

**Culture Shock Encountered in American Classrooms by a First-Time Teaching
International Teaching Assistant**

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Abstract

International Teaching Assistants (ITAs) has long been a popular topic in the field of teaching, especially language teaching. ITAs are usually thought to be a problem that needs to be solved (Rounds, 1987; Plakans, 1997) and are many times accompanied by negative words such as “problem” (Williams, 1992; Tyler, 1992) or “crisis” (Rubin, 1992). Moreover, not much research has delved into the personal experience ITAs encounter in American classrooms. This study aims at reflecting my experience of culture shock being an ITA that teaches American students for the first time. The culture shock is detailed from various incidents that happen during my two years of teaching as an ITA at Missouri State University. It is also analyzed based on a literature review of ITAs. Being female, Asian, and atheistic, I am more challenged by American students than my male colleagues and struggle in dealing with some classroom behaviors considered informal, perplexing, or rude given that my home culture highly respect teachers. Moreover, I have some reservation in expressing my ideas over issues that may involve religion in the classrooms. Some solutions are proposed to help me and other ITAs overcome the culture shock. ITAs need to reach out to experienced non-native professors for assistance and may consider participating in programs that help to reduce accents. American students should be involved in the orientation as well as training and teaching processes of ITAs in order to be more open towards ITAs. This will also give ITAs the chance to ask questions so they can better understand their American students as well as the culture of American classrooms.

Culture Shock Encountered in American Classrooms by a First-time Teaching ITA

International Teaching Assistants (ITAs) are usually associated with negative traits (Williams, 1992; Rounds, 1987; Plakans, 1997; Tyler, 1992; Rubin, 1992). Unaware of this, ITAs who step in American classroom for the first time like me could experience much culture shock. This may relate to the fact that I am female, non-native, and atheistic (while most of my students

are Christians). Some solutions for ITAs as well as American students could be come up with to help both of them succeed in the classroom.

ITA Problem

In the literature, ITAs are frequently associated with the “ITA problem” (Williams, 1992), the “foreign TA problem” (Tyler, 1992) or “NNSTA (nonnative English-speaking teaching assistant) crisis” (Rubin, 1992). The term ITAs mostly has a negative connotation - ITAs receive countless complaints from students, parents, and administrators mostly because students cannot understand what they are saying (Williams, 1992; Rounds, 1987; Plakans, 1997). These complaints have prompted many universities to ask them to go through strenuous screening programs (Plakans, 1997; Yule & Hoffman, 1993). Many states such as Ohio, Florida, and Missouri have established rules forcing ITAs to pass an oral test in order to be allowed to teach (Rounds, 1987).

All ITAs, myself included, have to go through an oral test in order to be able to teach at Missouri State University (MSU). The test includes making a short presentation in front of three faculty members who decide whether ITAs will pass or not. I have no issue performing the test; however, one former ITA at MSU complained, “It’s so unfair. I’m not from here, but it doesn’t mean I can’t speak English.”

Being female, non-native, and atheistic

Not only oral proficiency but also other aspects could prevent ITAs from teaching successfully. Yusa (1998) believes that “[s]tudent perceptions of the professor are affected by the religious, ethnic, and national identity of the professor.”

As a female, non-native, atheistic ITA, I did have some concerns before teaching the composition section full of American students. First, in the orientation for ITAs, it was stated that being a female TA is different from being a male TA. Some students can be sexist, so when evaluations are given, they may comment on the female TA’s legs, for example. It is also common knowledge that female TAs are not usually as respected as male TAs. Sandler and Hall (1986) state that “[f]emale professors experienced frequent challenges to their authority and qualifications by male students in ways not experienced by their male colleagues” (cited in Luo, et al., 2000). Second, being a non-native speaker teaching native speakers how to write in their own language poses a huge concern for me. They may get offended or think that I am not qualified to teach.

Researchers mention that the problems ITAs usually have are “nonnativelike pronunciation” (Williams, 1992), grammar, and discourse issues (Tyler, 1992) or low English competence (Rubin, 1992); yet, these problems do not worry me at all. I have been learning grammar intensely for 12 years, I got 28 in the speaking section of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and almost everyone who has talked with me in English thinks that I speak like a native speaker. Finally, in composition, the students are expected to talk about some sensitive topics including elections, immigration, and especially religion. The majority of my students are Christian; many of them are from Missouri and surrounding areas, the states in the “Bible Belt.” Therefore, I decided not to reveal my atheism to avoid conflicts with them in the classroom conversation. Yusa (1998) states that, regarding religions, “students’ reactions can be raw, because it does touch upon their inner convictions and sometimes ideology (which they mistakenly believe to be their religious faith), and they feel defensive.” This reminds me of the discussion we have on abortion in which most of the students in my class are pro-life.

After a few weeks of teaching, it dawned on me that being a non-native speaker should not be a concern. Writing academic English is hard, even to native English speakers. They need to know how to organize and transition ideas, use grammar and punctuation correctly, and cite properly. As a non-native speaker who has been going through years of learning and teaching academic English, I know English rules by heart. Thus, I can help students to fix mistakes in commas or sentence fragments by providing explicit rules. I am also able to pinpoint grammatical components within a sentence. In general, I can efficiently teach writing from the prescriptive perspectives.

Culture Shock in American Classrooms

Although being a non-native speaker doesn’t pose many difficulties to my teaching, the classroom culture in America certainly does. As an ITA teaching in America for the first time, I encountered much culture shock.

Sarkodie-Menash (1998) says that some cultures put professors at the highest position in the society and they must be addressed properly. In Vietnam, my home country, this is somewhat true. Traditionally, the two most respectable professions are being a teacher or a doctor. For example, students and parents celebrate Vietnamese teacher’s day, November 20th, by organizing

big parties and giving teachers cards, flowers, and presents to thank them. Moreover, Garner (1989) believes that the Vietnamese culture is formed based on Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, which demands people to respect “the king, the teacher, and the father.” Therefore, disagreeing with teachers can be considered disrespectful. This is quite true. Students don’t generally disagree with teachers publicly. If they ever do, they mostly discuss with each other secretly. Garner (1989) confirms this by stating that “[i]t’s disrespectful to challenge a teacher” and “Vietnamese culture emphasizes the maintenance of harmony; candor and directness are considered rude, so there is a reluctance to contradict someone outright.” Having been learning and teaching in Vietnam throughout my whole life, I’m use to students not disagreeing with me.

Thus, stepping into an American classroom for the first time, I faced a great amount of culture shock. Some behaviors of students are quite informal: they give me some requests that Vietnamese students don’t normally do. For example, American students ask me to write the instructions on the board when they miss my spoken instructions. In Vietnam, students will be so afraid to ask the teacher that they usually turn to the person next to them and ask. Moreover, one American student asked me to send them an email reminder of the deadlines; meanwhile, in Vietnam, students usually have to pay attention in class and take note of the deadline by themselves. Next, American students tend to disagree with me quite often, and if they’re not happy with any of my policies, they’ll express it or speak up to negotiate. I once put some negative comments on a student’s essay, and she said, “But that’s how I write.” It was not until I pointed out two words of similar meaning that she used in one sentence that she stopped disagreeing with me. In Vietnam, students just don’t normally show outright disagreement with the teacher.

Other behaviors seem perplexing. For example, some students wear headphones during class time. Since one colleague told me that wearing headphones actually helps him concentrate, I assumed that wearing headphones can benefit the students of writing so I let them wear headphones in class. However, some American TAs think this behavior is rude. Student are supposed to listen to the teacher, not to something else. Another confusing behavior is when a student asks someone to comment on her draft that I already commented on. She then revises based on those comments. I wonder if that means she belittles my comments and trusts someone else’s or she thinks there won’t be any issue with commenting on my comments. She might just want to show that she cares about the revision.

Other behaviors are just perceived by me as plain rude. For instance, when some students

look at me, I smile politely, but they don't smile back and just look away. It makes me think that they don't like me. It is really hard for me to deal with this behavior because many Vietnamese or international students at MSU, when the class is finished, usually look at me in the eye, smile, and say goodbye before going out of the room. In the university in Vietnam where I teach, students have to stand up and greet the teacher before leaving. American students just pack up and leave.

Bresnahan & Cai (2000) also mention some behaviors that are surprising to ITAs who take part in their research. They are "late arrivals, early departures, draping feet over chair backs, listening to music, eating and drinking during class, making excuses for late assignments, kissing in class, challenging the instructor, use of profanity, etc." They say these behaviors are not allowed in their cultures thus making these ITAs feel uncomfortable.

It should also be noted that the class I'm teaching is a general education class, and American students are required to take it. That may explain some of the behaviors as it seems that they have to be there without much interest in the course. Plakans (1997) cites Bailey (1983) who believes that when students study in a major-unrelated course whose instructor is an ITA, the experience is much more negative. Plakans (1997) assumes that major-unrelated required courses are usually "taught by inexperienced TAs whose manner of speaking English and whose cultural and pedagogical expectations may be different from their own." In my case, I have been teaching academic writing of English to Vietnamese students for four years, so I have certain experience in teaching; my speaking skill is quite proficient, yet it's true that I'm new to the classroom culture in America. It is the fact that some of my interactions with students can be perceived as strange or may cause misunderstanding among them, which can lead to some of their confusing behaviors.

Proposed Solutions

For ITAs

When teaching American students for the first time, ITAs don't usually have a frame of reference. It is unknown to them, me included, which actions are tolerable, and which ones aren't. Bernhardt (1987) says that understanding norms of behaviors is essential; "foreign teaching assistants need an awareness of the social rules by which U.S. students and their teachers operate" (p. 69). She suggests that it's necessary to give ITAs many chances of seeing and talking about American students' behaviors in class. For example, ITAs should look at videotaped lessons and

discuss them. Additionally, she suggests using “critical incidents” or “teacher-tale,” the story about how a teacher succeeds or fails to manage a classroom incident. These open discussions can be helpful; yet some difficulties still exist. First, different teachers will have different ways of handling situations. As already mentioned, some of my colleagues think that wearing headphones during class periods is disrespectful, but I don’t think the same. Thus, it’s somehow difficult to reach a consensus. Second, upon hearing some of my experiences, some TAs will recognize that students’ behaviors are strange, but when they are asked whether it shows disrespect or not, they tend to say, “I’m not in that situation so I don’t know. If I were there, I would know.” Therefore, using teacher-tale may present certain difficulties.

Believably, it’s a good idea to reach out and talk with experienced non-native teachers who have been in the same situation as they can give useful advice on how to interact with American students. This idea is shared by Bresnahan & Cai (2000), who report that successful ITAs find someone such as an instructor or a student to talk to.

Sarkodie-Mensah (1998) believes that ITAs should take part in the “accent reduction program.” Although he cites an example of an ITA whose accent is British and he refused to participate in such a program, Sarkodie-Mensah (1998) thinks that such a program can help ease the interaction between ITAs and American students. However, it’s asserted that some ITAs want to maintain the accents so they won’t be standardized. Accents tell people who they are, so in reducing their accents, in spite of being able to make them more comprehensible to American students, they risk losing a part of their identities.

For American Students

Rubin (1992) mentions that the communication breakdown happens because of not only ITAs, but American students as well. He says that American students have many negative stereotypes towards ITAs. For instance, when students recognize that an accent is “foreign,” they can regard the teacher as ineffective. He believes that American students should be educated on the foreign accents; they should learn to listen to different accents and be exposed to more ITAs. Furthermore, there should be an “intervention program” to help American students overcome the stereotypes. Plakans (1997) concludes from the research conducted at Iowa State University that universities are responsible for opening students’ minds and raising their cross-cultural awareness. She proposes involving American students during the training process of ITAs and cites the

suggestion of B. Hoekje (1996) that they can form a panel in the ITAs' orientation, even judge the performance of ITAs, and create a role-play where American students ask questions that may come up in class or during ITAs' office hours. This idea is shared by Bresnahan & Cai (2000) who bring up the "buddy program" in which ITAs and American students are paired up to talk informally - these students even get credits from the university.

Also, American students should go through a program that helps them become more open-minded towards ITAs. If a program is implausible, during the students' orientation, there should be a brochure or a speaker addressing the possible encounter between them and ITAs, who may be their future instructors. The speaker should talk about the differences in culture, which lead to the differences in expectations, especially of behaviors in the class. This can help alleviate stereotypes existing among American students. The students should also be made aware of the foreign accents and ways to get used to them such as listening to podcasts of non-Americans or to foreign actors and actresses in American movies. Moreover, engaging American students in ITAs' orientation and during ITAs' teaching periods is a good idea. Giving ITAs the chance to talk with American students in the orientation will prepare them significantly for the courses they're going to teach. These students can also be the source that ITAs can go to during the time that they teach. They may discuss with these students the concern they have when they teach, and students can serve as advisors. This may help ITAs understand why American students act certain ways in class and better their classroom management.

Conclusion

Although ITAs tend to be associated with a negative image, they significantly benefit the American education system. They can have great expertise in what they're teaching, help alleviate the stress of professors as they take charge of lower-level courses for them, and bring unique perspectives to the classrooms. That's why American students should be open to them, learn from them, and help them succeed in their job. At the same time, ITAs should try their best in teaching to prove their abilities, learn to overcome culture shock, and make efforts in adapting to the culture of American classrooms.

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