact factors in their

encounters with rich points. The impact factors found among ITAs from NTU and ITAs from STU are different in nature, but they are still connected to the management of various identities and selves in the process of new discoveries within LC1 and LC2.

The topic of **concealing and revealing various identities** strongly appeared among southwestern ITAs' data. Most of the times it related to the personal desire or advice by a more experienced member of the community to conceal one's languacultural identity or an academic rank/status (institutional identity) or emotional state (true identity at the moment). However, it is not only about hiding but about an act of revealing, sometimes, as a planned act (conceal-reveal dynamics). For instance, Guillermina and Aloha shared a story which is similar – each of them experienced advice from a more knowledgeable person not to showcase their identities. In Guillermina's case, it was her friend/ITA who previously taught the same class and who strongly recommended Guillermina to abstain from telling the students about her international status, which she followed but, later, she felt that hiding her identity is against her overall philosophy as students “should know where I am from and why I speak like I speak” (Guillermina). Guillermina eventually came up with her own strategy which allowed her to purposefully conceal her identity until the time when she is confident her students have an opinion of her as a teacher and then she reveals her true “international” identity. In Aloha's case, it was her professor who advised her against revealing her status as a first-time teacher, which was a shocking point for Aloha. She, however, followed that advice as it was her first semester teaching: “I personally felt I should not question that... I didn't know what I should expect... I thought that answer was more like a solution for me at that time” (Aloha). Aloha eventually stopped following that advice too as she felt it was rather insincere. Aloha, Malek, and Guillermina also reported that they have to conceal their true emotional state in teaching as it might affect their roles as teachers. For Aloha,

it is also about “avoiding classroom drama” which happens due to the constant discussions of sensitive topics in her intercultural communication class. Overall, it seems like concealing an identity or a state is a factor which helps ITAs resolve rich points which are associated with certain possible biases or skepticism about them as credible teachers. It is also a preventative measure to avoid such rich point development further.

Above are examples of concealing acts but, in some cases, ITAs desire to reveal certain identities on purpose. For instance, Malek purposefully reveals his identity as an international graduate student because he wants his students, who are mostly international graduate students, to feel more comfortable in his class. What is more, he reveals his status of an ITA because he is teaching other (I)TAs. Another participant – Mary – does not even have an intention of concealing her languacultural identity since she is teaching her native language as a foreign language at South Trails University and she, by default, is seen as a person from a particular languaculture. Guillermina, who conceals her international identity in one of her classes, does not have the same tactic in her other class as she teaches in and about her native language, hence, her language identity is revealed on its own. Nonetheless, the impact factor of ITAs revealing their identities serve as preventative measures to avoid a rich point formation, possibly, as a found resolution of previous rich points. Such conceal/reveal acts, whether they are conscious or happen by default, showcase that ITAs from the Southwest have to navigate those identities together with the aforementioned “multiple hats”, forced identities, and teacher-as-learner identities in order to move along in their transformations in the academic settings.

The second impact factor, which appeared in the southwest, was **a split in teacher’s identity** and it was prominently traced in two ITAs’ stories. The main reason for this identity split was working simultaneously for two departments or programs, which positioned these ITAs

in the constant state of comparative evaluations of them as teachers. At the moment of data collection, Guillermina was teaching two classes – one in the Linguistics department and another in the Spanish department. Throughout interviews and observations, she was consciously and subconsciously comparing her teaching positionality in each class. She had a clear vision that in her Spanish class she has more personal connections with students; the class reminds her of a community in comparison to her linguistic class, but she attributed this to the logistics of teaching a smaller Spanish class compared to a larger, lecture-like linguistic course. Referring to the example provided in the previous paragraph about Guillermina concealing her international identity, it would become evident that she never had to conceal her identity in her Spanish class: “in my Spanish Linguistics though I tell them where I am from. This is the difference. It’s Spanish but I don’t sound like I am from here or I am from Mexico. Where are you from?” (Guillermina). In this way, the impact factor of concealing/revealing identities happens within the dynamics of splitting her teaching identity. Even her the-end-of-the-semester evaluations convince her how differently she is perceived as a teacher based on the class she teaches. She notes that she is valued in her Spanish class for showing her human nature in teaching while the same feature is seen as negative in her reviews from linguistics class. As a result, students’ perception further deepens the split in her teaching identity.

Interestingly enough, Mary, who at the moment of data collection, was only teaching Japanese, pointed out the same dynamics. She, as well as Guillermina happens to be a PhD student in Linguistics, but she mostly teaches Japanese at the Foreign Languages department. However, referring to her past experiences, when she taught linguistics, she indicated that she would not even be able to compare her teaching in these two departments because her experiences were so different. In fact, she underlined that teaching at these two places as a

“schizophrenic state and if something happens in linguistics I can always come here [to the current department]” (Mary). Her impact factor of having a teacher’s identity split is also very dynamic. It coincides with managing multiple identities as Mary confesses that she feels more freedom and flexibility regarding her departmental relationships when she is teaching Japanese because she does not have a graduate student identity in that vicinity. During the observations when she had an informal talk with the professor at Foreign Languages department about the hiring process in linguistics field, Mary emphasized that, even though, she acknowledged that professor’s superiority “she is not my professor and she is not in my department” (Mary). This makes her interaction with professors, especially those with similar background and more familiar ones, happen in a more relaxed and informal ways since she does not have to deal with the student identity. She is just a teacher at that very department. This instance showcases how complex the ways of negotiating rich points are as well as it involves various identities to intertwine.

The theme of a teacher identity split also somewhat appeared in Aloha’s data while she was discussing her online and offline classes referring to the online teaching as a “healing time” and a chance to avoid “the classroom drama” but, at the same time, she stated that online teaching makes her miss the real interaction with students. Malek’s self-identification of himself as an autonomous teacher, which has been mentioned previously, can be, somewhat, attributed to a split too. However, that would be not the same teacher’s split as Mary and Guillermina have. His split would be a separation of his graduate student and teacher identity as Malek’s teaching assistantships (in the past and present) have been given by other departments so it could have impacted his teacher’s identity development towards more independent. Observing the split in identities, such as, in teacher identity can lead to both rich points to appear (the moments of

confusion how to act in teaching) and to resolve (when the reflection about such a split helps ITA position themselves as teachers more consciously). Overall, all the examples of reveal/conceal identity acts and instances of splits in teacher identities showcase that ITAs have to deal with multiple identities and that in the process of languaculture transformations such mediation of multiple identities can trigger both a resolution and emergence of rich points.

Finally, **the imposter syndrome** was rather prominent in the ITA community from the Northwest, most likely, due to the lack of teaching experience among the participants. Imposter syndrome is characterized by a constant feeling of not fitting in the assigned group due to doubts about one's ability and credibility to represent that very group. Two ITAs – Alex and Astro-Gal referred to the situations when they questioned not only their teaching identities but other identities at play, which can be seen as the intersection with “multiple hats” impact factor. Astro-Gal, for instance, provided multiple examples of feeling that she is perceived as a dysfunctional member of various communities as she forces herself to accept that “it is okay if they feel that you don't know anything... let them think you don't know anything” when she speaks about teaching a class and “I have questioned my self-worth in the past two years a lot... because I always think that they will know that I don't deserve it and they will kick me out” (Astro-Gal) when she refers to her position in the department. Alex highlights that before her second semester she was very doubtful that she does right as a teacher and only self-realization that she was trusted with other classes to teach for the second semester made her doubts subside. The imposter syndrome appeared rather prominent among those two ITAs from NTU but given that they had the least teaching experience from the overall sample it can be attributed to their lack of teaching practice. This topic is an impact factor too as Alex and Astro-Gal's rich points often seem to appear due to the fact they doubt their positions in the environment as valid and credible



members, therefore, when the imposter syndrome is combined with other impact factors it becomes evident that it leads to rich points appearance.

As it can be inferred, ITAs' identities play a significant role in the way of navigating rich points, whether it is about its emergence or resolution. ITAs develop new identities and see themselves caught in the intricacies of multiple identities as they move on the "spiral" of their experiences in a new languaculture. Identities evolution never stops and continues to be a method to translate new challenges in the languaculture in the process of ITAs' transformations.

### **Translating Rich Points via Self-Analysis/Self-Reflection**

It appeared rather salient among all ITAs in the study that another way of navigating through a rich point is via a constant state of self-analysis. All participants across cases showed a great deal of self-reflection. It was not just reflecting at the point when the interview was taken but the way they referred to a thinking process at the moments of rich points dynamics. Across cases there was one salient impact factor - **critical understanding of reality**. This impact factor mostly appeared as a way for rich points to resolve; a state in which an ITA internalizes the conflict or confusion about a new phenomenon and develops a new sense of reality. Under the world "reality" I mean an array of things from understanding students, ITA's duties, the ITA's department structure with its relationship between members, and the subjects ITAs teach. This impact factor was seen as prominent in the discussions about rich points resolutions in regard to students' behavior. Approaching certain conflicting situations in connection with students, ITAs in many cases, demonstrated that by using self-reflection they developed a different viewpoint, which helped them observe their students in the context and make certain inferences about who their students are. In some cases, such critical understanding of the students was based on ITAs'

initial expectations of students, which proved to be wrong. It was especially true for ITAs with minimal amount of experience.

For instance, Ahmad, while describing his first semester teaching emphasized that, even though, he was prepared to teach the class after observing his co-workers teaching the same course several times and having three years of graduate education in the US, he still fell prey to his expectations about students and educational settings once he assumed the role of an ITA. One of the ways he managed to translate the discrepancy between his expectations and reality of LC2 was through self-reflection: “before going to the class I was a little worked-up...because it’s the first time I am going to international students and, well, native speakers..., who come from a different educational background as compared to me...but after the first session I came to know that students are students wherever they are” (Ahmad). Later, Ahmad points out that he faced a certain hypocrisy in students’ behavior as they appeared to be providing positive feedback in class but the evaluations showed otherwise. Thus, he ended up developing understanding of his students as people who might show satisfaction in class but provide a critical evaluation at the end of the semester. On one hand, Ahmad’s feeling of them being hypocritical stems from his expectations (based on his languaculture as he compares it to the educational system he knows). The way he is assessing reality is based on the same languaculture, which makes him feel confused and sad. He constantly questions his position in the situation. On the other hand, this conflict (a rich point) is being resolved due to the fact that the discrepancies between expectations and reality make Ahmad analyze the whole situation by constantly adjusting his frames in order to see the situation clearly. Thus, one of the ways how the new reality gets internalized for Ahmad is when he adopts a method of self-reflection. The impact factor here – his self-analysis which leads to developing critical understanding of his students – is one of the

ways how Ahmad comes to the conclusion of what to expect (or not to expect from his students). In this example, it is also visible that he is trying to find some similarity between his languaculture and the new languaculture. Speaking of similarities, which is a crucial way to resolve a rich point, self-analysis, in fact offers such an opportunity as thinking about the context and the self/selves helps identify the similarities as well as differences in the given rich point.

To illustrate the critical understanding of the reality as an impact point in the northwestern sample, I can refer to the aforementioned Astro-Gal's experience when she felt offended that the student spat in front of her. One of the ways how she resolved this rich point was through self-analysis which continued until she developed critical understanding of American students who "mean no harm" to her. Indeed, all ITAs across the cases reported developing critical understanding of their reality: Aloha realized that "the classroom dramas" are expected as a pack and parcel of the subject she teaches (intercultural communication); Malek internalized that the current US environment can be both hostile and friendly, when it comes to his languaculture, tradition, and religion; Mary developed a critical understanding of roles and functions in departmental communities of practice, for instance, that new (I)TAs would want to initiate conversations and share things since it is a new stage of experience while she, as an older and more experienced ITA would not get too enthusiastic about building new connections as she already has established confidants in the community. At the same time, Guillermina, by observing students from several classes, critically understands that she faces a "double-sided sword" situation as she needs to be careful in regard to critiquing her reality in one of her classes, but, at the same time, she needs to stay true to her teaching philosophy which aims at nurturing students as critical thinkers. Similarly to Ahmad, Selda and Alex become more aware of what can be seen as "standard" or "expected" behavior of students while critically evaluating certain

conflicts in their teaching, which, in their turn, were based on Alex and Selda's original languaculture.

It is also vital to note that in majority of cases, when ITAs in the study revealed that their rich points were resolved via critical understanding of their environment, especially, students, they pointed out that they felt sorry for students and found multiple excuses to sympathize with their audience. In the Northwest it was mostly a feel of sympathy to students due to the students' lack of cultural awareness while in the Southwest, ITAs felt sorry for their students because ITAs realized that they once also "were in student's shoes". Thus, they could relate to some of students' behavior and, in a way, excuse it. Hence, their critical understanding of reality allowed ITAs to look at the situation and, especially, at students from a distance while they were trying to negotiate differences of the environment and their initial expectations. ITAs' self-analysis and reflection served as an impact factor to resolve rich points and move towards internalization of their new languaculture.

### **Translating Rich Points via Adherence and Internalization of Politics and Policies**

As I have mentioned before, the research question of the study presupposes the discussion of self/selves and environment. If the previous two ways of navigating rich points could be positioned within the domain of self/selves, the next two themes, which appeared rather significant in ITAs' discussions of their experiences, mostly, belong to the contextual domain of environment. This positioning is, certainly, nominal as the whole rationale of the study assumes that both contextual domains are overlapping. Nonetheless, it became apparent after working with the data that **politics and policies of the environment** are fundamental factors in appearance and resolutions of rich points. One of the impact factors was **adherence to university policies** as it was traced across all cases in the study. Under adherence to university

policies, I understand that the institutional forces either help or prevent ITAs from resolving a rich point as well as such forces can serve as triggers for the rich point appearance. ITAs, ultimately, become a part of these forces. Metaphorically, university policies are like weather – it is a part of environment, and if it is raining you have to adhere to the fact that it is raining.

The theme of policies in the study was mostly seen via, first, overall, **rules of institutions**, and second, in regard to **funding** (these are the most salient impact factors). All eight participants while answering to my introductory question about why and how they became ITAs suggested that funding or financing one's education made them consider or accept the position of ITA. Even in those cases when teaching assistantship could have been substituted with research assistantship but the students were obliged to teach (Selda and Astro-Gal), funding was one of the aspects which made them accept their forced identity. In case of Aloha and Alex, who did not have any teaching background at the point they became ITAs, they accepted the teaching assistantship because that was a given funding option, which came with the acceptance letter. Alex highlights: "I really wanted to come here to pursue my master's degree... I also heard you need a certain type of assistantship or scholarship to be able to sustain your life here...out of all schools I got admitted that one was the only one which provided me with a scholarship" (Alex). Aloha echoes the same situation in terms of funding: "It is a part of my contract in PhD... if I want the scholarship I have to teach. In our department we don't have an option – we have to teach" (Aloha). For Mary, who at the moment of data collection had more than 10 semesters of teaching assistantship experience in the US academia, the entering point was the same – becoming a teaching assistant was a part of the graduate program acceptance. Even though the rest of the sample – ITAs with the previous experience and background in teaching (Malek, Guillermina and Ahmad) – might first project an image of their intentions of

becoming ITAs but the idea that teaching assistantship provides a financial support for the international student and appears to be one of a few ways to sustain academic life in the US is highly critical. Hence, teaching assistantship can be seen as just a university rule or a policy which does not truly provide a freedom of choice, but, rather, it demands certain adherence to institutional perception of international graduate students. It is also an impact factor to resolve a rich point, which helps ITAs internalize their new educational environment and intricacies of their position within the US academia.

However, financing their graduate studies via teaching assistantship can also turn into the impact factor for rich points to emerge. ITAs depended on university funding so when ITAs face a harsh conflict they realize that they may lose their position, hence, the financing, which can jeopardize their graduate studies and life in the US. As a result of such a fear, ITAs have to force certain ways of behavior on themselves, thus, they might find themselves stuck in a certain conflict or rich point without a resolution. Another scenario of funding being a possible impact factor for triggering rich points emergence is trying to obtain funding from the university. Such dynamics can be seen at the institutional micro and macro levels. Referring to Astro-Gal's experience about fighting for the funding in the department (in order to be able to cover expenses for her child traveling with her) it is obvious that the department (university) policy in regard to funding serves as a catalyst for the rich point to appear and, unfortunately, not to be resolved. Ahmad, for instance, emphasizes that, due to his cultural beliefs, he is financially responsible for the entire extended family and he feels that "there is a kind of burden and tension" because the family has a higher expectation of him working in the US and "whether you are getting money from the assistantship" he has to find some ways to meet family's expectations (Ahmad). Funding from university becomes an impact factor for rich point to appear as Ahmad finds

himself in the thick of languacultural conflict. Interestingly enough, funding in Ahmad's rich point story might also turn into the resolution of the conflict if he gets sufficient money to support his family and, hence, meet their expectations. Before I move to the next impact factor within this theme of politics and policies, it is necessary to mention that majority of ITAs across the cases suggested that their payment/salary is rather low, especially, when they compare their teaching duties to faculty members in their programs.

Apart from funding, ITAs demonstrated that emergence and resolution of rich points can be dependent on such a factor as **institutional rules**. Alex, for instance, had to fall prey to the inefficient institutional system while one of her biggest rich point stories emerged. Alex was not notified on time by the disability services about having a student with learning disabilities in her class. Without such knowledge Alex inquired about the reasons that student missed her classes, which appeared to offend the student. As a result, Alex had to sit through a several-hour-long discussion with all the involved parties and felt as if she was on trial, even after the official apology by the disability services was received. Similarly, Guillermina, was shocked to find out that she was reported by one of her students to the Dean of Students as she, according to the student, was not fast enough in grading. According to Guillermina, "it was something, like, completely outrageous and I was, like, why didn't he or she talk to me directly?" (Guillermina). Guillermina's expectations are based on her languaculture while she faces a conflict which is based on the institutional policy about grading. Evaluations are another institutional policy which was mentioned with respect to ITAs' experience. It was, especially, prominent in Ahmad's case when his expectations of students' satisfaction shown in class did not correlate with the evaluation content and, as a result, became a trigger for him to question his credibility as a teacher. In all aforementioned cases, institutional policies and rules appeared to contribute to

creating rich points for ITAs, which required ITAs to readjust their initial expectations and practices accordingly.

Institutional policies, though, are not the only “evil” impact factors which cause rich points to happen. They often serve as a way out of the conflict or the rich point turmoil. For instance, Aloha, while accentuating that she had to learn how to deal with students’ disruptive behavior in class, suggests that one of her options is to dispel a student from the class (a university policy). It is the least she wants to do but she indicates that by implementing this policy she can stop an out-of-hand classroom conflict. Similarly, Mary used the institutional policies to resolve a rich point which stemmed from inadequate departmental support regarding a student in her class. Mary, being an experienced TA, was given advice by the department supervisor, which indicated the preference of not taking the conflict outside the class and the department. Although Mary was trying to deal with student’s attitude in the class according to the advice, it did not help. The ITA decided to report the student to the Dean’s office as she felt that the advice from the department was insufficient. Thus, she referred to the university policy for resolving a rich point in her teaching. Finally, Malek showcased a very unique attitude towards university policies. Since he is in charge of teaching a preparation course for other ITAs, Malek feels obliged to have deep understanding of various university rules and guidelines. He tries to nurture his students’ awareness in this regard. Knowing and using university policies serves as a preventative measure to avoid many rich points for ITAs. First, Malek, retrospectively sees how he could have prevented several rich points in his career (dealing with the drunk student in his class, for example). Second, according to Malek, the ITA cannot detach himself/herself from reality on campus and needs to be a part of university community. Therefore, learning more about policies in order to teach his class helps Malek expands his



professional and personal languaculture too so university policy can serve as a resolution or even as prevention of rich points for ITAs. A complete discussion of this rich point is described in Chapter 5.

### **Variation across cases.**

Although dealing with university policies and funding appeared as prominent impact factors across cases, one peculiar topic regarding how the environment (in the general sense) impacts ITAs from the Southwest sample emerged. If university policy is a condition one has to deal within the institution settings, **current US politics** serves as a condition one has to deal with everywhere. It became evident that certain features of the current sociopolitical condition in the US affect participants from the STU sample, hence, influence their experiences as ITAs. Three main features were mentioned: current political situation (Trump administration), mass shootings and gun laws in the US, and the US immigration policies. Guillermina, for example, reported that her “double-sided sword” dilemma rose to a new level after Trump was elected. She is trying to be a critically thinking teacher who fosters the same aptitude in her students but, at the same time, Guillermina feels she should not appear too critical because the students might start judging her since she is a foreigner. Although she has already felt like that before, she identified that, currently, her critique of the US reality can be dangerous as she assumes that “statistically, there are some students here who voted for the person who said immigrants are not welcomed here. And I am technically not an immigrant...I am just a visitor but I don’t think they [students] have this fine-grained division” (Guillermina). She, in fact, started questioning the sincerity behind people’s interest in learning about other cultures and countries, which makes her feel rather unsafe.

Aloha also reports being even more cautious in her teaching after the Trump election. Her intercultural communication class, generally, is built around sensitive topics - whiteness, racism, gender discrimination, to name a few. She is fearful that previously existing “classroom dramas”, which are based on reactions to such topics, can get even more escalated. She observed that on the day of elections some “students were crying. Some of those male students [who previously showed a rather biased vision on some sensitive topics] didn’t show up because they probably knew that in that situation, they were not welcome” (Aloha). Similarly, Ahmad and Malek, being Muslims and being representatives of certain nations, which according to the mainstream US media are positioned as dangerous, anticipate possible future challenges in their communities of practice, though, remain hopeful for the best. They, as well, note that they never experienced direct hostility on campus in this regard, apart from occasional stereotyping, which they try to prevent in their classes and outside the campus too. In all the cases, US politics becomes a factor which impacts rich points emergence and, as a result, the said ITAs have to readjust their vision and practices.

Mass shooting and gun laws appeared a salient topic for discussion among ITAs from STU too. Not only this is an impact factor for rich points to emerge, it is a direct example of how ITAs’ languaculture transforms as they have to deal with a possible threat of shootings on campus or worry about their children in schools. Their teaching identity is changing as Guillermina, for instance, reports that she started practicing the classroom examination to be ready for a possible escape and defense from shootings. Aloha suggests that, since she has to discuss sensitive topics which also provoke people’s emotions, she is not only evaluating students in regard to being dangerous but she, sometimes, prefers not to push certain topics further and “let it go” as she is afraid of the consequences. In her practice, one of the rich points

appeared after she did not know how to react to a student's cultural presentation about guns. Her advisor, who was observing Aloha's class on that day, could not provide any advice too, though, the advisor was an American citizen. This made Aloha feel further confused about how to deal with the gun topic in class as in her native languaculture such topics cannot even emerge in the educational settings. Malek mentioned that mass shootings make him very emotional as he, a teacher of ITA preparation course, feels responsible to prepare ITAs for situations like that as well as he feels concerned about his family.

Finally, immigration rules emerge as a very important impact factor for all ITAs in the Southwest as all ITAs reported their desire to stay in the US for work in academia. One of the anticipated challenges they have to deal with is immigration policies and visa procedures. Overall, the STU ITAs seem to be more influenced by the current US politics as they referred to future and present changes in their environment and self/selves positioning. To conclude, adhering to policies and internalizing politics indicated another way ITAs deal with rich points dynamics as it was discussed in this section.

### **Translating Rich Points via Internalization of Others' Actions in various Communities of Practice**

In the previous section I have started the discussion about how rich points occur in the contextual domain of environment. It seems logical that actions within communities of practice also need to be presented, especially, keeping in mind that community of practice is one of the fundamental concepts in this research. Before I delve into the analysis of what roles communities of practice have within rich points dynamics in ITAs experiences, it should be noted that one of the features of the following study has been an assumption that the classroom is not the only community of practice for ITAs in the US academia. ITAs function and lead their day-to-day

activities in multiple communities of practice, which has not been researched thoroughly in the previous studies about ITAs' experiences. Hence, I aimed at exploring other ITAs' communities of practice and what dynamical nature they exhibit (from ITAs' perspectives).

Since it was significant for the research to explore as many communities of practice as I could, I focused on observing various ITAs' interactions in multiple settings (face-to-face). I had a chance to observe six different **classes** in both research locations (Alex at NTU; Mary, Guillermina (2 classes), Malek, and Aloha at STU). The classes which stood out as peculiar due to their specifics were an Art class in a studio (Alex at NTU) and an (I)TA preparation seminar (Malek at STU). I also managed to observe the following ITAs interaction: **a lab set-up**, which is a collaborative (I)TA action to prepare the classroom for the next lab session (Selda at NTU); **a meeting of an ITA-led support group**, which is meant to discuss teaching questions for the specific class (Ahmad at STU); **an informal department social**, which aims to provide socializing and collaborative space for graduate students in the program and is organized by the students (Guillermina at STU); **an informal meeting with a professor** in regard to specifics of a hiring process (Mary at STU); **a collaborative ITA grading session** (Alex at NTU); and, finally, **after-class office time** (Guillermina at STU and Mary at STU). All these observations were followed by debriefing in which ITAs described and discussed their perspective on their observed interactions. This data, coupled with the data from interviews and visual/artifact data collection, helped me obtain deeper understanding of ITAs' various communities of practice and rich points dynamics within such environments. Also, it contributed in the triangulation of data.

In the process of analysis, it became evident that ITAs across cases do consider the classroom as one of their communities of practice, but it is always positioned as a separate entity. The only time that the classroom as a community of practice merges with other communities of

practice, like the department community of practice is when the ITA feels that he/she needs some help from the faculty/other members, or they are in trouble. The second prominent community, as one might guess, is the department as a community of practice, which in majority of cases was perceived as a hierarchy. The next community of practice was the community of (I)TAs/colleagues which had a variation between the cases.

ITAs from NTU recognized the (I)TAs/colleagues community of practice as a sub-community of the department community of practice. However, less hierarchy and more informal patterns of behavior were attributed to the (I)TAs/colleagues community of practice in the Northwest whereas, in the Southwest, (I)TA/colleagues community of practice was seen as a part of department with more frigid dynamics within. What is more, STU ITAs demonstrated that more informal, affinity-based communities of practice might stem from the (I)TA/colleagues communities of practice. Such informal communities of practice, which usually are comprised of (I)TAs, friends, and co-workers, are born on the borderline between the formal (I)TA/colleagues communities of practice (a part of the department) and informal communities of friends (outside the department).

First, the latter communities are very dynamic in nature and change over time while affecting the positionality of the study participants. For example, Guillermina expects that she would still maintain relationship with people from her current “unofficial (I)TA” community of practice once she finds a job at a different university but this community of practice would change as new people would be introduced. Second, these communities of practice are informal and less hierarchal, which allows members to share their true experiences and obtain authentic advice and support from other members. Valuable examples of this would be an ITA-organized support group in which Ahmad discusses his questions about the class (there are two more ITAs

who had certain exposure to teaching the same class). Aloha practices the same as she and her ITA friend has an online support group to discuss their experiences. Third, such communities are seen as emotional support groups too. Finally, a vital feature of such groups is recognition of the expertise of more knowledgeable people but without any threat to the individual's position (feeling equal in roles). Referring to the participants' words, such a community might be called "an unofficial community" (Guillermina) or a "real" community (Aloha). Surely, there are exceptions in the STU sample too. For example, Malek feels that his community of practice in the department is a "two-way relationship" and he does not report any hierarchy within his department community of practice. Overall, communities of practice which are described by the NTU participants show more hierarchal and less dynamic nature in comparison to the communities of practice presented by ITAs from the Southwest. Alex from NTU, probably, is the only ITA in that location who somewhat recognizes the informal nature of such (I)TA communities, but she still sees such (I)TA collaborations as a sub-community of the department community of practice. In contrast, STU ITAs, who have been mentioned above, position such (I)TAs communities either outside the department structures or right on the borderline.

Presenting findings about various communities of practice, undoubtedly, deserves a much-detailed discussion as they are integral part of ITAs life in academia. The little snapshot of findings above cannot fully demonstrate the whole dynamics of ITAs' positionality, roles, functions and relationships with others, yet, it is needed to, first, propel the discussion of rich points emergence and resolution further and, second, showcase the evidence for my research assumption about ITAs existing in various communities of practice. Hence, I have provided only the gist of findings about communities of practice pertaining to the nature of my main research

question. Below is the discussion of rich points dynamics which are attributed to such various communities of practice.

ITAs' navigation of rich points via **internalization of others' actions in communities of practice** appears as one of the salient themes across cases. It means that other participants of various discourses affect ITAs' rich points emergence and resolution. The most suggested instances in this regard were about first, classroom as a community of practice with students' actions towards ITAs; second, department community of practice with supervisors/professors' impact; and finally, interactions within (ITAs/colleagues (sub)community of practice (in whatever variation it can be).

First, **students' behavior** is one of the most mentioned impact factors, primarily, serving as a trigger for rich points to bloom. ITAs across cases refer to either peculiarities of American students' behavior (a discrepancy between LC1 expectations and LC2 reality) or to a not-caring, somewhat passive attitude (to the subject, the class, the teacher) projected by students. It has been already demonstrated in the aforementioned examples from rich point stories by Astro-Gal (student spitting in class), Ahmad (hypocrisy in students' feedback) and Guillermina (a student reporting her for not quick enough grading). In addition, Malek highlighted that he was initially shocked by the amount of casualty in students' behavior (putting feet on the table) while Aloha's main concern has been students' direct display of not paying attention. Students' behavior ultimately, as an impact factor, leads to reconsidering one's values, expectations and views as well as it fuels ITAs' transformation in teaching. Hence, students' behavior forces ITAs to modify their frames in the process of their languaculture evolution.

The second prominent theme which appeared regarding students' influence on ITAs' development is a topic of **students' biases towards ITAs**. All ITAs across cases emphasized

how they felt being judged and even openly discriminated due to a variety of reasons. ITAs observed the “native versus non-native” dichotomy in terms of their language skills and pedagogical aptitudes, which was rather salient in all ITAs’ accounts. ITAs felt that students were also biased towards them regarding their academic rank (as compared to faculty), international status (as compared to domestic TAs/faculty or to the white/European international teachers), gender (being a woman), race and nationality (people of color), and religion/tradition (as compared to the main Christian religion). Sometimes, ITAs report faculty and administration showing such prejudice against them.

It should be noted that in majority of cases ITAs felt that students might be biased; these statements did not come via the direct insult against ITAs. Rather, ITAs inferred such attitudes through indirect evidence and their own observations of being treated differently in comparison to the mainstream category. In some cases, students’ biases were seen through stereotypes and micro-aggression instances. For example, NTU ITAs mostly reported the “native versus non-native” dynamics and a feeling of being perceived as “exotic”: “in all these impressions I would just question would they do the same to an American teaching assistant? Would they behave like this in front of the white person?” (Astro-Gal about feeling that students are prejudiced because of her appearance); “those two students... never met international students and new accent was very difficult to understand for them” (Selda about one of her rich points when the supervisor had to explain to students that Selda speaks with an accent). Mary from STU also referred to accentism when she switched from teaching Japanese to teaching Linguistics as she was “feeling strange” that she would be teaching native speakers about English accents. Aloha from STU directly highlighted that she feels and expects the prejudice of all sorts “They will judge everything: your accent, your grammar, and they would, probably, even judge your credibility to



teach the class. Because you come from China. Because if you are from a European country, they will see you as something beautiful” (Aloha). She concludes that such biases are visible: “They are giving you those looks and the attitude as if they are saying: “You are really not talking, right?” (Aloha). Ahmad and Malek from STU suggested that they, potentially, can be discriminated against their religion (Islam) due to the political situation, while Guillermina highlighted that being international and a Spanish speaker might provoke a certain stereotype about her, which can lead to a bias about her being a credible teacher. The biases, whether they are projected towards ITAs directly or indirectly (perceived as biases by ITAs), serve as one of the most prominent triggers for rich points to occur. Such impact factors force ITAs to readjust rather rapidly while being entangled in the internal identities’ conflicts (the previously discussed impact points of forced identities, “multiple hats”, conceal/reveal acts in identities development, and the imposter syndrome). The impact factor of students’ behavior and students’ biases often go hand in hand and can, also, be seen in connection to self-analysis as a possible way to navigate these rich points.

The process of ITAs’ rich point navigation in terms of others’ actions in various communities of practice also reflected such an impact factor as **supervisors/professors’ support and advice**. All ITAs’ underscored the importance of such help and the analysis of various rich points across cases demonstrated that, in fact, supervisors’ (professors and advisors) support and advice served as the factor to resolve rich points and internalize certain changes in the ITA’s evolution. This impact factor is linked to the department community of practice. For instance, the aforementioned rich point stories from the Northwest can illustrate how this topic plays out in rich points resolution. In Astro-Gal’s story about the student appearing disrespectful (spitting in front of her several times), one of the main factors to internalize that the student “meant no

harm” was a discussion of this conflict with Astro-Gal’s advisor and his willingness to help if the situation repeats itself. However, at times, Astro-Gal would point out that the provided help from the professor did not meet her expectations of what the professor could have done. Alex very prominently refers to her supervisor/professor’ support as a factor which helped her understand certain new concepts and move along in her new languaculture. For example, in her conflict situation between the offended student and apologetic disability service authorities, her professor was the one who arranged the whole discussion to happen: “She explained the whole thing to disability people... She listened to me and listened to my opinion...she kept me informed in every part before that meeting... and during the meeting she took care of it. In a good way” (Alex). Selda’s story about students’ not understanding her accent, as I have already described, was also resolved by her advisor’s involvement.

Support and help from supervisors/professors and advisors were also strongly reported by the ITAs from South Trails University. Mary reported that she even has “supervisor’s voice in my head” as she received a lot of help from the supervisor whose perspective is rather valuable in the whole process of teaching: “it is XXX speaking to me”. It is interesting that Mary fully acknowledges that her supervisor helps her resolve conflicts and navigate in teaching experiences but, at the same time, Mary is autonomous enough not to follow her supervisor’s advice if such advice does not work (in a way, she developed the critical understanding of her supervisor over time). Guillermina highlights that professors are helpful in regard to conflicts with policies (her incident with reported late grading). She also underscores another type of help provided by the faculty, which can be found in Ahmad’s experiences too: by observing how professors approach teaching, research, and interpersonal communication in academia, ITAs learn a new languacultural way of existing within their environment. This is not the direct help

which is provided but it is, in a way, help which ITAs obtain from observing their academic authorities and modeling their future scenarios. What is more, Ahmad points out that not having such a support from faculty, which usually happens when ITAs are not invited in the communal actions within the department, leads to feeling lost and halts ITAs' teaching development. Malek's vision on faculty's support echoes previously mentioned ITAs' reflections but he, also, underscores that he sees the ideal relationship with the faculty as "a two-way relationship" (helping each other equally), which he is lucky to observe in his current teaching assistantship.

STU ITAs provided a valuable insight in the role of a supervisor: the more experienced the ITA is the more his/her perception of the supervisor changes. Mary, Malek and Guillermina referred to such a change: Mary feels comfortable questioning her supervisor's advice while she is still rather influenced by the supervisor's opinion. She also feels like other professors see her as "a young co-worker" and she can approach familiar professors for the advice which is not directly related to teaching (for example, talking about a hiring process I observed). Guillermina realizes that she can have a more informal relationship with her advisor and supervisor as they are not her "bosses" as she thought initially. Malek is still surprised and elated about the fact that his current supervisor can be called his friend and such a relationship make him feel rather confident as a professional in his departmental community of practice. Such a shift in perception can be attributed to ITAs' gaining their legitimate positions in the communities of practice as they progress in their teaching via experience and time.

Therefore, the role of supervisors, professors, and advisors appeared rather salient in ITAs' experiences, especially, in regard to providing support and help. Such help can be seen as a way out of the conflict and rich point turmoil while the absence of supervisor/professors' support might become the rich point emergence. Aloha, probably, was the only ITA who

mentioned such support the least but she, at the same time referred to another source of help, advice and support – from her “unofficial” or “real” (I)TA communities of practice, which I am about to discuss below.

The final impact factor in the current theme discussion is **(I)TAs support and help**. This factor is true to such ITAs’ communities of practice which either is positioned as a sub-community of departmental community of practice (mostly observed in the Northwest location) or as a community of practice which emerged on the borderlines of department and other affinity community of practice or completely outside the department (mostly found in the Southwest). The main feature of (I)TAs’ help and support is similar to the previously discussed impact factor – ITAs seek advice and expertise from their peers whether they see them as a part of the department structure or not. However, there is a little distinction as ITAs expect to be able to share their experience within such a community and, ideally, find emotional balance and support. Aloha, as I mentioned previously, solely relies on her “unofficial” community which includes her international friend from the previous program. They communicate daily online and as Aloha points out: “we support each other [in academic life and everyday life]. We talk about difficulties in teaching, even though we teach different classes. Our problems are sometimes similar because we are women and also international” (Aloha). Aloha values her friend’s advice as she feels that her friend “is a better scholar” than her but at the same time “there is no hierarchy” in their community as they just want to support each other. Apart from this community, Aloha also establishes communication and collaboration with other ITAs who identify as international or with American TAs/students of color as she thinks they can relate more to her experiences as an international scholar and teacher. Department community of practice, according to Aloha, is “fake” and hierarchical.

Interestingly, the same pattern is found in Ahmad and Guillermina's "real" (I)TAs communities. As Aloha, Ahmad believes that department community of practice is hierarchical; what is more, he still finds himself excluded from the communal engagement. Ahmad receives the most support and expertise from the ITA-led teaching support group, which I was lucky to observe. This community aims at helping each other in teaching, especially, given the fact that all three community members had experience in teaching the same course (the same one Ahmad was teaching at the data collection point) as well as they all share similar views as certain instances of their original languacultures overlap. All three are international students too. There is no hierarchy observed but as with Aloha's informal community of practice, there is conscious acknowledgement of more experienced and knowledgeable people in the group (ITAs who have more teaching experience). Guillermina suggest that she has "official" and "unofficial" communities of practice when it comes to peers and co-workers. These two communities merge at various moments and during certain activities but one of the reasons she feels rather indifferent towards her "official" ITA group in the program is that she could not find those (I)TAs' genuine support and collaboration. Initially, she really wanted to collaborate with other (I)TAs in the department but she realized that there was a sense of competition and her collaboration attempts faced the wall. Guillermina turned to her "unofficial" (I)TAs community as she internalized that the best position in her "official" (I)TA community is "I am here if you need me" (Guillermina). Her "unofficial" group still has a few people from her program, and it is obvious that these two communities merge. Malek and Mary did not really differentiate having special groups as it appeared that they establish very solid communication within the department community of practice: for Mary it is the communication with her "old" friends who are

TAs/colleagues whereas for Malek his supervisor and other colleagues represent the true support and help via their “two-way relationship”.

ITAs from NTU saw such (I)TAs’ help and support mostly within the department structures (ITAs are seen as extension of the department community of practice). All three participants reported multiple examples on how other (I)TAs support served as a way to resolve certain rich points. The most prominent instances in the Northwest ITAs’ experiences were an opportunity to approach other (I)TAs with questions, discuss certain problems, and to learn something new about the US academic environment in the process of collaboration. Alex mentioned that she confided in other (I)TAs during her problems with students as well as she highlighted that she learned how to grade more efficiently after doing it together with her peers. Selda appreciates the opportunity that she can communicate with other (I)TAs during their meetings and setting the labs as well as that her first teaching attempts were highly influenced by other (I)TAs’ teaching approaches through observing their classes. Astro-Gal, though pointing out that she feels that relationships with people are “fake” in the US academia, still found two people – her resource TA for the class and her friend TA from the program to provide a great deal of support from helping to calibrate her telescope to clarifying certain policies.

Overall, (I)TAs’ support and help, whether it is perceived as a part of the department community of practice or on the borderline or completely outside of the structure, appears as a dominant impact factor for ITAs to resolve some of their rich points and navigate in the new languacultural reality easier. This impact point, also, is connected to how participants perceive themselves in various communities. During the data analysis, it became quite evident that, even though all these communities seem to be autonomous, the ITA, by moving to and fro, creates a dynamic movement within and between these communities, which affects how he/she positions

himself/herself. At times, those communities merge or overlap or the boundaries become vague as it would, again, be dependent on how the ITA perceives his/her positionality and how he/she is being perceived. If the ITA is stuck in the zone of legitimate peripheral participation in one of his communities, he/she might attempt to become a member of a more accepting community of practice. This is very evident in Malek's example above: since he achieved that "two-way relationship" in his department (job) community of practice, which makes him content as a professional and a human being, he does not strive to create another community of practice for the same purpose. Aloha's example is the other side of the spectrum: her most inclusive community of practice is her informal (I)TA community with the friend because her department community of practice is almost non-existent and "fake", thus, here positionality in such a community of practice is questioned too. Having support from some external sources appear as a way to continue moving within the academic settings and resolve certain challenges.

### **Variations across cases.**

The only variation within this rich point navigation in this theme is that ITAs from different research locations reported the difference in dynamics within communities of practice. I have partially covered these differences above. In summary, all ITAs across cases observed a more rigid and hierarchal structure in the department community of practice, which can serve as an impetus for the rich point to appear. Meanwhile (I)TAs/fellow colleagues, predominantly, from the "real" or "unofficial" communities of practice seem to be the people with whom the study participants want to share their experiences and seek advice from. The ITAs from the Southwest indicated that they are more conscious and selective when they socialize within (I)TA communities. They seek people with the same backgrounds and experiences (international, academic, emotional and other), which helps them navigate in their overall experience. It means

that Southwest ITAs see yet another impact point to resolve a rich point situation – via building a strong relationship with others who share similar experiences and backgrounds while understanding that departmental hierarchy can play against them and provoke another rich point to appear. Also, the STU ITAs built their (I)TA communities of practice outside the department hierarchy or on the border with the department community of practice, while ITAs from NTU considered their (I)TA community to be an extension or a sub-group of the department community of practice.

### **Translating Rich Points via Teaching Evolution**

Finally, there is a big theme across cases which indicates that rich points can be mediated via one's movement and progression in teaching or **teaching evolution**. This theme indicates that there are several processes which can be seen as continuous and transformational. During the analysis it became evident that transformation happens, mostly, within teaching. It is imperative, however, to understand that these processes also can be found beyond the class teaching as teacher's identity represents a complex play of multiple identities (as it has been discussed in this chapter) but the findings mostly showcased that ITAs were referring to the teaching-related transformations. This theme or a rich point navigational tool is located on a borderline between the contextual domain of self and the contextual domain of environment since the impact factors I am going to discuss further simultaneously represent both, self/selves and environment in teaching evolution.

It became evident that the most salient impact factor across all cases was **adjustment through time and experience**. This process was showcased by the ITAs as one of the most prominent rich points resolution techniques, especially, with the reference to teaching. It seems that whatever was not internalized by ITAs, whatever newness was not understood immediately,



was accepted in some time in the process of moving along on “the spiral” of ITAs’ experience. It is almost like an expected solution, even for those points, which were reported not to be resolved – time and experience would take care of resolving them. This process is also closely related to ITAs’ teacher-as-learner identity which I have discussed previously. The impact factor of adjusting through time and experience, though, is more fluid and abstract as well as it is noticed as a rich point resolution technique in the process of self-analysis and retrospective vision.

While adjusting through time and experiences, all ITAs connected their teaching evolution to a changing attitude towards teaching: depending on the duration of their involvement in academia as ITAs, they became or were about to become or strive to become a **responsible and goal-oriented teacher**. First, across all the cases ITAs were progressing towards a more responsible and goal-oriented teacher or the teacher in charge. Being in charge did not mean to have a teacher-centered classroom but rather to be a teacher who is critical in his/her thinking and who improves his/her teaching daily to have a more meaningful teaching-learning environment. The teacher in charge is also about receiving respect and appreciation – an idea which appeared throughout the data set in the reference to ITAs positing themselves as teachers. For instance, teacher’s evolution of less experienced ITAs (Alex, Selda, Ahmad, Astro-Gal) is centered on the discussion about their transformation and rich points through a change of their original expectations or the struggle of not meeting their initial expectations in their immediate environment. Aloha and Guillermina, being somewhat in the middle between new and mature ITAs, showcase that certain transformation has already happened but it is still very important for them to track it as they are developing a more critical outlook on such modifications in their teaching and getting used to their new selves in teaching. Finally, Mary

and Malek - the most “seasoned” ITAs in the study - demonstrate that they already are teachers in charge, they are rather autonomous and independent.

Finally, adjustment through time and experience reflected one of the major ITAs’ “problems” – **language**. Technically, it is ITAs’ language and culture as the current research project does not recognize language and culture as separate. References to challenges in language and communication did appear in ITAs’ experiences but not as an isolated problem, rather, as a factor which transforms over time and experience. This topic was more prominent in the Northwest sample and, for this reason, I will discuss it in the next section, which is about variation across cases.

#### **Variations across cases.**

The variation between cases revealed anticipated themes of **language, culture, and pedagogy in teaching/teacher’s evolution**. In the Northwest sample, the evolution within communication and language appeared as salient. All ITAs reported that one of the impact factors to trigger a conflict situation or a challenge in understanding new languaculture was connected to their ability to speak, pronounce words with the right accent, and communicate using the “accepted” phrases and concepts. This language ability was, in its turn, connected to ITA’s background or what the traditional approach represents as “culture”. Progression and evolution in language and communication skills in the Northwest sample was viewed as resolution of certain rich points or internalizing the change which came with new languaculture. Ultimately, this impact factor – language - is connected to ITAs’ progression through time and experience. For instance, Selda and Alex report that improving their language skills over time help them feel more confident in class as teachers. One of Selda’s initial rich points happened around her accent being not comprehensible for certain students. Initially, to resolve this rich

point, she had her supervisor talk to the students about her language skills. However, in the course of time, as she highlights, the situation changed and, eventually, she felt comfortable with her language skills as well as her students stopped paying attention to her accent. Alex stressed that she would mispronounce some architecture related terms, which would be corrected by her students and which she would appreciate as a learning opportunity. Astro-Gal was probably the most outspoken about how she feels her language skills are not sufficient enough, although, she has been bilingual (English as one of her languages) throughout her life: “I think no matter how much I try to convey things I still do not use the same words... the words they use for the same things... they usually ask me what do you mean?” (Astro-Gal). For Astro-Gal, the language proficiency is linked to the imposter syndrome and to feeling of students’ biases as she continues: “I noticed that and I’ve seen that sometimes when the kids see me or somebody whose skin color is different they are thinking that whatever this person is going to say I am not going to understand” (Astro-Gal). She even observes the same attitude in her professional research community as she feels that people question her language and her ability to communicate because she looks “exotic” and “her accent is odd”, which automatically equals to bad English. In Astro-Gal’s rich points story there is no resolution yet. She is obliged to be an ITA for one more semester before graduation, according to the department rules. That semester might become the moment when her current languaculture will get modified as Astro-Gal already states that after teaching for one semester she is more hopeful and confident. Time and experience might appear as a possible impact point for her, especially, regarding language skills.

The Southwest ITAs showcased less references to problems with language and culture; however, the “native versus non-native” dichotomy became evident in some stories. Mostly such references appear within a topic of students’ biases, which has been already discussed above.

Mary, for instance, demonstrated something which can be described as a “reverse” native-non-native dynamics as she felt that once she stopped teaching Japanese (her LC1) and switched to teaching linguistics (in LC2) she became acutely aware of accentism, which was directly connected to her role as a teacher and professional in the field of linguistics: “How can a person with accent speak about accent variations in English?” (Mary). Guillermina had a similar dynamic by navigating her split teaching identities: teaching Spanish linguistics (teaching in LC1 about LC1) versus teaching linguistics (teaching about LC2 using her LC2 but being a representative of LC1). Those instances, however, were less connected to language imperfections and more linked to **being able to share one’s cultural identity in class**. Being able to reveal their languacultural identities and share cultural experiences is seen as a significant impact factor for possible resolution (avoidance) of rich points among STU ITAs. It ultimately leads to changing a role of the teacher in the classroom and finding that students can be **ITAs’ allies** in challenging teaching moments, especially those who **share the same experience and background**. Inability or fear or lack of confidence to share one’s cultural selves appeared as an impact factor of a possible rich point. One can say that with time and experience the state of concealing might fade away (like it happened with Guillermina and Aloha who chose to stop concealing who they are as teachers) and by being able to share his/her cultural assumptions in the class the ITA demonstrates the evolved version of his/her teaching/being a teacher.

The variations in cases might be explained by several factors. First, in the Southwest sample ITAs had to teach and deal with a lot of **sensitive topics in their classroom**, which by itself is an impact factor to trigger rich points emergence. All ITAs in the STU sample are from the field of social sciences and humanities. They teach such classes that presuppose an in-depth discussion of stereotypes, discrimination, and biases. Even the linguistics classes, which from

first glance, appeared to be generic introductory classes, required Mary and Guillermina to talk about sensitive language and culture topics, for instance, language policies, language colonialism and accents. Thus, this factor might have influenced the significance of (not) being able to share ITAs' cultural identities in class. Second, the school's culture presupposed more **diversity** than NTU, thus, the population of STU might have been more prepared not to notice an accent or an "exotic" look. In contrast, what united all three Northwestern ITAs' experiences is the ITAs' critical understanding of their class and their environment overall as the environment which lacks diversity. All ITAs highlight that they cannot expect a reaction other than feeling "exotic" or insufficient in their language and culture from a young crowd of students who have not been exposed to diversity due to the specifics of their region. Alex, Astro-Gal, and Selda emphasized that there were instances when some students confessed that these ITAs were the first international people they ever met in their lives. Thus, the geographical location and the dominant assumptions/expectations among local population might have played a role in "problematizing" accents, language imperfections, and ITAs' looks. As I have mentioned already, these findings are not meant to be generalized to the entire population of ITAs in their locations; rather, the findings demonstrate what came across as prominent in discussions of each ITA's unique experience in the US academia.

Teacher's/teaching evolution can be observed as the final way for ITAs' to navigate through rich points. The most significant moment in such a navigation is adjusting through time and experience as well as becoming an autonomous and goal-oriented educator. The anticipated "ITA problems" of language, culture, and pedagogy made their appearance in this theme but they were witnessed through the lens of teaching evolution, thus, as something which is anticipated to be transformed via time and experience. Teaching evolution in the Southwest hinted more at

such factors as ITAs' desire to share their cultural experiences in class and a challenge of dealing with sensitive topics on a regular basis. Language and communication were more of a concern at NTU. This theme is located right in between the contextual domains of self/selves and environment.

### **Summary of Findings**

The findings can be summarized in the following way. First, navigation or mediation of rich points by ITAs is a complex process, which happens simultaneously in two contextual domains of self/selves and environment. Five ways to navigate through the rich points dynamics were found among eight ITAs (focal participants) from two ITAs communities (two cases), who were bound to a specific research site location (the Northwest and the Southwest of the US). The mediation of rich points happens via **navigating ITA's multiple identities**; via **ITAs' self-analysis/self-reflection**; via **internalization of others' actions in ITAs' various communities of practice**; via **adhering to the politics and policies**; and via **evolution as a teacher**.

Second, in order to trace the dynamics of changes in LC1 and LC2 via rich points, in each of the five aforementioned ways of navigating/mediating rich points the most salient triggers for the rich points to emerge and resolve were found (the impact factors). The most salient impact points across cases were ITAs' "multiple hats"; ITAs' forced identities; ITAs' teacher-as-learner identity; critical understanding of reality; students' behavior in class; students' biases towards ITAs; supervisor/professor's support and advice; (I)TAs' support and advice; university policies (funding); being/becoming a goal-oriented teacher/ teacher in charge; and adjusting through time and experience. Also, in each case other salient impact factors were discovered, which showcased the variation between two cases. The Northwestern sample demonstrated that imposter syndrome, language/communication peculiarities and lack of

diversity in class are other important impact factors to embrace new languaculture. The Southwestern ITAs exhibited the influence of US politics on rich points emergence and resolution, as well as, they demonstrated more dynamic and varied nature in their communities of practice. They also showed significance of their languacultural experiences and identities in class via sharing/concealing/revealing such identities while being impacted by the sensitive topics discussions as a part of the subjects they teach. Such variations are attributed to the specifics of the sample (field of study and time spent being an ITA) and the overall culture of the institution (population and location). The summary of findings is represented below (Figure 9).

### Findings: Navigational Ways through Rich Points

R Q: How do ITAs mediate the emergence and resolution of rich points in their communities of practice in the US academia?

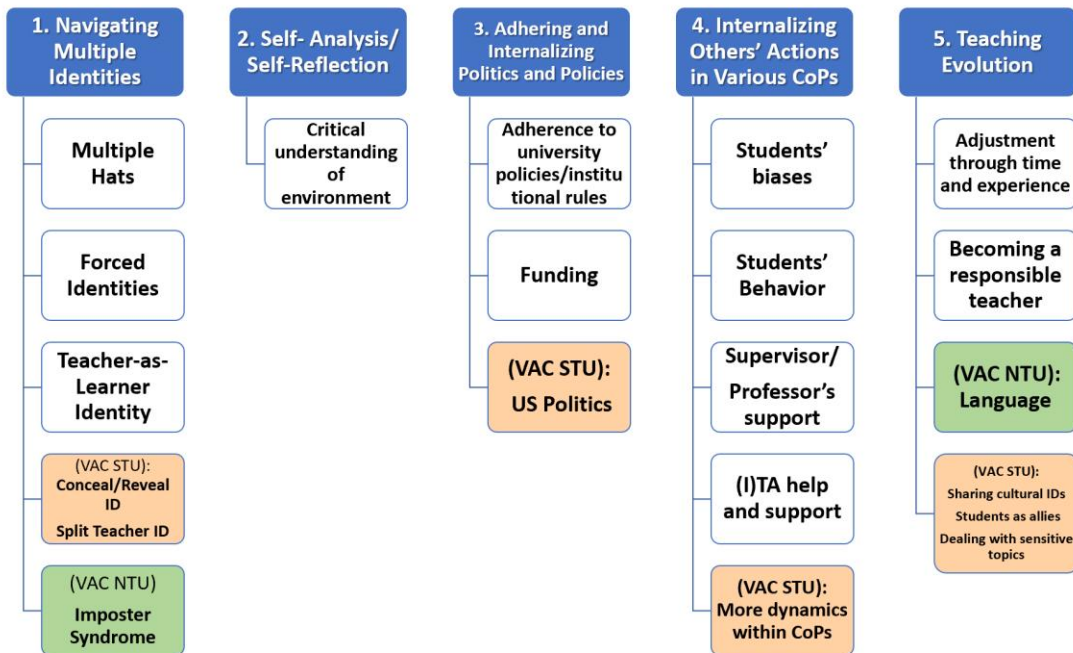


Figure 9. Navigational ways through the rich points. This picture illustrates the findings of the study.

Third, it is important to understand that while highlighting five big ways to negotiate the movement within LC1 and LC2, each rich point, being unique and complex, is sometimes navigated by combining several ways of navigation. Similarly, it is not just one and only impact

factor which initiates or resolves the challenge, it might be a combination of impact factors. Hence, each rich point appearance and resolution is an exclusive and complex process, which involves multiple impact factors in unique combinations to appear and which is, also, impacted by the peculiarities of each ITA's languaculture and background. Consequently, it influences the ways that very rich points are being navigated.

Fourth, various communities of practice were traced in ITAs' narratives about their experiences in the US academia. The classroom community of practice, which is the most researched regarding ITAs' experiences, appeared to have an autonomous status in a majority of rich points stories. The classroom community, however, overlaps with other communities at the moment of challenges. Other communities of practice, such as department community of practice and (I)TAs/colleagues' community of practice demonstrated to be rather important for ITAs. STU ITAs are inclined towards more informal/affinity based (I)TAs communities of practice located on a borderline of department community of practice or completely outside. Department community of practice is seen as a hierarchy by the ITAs across all the cases. It is also quite important to see that ITAs are moving within these communities of practice and these communities can appear in different capacities during the rich point navigation as well as they affect ITAs' positionalities.

Fifth, it was revealed that majority of rich points have a reference to a negative type of emotions such as confusion, stress, shock, skepticism, anger, fear. However, in some instances, the rich point is associated with the positive emotion – feeling surprised. Overall, ITAs showcased that with their progression of experiences as ITAs in the US academia they move from negatively-loaded emotions to either, neutral (feeling curious) or to a more positive spectrum of emotion including more optimistic hopes for the future.



Finally, the variations between cases demonstrated that the major observed differences indicate that the southwestern ITAs showcased, first, a variety of additional identities at play, which are mostly linked to a desire to reveal/ share/conceal cultural background; second, influence of sensitive topics presence in their classes; third, an impact of the current sociopolitical reality on ITAs' experiences; and, fourth, a more expanded and dynamic nature of ITAs' multiple communities of practice. The northwestern sample revealed an impact of language and communication peculiarities and a more pronounced presence of imposter syndrome. Such variations are not meant to be generalized to the entire population of ITAs at both research sites or to be presented as a comparative study; rather, I see a discovery of such variations as a reminder of how versatile ITAs' experiences can be and, at best, can attribute the aforementioned discrepancies to, first, peculiarities of the sample and specifics of each university location, population, and institutional culture.

## Conclusion

Chapter 4 was meant to provide a thorough discussion of the main findings and set the ground for further synthesis and analysis in Chapter 5. The discussion reveals that five major themes were found in the process of data analysis while the researcher targeted the research question. These five themes represented how ITAs navigate rich points. According to the findings, rich points are mediated via, first, navigating ITA's multiple identities; second, via ITA's self-analysis and self-reflection; third, via ITAs' adherence and internalization of politics and policies; fourth, via internalization of others' actions in ITAs' various communities of practice; and, fifth, via ITA's teaching evolution. Within each navigational way certain impact factors were identified, which serve as triggers for rich points to appear, to be resolved or to be prevented. At times, the same impact factor can be seen as both a factor for rich point emergence and rich point. The section about main findings provided the depiction of the salient impact factors across cases and the variation across cases.

The summary of main findings emphasizes that ITAs' rich points are seen as unique and complex; the ITA tries and uses multiple ways of navigation. At the same time, multiple impact factors (or a combination of impact factors) can contribute into each rich point appearance and resolution. All navigational ways as impact points are located in the contextual domains of self/selves and environment, which overlap and merge at certain points. Teaching evolution is observed as one of such merging points as it reflects ITAs' movement within new languaculture. ITAs' dynamic movement between and within various communities of practice, for instance, classroom CoP, department CoP, and (I)TA/colleagues CoP, play a significant role in ITAs' positionality (perceiving self and how others perceive ITAs) as well as it predetermines existence and nature of ITAs' certain communities of practice.

The variations between cases established that ITAs from STU displayed, first, a variety of additional identities, second, sensitive topics presence in their classes; third, influence of the current sociopolitical reality on ITAs' experiences; and, fourth, a more dynamic nature within ITAs' various communities of practice. NTU ITAs demonstrated that language and communication impact their navigation of rich points. Presence of imposter syndrome was also observed among NTU ITAs. Such variations are not meant to be generalized and are attributed to the location and overall culture of the research sites.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

### Introduction

The final chapter aims at analyzing the findings in order to deliver a more vivid picture of ITAs' experiences in the US academia. First, main findings are synthesized within the theoretical framework of sociocultural theory and, specifically, within the concept of *perezhivanie*. Such a discussion is meant to address the main question once again in a more focused manner. Eight rich point narratives are provided to illustrate an example of each participant's movement along the "spiral" in the process of navigating rich points. Next, the analysis of the interconnectedness between rich points and identities is presented, which targets answering the sub question of the study as well as it delivers identity discussion in the overall understanding of the study results. The discussion of language, culture, and pedagogy made an appearance in this chapter due to the urgency of discussing this topic in light of the study findings and how the research project positions them in comparison to the "deficit" perspective which was described in the first two chapters. After drawing conclusions within the analysis of the study, recommendations for the future research in the ITA-related field are presented.

## **Discussion of Findings within the Theoretical Framework**

As I noted previously, each rich point story is unique regarding how impact factors provoke emergence and resolution of rich points. Also, there is much variability in what navigational methods an ITA can take. Most times, it is not about one navigational way. Based on experience, background, and specific languaculture the participant can refer to multiple navigational tools creating a combination for mediation of the rich point as complex and original as it can be. I have already provided a solid amount of references to various impact factors and navigational ways throughout Chapter 4. However, I find it paramount to demonstrate the full process of navigation of some examples of rich points from the study. It is logical that I would not be able to provide an in-depth discussion of all primary and secondary rich points for each focal participant due to the number of participants in the study and the format of the dissertation, so I limited myself to sharing one rich point narrative for each ITA in the study to demonstrate the complexity of rich points mediation.

### **Rich point narratives: a grading conflict (Alex, NTU).**

During her first semester of teaching, Alex encountered a student who would appear as a diligent and disciplined learner but, at the point of turning the lab report in, her grade would not reflect any appropriate skills and knowledge. Alex, following the professor's guidelines for grading, would give this student a "C", which would cause Alex to be bombarded with emails about her being unfair in grading. After the first incident of being accused, Alex asked her professor to help her settle the conflict. She showed the professor her grading and asked for advice. Alex made a compromise by allowing the student to turn a make-up lab report to improve the grade, which never happened. She even apologized for giving the student a bad grade and offered some help. When the situation appeared for the second time and Alex received

angry emails for the same reason, Alex again allowed the student to work on improving the grade and also consulted with her fellow TAs in the program, who suggested that Alex needs to toughen up and stand her ground as a teacher. She also sought advice from the professor again. Alex, as well, reported a lot of self-reflection at those moments of being accused of unfair grading: “I really felt bad. And I felt a bit confused with her behavior. What should I do? Being an international student at that moment is very scary because we cannot afford losing our assistantship... the things were really bitter at that time”. Alex even received threats from the student to have Alex reported to the Dean of Students office. That is why Alex referred to her professor again for the help and her professor helped Alex by talking to the student’s advisor. The third email was the final drop for Alex and she followed her fellow TAs’ advice not to be too soft with the student as she expressed her firm position that student’s grade would not be improved unless some knowledge is reflected in her assignments. The emails stopped. Alex, when reminiscing on that story, emphasizes that this story probably happened because she is international as she would ask other TAs (one from Europe and one domestic): “How do you handle situations like that? And everyone was very surprised because no one received emails like that”. Alex highlights that situation made her feel very sad and confused.

Now, let me look at this story once again through the prism of rich point. Alex’s expectations (based on her languaculture) that if she follows supervisor’s grading rubric her students should be satisfied with their grades. However, she does not expect that grades can be disputed as well as that it can be done in such a harsh way. The rich point is learning about grading and interpersonal relationship between the teacher and the student in LC2 settings. It is being triggered by two impact factors: first, the student’s behavior and second, the student’s biases (as perceived by Alex) based on Alex’s international status. Hence, Alex arrives at the

rich point via **internalizing others’ actions in various communities of practice**. Alex is confused and sees the resolution in professor’s support, first, and, second, in her fellow TAs’ advice. As the situation continues without resolution, Alex also self-reflects and, finally, with additional help of supervisor and by taking full charge of her teaching (standing the ground), Alex manages to exit the rich point with the modified frames and transformed languaculture. Her exit is predetermined by such navigational tactics **as internalization of others’ actions in the departmental community of practice** (professor’s advice and support), via **self-analysis**, and her **teaching evolution** (becoming a teacher in charge). Notice, also, that there are references to such impact points as, first, a possibility to being reported to the university authorities (policies) and, second, fear of a possibility to lose funding (policies). Although they do not directly pertain to the emergence and the resolution of this very rich point, they indicate that other rich points could have spun off for Alex if she would not resolve the current rich point. Hence, this example demonstrates how complex and multiangled the navigation of rich point can be as well as how unique the rich point is with regard to being triggered, entered, resolved and exited.

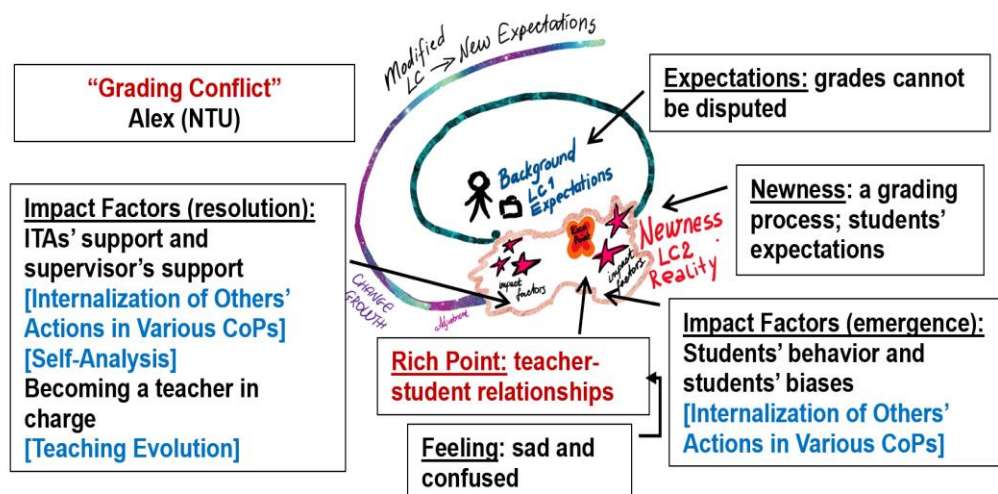


Figure 10. A Grading Conflict (Alex, NTU). This picture illustrates a rich point development.

**Rich point narratives: all alone under the stars (Astro-Gal, NTU).**

It was rather a happy day for Astro-Gal when she, exhausted, passed her 10 hour long qualifying exam for her Doctorate degree which lasted over three days. What happened next shocked Astro-Gal as she was told that she is about to start teaching a lab in Astrophysics: “I gave my exam on Tuesday and Thursday...It was Friday but then on Monday I started teaching. I was so occupied... just gave my exam... I'm exhausted and then my resource TA says: “You're done with your exam, let's go to the observatory and I would teach you to how to calibrate [the telescope]” (Astro-Gal). This was her first and only semester of teaching and being an ITA. It was a quite stressful semester too, which Astro-Gal still remembers with bitterness. She had to spend several nights a week from 7 to 11 pm setting up the telescopes, leading, the lab, and then packing up all the equipment all alone in the isolated part of the town on the hill, which made her feel very unsafe and her overall teaching experiences miserable. The situation remained the same until the semester was over. Astro-Gal, however, believes that her advisor and/or university could have tried to improve the teaching settings, for instance to “ensure that there are some guards there... Or a call on button to ensure that you feel safe”. Although Astro-Gal felt relieved her teaching assistantship was over, she is not excited about her future teaching assignment, which Astro-Gal is obliged to do as a part of the department requirements.

Astro-Gal faces a new experience – teaching a class and becoming an ITA. This is not her choice but a rule of the department, which is a prerequisite for her degree. Hence, she is forced to have a new identity of an ITA. These are impact factors for rich point to emerge so Astro-Gal’s entrance into the rich point happens via **navigation of multiple identities** and **adherence to institutional policies**. She enters the rich point with the expectations that it would be a reasonable teaching timetable, which appears to be not met. This collision of her



expectations and new reality makes a profound effect on her teaching experience as she feels stressed and insecure. This is a story which has no resolution of the rich point. Surely, the class was over, and the situation ended on its own, but this rich point has not been internalized as Astro-Gal still does not find such a teaching reality (teaching late) as acceptable. However, there is a potential resolution: via her advisor's help (taking an action to improve the teaching settings), which never happened. In this case, the resolution of the aforementioned rich point could have been via **internalization of others' actions in various communities of practice** (impact factor: advisor's help).

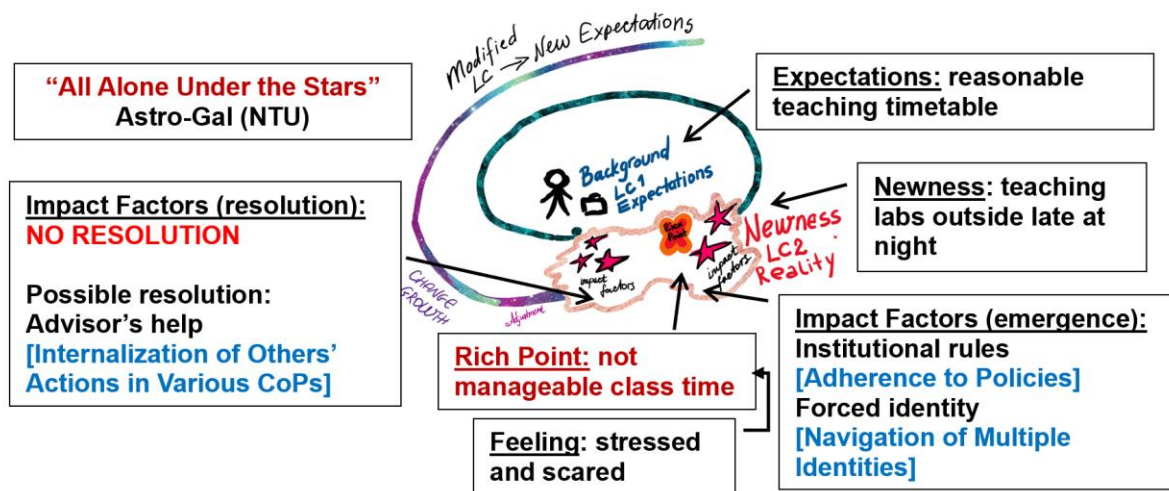


Figure 11. All Alone Under the Stars (Astro-Gal, NTU). This picture illustrates a rich point development.

### Rich point narratives: forced to be a teacher (Selda, NTU).

Selda never thought she would be a teacher. When she was working as a research assistant (RA) for her advisor it suited her pace within the PhD program and she could spend sufficient time on her own research. It turned out her advisor ran out of funding and could only offer Selda a position of an ITA. She was terrified: “I was so scared I didn’t want to be a TA

after I noticed I had to run a lab and I was talking to my professor... please, give me another option, I don't want to be a TA but he said "I have no money right now" so I had to do it" (Selda). Selda had no choice. Her advisor suggested that she should observe how other TAs lead the physics labs, which she did. The professor himself was always ready to help too. Even though, her first semester was stressful and challenging, Selda, eventually, mastered teaching physics labs. As she gained more confidence as an educator she continued working as an ITA and even started considering teaching as her future job. However, she still believes that research assistantship is better for her: "[it is] less responsibility you have... you don't have to spend two days just for TA's stuff and I can't focus on my research so I prefer to just do my research... it is much easier" (Selda).

Having no choice but teaching is the essence of rich point for Selda. She arrives at this rich point via **adherence to policies** (her professor does not have any funding) and via **navigation of multiple identities** (she experiences a forced identity of an ITA). In order to resolve this rich point Selda uses two ways to translate it: via **internalization of others' actions in various communities of practice** in which her professor's help and (I)TAs' support serve as impact factors as well as via **teaching evolution**, which is observed through such impact factors as time and experience aiding Selda accept her teacher's identity and develop as an educator.



Figure 12. Forced to be a Teacher (Selda, NTU). This picture illustrates a rich point development.

**Rich point narratives: an invisible professional (Ahmad, STU).**

If I did not know that Ahmad is an international graduate student, I would assume that he is a faculty member. At least, on the paper. Ahmad is not a part of a big community of ITAs because in his program such a community of TAs and ITAs are almost non-existent. He is an instructor of record for a 500-level class. He highlights that he is called a “teaching associate”, which makes him feel a bit higher in rank than just an assistant. He never had any orientation, specifically, an orientation geared toward ITAs or TAs. He is very independent in his teaching and performs the duties similar to professor’s but he does not feel like one. No, it is not about the fact that he is still a PhD candidate but, rather, about Ahmad’s feeling that the department community does not recognize teachers like him as legitimate members: “being an ITA I don't feel being a part of the department. I feel like I'm a secondary member. Which they don't care about. Just teach. I have a feeling that they feel they are kind to us to give a class to teach. Otherwise they can give it to anyone they like. They don't care about the qualification” (Ahmad). He is convinced that having more shared activities with other members can be rather beneficial for ITAs like him, especially, those who have been professional teachers and are about to complete their degrees:

I should have some opportunity to be a part of faculty members. During their faculty meetings they talk about different issues, about the students of the department so I come to know about these issues. As I'm teaching the graduate class as they are teaching. Sometimes, we have more students than they have. We can learn from the meetings and the information they're sharing and maybe we will be in a better position. Sharing the information with our students. And being an ITA I also want to have a better relationship with my professors... I am a professional in the department... And without being a part

of this department, the part of this meetings, part of orientation kind of things, I'm not encouraging my professional links. In the last four years I only deal with four-five professors whom I know. Other than that, I didn't have any other opportunity to talk with other people. Maybe there should be opportunities to talk with other people of the department. Our department should be at my fingertips. This person does this, this person does this, this person does this. For example, if I have 30 students in my class... Of course, every student has a different kind of attitude, research attitude, research agenda. If I have a chance to meet faculty, talk to faculty, learn from them I think I would have a good knowledge of advising my students... Where to go for this particular type of issue or a problem. If they have some particular type of research, I can say this is the guy you can contact. (Ahmad)

Although, Ahmad does not see any improvement in his inclusion in the departmental community he believes that after teaching the class several more semesters he would be more accepted and recognized. Meanwhile, the necessary support comes from other two ITAs who taught or have been teaching the same class. Ahmad and these two ITAs have meetings to discuss various issues about the class and share perspectives about teaching, which was their own initiative.

This is another rich point story which, currently, does not have any resolution. Ahmad's expectations that he should be recognized as a professional within the department clashes with the reality of Ahmad not being noticed as a legitimate educator. This rich point is triggered by the lack of professors' support, who, in Ahmad's case, are viewed as colleagues (**internalization of others' actions in various communities of practice**). It is also about Ahmad's "multiple hats" impact factor as he constantly compares his position to professors' and observes that he is also a graduate student and an international person. Hence, the rich point is also predetermined

by Ahmad's **navigation of multiple identities**. The possible resolution lies within receiving professors' recognition and support (internalization of others' actions in various communities of practice) but it has not yet happened for Ahmad. However, he already demonstrates certain movement towards the exit from this rich point via, first, developing a critical understanding of his professional settings (self-analysis) and obtaining other ITAs' support (**internalization of others' actions in various communities of practice**). Ahmad's rich point also illustrates a dynamic nature of several communities of practice in which a new community of practice (ITAs-led) is triggered by Ahmad's inactive status in the desired departmental community of practice.

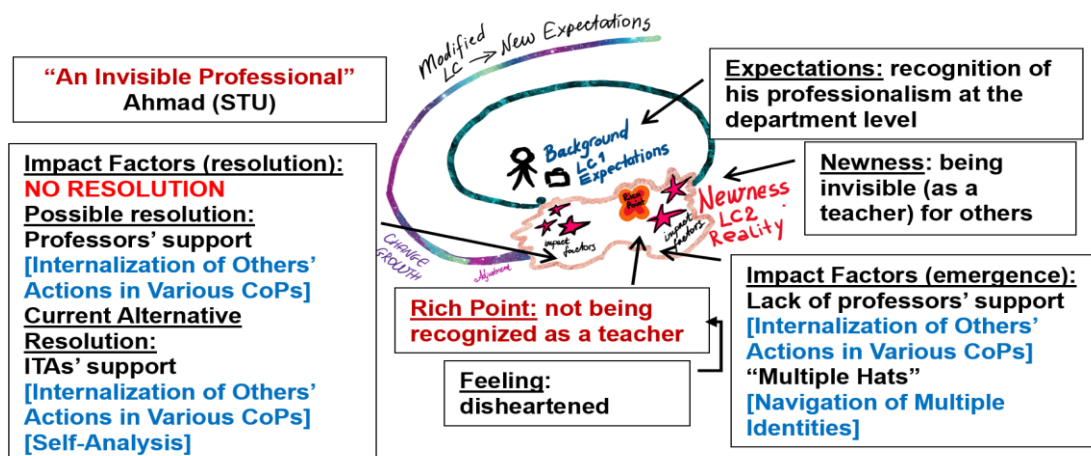


Figure 13. An Invisible Professional (Ahmad, STU). This picture illustrates a rich point development.

**Rich point narratives: a teacher's compromise (Guillermina, STU).**

“Well, we don't use multiple-choice in my home country. It is becoming more and more common but this is not something I grew up with. I know that this is something they [US students] grew up here with” – Guillermina stresses when she tells me about how she has to compromise and instead of asking her students to do more reflective writing she selects the practicality of grading via multiple-choice questions. After the incident of being reported to the university for late grading by one of her students Guillermina learned that she needs to choose

pragmatism over her teaching philosophy which aims at nurturing critical writers and readers. She continues: “multiple-choice questions ... [it] doesn't assess your knowledge... But now I'm using these multiple-choice quizzes and this is something which I don't really like... when students take a quiz they already know whether they're right or wrong... they know and they can also keep track of their grades. I think also they're used to having an immediate feedback. They don't really like waiting for their grades. So [I became] open to the idea of multiple-choice quizzes. Maybe it goes a little bit against my teaching philosophy...” (Guillermina).

This rich point story is valuable since it showcases how several rich points intertwine and interact in ITAs' overall experiences. Guillermina's teaching evolution stemmed from her encounter with another rich point (being reported for late grading). This previous rich point gave an impetus for Guillermina to rethink her approach to teaching in the US. The change – choosing multiple-choice quizzes – is based on her experience of struggling to grade a high number of works on time. Guillermina learns that, according to institutional expectations, students need to receive a grade and a teacher's feedback within a certain time period, hence, **adherence to university policies** is the trigger of this rich point to emerge. The resolution happens via **teaching evolution** as Guillermina becomes a more responsible teacher and via **self-analysis** as she develops critical understanding of her reality.

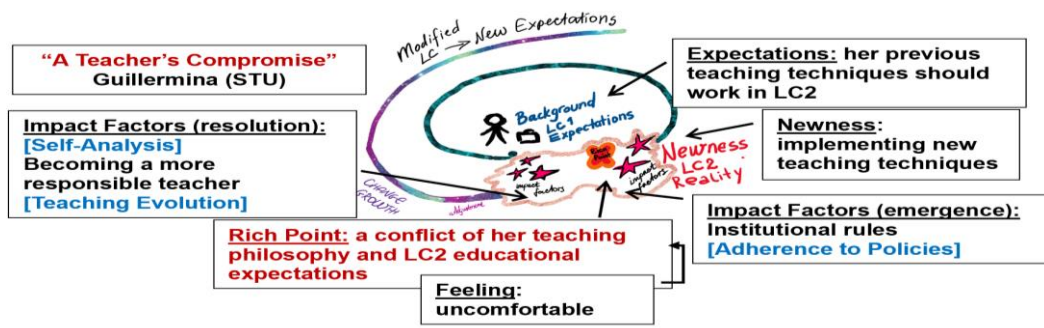


Figure 14. A Teacher's Compromise (Guillermina, STU). This picture illustrates a rich point development.

### **Rich point narratives: living the reality (Malek, STU).**

It seems that nothing can surprise a teacher who has been working at the same university for almost seven years. The teacher who has taught at three different departments, who has been in charge of various classes to teach, who has been involved in academic life as a graduate student and a scholar, and who has developed his own perspective on the US reality over the time serving as an ITA. However, once this educator was giving a task to lead a class for other ITAs, certain aspects of the US reality suddenly became sharply evident. Yes, he was aware that shooting can happen on campus or that people can report harassment at work/school but when the teacher has to prepare other international graduate students to react and deal with such situations, the reality is rediscovered from a different angle. This is a true description of Malek, one of the focal participants of the study.

When Malek had to learn how to teach about certain sociopolitical aspects of American life on campus he was forced to accept that the reality of an ITA is rather unpredictable and all ITAs should be equipped with knowledge of what to do in such situations, which might not be expected due to their prior different languacultural experiences: “I’m not just there to teach how to teach. It is good but it’s not the only one thing. But, also, to teach them about their rights, what to do, how to defend their rights, how to be ready for different scenarios. And to know their duties and what to expect from their students, and from the XXX as an employer” (Malek). Malek confessed that some of his knowledge stemmed from his personal experience while certain information he had to learn: “like I got to know from the emails that they are appointing a new Title IX coordinator... So, I was just asking myself what is Title IX? And I just Googled it. What is the job description? How does this coordinator is going to help me? And then I just got to meet them too”. (Malek). He felt that it is his responsibility as an educator to nurture ITAs’

responsible teaching too since he sees that ITAs, as any other teachers on campus, should feel that they are a part of campus and they are equally significant for the work of the entire university, thus, equally in charge of their actions on campus. Knowing policies and acting accordingly is integral for ITAs' understanding of the reality. Malek, at the same time, stresses that he also developed a new sense of compassion – when he learned that his former student contemplated a suicide Malek felt obliged to include information about suicide prevention in his class for ITAs; when he heard about another active shooter on campus Malek was worried how well ITAs were prepared to deal with such reality as well as he felt emotional as a family man.

This rich point is of a different nature. Instead of being anecdotal and based on a certain situation, which is physically lived through, this rich point showcases a conceptualization of reality. In other words, it is more evident realization of a certain aspect of the languaculture which was not observed previously. The newness of the situation is the sociopolitical reality which is noticed under a different angle due to the new teaching assignment (teaching other ITAs). The conflict stems from the expectation that the reality is known but, in fact, the reality is unpredictable and certain level of preparation is necessary to internalize such a reality. For Malek the entrance into this rich point happens via **adherence and internalization of politics and policies**, more specifically, via such an impact factor as US politics. He also showcases different identities at play – a teacher, a fellow colleague for other ITAs, a father and a husband (a “multiple hats” impact factor) – so the entrance to the rich point is predetermined by **navigation of multiple identities**. To resolve the rich point Malek employs **self-analysis** (developing critical understanding of the reality of himself as an ITA and other ITAs as teachers); **internalization of policies and politics** (learning institutional rules, policies and regulations and then educating others so everyone is ready to act accordingly); and, finally,



**teaching evolution** (becoming a more responsible teacher). This rich point demonstrates how **internalization of policies and politics** can serve as both, the navigational way to enter and exit the rich point.

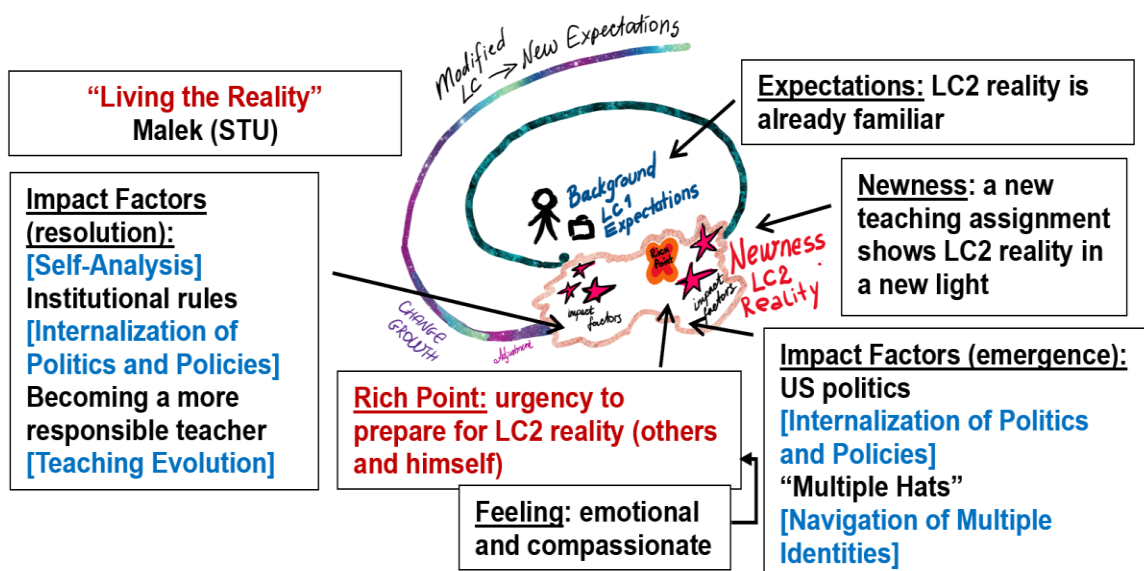


Figure 15. Living the Reality (Malek, STU). This picture illustrates a rich point development.

### **Rich point narratives: learning to be a teacher (Aloha, STU).**

It seems like a scene from a movie which stereotypically portrays an introductory class at the university – a crowd of rather passive youth not sitting but almost laying in their chairs and mindlessly staring at the teacher. A couple of guys joking with each other at the back. A youngster watching a football game while pretending that he is working on his laptop. A group of few enthusiasts in front who try to be involved in class discussions. A very eager student who is rather outspoken about any issue. And, yes, a teacher, who seemed to have done everything “by the books” – placing chairs in a semi-circle, asking questions to maintain the conversation and elicit answers, providing alternative ways for learners’ to express their opinions like asking them to write what they think – but there seems to be no spark. The crowd is counting seconds

until the class is over and so does the teacher or, at least, it appears in such a way as she looks tired.

This is Aloha's class and she, indeed confesses after the class that it is rather challenging to keep the students motivated and engaged all the time, especially, when she has to discuss very sensitive issues of race, gender, discrimination, cultural stereotypes and other modern US issues. Although she has been working as an ITA for about three years, Aloha stresses that she is still learning how to be a more efficient teacher, which in her understanding is about being "an entertainer-teacher". She highlights that she comes from the languaculture which presupposes a teacher-centered classes of a lecture type with a high number of students. Her experience being an ITA in the US has been fruitful as she did learn several tricks and improved her teaching style but it is not quite evolved yet, according to Aloha. She hates "classroom drama", which can arise any time due to the specifics of the subject (intercultural communication) and due to students just being disrespectful (Aloha suggested throughout all our conversations that she feels students' prejudice regarding her nationality and language), so Aloha came up with the couple of tactics to approach the conflicts. Sometimes, when students are too unruly, she can threaten them with certain university policies, for instance, them being dropped from the class or reported to the university. Sometimes she just "lets things go" as she fears students' rage if she pushes them too far. At these moments she does not want to show her true emotions. Sometimes she just tries new assignments to make the class more engaging. Aloha does not share all the classroom incidents with her advisor as she feels that some ITAs, who are, mostly, her very close friends, can help her more with advice and emotional support. And this is her class-to-class reality.

This story is an example of how a rich point can be seen in progression and that it is a rather dynamic and time-consuming process of translating the rich point. It can last for a long

time and still appear to be not resolved fully. The impact factors for Aloha's rich point to appear are students' behavior and students' biases (**internalization of others' actions in various communities of practice**) as well as US politics, which serves as impetus for class discussions and class arguments (**internalization of politics and policies**). Although it seems that it is not new for Aloha to be an ITA in the US university settings, the rich point stems from the conflict of her languacultural values in education, her desire to adjust to "the appropriate" level of the teacher in the US ("an entertainer-teacher"), and keeping a fragile balance in her emotionally loaded classes among students. Aloha attempts to use various exits from this rich point while translating the conflict via **adherence and internalization of university policies** (using university rules as a warning for students) or **teaching evolution** (improving her teaching; dealing with sensitive topics). Sometimes there is no resolution as she just prefers to avoid the conflict situation. She also **negotiates multiple identities** by either revealing her true emotional self (at the moments when she is in control of her class) or not (when she avoids recognizing the conflict). Her exits from this rich point is also impacted by such a factor as (I)TAs' help and support (**internalization of others' actions in various communities of practice**). Her rich point is ongoing, and, at times, she feels that it was resolved for certain situations while for other instances the resolution did not happen. Overall, Aloha's rich point story highlights that she is in the process of internalization of her educational reality but she cannot call it complete.

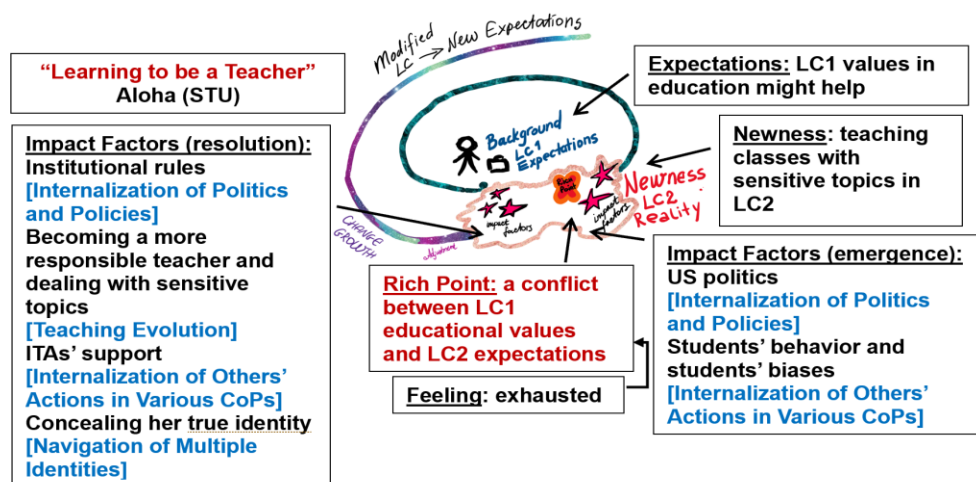


Figure 16. Learning to be a Teacher (Aloha, STU). This picture illustrates a rich point development.

### Rich points narratives: language games (Mary, STU).

Mary has been working as an ITA for a while. Being a PhD student, she admits that her life is hectic, even though, she somewhat feels that she has mastered teaching her native languaculture – Japanese – at STU. At some point she decides that she needs a teaching experience in linguistics (it is her graduate program). Her first assignment is to have a lecture about English accents and dialects, which amuses her since she realizes that she herself has an accent in English. Mary jokes: “How can a teacher with an accent teach about accents?” while confessing that it feels so strange after her experience working as a teacher of Japanese, which meant she had no accent. Mary discusses this feeling with one of her professors who shares her own reassuring story about similar experience. The professor recalls a moment when she lectured on accents while her accent was also evident. The professor, being an international educator, also felt really awkward in front of the students. This story seemed to encourage Mary and she left the professor’s office in high spirit.

Mary, though experienced and knowledgeable in linguistics, is getting caught up in the native versus non-native language users dynamics. She is used to being perceived as a native speaker (of Japanese) in the idealized form – a “true” representative of the target language and culture with no accent. What is more, Mary highlighted in one of her first interviews that she never perceived herself as international TA since majority of TAs in the foreign languages program are international. Hence, she never felt marginalized as a non-native speaker at work. The new experience of teaching in linguistics shifted Mary’s status to a non-native speaker, who is teaching native English speakers about their own language, serves as the ground for the rich point to emerge. Mary arrives at this rich point, first, via **internalization of others’ actions in various communities of practice** when she suspects that students can be biased towards such a teacher (an impact factor). Second, the entrance happens via **navigation of multiple identities**, specifically, Mary’s experience of shifting between a teacher of Japanese and a teacher of linguistics (a split in teacher’s identity). Finally, **teacher’s evolution** is observed at the beginning of this rich point in which such an impact factor as the educator’s language plays a huge role. In Mary’s case her language abilities in English as her second language appears more significant than her overall knowledge of the subject. Thus, she observes her non-native status as a drawback. Mary is only about to learn that her language aptitude in English can be approached in a different, more positive, way. Professor’s support (**internalization of others’ actions in various communities of practice**) serves as a resolution of the rich point.

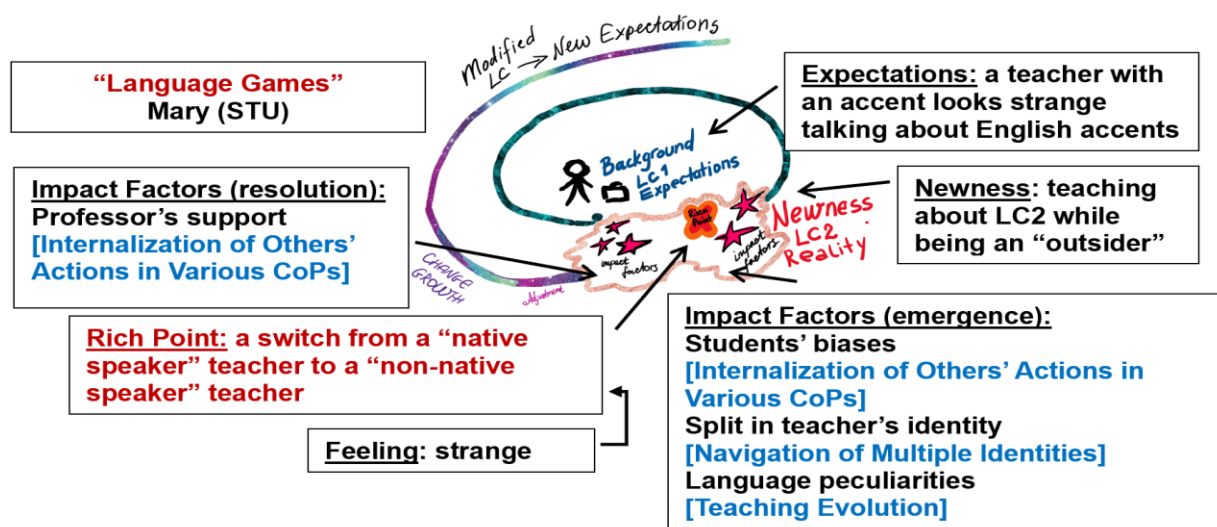


Figure 17. Language Games (Mary, STU). This picture illustrates a rich point development.

What other important observations can be seen in the aforementioned examples? These rich point narratives showcase the interplay between the contextual domains of self/selves and environment. It is evident that all focal participants find themselves in both domains. In all examples, it is evident that there is a certain outside impact on the way rich points emerge, progress and resolve. This impact, however, is not isolated as the way all ITAs' react to such environment's impact predetermines the development, translation and internalization of rich point. This process indicates the blend of two domains of self/selves and environment; what is more a transformative state of two domains merging. Participants also report experiencing certain negatively-loaded emotions while shifting between languacultures. However, those emotions are not isolated experiences but, rather, a combination of affective, cognitive and psychological processes so the whole individual experience is being transformed.

Now, if I pause at this step of the discussion and look back at the theoretical foundation of the study – Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, it would be clear how each aforementioned rich point can be observed via the lens of *perezhivanie*. As Vygotsky (2001) suggests, *perezhivanie* is

a crucial process as it identifies the influence of the environment on an individual (in his works, on a child). Such impact depends on how the person experiences (lives through) a certain environment or a situation in that environment. It is very important, though, to understand that when Vygotsky refers to “emotional experience” he does not mean that the individual’s particular feeling or an emotion is all that is considered. Instead, a combination of emotional, cognitive, and psychological factors is taken into consideration, that is why *perezhivanie* serves as an intersection between the self and the environment. *Perezhivanie* simultaneously refers to the individual (the self/selves) and to the environment. It is a unit which belongs to both domains and is not meant to be split between the two contexts. *Perezhivanie* resides right in the overlap of two domains. The overlap of the self and environment is unique as it depends on the individual’s development and the situation. The concept of *perezhivanie* also presupposes a process of the transformation from one stage to another; the transformation, in, its turn, constitutes a new stage in the psychological development of a person.

Agar (1996, 2006) suggests that there is an initial languaculture (LC1) which prompts the individual to observe the reality and the environment in a specific way. When the person encounters something different, something which does not fit into his languacultural expectations or values, this person finds him/herself in the depth of the rich point. Rich point is an internal and external conflict, which is only resolved when the individual adopts a different view or different “frames”, according to Agar (1996, 2006). Change of frames presupposes the transformation of his/her initial languaculture. Vygotsky (1982, 2001) highlights that there is a person and there is an environment; at the moment of an intense emotional context in a certain environment the person internalizes that (part of) environment by emotionally living it through (Russian: *perezhivaet*, a verb), even more, builds his/her attitude and relation to such context/environment.

As a result, a change or a transformation occurs within the person, which, at the same time, influences the environment as well. Vygotsky (2001) compares *perezhivanie* to a prism which predetermines the influence of the environment on the individual's development while Agar (1996, 2006) uses "frames" to signify the change in one's languaculture after encountering a rich point. Therefore, the essence of rich points can be theoretically explained via Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. The rich point is convergence of the individual and his/her views with the context around him/her at the moment when the environment is seen through a difference, when the reality stops making sense; to regain that sense one has to live through that difference in the environment in order to claim the renewed sense. In other words, one's movement within a rich point transformation is, in fact, one's *perezhivanie*. The environment, in its turn, is also affected by the individual's changed perspective so the relations between the individual and environment become modified.

All aforementioned examples of rich points could be seen in the following way: the moment when an ITA arrives at a certain rich point, which, usually, presupposes a negatively-charged emotion of stress, doubt, and confusion, they start living through this experience of being stressed, doubtful, and confused. Such emotions, as it has been demonstrated earlier, appear as a result of the environment influence but they cannot be understood in isolation as those emotions happen within the individual's psyche. The more the individual internalizes his/her situation via *perezhivanie*, the more the unity between self/selves and environment is evident. The understanding of the context is seen via the emotional experience and, at the same time, the influence of context on the individual's understanding is also seen via the emotional experience. Each ITAs' movement within rich point boundaries, then, can be observed as the



dynamics of *perezhivanie*, a transformation in one's understanding of reality, which is sharpened by emotional experience.

Hence, the five prominent navigational ways which have been identified in the course of the study, namely, **navigating ITAs' multiple identities, ITAs' self-analysis/self-reflection, ITAs' adherence and internalization of politics and policies ITAs' internalization of others' actions in various communities of practice, and ITAs' teaching evolution**, can be seen in light of the concept of *perezhivanie*. What is more, applying *perezhivanie* as interpretation of such ways to mediate rich points solidifies the importance of understanding rich points dynamics as an inseparable unity between the self/selves and environment. Although the five mediational ways were placed in the domain of self/selves and environment, it has been emphasized throughout the analysis that rich points dynamics occur on the borderlines or intersections of two domains. It is crucial to understand that one domain does not exclude the other in the process of rich points emergence and resolution because the moment an ITA comes across a qualitatively new, most likely, challenging situation, he/she would ultimately place him/herself within the environment and would have to experience (live through) this new environment in order to keep moving along. In fact, being a part of such new experience and getting involved in the dynamics of *perezhivanie* is the only way for the transformation (change of frames) to happen, which appears during any type of evolution-based processes.

In Chapter 2, while introducing Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, I have used the metaphor of a flower to explain how evolution should be grasped via dialectical approach. Each stage of the plant development is observed as a process which terminates the existence of that very stage, which, at the same time, gives birth to a new stage of the plant. That transitory process of perishing-beginning is a qualitative leap the plant undergoes. It is characterized by the

presence of some features which were a part of the previous stage and, at the same time, are a part of the new stage of life. Now, we can apply this understanding of life to the concept of *perezhivanie* in the study – to move to a new transformed understanding of environment one has to extinguish a previous sense of the environment, to some extent, so the new sense has a chance to be born. This is a process of *perezhivanie*. Now, if it is assumed that rich point dynamics is nothing but a process of internalization of one’s emotional experiences or *perezhivanie*, then it seems paramount that the only way for the ITA to move along in his/her experiences is to undergo the qualitative transformation, which is prompted, first, by entering an emotionally new situation (a challenge) and, second, exiting such a situation (a challenge) with the transformed view on the environment. In other words, at the moment when the environment changes and places the ITA in a new conflict-based setting, his/her languaculture has to perish (to some extent) while getting transformed into a new languaculture. The vital part of such transformation is that the new languaculture would still have features of the old one but in a modified way (the concept of *Aufheben* – **deleting with preservation** - as found in Vygotsky’s works). Hence, it appears that it is not only impossible to escape rich points in ITAs’ journeys but mediation of such rich points becomes an integral part of ITAs’ development and evolution as teachers, professionals, and humans.

The aforementioned observation, in fact, can be supported by the ITAs’ experiences across all the cases. ITAs place a big emphasis on the fact that conflicts, emotional situations, and challenges in dealing with other languaculture makes them grow and evolve. “If you don’t do anything you are surely safe... but the fear of newness is just to protect you, right? If you are walking forward, you are growing...pain and suffering is going to be a part of my life and only if I know how to take all of this and appreciate all of this I will be able to grow” - Astro-Gal

highlights. Ahmad concludes that “whatever the experience I have over here that is very good experience” (Ahmad) as it helps him grow as a professional; Alex underscores (about her adjustment struggles during the first semester): “It was a lot of adjustment. Learning a lot of new things. I have to read, like, two, three times to understand... I was like, why me? So, I think these things helped me grow to move to the second semester” (Alex). Thus, the presence of such struggles and conflicts help ITAs develop in the US academia.

### **Discussion of Findings: Rich Points and Identities**

It was established that rich points mediation via living through given situations serves as a fuel for the ITAs to move along the “spiral” of their experiences in their own unique and complex ways. This conclusion is rather valuable for answering a sub-question of the study: **what role do rich points play in ITAs’ identity evolution?** This question was mostly based, first, on my own assumptions about the interconnectedness between languaculture and one’s positioning of self and, second, on the fact that Agar (1996) himself underlines the presence and impact of identities in the movement between languacultures. He suggests that “the number of social identities tied to languaculture is phenomenal” (Agar, 1996, p. 233) and while “these more specific identities vary, on the one hand, because of different social identities *inside* the languaculture” they also “vary, on the other hand, because some social identities *cross* linguacultural boundaries” (Agar, 1996, p. 221). Not only it became quite evident that the ways rich points are navigated by ITAs can be found in the merging domains of the self/selves and environment, but that navigation through rich points appears to contribute into ITAs’ identities evolution. Moreover, by zooming out and glancing at each participant’s experiences from a distance, it seems that one can observe one giant Rich Point which constitutes ITAs’ overall experience in the US academia. The Rich Point, when unwrapped, demonstrates the whole

process of evolution with multiple qualitative transformations inside (rich points which are being lived through). The Rich Point which affects each participant's view on reality (languaculture) once they are done with their graduate studies, whether they return to their home languaculture or not. Hence, the answer to the question is as follows: **the role of these rich points is to prepare the ground for the future ITA's transformation or a qualitative leap in ITA's identities evolution via a challenge which has to be lived through.**

As it has been mentioned before, rich points are unique and complex, thus, each ITA would internalize them differently. As a result, rich points would play out differently in each ITA's identities development. For instance, the amount of time spent working as an ITA in the US academia can influence ITAs' languacultural transformations. While moving along the "spiral", the nature of ITAs' rich points gets modified as well as ITAs' approach to navigation of rich points and ITAs' emotional attitude towards rich points change.

The inexperienced ITAs' rich points seem to appear more pronounced and their *perezhivanie* is more intense since adjusting to the differences in LC2 is a relatively new process (unless they had additional exposure to that languaculture). Thus, new ITAs' initial expectations play a significant role in mediating through rich points. Once ITAs gain some experience and find themselves in the thick of constant languacultural transformations and modified expectations, they observe more similarities and are less preoccupied with their peculiarities (differences) and how they are seen by others. More experienced ITAs seem to show in-depth understanding of intricacies of their environment as they become consciously aware of their reality and their position within it. However, anything new can still become a rich point and can still initiate the process of *perezhivanie* but entering and exiting the rich point would still be unique for each ITA despite the amount of years he/she spends in the US academia.

The study findings can represent such a vivid gap in the nature of rich points among ITAs. Institutional policies are a catalyst of rich points emergence for Alex (one semester teaching) while for Malek (more than ten semesters teaching) institutional policies are rich points resolution as he finds the awareness of university rules significant for successful ITA experience on campus. While it is crucial for Ahmad (three semesters teaching) to find his legitimacy in the departmental community of practice, Mary (more than ten semesters of teaching) has already established her position within such a community of practice to the point that allows her to feel more independent in her decisions (for example, not following supervisor's advice). The intensity of emotion which is linked to such transformations is much higher among new ITAs since they are still internalizing changes while more experienced ITAs present their emotionally-laden stories as the stories from the past. Hence, the rich point nature depends on the ITAs' experience and involvement in the environment, which, as a result, can showcase different nature in ITAs' identities evolution.

I acknowledge that it would be incorrect to say that it is only the experience and involvement which reflect ITAs' identities evolution since I have been highlighting throughout the whole discussion that it is a unique combination of different factors which help ITAs transform. The discussion of how rich points are connected with identities, inevitably, slide back to the main findings. It is already established that rich points navigation happens in five ways, which all presupposes the dynamic involvement of self/selves within the environment. Three mediational ways – Navigating ITAs' Multiple Identities, ITAs' Self-Analysis/Self-Reflection, and Teacher's Evaluation – by default, emphasize the interconnectedness of rich points in identity evolution. The remainder – ITAs' Adherence and Internalization of Politics and Policies and Internalization of Others' Actions in ITAs' various Communities of Practice – also

underscores such a link as the concept of self/selves is always observed within the environment, according to the study rationale and its conceptual and theoretical framework. It is evident from the findings that certain ITAs' identities are forced (no choice but accepting an ITA position) on them while other identity development stems from advice given by their experienced counterparts (conceal/reveal ITAs' cultural identities; concealing true emotional identities). Such actions from others do not only showcase that there are certain dynamics within each ITA's identities development but, also, that their roles are perceived in certain ways by other members of the context. While the entanglement within multiple identities is richly covered by identity scholars (Block 2007a; Li, 2007; Kramcsh 2009) and the discussion on how such studies correlate with the current research project has been already present in the first two chapters, it is important to mention that one more approach relates to discussing the findings of the study in connection to identity development of ITAs. It seems like *intersectionality* can help understand such findings.

For instance, Carastathis (2016) warns that the Crenshaw's original meaning of intersectionality as the analysis of race and gender (specifically, Black women) has been already diluted and it became more of a "buzzword"; however, she accepts that people have been referring to the term "to narrate their own lived experiences and to generate collective understanding of the processes of exclusion and marginalization within oppressed communities and resistant collectivities" (p. 236). It is also important to remember that scholars approach intersectionality from different angles, but the most applicable for the discussion of the findings in this study is the approach in which various categories of the individual is observed as the constant interplay of what constitutes the "appropriate" in the context. The differences between the individual's various categories and the "appropriate" are the ground for analysis (Grant and

Zweir, 2014). For instance, according to Johansson and Śliwa (2014), intersectionality “makes visible the dynamics of multiple social positioning” (p. 19-20) as they add a concept of “foreignness” in their study, so the difference which is built between the foreigner and the dominant group can be traced “through the processes of race, ethnicity, bodily presentation, nationality, class, religion, language and the historical relations between the foreigner’s place of origin and the destination” (p. 20). Nevertheless, the adopted version of intersectionality is what appears to be valid: ITAs’ experiences in the study can be seen as a constant dynamic interchange between self/selves and the environment in which ITAs find themselves in the constant battle of differences to fit or being positioned as eligible in the mainstream group of educators and students. Intersectionality presupposes a process and, as a result, reflects shifts in those categories which interplay within the context. ITAs, if seen via the lens of intersectionality, reflect that dynamics of multiple positionings within their given academic discourses.

Referring to its origin, the concept of intersectionality is rather applicable to female ITAs in the study (although the male ITAs can also be seen within the intersectionality paradigm). When Astro-Gal feels “exoticized” due to her different race or Aloha’s teaching value is being reduced due to her “less appropriate” Asian nationality, those categories do not appear alone but, rather, within the complexity of other categories, for example, gender and language. Alex has been, in fact, battling against the negative assumption of “only daughter family” in her own languaculture, which presupposes not only the gender but her social and professional identities interplay. Her graduate studies and teaching assistantship become more of an action to rebel and escape the predestined boundaries for females in her culture. Intersectionality is observed on a deeper level when gender prejudice includes a mother identity into the discussion, which complicates female ITAs’ experiences even further. For instance, while discussing mass shooting

with Guillermina she had to worry about her child in school because there was “a shooter situation” on campus (the school is located nearby). This showcases how she has to handle multiple identities at once: she is an educator who has to be on campus while she receives messages from school which her child attends (a parent identity). US sociopolitical situation, which is one of the impact factors in the findings, appears in that intersectionality moment too. Astro-Gal, in her incident with asking for funding to cover extra expenses for her child, showcases similar identities knot: “The university, if they want to have their women researchers and scientists to stick to their research, they need to support us too. Otherwise twenty years from now when my daughter will start her research she will fight for the same issues as I am doing right now” (Astro-Gal). These are episodic instances but even they demonstrate the intersectionality among female ITAs, which contributes an understanding of how identities evolution can be seen within the finding of the study about rich points.

### **Discussion of Findings: A Different Perspective on Language, Culture, and Pedagogy – What Can Be Changed?**

As I have mentioned earlier, for several decades ITAs have been positioned from the “deficit” perspective within which their language, culture, and pedagogy appeared as “problems”. The academia found a solution of such problems via constant ITAs’ assessment, training, and evaluations in order to eliminate those three big problems and make ITAs’ language, culture, and pedagogy more appropriate and “Americanized”. About a decade ago researchers, in fact, started paying attention to ITAs’ experiences and, thus, started attempting investigations which implemented ITAs’ opinions and perspectives on their reality. The study which I conducted aimed at contributing into the same approach.



It was anticipated that the themes of “language, culture, and pedagogy” would make it to the findings. Indeed, I was not able to escape these three big themes. First, references to language and culture are already embedded in the concepts of languaculture and rich points since they are the dominant features which come to mind when people decipher one languaculture from another. Pedagogy is also implied in the research rationale as I have been exploring the experiences of teachers. Second, the findings revealed that language, culture, and pedagogy were important for ITAs. However, one of the most vital discussions is a conversation about how these three big themes are positioned within the findings of the study.

To start with, the study does not separate the language and the culture, thus, even if there is a reference to the language or to the culture separately, it should be understood as a unity of both. When “language and communication problems” appeared in the findings in the NTU case as one of the most prominent impact factors, it was undeniable that this impact factor should be discussed. Similarly, pedagogy appeared in the themes (navigational methods) of teaching evolution across cases. References to “language” was also evident in the theme about ITAs’ internalization of others’ actions in various communities of practice around them. Culture, though, never mentioned as a separate topic, was understood as a part of the whole experience and, could be seen within every big theme of the study. Apart from the language references, which really stood out as a separate topic for the ITAs from the Northwest, all three big so-called ‘problems’ were embedded within overall discussion. This is what, I believe, separates this study from the rest of research undertaken about ITAs. ITAs’ language, culture, and pedagogy are seen not as a prominent theme on its own but, rather, as a crucial part of ITAs’ whole experience.

Even when the language and communication is discussed, especially, with the reference to the northwestern ITAs, it is expressed as something which is significant within a shift in the

view or a frame or a qualitative transformation. Language, ultimately, is not observed as a problem but as a part of the process of a change and evolution. When ITAs report that they feel that their language skills are insufficient, like it was with Astro-Gal, Alex, and Selda at NTU, they report about an initial characteristic of something which is going to transform whether it is going to be a direct improvement in the language skills (what the majority of research studies try to see as the ideal result) or a change in ITAs' attitude towards the language in the environment they dwell in (becoming more confident in the context, for instance) or a change in others' attitudes and opinions about ITAs (students are getting used to an accent or accepting the ITA with all the differences). ITAs themselves pointed out that time and experience (one of the impact factors) is a combination which helps them move along in their ITAs' experiences and overcome some initial difficulties (rich points resolution). Thus, it is not the language/culture differences which should be seen as problems; rather, it is a challenge of having a luxury of time and experience in the academic environment to notice ITAs' transformation. If one expects an ITA to be completely socialized in the intricate details of the environment, including usage of the language, culture, and pedagogy according to the ideal standards, it means that academia is delusional. Nobody, whether domestic or international, can be "ideal" from the start in a new environment as rich points will appear anyway. Hence, claiming that ITAs can be prepared to have a more appropriate language, culture, and pedagogy is idealistic. Instead, the socialization of ITAs should be done in such a way that they are allowed to make mistakes, encounter rich points and undergo transformations in their experience as it is assumed as a normal course of any development and evolution. Experience and time, then becomes a crucial catalyst to see language and culture in a different light.

In order to avoid “idealization” of ITAs in academia from the very beginning, a different viewpoint and approach to ITAs’ socialization should be implemented. In the process of analysis, it became especially evident that the space, where the rich point dynamics happen is located on the merge between two main domains – self/selves and environment. It is the space when the ITA lives through the emotionally-loaded experience (*perezhivanie*). The boundaries between where the domain of self/selves end and where the domain of environment starts are very blurry. This space is interactive and presupposes constant movement and transformation as well as it assumes certain change in individual’s communication and collaboration with various parts of the settings. ITAs’ movement between domains correlate with the concept of *third space*, which can be, roughly, described as construction of a new culture from existing two. In such construction of third space, culture A and culture B do not have to compete for dominance but, rather, they negotiate and create the third unique blend of cultures – culture C. Bhabha (2009) calls the third space “a challenge to the limits of the self in the act of reaching out to what is liminal in the historic experience, and in the cultural representation, of other peoples, times, languages, texts” (p. xiii). For Soja (1996) the third space can be seen through the trialectics of spatiality where one’s exploration of self/essence of self (ontological) is blended with what is known about such essence (epistemological) and where such binaries as *historicality - sociality* and *conceived - perceived* cannot exist without the third elements, namely, *spatiality* and *lived* experience. For Finkbeiner (2006), the third space is tied to achieving intercultural competence through conscious and subconscious attempts to see different cultures blend. Building third space presupposes a certain degree of discomfort, emotional disbalance, and a challenge of “trading” one’s own vision, practice, and beliefs for other’s understanding and practicing of the same reality.

Linguacultural development through rich points, as suggested by Agar (1996, 2001) and implemented in this study, echoes third space construction. When one's vision on life is being challenged via the conflict of differences in the interaction and this person has to rearrange his/her view (frames) in such a way that he/she accepts the interlocutor's languaculture to a certain degree but, by doing so, has to give away a part of his/her "native" languaculture. This "exchange" happens in a rather painful process of finding certain similarities with the other languaculture. This is, precisely, what third space construction is about. Thus, ITAs' experiences of rich point navigation can be also seen as such. ITAs' rich points are nothing but that very collision of two languacultures. By entering and exiting each and every rich point, the ITA carves his or her third space right in between the two languacultures. On a micro level, each rich point contributes into constructing a unique third space. On a macro level, all these micro third spaces can be observed as creation on one big unique third space which constitutes each ITA's transformed languaculture in the course of the overall experience within the environment.

Even when I go a level up – to my theoretical framework of Vygotsky sociocultural theory – it is clear that the conflict which is integral to third space construction is, in fact, the internalization of the conflict between the individual and the environment through *perezhivanie*. The third space can be only constructed after living through a certain experience, mostly negatively-colored, within spaces, which is what concept of *perezhivanie* entails. For the study it means that the findings – all rich points navigational methods can be also seen as ways the third spaces are constructed in which impact factors are the moments which initiate and finalize third space construction. It also means that understanding the ITA experience as a dynamic process and allowing this process of learning through the experience to happen – whether it is seen as third space construction or transformation of languaculture or living through one's experience

within environment, can be taken as a new approach for the ITA preparation/maintenance course. All ITAs in the study, in fact, mentioned their dissatisfaction with certain aspects of ITA trainings, which might indicate that there should be a more comprehensive preparation system for ITAs.

Socialization in the profession, as a core component of the community of practice principles, which plays its significant role in the research project, – presupposes a process which is based on the actual practice and experience of ITAs who are a part of “an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992, p.464). This means, that the traditional orientation and trainings fail because there is nothing resembling of the aforementioned process; rather, it is a process which is oriented at placing one group of members onto a certain “appropriate” path. The real collaboration and, especially, the feeling that there is a mutual goal for the ITAs, and the rest of academia cannot be achieved via a brief one-week orientation. In fact, one of the ITAs – Alex – highlighted multiple times that she felt disoriented after a very “loaded” but short ITA orientation, which prompted one of her impact factors and, later, a rich point to appear. She found herself confused and overwhelmed and after co-teaching her first class she decided that her second teaching session would be similar but, instead, she found herself all alone in front of the class while her professor encouraged her: “go ahead, take your class” (Alex). This story is the direct example of the ITA orientation being “disorienting” because it assumed that ITAs have got enough information to be in the “right” shape to teach.

The possible solution here, based on the findings of this study, is acceptance that adjustment happens through time and experience and, if academia really wants to help ITAs have smoother qualitative transformations within their pedagogy, language, and culture, more

attention should be paid to the organization and support of such a dynamic movement in each ITAs' unique experiences. It means, for instance, promoting more reflective activities and opportunities for ITAs to balance their understanding of their conflicts/*rich points/perezhivanie*, which is inevitable, since self-analysis and managing multiple identities appeared rather salient in ITAs' experiences in the project. Astro-Gal, a participant who stood out from the whole sample because she directly claimed her ITA experience to be more negative than positive, emphasized that orientations should be "a meaningful lesson on how to teach... on how to work on that psychological thing that makes them [ITAs] feel inferior" (Astro-Gal). Thus, the orientation should also account for a certain psychological support, which cannot be delivered as one-time session but, rather, as an ongoing practice.

Second, the role of the settings is crucial for quicker integration and fewer conflict situations in ITAs' experiences. It is especially significant within the theme of navigating the rich points through adherence to political/institutional situations in the US since ITAs as well as many other members of academic discourses have very little influence on politics (in the broader sense) and policies (at the institutional level). Nonetheless, promoting a meaningful familiarity with the environment is necessary. Mary suggested that one of the ways for her to feel relatively comfortable during her first days of teaching assistantship was the fact that she was a student of the same university where she received her bachelor's degree, so she knew places, people, and, somewhat, expectations. Ahmad placed an emphasis on the fact that before he started his teaching assistantship and proceeded to teach a certain class, he had a chance to just learn the overall educational environment as well as the dynamics of that very particular class for almost three years. Malek explained that many concepts which he teaches to other ITA he learned via being involved in the academic life of STU for a long time. At the same time, not having such

familiarity, as in Alex's aforementioned case, can serve as an impetus for facing more challenges.

One of the possible solutions of how such knowledge might be obtained in a more experiential and meaningful way is incorporation of ethnographic approaches in ITA preparation/maintenance courses, which, by default, is positioned not as one-time activity but, rather, as a systematic inquiry. For instance, in Golkowska's (2012) project the new ITAs were asked to explore the university settings and reflect on the findings. Finkbeiner's (2006) ABC project can be also adapted to reflect on ITA's original settings in terms of political and institutional environment (of their home country or the place of the main residence and the US context). Such a project might also help new ITAs establish connections with those who represent domestic educational participants (faculty, students, local teaching assistants). It can, as well, aid ITAs in avoiding certain stereotypes – one of the main culprits for the conflict, according to ITAs in the study. According to Malek, who is in charge of teaching ITAs, it is paramount that stereotypes about cultures are discussed directly: "I would be opening a casual conversation between all of them [(I)TAs] about the stereotypes which a lot of us are trying to address" (Malek about ITAs' supervision). It is already known from the study that time and experience is one of the salient factors to resolve a rich point. Hence, it should be assumed that intimate, almost subconscious, knowledge of the politics and policies around ITAs is very difficult to achieve without giving it time and experience to internalize. It should be assumed that ITAs would make certain mistakes and would encounter rich points on the way. However, academia, in my opinion, should forget this "idealistic" idea that ITAs can be prepared to deal with the environment after a couple-day workshop series or a lecture during the ITA orientation.

Surely, ITAs can be warned against certain cultural points and informed about the dominant pitfalls, but this information can be internalized as meaningful only through experience and time.

Third, the role of supervisors, professors, and other faculty members is crucial. This was found not only in the current study (the internalization of others' actions within various communities of practice) but supported by other research too (Ashavskaya, 2015; Bauer, 1996; Duff, 2010; Samimy, Kim, Lee, & Kasai, 2011). Hence, the continuous involvement of faculty members in the preparation/maintenance processes is paramount. Several aforementioned activities can serve as helpful as they involve other members of ITAs' academic discourse. The stark observation which was shared by all ITAs in the study is that department community of practice is very hierarchical. Malek was the only person who identified his current work community of practice as a "two-way relationship" but he also highlighted that until he started to work as an ITA for teaching other ITAs, his community of practice in the department was not only hierarchal but the main professor was exercising the power to the extent Malek felt that he did not have any identity because everything was tightly regulated. Ahmad emphasized that he feels that he is completely excluded from any possible meaningful communication within the department while Mary, a mature ITA, suggests that she still finds it confusing whom to follow within the department as the supervisor and the faculty should first reach the consensus in their vision. Aloha suggests that the hierarchy is not only present in the department, but it is "fake" as departments and academia in general tries to project an image of inclusive welcoming culture but, instead, "recruit students from different countries" to show "an American way to do [things]" (Aloha). Guillermina's experience within the department community of practice showcased that she hid her initial enthusiasm about collaboration because she saw the competitiveness between other members of the community and indifference to her attempts to



collaborate. The ITAs from NTU showcased that they just follow what the faculty think ITAs should do, even if it means adhering a two-day notice before they start teaching a class or teaching a lab which ends at 10 pm (Astro-Gal's rich points). In Astro-Gal, Aloha, and Selda's stories a very rigid structure of department community of practice was observed. Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to assume that all ITAs are not provided any support – they, in fact, underlined that advisor/professor/supervisor's advice and help is one of the most significant instances in their experience to resolve rich points, despite even the most inflexible hierarchies in departmental communities of practice. Hence, the inclusion of faculty into the initial and then continuous process of ITAs' socialization is vital, which is possible through collaborative work between the two.

Faculty is not the only people in the ITAs' environment. Students play a crucial role in igniting ITAs' rich points and in resolving some of them. Involving students into the conversation is rather important. In fact, one of the reasons why language and culture are still seen as problematic is the idea that the receiving side – mostly, students – are not prepared to patiently wait for such qualitative transformations to happen within ITAs. The differences are too stark and, if a person has never been engaged in critical understanding of languacultures, the situation will be the same: students would expect the “ideal” and “appropriate” ITA to be their teacher. The differences in language, culture, and pedagogy become the triggers for students to feel uncomfortable and such triggers are treated as ITA's negative characteristics, which are pushed to ITAs in the form of criticism, negative feedback. If one looks back to the origin of the research about ITAs, it would be evident that the students' opinions and perspectives were something which fueled such research and created the field of such a study.

The perpetuated myth about reaching the level of the native speaker haunts ITAs as they are expected to communicate in such a way that is comparable to native English users. Instead of perpetuating the “native versus non-native” dichotomy, other approaches should be suggested and discussed by all participants of the educational discourse: students, faculty, and ITAs. For instance, the concept of Global Englishes (Jenkins, 2007; Kachru, 1985, 1997; Kramsch, 2009; Schneider, 2003) or Kramsch’s (2009) “multilingual subjects” can be an alternative way to perceive language abilities and attitudes. Questioning the legitimacy of what constitutes standard English in a form of a direct discussion with students can be one of the ways to break the circle of language as one of the ITAs’ problems. Overall, students’ readiness to participate in rich points resolution can be an answer to how language, culture and pedagogy could lose their labels as “problems”.

It is evident that the southwestern ITAs reported less about language and culture being a culprit of the difficulties in their experiences as ITAs. One of the explanations is the institutional culture of the South Trails University. Since the overall composition of university and city population presupposes more diversity when the location of NTU it might be inferred that the students are also more prepared for the variations in the languages and cultures. However, I would not express this assumption as conclusive because there are two other possible factors which influence reporting less of language and culture as a problem: first, the sample from STU had more experienced ITAs, and, second, the ITAs were from the social science/humanities fields, which prepared them for a more conscious understanding of critical issues of language, culture and pedagogy.

Finally, the discussion of language, culture, and pedagogy can be also changed via understanding that ITAs, by default, are educators who represent constant dynamic nature due to

their definition (as perceived by others and ITAs themselves). The status of *assistants* conveys certain temporality and relationship with people in power in academia. The attribute *graduate*, even though it might not always be explicitly stated in their title, contributes to the complexity of ITAs' position, as it has been observed in one of the most salient impact factors – ITAs' "multiple hats". *International* is not just a random word which is attached to the title. As it has been discussed in first two chapters, "international" is rather confusing to define. However, "international" presupposes that an ITA lives within more than one *culture* and more than one *language*. Also, it suggests that the individual possesses a certain amount of unique empirical and theoretical knowledge which allows him/her to navigate within several realities at once. ITAs become the surfers across several dimensions of language, culture and other aspects associated with their lives. Their *pedagogy*, also, does not stay static as they have to move along in multiple spaces at once. ITAs appear to be in the constantly dynamic state of *trans-language*, *trans-culture*, and *trans-pedagogy* as they navigate from who they were to who they are to who they will be. This is a confusing state but it is also an empowering state. The insights should be shared. However, as soon as the ITAs' differences are labeled "problems" with their own culture or language or pedagogy as well as when the focus is turned towards ITAs' non-native abilities to speak English, international teaching assistants are, simply, placed in one dimensional reality which leads to more rich points to appear. Therefore, one of the ways to avoid labeling ITAs as "deficient" with regard to language, culture, and pedagogy, is moving towards understanding the dynamics and fluidity of their positions as ITAs. It is about accepting that ITAs, being in the constant transformational state, need to be allowed to internalize new languaculture in a more meaningful and practical way, which takes time and effort from all the participants of the educational discourse. It is about realizing that mistakes are necessary. It is about abandoning the

idea that ITAs should be taught and prepared to become the “ideal” and “appropriate” standard of educators because no one is.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

After discussion and analysis of findings, there are several recommendations and suggestions for future research. First, it is paramount to continue placing ITAs’ perspectives, experiences, and viewpoints at the front of the research. It is also vital to include other participants of the discourse into the conversation about ITAs’ experiences. It has been mentioned throughout that the concept of self/selves and the concept of environment should be explored as a unity. The undertaken research investigated such a unity of self/selves and environment in terms of ITAs’ experiences from their point of view. Adding other participants’ perspectives can add to the discussion. Although, the study should be built on both, ITAs and others’ perspectives of the same reality/context, otherwise, it is likely to appear on the other end of the spectrum of ITA-research which already has a great deal of studies written from just the others’ viewpoints on ITAs. In other words, the research should move towards studies with everyone’s mutual engagement.

Second, ITAs’ communities of practice can be further explored. This research demonstrated that the classroom is not the only context in which ITAs find themselves positioned. ITAs are members of multiple communities of practice and their legitimacy status within certain communities predetermines, to some degree, significance of other communities in ITAs’ experiences. The research should also aim at exploring ITAs’ communities of practice outside academia. It has been observed that ITAs have to mediate multiple identities and that external sociocultural context of living in the US affects ITAs’ positionality and experience.

Hence, exploring identities and communities of practice which stretch beyond ITAs' professional domain can help create a more vivid picture about ITAs.

Third, more research is needed regarding ITAs' definition, especially, in investigating such a concept as "international" in ITAs' title. I have already discussed that the problem of ITA definition goes back to the beginning of research on ITAs. It seems that adhering to the institutional method of identification (visa status) becomes outdated because, first, a certain group of people are excluded from conversation and, second, such an approach does not fit into understanding phenomena as something dynamic and ever-changing. During the undertaken research, I faced this discrepancy as several potential participants could not contribute to the project because their initial "international" status changed, according to the institution. Hence, more studies can explore such a discrepancy between "institutional international" and "international as self-identified".

Fourth, more research can be conducted on the concept of *perezhivanie* as well as Vygotsky's sociocultural theory both, to inform Vygotskian studies and to apply such vision to answering research questions about individuals' psychological development.

Finally, it is urgent to continue finding a different approach to ITAs' trainings and orientations, especially in order to abandon the perpetuation of language, culture, and pedagogy as ITAs' problems which have to be solved by academia. This recommendation is not only for the theoretical side of the ITA-related research; rather, it is necessary to expand all the discussions towards their practical implementation. In other words, trying out new meaningful practices, which have been described in this chapter, and testing whether they work in ITAs' opinion or not can be one of the future research directions. Finding other methods to help ITAs

navigate their languacultures without imposing certain identities and expectations can be another way to approach future research related to ITAs.

## Conclusion

Chapter 5 has been devoted to the analysis of findings, which is meant to serve as a conclusion for the entire study. First, main findings were synthesized within Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and, specifically, the concept of *perezhivanie* via eight rich point narratives. The discussion centered on the idea that ITAs' changes in languaculture via rich points are essential processes of living through certain emotional experiences (*perezhivanie*), which lead to the ITA's qualitative transformation. Next, the chapter focused on answering the sub question in the research of "What role do rich points play in the ITAs' identities evolution?" A detailed analysis of such interconnectedness was presented making an argument that rich points are necessary for the evolution to happen. The discussion culminated in attempting to trace a rich point-identity link in the already existing literature offering intersectionality as a way to understand that connection.

Stemming from the research rationale and literature review, the analysis of ITAs' language, culture, and pedagogy, which were previously labeled as "ITA problems", demonstrated how the said concepts appeared positioned in a new light within the research findings. The pillar of the discussion was a notion that understanding of ITAs as educators have to shift towards understanding them as individuals in the constant transformative state, thus, their language, culture, and pedagogy should be treated as fluid and constantly changing characteristics but not the problems. As a result, the institutional practices should consciously reflect such understanding. This section was supported by already existing research which aids in internalizing a new approach to ITAs' language, culture, and pedagogy (third space and "native versus non-native" dichotomy).

The recommendation for future research is outlined in the final section of the chapter. It underscores the necessity to continue the contribution to the ITA-related research from ITAs' point of views as well as involving other participants of the educational discourse in such studies. ITAs' communities of practice inside and outside the academia should be researched in a more detailed way because such research can add to the discussion of ITAs' identities, especially, given that the undertaken research pioneered the exploration of ITAs' communities of practice beyond the classroom in the same regard. The definition of "ITA" should be also studied further as well as ITAs' orientation or preparation methods should be reexamined to reflect the dynamic nature of ITAs' positions in the US academia.



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