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TEACHING IN A FOREIGN LAND:
PORTRAITS OF INTERNATIONAL TEACHING ASSISTANTS IN ENGLISH
COMPOSITION CLASSES AND STUDENTS' EVALUATIONS

By
Wei Chen

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Applied Linguistics

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

As more and more American universities open their gates and welcome students from all over the world, the population of international students on American university campuses has grown tremendously since 1980s. The latest statistics show that the total number of international students in the United States is 1,095,299, which makes up 5.5 percent of the total U.S. higher education population (Institute of International Education, 2019). Among these international students, some are funded by the universities through graduate teaching assistantships and therefore expected to work as part-time instructors, test graders, discussion leaders, or laboratory supervisors in introductory level courses while completing their own courses of study. This has been a common practice for large American universities for decades.

While both American universities and these international students have benefitted financially from this practice, complaints about the international teaching assistants' (ITAs') oral English proficiency and the effectiveness of their teaching have been reported constantly (Bailey, 1982, 1983; Hoekje & Williams, 1992; Tyler, 1992; Rubin, 1992; Jenkins, 2000; Pickering, 2001; Gorsuch, 2011). In response to these complaints, TESOL/TESL professionals as well as scholars from other fields of disciplines have conducted numerous studies trying to identify the problems and provide solutions to these problems. Meanwhile, other scholars have looked into the issue from a different perspective and learned how some international teaching assistants (ITAs) view their experiences teaching and interacting with their American college students (Prieto & Altmaier, 1994; Luo, Bellows, & Grady, 2000; Kim, 2009; Ates & Eslami, 2012), and the findings of these studies have been applied to the advancement of ITA training programs.

However, in almost all the conducted research in the field of ITA studies, the participants are ITAs in science/math-based disciplines. Often being ignored is the fact that, among all the

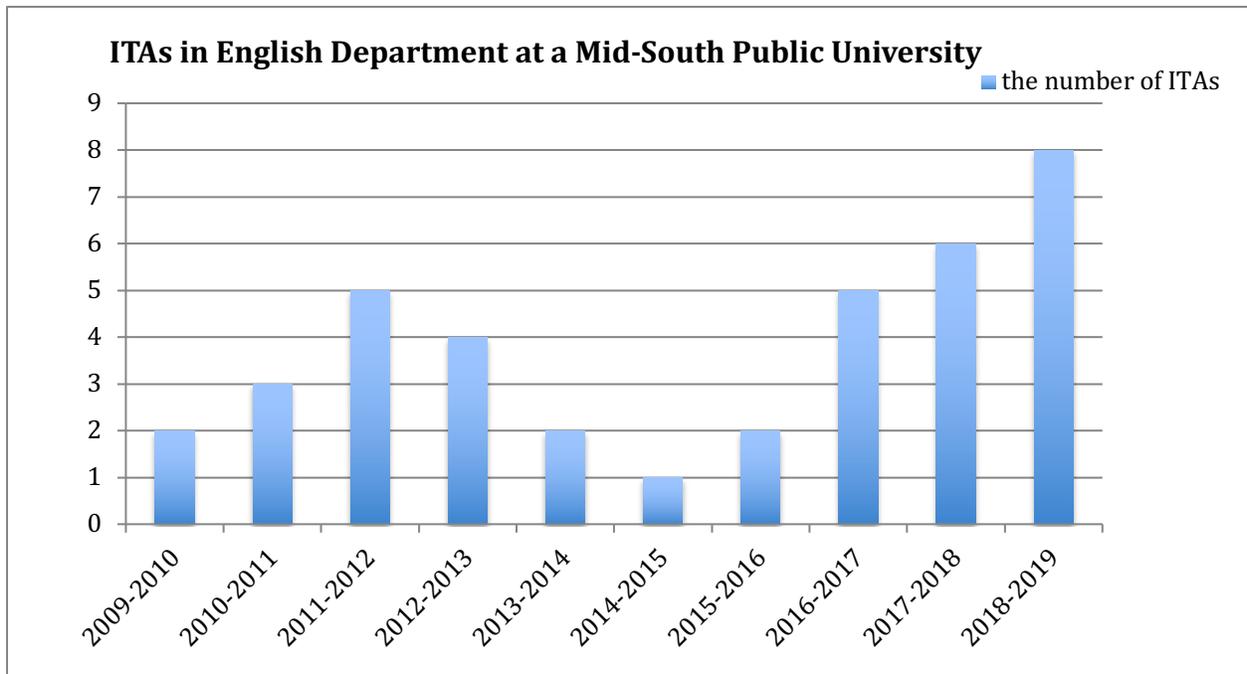
ITAs on American university campuses, there are some who have been granted an assistantship by the English departments of the schools and therefore are teaching, mostly, lower division English courses to college students who are native English speakers. Unlike the ITAs in disciplines other than English, for whom English is just a means of communication, the ITAs in English departments teach English as a subject, in addition to using English as a medium of teaching. Using English, which is their second, third, or even fourth language to teach English courses to students for whom English is their mother tongue, these ITAs face challenges ITAs in other departments could only imagine. This unique group of ITAs is the focus of the current study.

Background and Context of the Study

Since both American universities and ITAs have benefitted financially from this practice, it is inevitable that these schools will continue to offer graduate teaching assistantships to more and more international students, and the number of ITAs who are assigned to teaching English courses will grow as a result. At the school where I received my MA, I was the first ITA in the English department and the only one then. As far as I know, three more Chinese graduate students have been granted assistantships and assigned teaching responsibilities since I graduated from that school a decade ago, and there may well be ITAs of other nationalities, too.

The school where the current study is conducted is approximately three times the size of the school where I received my MA, regarding the student population; therefore, it is safe to assume that the number of ITAs on this campus is greater. In fact, according to the Assistant to Graduate Studies at the English Department of the school, this department has long had the tradition of granting graduate teaching assistantship to international students, and the number of ITAs in the Department has increased tremendously in the past five years (see Figure 1), which

further speaks for the need of studying the ITAs in English Departments as a unique group of people. Since they are assigned teaching responsibilities to teach composition courses that are required for all students, it is crucial for the reputation of the schools and the well-being of the students that the party that is responsible for making the decisions of granting teaching assistantships learns more about these ITAs and is able to justify the legitimacy of this practice.



• Figure 1

Researcher's Testimony and Motivation

When first started teaching, I was very nervous not knowing what I would be facing (If I were to be completely honest, until this date, I still have trouble sleeping the night before the first day of class.). I was not sure how my American students, who were native English speakers, would respond when finding out their English teacher was *not* a native English speaker; I assumed they would, naturally, have doubt about my credibility, so I felt the need to justify my presence and establish my authority, especially at the beginning of each semester. Early on in my TA career, when I was teaching at a small public university in Arkansas, I was told by a student,

who was failing the class, to my face that, “I never understood a word you said” on the last day of class. I have been challenged by some students on the grades I gave them; one student confronted me by saying, “I never made a B in English, and you gave me a C?” Regardless of these incidents, there were some “good days” during my over-a-decade-long teaching experience; there were aha-moments during my lectures and office hours. In a recent semester (before the pandemic), on the last day of class, a group of students remained seated in the classroom after turning in their final papers and one of them said, “this is so sad, I don’t wanna leave!” They kept chatting with me until we had to empty the classroom for the next class; some of my previous students enjoyed my class so much that they recommended their friends or siblings to take my class. My mixed experience left me wondering if other ITAs in our department have had similar if not the same experience and felt the same way about teaching native English speakers English as I have. At the same time, I am also interested in finding out how, in general, American college students evaluate their English instructor who is not a native English speaker and the learning experience they have had with their instructor, and if we, ITAs in English departments, face the same challenges and criticisms as ITAs from other disciplines often do.

Purpose of the Study

The current study is, for the most part, an attempt to explore the international teaching assistants’ expectations towards and experiences with their students when teaching English composition classes at a large mid-south public university. In addition, how these ITAs handle classroom management issues, such as how they present themselves in class, will be discussed; listening to the *stories* told by ITAs from the English department will help enrich our understanding of the issue of “ITA Problems” (Bailey, 1982), and ultimately the findings of the

current study can shed light on the advancement of ITA training programs. This study is also a close examination of American college students' attitude towards their English instructors who are non-native English speakers. Knowing what the American college students think of their English instructors who are non-native speakers of English helps identify, from the "consumers' perspective," the strengths and weaknesses of ITAs from the English department and provide a road map for the improvement of training programs for ITAs of other disciplines.

Research Questions

In order to achieve the purpose of the study, the following questions will need to be answered:

1. What do ITAs, the ones in English department, expect from their students before they start teaching? How do they prepare themselves?
2. How do ITAs present themselves, establish their credibility, and manage their classrooms?
3. How do ITAs evaluate their own teaching and classroom management strategies? If and how do they change these procedures as they gain more experience in teaching?
4. How do American college students evaluate their experience of taking an English composition class with an instructor whose native language is *not* English?

Significance of the Study

While compared to the total population of ITAs on any American university campus, the number of those who are assigned to teach English composition to native English speakers is small, their experience is unique and should be studied. The significance of the study can be seen from three directions. First, the findings of this study will be helpful for the administrators who are involved in the process of granting graduate teaching assistantships in justifying the

legitimacy of this practice. Secondly, for ITAs who teach English courses (not just composition courses), the results of this study, especially the analyses of the results of the student survey, will point out the direction for their improvement and advancement, and ITAs of other fields can gain a better understanding of what they would be facing as well. Lastly, American college students will benefit from this study ultimately because their instructors who are ITAs have improved their teaching.

Organization of the Study

This study consists of six chapters. Chapter one sheds light on the setting and focus of the study. Chapter two reviews the concepts and studies related to challenges ITAs are facing, in three major areas: language, pedagogy, and culture. Chapter three describes the design of the research methods, participants of the study, data collection, and data analysis of both quantitative and qualitative chapters. Chapter four analyzes the feedback gathered from the student survey and presents research results. Chapter five presents and analyzes the data collected during pre-observation interviews, class observations, and post-observation interviews. Lastly, chapter six interprets the results, highlights the significance of the study, suggests implementation of the findings, outlines limitations of the study, and provides suggestions for future studies.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Although different terms may have been used, most scholars in the field agree that ITAs are facing difficulties in three major areas: language, pedagogy, and culture (Rounds, 1987; Hoekje & Williams, 1992). Among the three, ITAs' language ability has been questioned the most, and it has been the subject of many studies. Shared by almost all the ITAs, a non-native-like pronunciation is the most noticeable characteristic in ITAs' speech and seems to be a barrier that hinders the communication between ITAs and their students. However, as Williams (1992) pointed out, it may seem like a problem in the beginning, but it "may diminish in importance over time" (p. 694), and "[i]t has already been noted that modifying pronunciation is notoriously difficult" (p. 707), so she examined ITAs' discourse from a different perspective. In her study, Williams (1992) compared the planned and unplanned presentations of ITAs and found more explicit use of marking and fewer unmarked key statements in the planned ones. Based on the evaluations of all the raters participated in this study, including ESL professionals and undergraduates, she concluded, "the increased and more explicit use of marking appeared to enhance comprehensibility considerably," and since "teaching and learning the use of discourse marking may prove far easier" (p. 707), she suggested that teaching the use of discourse marking may be an effective solution to the "ITA problem" (p. 708).

Dalle and Inglis (1990) stated that the unintelligibility of ITAs' speech "may derive from the ITAs' inability to mimic English intonation and to use effectively the suprasegmental features of English" (p. 1); they joined Rounds (1987) in believing that "[t]he problem ITAs have may extend beyond pronunciation and intonation; they simply may not have mastered the special discourse of 'teacher talk'" (as cited in Dalle & Inglis, 1990, p. 2). In their study, Dalle and Inglis (1990) had ITAs enrolled in a month-long training class to study and discuss "lecture

technique and the importance of classroom discourse markers” (p, 1). They then compared the ITAs’ videotaped presentations before and after the class and concluded that “when participating ITAs integrate discourse markers into their lectures, they improve the clarity of their presentations” (p. 2).

Tyler (1992) also looked into ITAs’ spoken discourse structure, and her study subjects were ITAs who were native Chinese speakers. She compared the planned spoken English of a native Chinese speaker (as it was read to the audience by a native English speaker) with that of a native speaker of U.S. English and found, between the two, “a variety of differences in the use of discourse structuring devices” (p. 713). First of all, native Chinese speakers do not use lexical discourse markers in a parallel manner, which is expected by native English speakers. Secondly, native Chinese speakers do not identify the referent in the discourse sufficiently, and “[t]he lack of lexical specification results in the impression that much of the discourse consists of disconnected detail” (p. 720). Thirdly, instead of syntactic incorporation, native Chinese speakers rely heavily on coordinate conjunctions and juxtapositions. In sum, according to the results of this study, it is the misuse/lack of use of the discourse structuring devices that makes the native Chinese speakers’ English difficult to follow.

Pickering (2001) was interested in another element of ITAs’ teaching discourse—tone choice, an intonational feature. The study of 12 recorded, “naturally occurring presentations” (p. 233), which were given by six Chinese and six North American male TAs showed that communication failures between ITAs and their students were caused, partly, by the ITAs’ tone choice. Therefore, she suggested that “tone choice [should] be directly addressed in the linguistic and pedagogical components of ITAs instruction programs” (p. 233). Gorsuch (2011) also chose Chinese ITAs as her study subjects, and while most scholars compared Chinese ITAs with native

English-speaking TAs, she compared Chinese ITAs as a group with ITAs from other countries. According to Gorsuch (2011), statistics showed that Chinese ITAs score lower than their counterparts on both the SPEAK test and ITA presentation test, and she argued in her proposal that “certain features of Chinese ITAs’ Discourse Intonation (DI), coupled with a lack of formal education on this important English communication skills, likely account for the low ratings Chinese ITAs as a group get upon arrival in the U.S.” (p. 8). It is interesting to see that among all the ITAs from different countries, the ones from China received the most attention and were the subjects of many studies. Possibly, this happened partly because Chinese ITAs formed the biggest nationality group and partly because they were the ones facing language difficulties the most.

ITAs’ communicative competence was also the concern of many scholars. Hoekje and William (1992) divided communicative competence into four subcategories: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence, and they believed that almost all the ITAs demonstrated gaps in the first three competences; therefore, it was beneficial for the teaching of “compensatory strategies” to be included in ITA training programs, since these strategies, including verbal and nonverbal ones could “either be used to compensate for deficiencies in other areas of competence or to increase communicative effectiveness in general” (p. 257). Halleck and Moder (1995), however, found in their study that ITAs had to “attain a threshold level of language ability” (p. 754) before they could benefit from using compensatory teaching strategies.

When most scholars in the field were focusing on finding a better way to prepare/train ITAs for their teaching role after they have already been awarded the assistantship and arrived at the American university campuses, some scholars tried to find ways to predict the performance

of ITAs before granting them the assistantships. Bailey's (1983) study proved the correlation between ITAs' performance on the Interagency Language Roundtable Oral Interview and the evaluation of their teaching performance, and she found statistically significant differences in students' ratings of ITAs "who had been rated 1+ and lower" and those "who scored 2 or better" on the interview (p. 309). However, due to the issue of cost, these interviews rarely happened when the ITAs were still in their home countries. When these interviews were arranged after ITAs had arrived on the university campuses, the assistantships had already been awarded, thus the results could only provide indications for the areas in which improvements were needed.

Dalle and Inglis (1989), in their study, tried to "establish the relationship between SPEAK scores and student-rated speech evaluation scores" (p. 3) and found a moderate positive correlation between the comprehensive ratings that the NNS TA received on the SPEAK test, of which the perfect score is 300, and the mean ratings of the NNA TAs on the speech evaluation scale. The results showed that "[a]lthough the test did predict the top quarter and the bottom quarter of the sample very accurately, the grey area in this sample appeared to range from 180 to 260" (p. 5). Foreseeing the potential discrepancy between the SPEAK scores and Speech Evaluation scores, Dalle and Inglis (1989) distributed, at the same time as the Speech Evaluation scale, the Communicator Style Measure questionnaires (p. 6), and they found out that "poor English speaking skills can be compensated for by expressing an attentive style of communication" and that "speech alone cannot predict effective teaching performance in the classroom" (p. 11-2). In practice, Dalle and Inglis (1989) admitted that "the [SPEAK] test would have to be regarded as a valuable primary screening device" due to the limited funding and number of qualified personnel the institution possessed (p. 5).

Yule and Hoffman (1990), in trying to “make it right” from the beginning, took a different route; they looked into the process in which international students were awarded assistantships and focused on the requirement for TOEFL scores. After two years of close examination, they found out “the TOEFL scores at application do have some predictive power with regard to eventual recommendation status for our population [233 ITAs at the school where the study was conducted]” (p. 231). Yule and Hoffman (1990) believed that this finding could help the administrators lower the risk of awarding the assistantships to the ITAs who are more likely to receive a negative recommendation for teaching duties and therefore make the job of ESL professionals, who are, in most of the cases, the training body of ITAs, easier. Five years later, Halleck and Moder (1995) did a parallel study and looked into the predicting power of TOEFL among a different population, but they failed in drawing the same or even a similar conclusion with their body of participants; instead, the results demonstrated the “general and understandable weakness in the TOEFL’s ability to predict performance on a teaching task” (p. 745).

Although ITAs are partially responsible for the unsuccessful communication between ITAs and their students, they are not the only responsible party; in many cases, communication problems are rooted from the negative attitudes the students hold towards their instructors who are ITAs. As Halleck and Moder (1995) pointed out “undergraduates in a university class are not likely to function as cooperatively as listeners in other language use situations” (p. 753), and “when students believed an instructor’s accent to be ‘foreign,’ they simultaneously perceived him or her to be a poor teacher” (qtd. in Rubin, p. 513). Moder’s (1995) research showed that “listening comprehension appeared to be undermined simply by identifying (visually) the instructor as Asian” (qtd. in Rubin, p. 519). Bailey (1984) believed that “[u]ndergraduate

students, while often having valid reasons to complain, sometimes respond to their non-native speaking TAs' foreignness with an attitude of annoyed ethnocentrism" (p. 15). Approximately three decades later, it was reported in Ates and Eslami's (2012) study again that NNES GTAs experienced "subtle racism in the forms of being marginalized or being disliked and prejudiced by their students" (p. 541).

Since U.S. undergraduates are the ones "whose complaints provided the original impetus for ITA programs to be created and screening procedures to be required" (Yule & Hoffman, 1993, p. 326), getting undergraduates involved in ITA training programs and redirecting their attitude towards ITAs should be one of the ways to fix "the foreign TA problem" (Bailey, 1983). Rubin (1992) also suggested having undergraduate students participate in NNSTAs' training, in the hope of promoting a positive attitude towards NNSTAs among undergraduates; however, in reality, "there is some anecdotal evidence that students in the training group actually became more critical of NNSTAs' communication behaviors during the course of this experiment" (p. 527). Meanwhile, Yule and Hoffman (1993) suggested universities "foster greater involvement of U.S. undergraduates in versions of the ITA screening process" (p. 324) because "in small groups, undergraduate observers can reach decisions which are overwhelmingly in agreement with those of the ESL professionals observing the same ITAs" (p. 326).

In addition to U.S. undergraduates' involvement in ITA training programs, several other factors may have the potential of manipulating the evaluations ITAs receive. Among all the factors, the influence of intercultural experiences remained ambiguous. On the one hand, Plakans' (1997) study claimed that "students involved in international exchanges or environmental and social action projects, for example, might have been more likely to have a positive attitude toward ITAs than those whose activities were primarily social or athletic"

(p.106). On the other hand, Smith, Storm, and Muthuswamy (2005) stated, “Their [Undergraduate students’] intercultural experiences were not related with their final evaluations of ITAs’ English competence and teaching competence” (p. 15). It is worth noting though while more than half of the students who were required to meet with an ESL learner weekly did not change their opinion on the language competence of the ITAs, the intercultural experience did help the ratings of ITAs’ teaching competence remain the same, instead of getting lower, Smith, Storm, and Muthuswamy (2005) noted.

Smith, Storm, and Muthuswamy (2005) tried to find out if there was a relationship between the timing of conducting ITA evaluations and the results of the evaluations, so they asked undergraduate students to evaluate international TAs, domestic TAs, and TAs in general at the beginning and the end of a semester. The data indicated that compared to domestic TAs, international TAs were rated lower throughout the semester. However, when compared to general TAs, ITAs only received a lower rating at the end of the semester. It was proven that “language and teaching ratings correlated positively and significantly” (Smith, Storm, & Muthuswamy, 2005 p. 8). Nevertheless, timing of the evaluations was not the determining factor of undergraduate students’ ratings of TAs. According to Smith, Storm, and Muthuswamy (2005), “Undergraduate ratings differed depending on who they evaluated, but not on when they evaluated them” (p. 8).

Not only did scholars focus on the communication problems in the classrooms, they also looked into the ones outside the classrooms and suggested solutions for the problems. Chiang (2009) was interested in analyzing the communication problems ITAs and ACSs (American college students) encountered during office hours. Conversations between five ITAs and ten ACSs were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Results showed that pronunciation was

the main cause of “problematic understanding,” but it was an easy-solving problem—all ITAs needed to do was to develop “a habit of writing down critical words while lecturing” (p. 473). This coincides with what Hoekje and William (1992) suggested 17 years ago, “ITAs who mispronounce terms can become more intelligible by learning to recognize which terms are problematic for them so they can write them on the board” (p. 248-9). After all, “such compensation techniques are quicker to master than changing pronunciation” (p. 249). In many cases, cultural differences were the “trouble-makers.” In Chiang’s (2009) study, the participated ITAs adopted “Asian students’ preference for inductive reasoning over Euro-Americans’ deductive reasoning” (p. 474), which was not what ACSs used to. On the other hand, the way in which ACSs formed questions was foreign to ITAs. As a result of these cultural differences, or what Hoekje and William (1992) labeled as “sociolinguistic inappropriateness” (p. 252), problematic communications occurred. The good news was though, both ITAs and ACSs were aware of the “linguistic deficiencies” and “cultural differences,” and they were “active problem solvers,” thus “procedural knowledge and positive attitude” were what it took to solve the problems (Chiang, 2009 p. 474-5).

Attitude is everything; ITAs’ psychological status is believed to play an important role in the successful communication between ITAs and their students. Roach and Olaniran (2001) reported that “ITA communication apprehension [CA] was positively correlated with intercultural communication apprehension [ICA] and negatively correlated with intercultural willingness to communicate [WTC]” (p. 31). An inverse relationship was also found between ICA and intercultural WTC. Results of this study also indicated that ITAs’ communication apprehension and their intercultural communication apprehension were “positively correlated with state anxiety and negatively correlated with satisfaction with students, relationship with

students, and perceptions of student ratings of ITA teaching” (p. 31). Interestingly, ITA intercultural willingness to communicate, while negatively correlated with both CA and ICA, was not “significantly correlated with any of these four variables” (p. 31). In light of these findings, ITA trainers were suggested to “diagnose communication apprehension in ITAs before they enter the classroom” and implement “training in coping mechanisms, in CA reduction strategies, and even in techniques to reduce situational or state anxiety” (p.33).

Kim (2009) chose ITAs from East Asian countries as the research subjects and surveyed their perceived self-efficacy. The analysis of the answers collected proved that there was a positive relationship between “the number of semesters spent teaching in the U.S. and teaching efficacy” (p. 177), but ITAs’ efficacy beliefs were not positively related to their perceived English proficiency. This conclusion coincided with Prieto and Altmaier’s (1994) belief that prior training and previous teaching experience enhanced graduate teaching assistants’ level of self-efficacy while TOEFL scores alone did not necessarily make the ITAs more or less successful. Furthermore, Kim’s (2009) survey showed that the study subjects “feel more efficacious in managing student behaviors and applying instructional strategies than in motivating and engaging students” (p. 177). In addition, this study yielded positive relationships between “perceived English fluency and efficacy for student engagement and classroom management” among the subjects with “high levels of adaptation difficulty,” and “as sociocultural adaptation difficulty decreased, the effect of perceived English fluency on efficacy decreased” (p. 177). Since “teachers with a higher sense of efficacy tend to utilize new methods to meet the needs of their students” (p. 178) which would make their teaching more effective, Kim (2009) proposed the inclusion of interventions that would help ITAs building their self-efficacy in ITA training programs.

William and Case (2015) also tried to provide recommendations for successful ITA training programs. They interviewed twenty ITAs and video-recorded their classes in authentic settings. As they watched the tapes with the ITAs, the interviewers paused and asked ITAs questions that were “designed to elicit participants to notice different elements of their teaching or to provide more information so that the researcher had a fuller understanding of the lesson” (p. 438). The answers and feedback from the study suggested that for many of the ITAs who participated in the study, this experience “enabled them to gain a self-awareness of how they appeared in the classrooms” (p. 439), helped them to gain a better understanding of the cultural and linguistic background of an incident from the tape (p. 443), and would ultimately “facilitate their own professional growth [as instructors]” (p. 443). Therefore, William and Case (2015) concluded their article with “general recommendations for effective use of observations as part of the training of international instructors” (p. 434).

Building on William and Case’s (2015) study, Arshavskaya (2017) put together a case study to look into how mentoring programs can help improve ITAs’ experience as instructors. Her study confirmed the finding of earlier research that “interactions with colleagues and mentoring can be a significant tool in mediating teachers’ development of instructional expertise” (p. 111). In addition, “given the participating ITAs’ prior experience in teaching and corresponding background, it is possible that solely the mediational spaces created through the [mentoring] project were of key importance to the ITAs’ development” (p. 111). Arshavskaya (2017) concluded that “mentoring sessions allowed ITAs to realize their limitations and the ways to overcome these limitations” and suggested that “interactions with their [ITAs’] advisors and students, using wait time, and incorporating more questions to make their [ITAs’] instruction more interactive” were effective mediational tools (p. 111).

Ates and Eslami (2012) were interested in finding out how non-native English-speaking (NNES) graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) responded emotionally to their teaching experience; therefore, they turned to NNES GTAs' weblogs. The NNES GTAs who participated in their study all believed "teaching is still a fulfilling and rewarding experience" even though during the process they had trouble "establishing credibility and authority as their language competence is being challenged" and adjusting to "different cultural expectations and values" (p. 541). A hidden message revealed in these weblogs was that in the eyes of "predominately monolingual, White, native English-speaking American preservice teachers," the fact that NNES GTAs were once ESL learners and are now excellent ESL users does not grant them any more credibility in teaching ESL related courses; instead, they "faced challenges managing their classes and felt discouraged and frustrated about the experience as a result of it" (p. 541). Then it should not be surprising that ITAs are questioned and challenged all the time while teaching American college students.

While students rated ITAs and USTAs quite differently, ITAs view their students the same way USTAs see their students. Luo, Bellows, and Grady's (2000) study demonstrated that even though "across gender, USTAs reported significantly more classroom management problems than ITAs" (p.372), they share eight out of the top ten most-experienced classroom management problems. In addition to that, ITAs' concerns and those of USTAs' overlapped; the results of their study indicated that "seven of the top ten student behaviors most frequently reported by USTAs to be their high concerns were also the high concerns of ITAs" (p. 361). According to Luo, Bellows, and Grady's (2000), USTAs and ITAs even share the same complaints they received; "too much homework and overly critical grading" (p.364) are the two common ones among the top five student complaints listed on their evaluations.

While Rubin (1992) found in her study that “for the multiple regression of listening comprehension scores, only a single variable, number of courses students had taken from NNSTAs, was a statistically significant predictor” (p. 521), Plakans (1997) believed that students’ major, together with gender, age, year of enrollment, and expected GPA, contributes to the differences in their evaluation of ITAs. In addition, Bailey’s (1983) study showed that “students who were not majoring in the same discipline as their TAs were significantly more critical of the non-native English-speakers’ public productive uses of English than were the students who shared a common academic major with their TAs” (p. 309). Baily (1983) also pointed out that the relationship between ITAs and their students was “complicated” and interaction was “sometimes problematic” because “while the non-native English-speaking TAs are assumed to be competent in their discipline, they have, to varying degrees, less than perfect control of English, the *medium* of instruction” (p. 309).

These findings post in front of us the questions:

1. Regarding the language competence of ITAs, the subjects of the current study are doctoral students in the field of English. By definition, these participants, while not native speakers of English, would be considered as “excellent users of the English language.” How would this factor play a role in their teaching practice and the interactions with their students? More specifically, how do the ITAs feel about their accent? At the same time, how do the students respond to their instructor’s accent?
2. Regarding the pedagogical strategies of ITAs, the participants of the current study all have a mixed educational background—they have attended schools in both their home country and the U.S.; therefore, it is logical to conclude that they all have been exposed to different schools of teaching pedagogies. With this kind of background, which school

of pedagogies do they adopt in their own teaching practice? What are the philosophies behind their choices?

3. Regarding the issue of ITAs' own cultural background and their understanding of the American culture and the acculturation of American universities, how do the participants of the current study deal with culture-rich issues? Such as the teacher-student relationship on an American school campus? How do they deal with the students when being questioned or challenged?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study aimed to investigate the expectations and experiences international teaching assistants had when teaching English composition classes at a large mid-south public university. It explored how ITAs present themselves in front of an “audience” who were not necessarily receptive of their presence and how they established their authority and eventually won the trust and respect of their students. This chapter describes the methodology for the study, including the rationale of the research design, the demographics of the participants, and the data collection and analysis processes.

Research Questions

In order to achieve the purpose of the study, the following questions would need to be answered:

1. What did ITAs, the ones in English department, expect from their students before they start teaching? How did they prepare themselves?
2. How did ITAs present themselves, establish their credibility, and manage their classrooms?
3. How did ITAs evaluate their own teaching and classroom management strategies? How did they change these procedures as they gained more experience in teaching?
4. How did American college students evaluate their experience of taking an English composition class with an instructor whose native language was *not* English?

Research Design

Since this study was a mixed-method research, I used semi-structured interviews, class observations, and an end-of-semester student survey. As Creswell and Poth (2018) stated, we conduct qualitative research because of the need to “study a group or population, identify

variables that cannot be easily measured, or hear silent voices” (p. 45). While the experiences of ITAs in other fields have already been examined and studied since 1984, ITAs in English departments form a unique group and have not received the attention they very well deserved. As a member of this unique group, I feel obligated to make known my feelings towards this challenging journey and help others like me to share their experience as well. We deserve the opportunity to have our silent voice heard. To accomplish this mission, I conducted two interviews with each of the participating ITAs, using the questions that I drew from my experience, previous research studies, and class observations.

In order to make sure the results of my study are convincing, not only have I interviewed the ITAs, I have also observed one of their classes, for it is a common practice among qualitative researchers that they would “gather multiple forms of data, such as interviews, observations, and documents, rather than rely on a single data source” (Creswell and Poth, p. 43, 2018). The current study used a qualitative discursive approach to analyze ITAs’ interviews as well as student-teacher and student-student interactions during classroom observations. I took extensive notes when observing the classes and composed questions for the second part of the post-observation interviews, which I conducted shortly after the visits to the classes.

A more thorough understanding of the scope of my study could be achieved only when the feedback of the students was also collected. Plakans (1997), in his study, explored undergraduates’ experiences with and attitude toward ITAs, using the QUITA, which is “a four-page, machine-scored instrument” (p. 101). In my research, since the main focus of my study was the ITAs, the student survey I used was brief, with only 13/15 questions. Upon the request of some of the ITAs participated in my study, I revised the student survey for their students; to be more specific, I deleted two of the questions that the ITAs claimed with which they “don’t feel

comfortable,” for reasons I would discuss later.

Participants

The participants of the current study were international teaching assistants (ITAs) who were at the time teaching English composition classes and their students at a large mid-south public university. With the help of my advisor, I sent out recruiting emails to ITAs in the English department of the school, and with the consents of the ITAs who agreed to participate in my study, I visited their classes and invited their students to take part in the study. It was made clear to both the ITAs and their students that the participation in the current study was optional and anonymous for them and the decision of not participating and the feedback they would have provided would by no means jeopardize the status of ITAs’ teaching assistantship and their students’ grades in the course respectively. I also ensured them that throughout the course of the study, ITAs would be referred to by pseudonyms, and when taking the end-of-semester survey, the participating students would not be asked questions that could potentially reveal their identities.

Ultimately, four ITAs from three different countries, two males and two females, participated in the current study. All the ITAs have had some teaching experience before participating in the current study, and both of the male participants have had quite extensive teaching experience (compared to their female counterparts). Blue, who is from Jordan, taught in his home country for two and a half years, and then he moved to Saudi Arabia and taught there for another five years. He had been working as a research assistant since coming to the U.S. two and a half years ago, and when this study was conducted, he was teaching English composition classes at an American university for the first time. Nayeem, a Bangladesh national, had taught in his home country for thirteen years before coming to the United States. He had taught Bangla

language courses and English composition classes in two other American universities for several years prior to teaching as a TA while attending school here. When the current study was conducted, he was teaching for the third semester at the school. Compared to their male counterparts, the female participants have had much less teaching experience. TiTi, from Iran, taught English to students of different age groups and proficiency levels back in her home country for roughly three years, and she had shadowed a couple of American TAs and substituted for some instructors during the previous semester and was teaching her own classes for the first time when the study was conducted. Angela, the wife of Nayeem's, was also from Bangladesh. She taught at another U.S. university as a TA for two years when she was working on her master's degree there, and she started attending school here a year ago and has been teaching since then.

With the consent of the ITAs, I revisited (I visited one of their classes and observed their teaching previously) their classes on the last day of classes to invite their students to take part in my study by taking a brief survey. Among all the ITAs, there were a total of 104 students in eight of their classes. Since two of the students in one of Angela's classes were under the age of 18 and could not legally sign the consent form, I ended up recruiting 102 students to consent to participating in my study. Out of the 102 students who took the survey, 8 students did not complete the survey as instructed, which then resulted in the number of valid participants decreased to 94. Due to the fact that the sizes of the classes varied, even though all the ITAs were teaching two sections, the total numbers of students of the ITAs ranged from 17 to 31.

Pre- and Post-observation Interviews

In order to gain a much deeper understanding of ITAs' expectation and experience being the instructors of English composition courses, two semi-structured interviews were arranged

with each ITA, one before the class observation and one shortly after. I conducted a total of 8 face-to-face interviews, and they lasted between 18 and 49 minutes, with the post-observation interview longer than the pre-observation interview for each and every participant. Throughout the interviews, I functioned as a facilitator and tried to let the ITAs fully express themselves, including the expectations they have had at the beginning of a semester, challenges and confusions they have faced during the semester (if there were any), and lessons they have learned by the points of time when the interviews were conducted.

At the beginning of the pre-observation interviews, I briefly explained my study to the participants and reviewed the IRB consent form with them; they all signed the consent form before the interviews were conducted. During the pre-observation interviews, I asked all the ITAs almost the same questions (with a few exceptions) from a list I put together before hand. Some questions were drawn from my personal experience of being an ITA myself, for example, when I found out for the first time I would be “teaching Americans English,” I had mixed feelings—a fear of uncertainty and a sense of proud, and I was very much interested in finding out if the participating ITAs have had the same sentiments along the journey. Some of the questions were inspired by the literature in the field of ITAs studies; for instance, the non-native like accent that most ITAs have has been the focus of such studies since the very beginning, and all the studies I have encountered so far approached this issue from the perspective of the students, and ITAs’ assessment of their accent has not been examined. I was curious to find out if they would perceive an accent as an issue that was worth the spotlight?

As for the post-observation interview, there were two parts, with the first part of the questions focusing on the general experience that all participating ITAs have had (these questions were based, again, on my personal experience and previous literature in the field), and

the questions in the second part were more tailored to each ITA (these questions were generated from the class observations). The ITAs were asked to *recall* and *report* their own teaching practice and interactions they have had with their students, such as how they dealt with communication breakdowns and grade complaints (if there were any). I did not ask these questions during the pre-observation because I did not want to bring the ITAs' awareness to these issues before the observation; this way, I was able to see how ITAs interact with their students in real time, without a filter. For the second part of the post-observation interview, I was looking for *explanations* and *justifications* as to why they did what they did in class; for example, if he/she dressed formal/casual for the class I observed, why?

Since the interviews were semi-structured, they left room for follow-up questions to be asked and more information to be gathered. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher later. I assigned pseudonyms to all participated ITAs to protect their identities, and no information that could potentially reveal the identities of the students was collected. I listened to all of the interview records multiple times, both for the purpose of transcribing the conversations and verifying the details as I tried to compose this study.

Class Observation

In order to learn how ITAs implement their lesson plans, manage classroom activities, and interact with their students in classroom settings in real time, one class observation was arranged with each ITA. I asked for the consent for and scheduled the class observations with the ITAs and left it for them to decide whether they would inform their students prior to my visit. I arrived at the classrooms a few minutes before the class times, checked in with the ITAs, and watched, from the corners of the classrooms, how he/she got ready for the lesson of the day. During the classes, I blended in with the environment and observed the teaching activities

without having any interaction with any of the students. I also paid close attention to the interactions between the ITAs and their students during in-class activities. I took extensive notes of what went on throughout the class period, and I turned to these notes when trying to generate the questions for the post-observation interviews. I also audio-recorded the entirety of the classes so that I would not miss any important details. Unlike the interviews, not all details of the classes were transcribed; instead, key details were noted.

Student Survey

Inspired by Smith, Storm, and Muthuswamy's (2005) study, originally, I planned to survey the students twice: once at the very beginning of the semester and once again at the end, so that I could compare and see if the students would change their attitude towards their English instructors who were non-native English speakers, based on their experience. Things did not happen as planned, and I only managed administering one student survey at the end of the semester. Even though it was not ideal for me, having just only survey may turn out to be enough for my study, since "[u]ndergraduates' ratings differed depending on who they evaluated, but not on when they evaluated them" (Smith, Storm, and Muthuswamy, 2005, p. 8).

I did try to reach out to the ITAs by sending them invitation emails during the summer, but I did not hear from them until the semester already started; as a result, I was not able to get the consents from the ITAs to participate in my study early enough. The first interview was not arranged until three weeks in, and the first class-observation was not done until week six. When I tried to negotiate with TiTi, the first ITA I interviewed, about surveying her students, she asked me to show her the survey. Two days later, she told me that she did not feel comfortable with some of the questions on the survey and suggested me to postpone the survey; in her words, "at this point, I just established my authority with my students, I don't want them to be asked some

of these questions.” Having walked in her shoes before myself, I did not argue but respectfully agreed to not surveying her students then, and she agreed to let me survey her students at the end of the semester. At that time, she did not specify for me the questions with which she was not feeling comfortable, so I was not able to identify which questions and why those questions made her uncomfortable.

As for the other three ITAs who participated in the current study, I was not able to recruit them until almost mid-term. At that point, their students had attended enough class sessions to change their opinions about their instructor if they were ever going to, so I put behind me the idea of surveying their students twice. I simply combined the questions I originally had on the two surveys and put them into one end-of semester survey. In order to evaluate the validity and reliability of the survey, I invited my students to test-take the survey as a pilot study. I collected and processed the results and revised the survey based on the feedback I received.

Three weeks before the semester ended, I approached the participating ITAs again and tried to set up the date and time for the administration of the student survey. Before agreeing to letting me survey her students, Angela asked me to show her the survey questions, so I emailed her the survey. A couple of days later, she sat down with me and expressed her concerns on two of the questions on the survey: one regarding the speech of the instructor and the other one the weak points of the instructor. She stated that she did not like the former question because it would draw her students’ attention to her accent and she did not want that to happen; as for the latter one, she did not agree with the idea behind the questions and said that one’s appearance and accent were the individual’s “personal identities” and therefore “should not be judged.” I tried to ease her concerns by telling her that I had had my students test-take the survey and the feedback was positive/encouraging, but she was not convinced and insisted that it was about the

time for the students to take the SETE (Student Evaluation of Teaching Effectiveness), and those two questions may evoke negative feedback from her students and result in poor evaluation for her teaching performance from her mentor. Since Angela and Nayeem were a married couple, she spoke for him on the issue.

One week before the last, TiTi, Angela, and Nayeem, after a few more rounds of negotiation, still insisted that they did not feel comfortable about those two questions, so I deleted them, and they agreed to let me survey their students on the last day of their classes. Blue did not raise any issue about the survey questions and scheduled for me to survey his students at the beginning of his last classes. During the last week of the semester when the current study was conducted, I revisited the participating ITAs' classes, distributed, and collected the surveys in person. The students were showed a consent form and asked to sign it before taking the survey. Students in TiTi's, Angela's, and Nayeem's classes were given Version II of the survey (with thirteen questions) while Blue's students took Version I of the survey (with fifteen questions). The surveys were done in a paper-and-pencil format, and identities of the students were kept confidential.

The student survey consists of two parts. There are 5 questions in the first part; the students were asked to provide basic information regarding their demographics (year and major), their exposure to people who speak a language other than English as their first language, and their previous experience with foreign instructor(s). In the second part, there are 8/10 questions; students were asked questions such as whether they thought their instructor was knowledgeable in the subject matter, whether they have had one-on-one interactions with their instructors and how they would describe the experiences, how they would describe the job their instructors have done in teaching the course, and etc. Blue's students were also asked to describe his speech and

to identify the weakest point of their instructor.

Pilot Study

Under the situation I previously described, I decided to administrate a pilot study with my own students. The students were given the full survey (Version I) but were told to skip the first part of the survey, considering those questions might potentially reveal their identity since I was somewhat familiar with their background as well as their handwriting by the time when they test-took the survey. In total, 44 students from three classes participated in the pilot study, only 39 copies of the surveys were valid, and valuable suggestions were generated from the process.

For the question, “What do you think is the weakest point of this instructor?”, five options were provided in the original draft of the survey:

- a. His/Her foreign appearance
- b. His/Her foreign accent
- c. His/Her understanding of the American culture
- d. His/Her teaching style
- e. His/Her unavailability in and outside classes

While taking the survey, several students raised their hand and asked, “what if none of the options applies?” They claimed that they did not see any of those listed being a “problem” and suggested I should add “none” as the sixth option.

Similar issue was raised regarding the question of “Circle your biggest concern about your grade in this class.” I have originally offered five options:

- a. My grade may suffer because writing has never been my strength.
- b. My grade may suffer since I have been having a hard time keeping up with the assignments.

- c. My grade may suffer due to my attendances in this class.
- d. My grade may suffer since instructor grades hard.
- e. My grade may suffer because I have been having trouble communicating with my instructor.

Some of the students were “feeling pretty good” and did not think their grade would “suffer,” so they suggested adding “none” to the list.

I then revised the survey based on the feedback I received, added “none” as the sixth option to the two questions mentioned previously, and kept the rest of the questions and answers the way they were. On average, it took the students approximately five minutes to finish the questions, and none of them reported having any trouble understanding the questions or answers.

Data Analysis

Since I was trying to draw a clear map of my chosen issue, I took the route of “reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges” (Creswell and Poth, p. 44, 2018). After all data were collected, I transcribed, coded, and analyzed the audio data collected via interviews and observations, and I categorized and compared the answers gathered through student surveys. For qualitative data, I synthesized the information and looked for emerging themes—both similar and different ones—amongst the challenges ITAs faced and the strategies they had employed in coping with these challenges. As for the quantitative data, after the students took the survey, I processed and categorized their answers to see how the students viewed their English instructors and evaluated the learning experiences they had had with their instructors. Out of curiosity, I also examined the feedback I gathered from the pilot study, the results of which will be discussed next.

CHAPTER FOUR: QUANTITATIVE DATA

Pilot Study

The results and feedback gathered from the test-survey were quite encouraging and rather valuable. Among the thirty-nine participating students whose answers were valid, thirty-seven students *strongly* agreed that “my instructor is knowledgeable about the subject” while two chose “somewhat agree.” Similarly, thirty-seven students agreed with the statement that “overall, the instructor has done a *great* job teaching this course” while two students described the job the instructor had done as “decent.” When asked if they would like to take the same instructor for their next English course if possible, thirty-five chose “Sure! My instructor is great!”, three students chose “I guess, I don’t really care,” and one person chose “Probably not, I would like to try new instructors.” No one chose “No, thanks!”

As previous studies (Bailey, 1983 & 1984; Gorsuch, 2011; Rubin & Smith, 1990) show, ITAs’ non-native like pronunciation has been the center of the complaints towards ITAs for decades, which is why I decided to include a question regarding ITAs’ speech in the survey. In the pilot study, when asked to “circle the statement that best describes your feeling about the speech of your instructor,” thirty-five out of thirty-nine students chose “my instructor has an accent, but I have never had problem understanding him/her” while only two students chose “my instructor has an accent, and I have trouble understanding him/her sometimes.” Two students even circled “my instructor doesn’t have an accent.” It is worth noting that there were several international students participated in the pilot study; they were from countries such as England, Germany, Canada, and Honduras. There also were several American students who are bilingual; they speak Spanish, Arabic, or Chinese as a second language. Since the students’ identities were not revealed, I had not been able to prove my suspicion that it was the international or bilingual

students who had chosen “my instructor doesn’t have an accent,” but it was probably true.

Another question, the answers of which are worth of further discussion is “what do you think is the weakest point of the instructor?” Seventeen students did not choose from the list of options; instead, they wrote in “none.” Among the options provided, chosen by the most students was “his/her understanding of the American culture,” by fourteen of them. Only two students chose “his/her foreign accent,” which matched with the number of students who circled “my instructor has an accent, and I have trouble understanding him/her sometimes.” Just one student believed “his/her foreign appearance” was the instructor’s weakest point.

It was the positive feedback I gathered from this pilot study that granted me the confidence about the validity and reliability of the survey and its results, which is why I deeply regret that the students of three ITAs’ took the survey from which the questions regarding the instructor’s speech and weak points were deleted. I totally understand these ITAs’ sense of insecurity, which is why I even shared the promising results of the pilot study with Angela when trying to talk her into letting her students take the full survey, but she was not convinced. With the remaining questions, I managed extracting the general attitude students had towards their ITAs, and the results of the end-of semester survey will be discussed next.

Student Survey

A total of 102 students consented to participate in the current study and took the survey. Among all the participants, six of them chose more than one answer for some questions, and two of them did not finish all the questions; therefore, the number of valid surveys was brought down to ninety-four. Since the courses the ITAs were teaching (ENGL 1010 and ENGL 1020) are required for all students early on in their college life, out of ninety-four valid participants, eighty-two were freshmen, ten were sophomore, one was junior, and one student wrote in “post-bach.”

Coincidentally, all ten sophomore and the only junior were Nayeem's students; the "post-back" was in one of TiTi's classes; Angela and Blue had all freshmen in both of their classes.

Plakans (1997) believed that students' major, together with gender, age, year of enrollment, and expected GPA, contributes to the differences in their evaluation of ITAs. In addition, Bailey's (1983) study showed that "students who were not majoring in the same discipline as their TAs were significantly more critical of the non-native English-speakers' public productive uses of English than were the students who shared a common academic major with their TAs" (p. 309). In the current student pool, only two out of the ninety-four valid participants major in English. Both of them strongly agreed that their instructor was knowledgeable about the subject; both of them thought their instructor had done a great job teaching the course and would love to take the same instructor for the next English course; both of them chose to label having a non-native English speaker teaching them English as an "interesting" experience. However, given the sample size was extremely small, only 2 out of 94 (2.1%), the results are not significant.

Living in a country that is famous for being a melting-pot, there is a good chance the students have been around people who speak a different language other than English as their first language, which would potentially alter the way they view other person's accent and ultimately his/her speech, for better or worse. Among the students who participated in the current study, the majority, 84 out of 94, which is 89.4%, reported that they had been exposed to native speakers of at least one other language. The number can be further broken down as follows:

- 40 out of 84 (47.6%) students reported having been around people speak one language other than English as their first language, for example, Spanish.
- 22 out of 84 (26.2%) students claimed that they had heard two different languages

spoken by others as their first language, such as Spanish and Arabic.

- 12 out of 84 (14.3%) students knew native speakers of three different languages, for instance, Japanese, Korean, and Chinese.
- 10 out of 84 (11.9%) students friended with more than four (including four) people who consider a language other than English as their mother tongue, including French, German, Chinese, Japanese, and etc.

Rubin (1992) found in her study that “for the multiple regression of listening comprehension scores, only a single variable, number of courses students had taken from NNSTAs, was a statistically significant predictor” (p. 521). Compared to the number of participants who have been exposed to people who speak a language other than English as their first language, the number of students who have had foreign teacher(s)/instructor(s) is much smaller; only 68 out of 94 students reported having been taught by at least one foreign teacher/instructor prior to this class, and they viewed their experience differently:

- 38 out of 68 (55.9%) thought their experience was great.
- 23 out of 68 (33.8%) described the experience as being decent.
- 6 out of 68 (8.8%) claimed the experience was disappointing.
- 1 student (1.5%) went as far as calling the experience terrible.

Previous studies have drawn mixed conclusions as to whether previous intercultural experiences would positively influence the way American college students evaluate their ITAs. Plakans (1997) claimed “students involved in international exchanges or environment and social actions projects, for example, might have been more likely to have a positive attitude towards ITAs than those whose activities were primarily social or athletic” (p. 106), whereas Smith, Storm, and Muthuswamy (2005) concluded that “their [undergraduate students’] intercultural

experiences were not related with their final evaluations of ITAs' English competence and teaching competence.” In the current study, 89.4% (84 out of 94) of the participants reported that they had been exposed to native speakers of at least one other language, and 89.7% (61 out of 68)) of those who had had foreign teacher(s)/instructor(s) described their previous experience as being either *great* or *decent*. How would the participants of the current study describe their experience? Are they more likely to evaluate their instructor positively or critically?

Baily (1983) pointed out that the relationship between ITAs and their students was “complicated” and interactions were “sometimes problematic” because “while the non-native English-speaking TAs are assumed to be competent in their discipline, they have, to varying degrees, less than perfect control of English, the *medium* of instruction” (p. 309). In the current study, the participating ITAs were doctoral students in English. They all have at least one degree in English; some even have multiple MAs in English (Nayeem) or publications in English (TiTi). In other words, English is both “their discipline” and “the *medium* of instruction.” What would happen to this already “complicated” relationship and “sometimes problematic” interactions? Will the “non-native-speakers” status of the ITAs hinder their credibility in the subject matter?

As mentioned earlier, out of the 102 surveys I gathered, 94 were valid, and the result of the valid copies were used to answer the questions posed above. During the semester the study was conducted, each of the ITAs was teaching two classes, and the classes were of different sizes, ranging from six to twenty students in each one; as a result, the numbers of participated students of each ITA varied (from the least to the most): seventeen (Angela), twenty-two (Nayeem), twenty-four (Blue), and thirty-one (TiTi). Generally speaking, the majority of the students responded positively to most of the survey questions, the details of the results will be further discussed next.

It is crucial for any instructor to have the trust of the students that their instructor is knowledgeable in the subject he/she is teaching, and students usually give their instructor “the benefit of the doubt.” In the case of an English course, when the instructor does not look and/or sound like a native speaker, the credibility would not be granted immediately and would have to be gained. Did the participating ITAs successfully gain the trust of their students? Their students were asked to fill the blank in the following statement, “I _____ with the statement that, ‘My instructor is knowledgeable about the subject’.”

	Angela	Nayeem	Blue	TiTi	Total
Strongly agree	15	12	20	26	73
Somewhat agree	2	10	4	5	21
Don't quite agree	0	0	0	0	0
Don't agree	0	0	0	0	0

While the degree of the agreements varied, all the students surveyed agreed that their instructor was knowledgeable about the subject, with 78 % of the students strongly agreed with the statement and 22% chose “somewhat agree.” The numbers proved that all the ITAs participated in the current study managed convincing their students that they were qualified to teach English composition even though English was not their mother tongue and they spoke the language with an accent. What did they do to gain them this level of recognition? Interestingly though, among all the ITAs, the one with the most teaching experience had the lowest percentage of students who “strongly agree” that their instructor was knowledgeable about the subject. What did the ITAs do differently that resulted in the statistical differences? The answers were revealed in the interviews and during class observations.

One-on-one interactions between people play a huge role in building rapport, which then smooths the teaching-learning process, so the next question on the survey is, “Have you had any one-on-one interaction with the instructor outside class? If you have, how would you describe

your experience(s)?" The result is as follows:

	Angela	Nayeem	Blue	TiTi	Total
I have never talked with him/her outside class.	5	4	8	5	22
I have talked with him/her right after classes to get my questions answered; since there was limited time, the conversation was short.	3	11	8	11	33
I have talked with my instructor during his/her office hours; there was plenty of time, but our conversation was short and focused.	9	4	7	11	31
I have talked with my instructor during his/her office hours; since there was plenty of time, our conversation was extended, and we got to know more about each other.	0	3	1	4	8

The majority of the students, 72 out of 94 (76.6%) have had one-on-one interaction with their instructor, which showed the majority of them felt comfortable reaching out to their instructor when the circumstances arose. Thirty-three out of 94 students chose to talk to their instructor after class, and slightly more (39 out of 94) students approached their instructor during his/her office hours. Out of the 48 students in female ITAs classes, 38 (79.2%) have had one-on-one with their instructor, and male ITAs have been reached out by 73.9 % (34 out of 46) of their students outside class. While there is a slight difference (5%) between ITAs of different genders, due to the small sample size, the effect of the gender of ITAs has on students' willingness to reach out to their instructor could not be determined. In order to get a holistic look of the issue, I sought to find out how ITAs saw their experiences with one-on-one interactions with their students, so I also asked the ITAs to comment on the one-on-one interactions with their students during the post-observation interviews, and their answers will be discussed in the qualitative data chapter.

The next question on the survey is "What do you think is the biggest strength of this instructor?", and the result is as follows:

	Angela	Nayeem	Blue	TiTi	Total
He/She is knowledgeable about the subject.	4	9	15	5	33
He/She cares about his/her students' success.	10	11	6	19	46
His/Her availability in and outside classes.	1	1	0	4	6
He/She is passionate about teaching.	2	1	3	3	9

While all the participants “strongly” or “somewhat” agreed that their instructor was knowledgeable, only about 1/3 of them thought being knowledgeable was the instructor’s biggest strength, whereas almost half of them (46 out of 94) believed caring about his/her students’ success was their instructor’s biggest strength. This implied that students appreciated their instructor being caring about the students’ success more than being knowledgeable, and many more students of female ITAs’ chose the former over the latter one (29 v.s. 9). The ITAs who participated in the current study not only successfully established their credibility in the subject of English composition, but also were they able to build a rapport with their students and show them their instructors cared about them.

The students were then asked to use one adjective to describe the experience of being taught English by a non-native English speaker. The question reads, “Having a non-native English speaker teaching me English has been a (an) _____ experience,” and the result is as follows:

	Angela	Nayeem	Blue	TiTi	Total
exciting	2	0	3	3	8
interesting	14	19	19	27	79
shocking	1	2	1	0	4
surprising	0	1	1	1	3

Generally speaking, the student participants responded with a somewhat neutral attitude. From the options provided, 84.0% (79 out of 94) of the students chose to describe the experience as being “interesting,” only 8 participants thought it was exciting, and 7 found it shocking or surprising. None of Angela’s students was surprised by the experience, none of Nayeem’s

students considered the experience as being exciting, and none of TiTi’s students admitted being shocked by it.

It is natural that when facing inconvenient consequences, some people will try to find something or somebody else other than themselves to blame. As mentioned previously, I have had a student who tried to blame her failure in the course on my speech. I have not had any other students since then telling me they “never understood a word” I said to my face, but what would the students say if asked to explain their grade in an English class taught by a non-native English speaker? To unveil the answer to this question, the participants were asked to “Circle your biggest concern about your grade in this class,” and the result is as follows:

	Angela	Nayeem	Blue	TiTi	Total
My grade may suffer because writing has never been my strength.	6	5	18	17	46
My grade may suffer since I have been having a hard time keeping up with the assignments.	3	5	1	1	10
My grade may suffer due to my attendances in this class.	2	3	3	7	15
My grade may suffer since instructor grades hard.	1	0	0	0	1
My grade may suffer because I have been having trouble communicating with my instructor.	2	6	2	3	13
None.	3	3	0	3	9

Out of 94 participants, 9 did not have any concern regarding their grade, and among those who did express their concerns, 71 chose to put the “blame” on themselves, with the majority of them (46 out of 83) believing their grade may suffer because writing had never been their strength. Only one person thought his or her grade would suffer because the instructor was a hard grader. While 22 students reported that they had never talked to their instructor outside class, only 13 believed their grade may suffer because they have had trouble communicating with their instructor, which implies some students did not perceive talking to the instructor outside class as a necessity and chose not to do so.

The next two items on the survey asked the students to provide their overall assessment of the course and the instructor; it would be interesting to see if and how the students associate their evaluation of the course to that of the instructor. As the feedback to the previous question shows, the students did not associate their potential poor grade with the performance of their instructor as much as with their own behavior. Then, would they base their overall assessment of the course on their perception of the instructor's performance? When asked what they thought about the course, the students commented:

	Angela	Nayeem	Blue	TiTi	Total
This has been an eye-opening experience, and I am glad that I chose to take this course with this instructor.	11	3	15	19	48
This has been a challenging experience, but I don't regret taking this course with this instructor.	4	8	8	7	27
This has been a disappointing experience; I should have dropped the course or switched to a different section earlier.	0	1	0	0	1
I don't really care who the instructor is; I am taking this course simply because it is required.	2	10	1	5	18

When asked to circle the statement that best describes their overall impression about the instructor, students responded:

	Angela	Nayeem	Blue	TiTi	Total
Overall, the instructor has done a great job teaching this course.	14	6	18	21	59
Overall, the instructor has done a decent job teaching this course.	2	11	2	9	24
Overall, the instructor has done an average job teaching this course.	1	4	4	1	10
Overall, the instructor has done a poor job teaching this course.	0	1	0	0	1

Altogether, only one student thought the instructor had done a poor job teaching the course, and just one student regretted taking the course and chose to describe taking the course as

a disappointing experience. A close look at the answers on the surveys revealed that it was the same student who thought the instructor had done a poor job and called the course a disappointing experience. Forty-eight students were glad that they decided to take the course with the instructor even though not all of them would describe their instructor's performance as "great:"

- Forty of them thought their instructor had done a great job.
- Seven of them described their instructor's performance as being decent.
- One person called the job the instructor had done average.

Out of 59 students who thought their instructor had done a great job, not all of them thought "This has been an eye-opening experience," and were glad that they chose to take this course with the current instructor:

- Forty were glad they chose to take the course with the instructor.
- Twelve found the experience challenging but did not regret taking the course with their instructor.
- Seven stated that they did not care who the instructor was.

The best way to judge if a restaurant serves good food is to see whether there are loyal guests who would go back often. The logic is obvious; we cannot have enough of what is good and would always want more. What will students do in academia? Will they become "loyal guests" once they become familiar and feel comfortable with certain instructors? The answer to the previous question shows that 88.3% (83 out of 94) of the students thought their instructors had done either a great or decent job, but would they be willing to take another English course with the same instructor? Lastly, the participants were asked, "Would you like to take the same instructor for your next English course if it is possible?" and the result is as follows:

	Angela	Nayeem	Blue	TiTi	Total
Sure! My instructor is great!	13	3	19	18	53
I guess, I don't really care.	0	6	4	6	16
Probably not, I would like to try new instructors.	4	10	1	6	21
No, thanks!	0	3	0	1	4

While 59 students thought their instructor had done a great job, slightly fewer of them, 53 students would like to take the same instructor for their next English course because “My instructor is great!” To further break down the result, the majority of Angela’s, Blue’s and TiTi’s students expressed their willingness to take the same instructor again, and none of Angela’s or Blue’s students responded with “No, thanks!” As in the case of TiTi, when I showed her the survey questions before administrating the survey, she told me that she had been encouraging her students to try other instructors in the future and warned me her students’ answers for this question might be affected by her words. However, against her “suggestion,” still more than half of her students showed their support for her by insisting that they would take her again if they could. Among all the ITAs participated, Nayeem had the most students who showed no preference of him over new instructors, which matched up with the answer to the previous question. In that, more of his students described his teaching performance as being “decent,” by 11 students, than being “great,” by 6 students.

As previously disclosed, three of the ITAs (Angela, Nayeem, and TiTi) insisted that their students were not to be asked the questions regarding their instructors’ speech and weak points. The fourth ITA, Blue, did not reject those two questions; therefore, his students were given the original version of the survey, on which there were 15 questions. Even though the sample size is not ideal, only twenty-four students responded to these two questions (regarding the instructor’s speech and weak points), it is still worth discussing the results.

The question regarding the instructor's speech reads, "Circle the statement that best describes your feeling about the speech of your instructor," and options provided include:

- a. My instructor doesn't have an accent.
- b. My instructor has an accent, but I have never had problem understanding him/her.
- c. My instructor has an accent, and I have trouble understanding him/her sometimes.
- d. My instructor has an accent, and I often have trouble understanding him/her.
- e. My instructor has an accent, and I have been having a hard time understanding him/her.

Among Blue's twenty-four students, fifteen chose "my instructor has an accent, but I have never had trouble understanding him/her," and the rest of participants, nine students, circled "my instructor has an accent, and I have trouble understanding him/her sometimes." None of Blue's students reported having had trouble understanding him "often," and nobody claimed he or she has been having a hard time understanding Blue.

The other question only Blue's students answered is "What do you think is the weakest point of this instructor?" The students were asked to choose from the following list:

- a. His/Her foreign appearance
- b. His/Her foreign accent
- c. His/Her understanding of the American culture
- d. His/Her teaching style
- e. His/Her unavailability in and outside classes
- f. None.

While all of Blue's students recognized that he has an accent, and nine of them claimed that they sometimes had trouble understanding him, only six of them believed their instructor's foreign

accent was his weakest point. In fact, more students, ten of them perceived their instructor's teaching style as a more serious issue or Blue's "weakest point." Four students chose "his/her understanding of the American culture" as their instructor's weakest point, two thought "his/her foreign appearance" posted challenge, and two did not view anything listed as an issue.

As the results of the student survey show, the majority of the students participated in the current study responded positively regarding to their experience with their non-native-English-speaking instructor, which is quite contrary to the findings of previous studies that revealed and discussed the "ITA problems." This begs the question of "what have the participants of the current study done differently that they received mostly acknowledgements instead of criticism from their students?" Answers to this question were unveiled through the interviews and class observations.

CHAPTER FIVE: QUALITATIVE DATA

5.1 Pre-observation Interviews

After negotiating with the ITAs and receiving their verbal consent to participate in the current study, I arranged an interview with each of them to gather some background information about them and, at the same time, to try to connect with them. On the day when an interview was conducted, I first chatted casually with the interviewee for a few minutes to get both of us comfortable. Next, I showed the consent form and asked him/her to sign it. Then, I set up the recorder and started the interview. Generally, I asked all the ITAs the same questions so that I would be able to compare their answers in a parallel manner. However, I did ask different follow-up questions as the conversations led us there.

Theme I: Initial Reaction

“I will be teaching Americans English! Can I teach Americans English?”

A friend of mine: “So, you are really teaching there?”

I: “Yes...”

The friend: “What are you teaching? Chinese?”

I: “No, I am teaching English.”

The friend: “Okay... Are you teaching English to non-native speakers of English?”

I: “Actually, I am teaching *Americans*. I teach *Americans* how to write in *English*.”

The friend: “Huh?! How is that possible? How does it work?”

I: “Well, it sure is possible because it is happening now, and this is how it works...”

This is a conversation between a friend of mine, who was an English major in a college in China, and me that happened about fifteen years ago, not long after she learned that I had started teaching in the United States. This is one of the best conversations I have ever had in my life; it

felt so good telling my friend that I was indeed teaching English to American students and how it worked. It all started with a casual chat with a professor with whom I was taking a course titled, “Teaching English as a Second Language.” When I shared with her my intention to volunteer at the Intensive English for Internationals at the school I was attending, the professor, who was from Italy, asked, “Why don’t you apply for the teaching assistantship in our department? Why work for free when you can get paid?” The suggestion sounded really good; the idea of getting paid while gaining real teaching experience was so appealing! “I would love an opportunity like that,” I said, “But, how can I, a non-native speaker, teach native speakers English?” I wavered. The professor started laughing; she looked at me in the eyes and said, “If I can do it, you can, too!” She convinced me that it wouldn’t hurt trying, so a week later, I put in my application. Then, a couple of days after an interview with the department head and the professor who was in charge of granting assistantships, I was pleasantly surprised by the news that they had decided to offer me the teaching assistantship. It is needless to say that I was so glad that I took the suggestion of the Italian professor and will be forever grateful for the encouragement she gave me, and I was absolutely very proud of myself for excelling the interview and being granted the assistantship.

Meanwhile, with proud, comes anxiety. Back then, I had only been in the United States for less than a year. Even though I have been learning English for about ten years, I studied it as a school subject; in other words, while I studied the mechanism (grammatical rules) and gained a good amount of vocabulary of English and became good at reading and writing, I was not confident at all about my listening and speaking skills. I had a lot of “*what ifs*” in my head: What if I cannot find the right words in the middle of my lecture? What if I cannot understand my students’ questions? What if I don’t have an answer for their question? What if my students

doubt my credibility? What if...? After all, I am not a native English speaker, and they have been speaking the language since they learned how to articulate a word.

I started my career as a graduate teaching assistant with a mixed feeling of proud and anxiety. It was the best time of my life, and it was the worst time of my life. On the one hand, I was feeling good about being granted the assistantship and assigned to “teach Americans English;” on the other hand, I was uncertain what I would be facing and therefore was feeling uneasy. With the support provided by the school and my family and friends, I didn’t “sink” and learned how to “swim.” Having been there and done it myself, I wonder how the ITAs who participated in my study would describe the occasions when they were informed about the assistantship and teaching duty? I asked them how they felt and how their family and friends responded to the news then. In their answers, two words emerged again and again: *happy* and *proud*—all the ITAs participated were happy that they were offered the assistantship and felt proud of themselves for being assigned to teach Americans English, and their families and friends were proud of them as well. Meanwhile, most of them admitted that they had also experienced some level of uncertainty and were even fearful/scared/terrified.

Since it was not her first time receiving an assistantship, while Angela was glad and proud that she was granted the graduate assistantship, she was not surprised and sounded calm when describing the occasion on which she found out the current school had offered her a graduate assistantship. In a monotone, she briefly explained to me how she was first offered the assistantship but not assigned teaching duty, and how she requested received the teaching assignment—she told the Director of First-Year Composition that she has had plenty experience teaching at the previous school and convinced the director that she was ready to teach.

Then, when I asked her about the experience when she was granted a teaching

assistantship for the first time, her mood and tone got a lift immediately and said, “Oh, that was really, that is really very *interesting* to me.” Back then, she did not think she was going to receive the assistantship because the competition was intensive:

There are lots of students who applied for this position, and my husband had like eight years teaching experiences, so that was a lot, but I had like only 6 months experience, so that is very short, so I thought probably, I am not gonna receive that.

Like me, Angela did not believe she was going to receive the assistantship even if she tried, but her reasoning was different; she did not think she was competitive enough because she lacked teaching experience, which was why when she did try and was indeed granted the teaching assistantship. She was overwhelmed by joy and immediately *ran* to her husband to share the good news with him. “Immediately, I called my parents. The time was nighttime there, but I called them. I was so excited. I could not resist myself. It was a long, cherished dream, and I could not believe, even,” she recalled that special day and a big smile appeared on her face. “When I told her [Angela’s mother], she was kind of so happy, and she, like, expressed the gratitude to the Almighty,” she paused for a little bit, “and yea, I could not, I could not deliver that moment with my speech, how happy she was.” She went on and described the conversations she had with the rest of her family, “They[Her family] are proud of me, they feel that they are proud of me, and they expressed the gratitude to the Almighty a lot.”

Angela also shared with me how her friends responded to her Facebook post in which she announced the good news: “All of them congratulated us [her and her husband who also received the assistantship] and commented ‘you guys deserve that.’” She then took a deep breath, “After a long time, I am just memorizing everything,” she said as she looked into my eyes, “Thank you for asking those questions! At least someone is hearing, listening [to] my moments, yea...” The

excitement in her voice was impossible to overlook, the sense of proud was exhibited right in front of my eyes, and I felt so good for my decision of doing this study.

As expected, “proud” was not the only feeling, after searching for the right words to describe how teaching American students English for the first time was a “mixed experience,” Angela landed with “happiness” and “fear.” She was happy that she got the assistantship, but at the same time she was afraid she would not be able to handle the classes, worrying, “if I do not understand anything, what am I gonna do? If I mistake anything, what’s gonna happen?” To her surprise though, when she started class, everything went smoothly; she found that the majority of the students respected her and were willing to work with her. While she did notice the look on some of the students’ face which she interpreted as “oh, she is not from my country, but she is here to teach us English,” she understood where the concerns came from and was not troubled by the look. She accepted the challenge and tackled the “problem” successfully. “Whenever I talk in the class, I try to be, remain conscious about my own speech, whether they [the students] understand me or not,” she concluded, “I think that helped me at the very beginning stage.”

When asked how she felt when notified about the assistantship and teaching assignment, TiTi first expressed her appreciation for the opportunity because it was such a great relief for her financially. “I had two feelings. I was both happy and a little bit, like, scared,” she then added:

I was happy because of the opportunity, and I was scared because I was like “Oh my god! I am gonna teach, like, 48 American students in a class? I am international, like, being a non-native English teacher, this is a chaos, potentially.”

Luckily, she has a husband who had been a TA in an American university before supported and encouraged her greatly from the very beginning. “I did this; you can do it,” he told her. However, the rest of her family was not so sure, “They were all like, ‘wow.’ They were all like, ‘oh, my

God! Are you going to do that?” TiTi recalled how they responded. As for her friends, TiTi was, after she had taught for a semester already, still getting texts from them asking her whether her students were, in fact, Americans. “I feel like they don’t even believe me,” she continued, “because they don’t see me, like, they are, they are not here, they don’t see me, they don’t believe, they feel like ‘maybe she was just bluffing,’” She started giggling. I followed up with a question asking her how she felt about these responses. “Proud,” one word flew out of her mouth right away, “because I accomplished something nobody is expecting me to accomplish. That makes me proud.”

It is interesting that both Angela and TiTi essentially chose the same words to describe their feelings towards the experience of being a teaching assistant in an American university. They both were happy, they both were fearful/scared, they both were proud, and they both read their students’ mind at the beginning of semester. TiTi described what she “saw” when she went to the classroom on the first day of class:

When the students entered the class the first session, I can see from their eyes, they are like “oh my god, what am I doing here? She can’t even, like, speak English without an accent, how am I expecting her to teach me how to write?”

Like Angela, TiTi was not bothered by her students’ reaction, and she also found a way to ease their concern (solely in her imagination, maybe) and at the same time establish her credibility. She would first admit that she does have an accent, but she also tried to make sure her students understand that she was not there to teach speaking but writing, and she was qualified to teach writing because she was a researcher and a writer and she had publications. “I give a resume, and that gave me, that gives me credit,” TiTi concluded.

Similar to their female counterparts, the male ITAs participating in the current study also

exhibited the sense of proud when describing their families' and friends' responses to the news that they were going to teach Americans English. In Nayeem's narrative of what happened then, both "proud" and "happy" were used:

I remember I posted the news in social media, okay, I phoned some of my friends, and when they learned it, they feel really so *proud* of this, and I shared this information [on] Facebook, so my friends from across the world, they congratulated me, and yea, it's kind of, you see, when you hear some, you see, greetings from people, some "wow" from people, you feel so *happy*.

Even though this was not the first time Nayeem was assigned teaching duty, and this was not even the first time he was assigned to teach Americans, this was his first time being assigned to teach Americans *English*, so his friends were understandably happy for him and he was rightfully proud of the fact that his friends greeted him and wowed at his achievement.

When he first came to the United States as a Fulbright scholar, Nayeem's job was teaching the Bangla language, his mother tongue, to Americans, and since the class was small, only 4 or 5 students, and since they were "friendly," it was not "challenging" to him. A year later, he was offered an assistantship and became an ITA whose assignment was teaching English composition to classes of 24 American students, which he found "more challenging." In fact, Nayeem went even as far as calling teaching Americans English "kind of terrifying," which was quite similar to how Angela and TiTi labeled this experience, *fear* and *scared*, respectively. He then explained, "being a non-American teaching American [English] is something really challenging," and he admitted that he was having a hard time with the African American accent early on in his TA career, "when they [African American students] spoke up in classroom, I, it took me long time, sometimes I had to struggle to figure out what they are talking about, so from

their gestures sometimes I try to understand, and that is why,” he said, “I did not feel much confidence in my classroom.” By the time he started teaching at the current school, Nayeem found himself having no trouble understanding his students anymore: “I don’t know why, [maybe] because I am getting used to it, I can understand. I think the students here speak more academic, speak more so called ‘standard English’ here.”

Since Nayeem had taught Bangla to Americans, in which case he was the native speaker of the target language, and English to Americans, in which case the students were the native speakers of the target language, I was curious to know how he would compare the two experiences. The conventional wisdom is that in a language classroom, the instructors who are native speakers of the language would be in the position of authority and therefore given the benefit of the doubt. My guess was that he would feel more confident teaching Bangla simply because it was his mother tongue and English was that of his students, so I asked him whether he felt like he had more authority when teaching Bangla, but he pushed back right away in saying:

Maybe my students, my audience can question the authority of my teaching, but I personally don’t question the authority of my teaching, whether it is English or Bangla, because the field I am teaching, I think I have sound understanding and knowledge, and I can do it, so I am not teaching them pronunciation or anything, so, or I am not to correct their pronunciation, their accent or anything, so I know how academic English looks like, and what is required from university students, as far as academic English is concerned, so as I have a thorough understanding on these fields so I teach very confidently. I, now I think I overcome the phase, the challenging phase of communication with some Afri-Americans in my classroom, I think I can, yea, I can handle it very successfully now.

Nayeem sounded very confident in the excerpt above, which is not something I expected,

considering how just a few minutes ago, he had described the teaching Americans English as being “challenging” and “terrifying.” Also, he speeded up when giving the answer above, which is an indicator that he had a strong feeling towards the topic being discussed here.

Blue was the fourth participant of the current study, and the interviews, both the pre-observation one and the post-observation one, with hi]m were the shortest among all interviews, for two reasons: he talked fast, and his answers were rather brief. When I asked him how he felt when he was first informed about the teaching duty, he simply replied, “I feel very excited, yes, I was so happy when just [the Director of Graduate Studies] told me that now you will teach for us, so I feel, yes, so excited and happy.” It was quite obvious that he was eager and ready to teach, and he did not seem to feel the need to explain why he felt the way he did. I then asked him how his family and friends responded to the news, he put on a smile and said:

I talked about that, for example, to my wife and to my brother. Yes, they felt very proud of me, and very happy that I am gonna teach, especially for students of, I’ll teach students English as first language, not as second language or foreign language, so [this is] like to be, like, new experience.

When I asked him how their responses made him feel, Blue did not answer my question directly, instead, he quoted them:

Yes, they encouraged me, and they said, “yes, that’s what you deserve to do because, you know, you taught for many years, and you have, you are now in the Ph.D. level,” so yes, I think, they said, “it is a good opportunity to get such experience.”

Even though he did not say it straightforwardly, his tone gave away his feelings—he was proud. He was proud that he was in the Ph.D. level; he was proud that he was teaching English to students whose first language is English; ultimately, he was proud of his achievements. Judging

from both interviews conducted before and after the observation, Blue was such a low-key person, who always tried to be humble in front of others, which is probably why he did not explicitly admit he was proud of his achievement; instead, he let his friends and family *speak* for him.

From *fear*, to *scared*, and to *terrifying*, all the other ITAs participating in this study expressed some degree of concern regarding the teaching responsibility, at least at the beginning of their ITA career. Blue, however, seemed to feel quite comfortable about the teaching assignment and was not concerned about his students' reactions. His confidence can also be seen from the fact that he was the only ITA who was not "curious" about the questions on the student survey; I told him that I would like to survey his students, and he simply said, "yes." Not only did he believe in himself, but also his family and friends had confidence in him with no reservation, according to him. When I asked him if his family or friends raised any concern when being told about the news, he thought for a second and then replied, "Actually, I don't remember that anyone expressed any concern about that." Even though he had the least experience teaching Americans English, Blue seemed to be the most confident ITA among the four.

To sum up, all four ITAs were *happy* that they got the assistantship, and both the people around them and the ITAs themselves were *proud* that they were trusted to teach Americans English. While Angela, TiTi, and Nayeem were less certain about the assignment of teaching and felt *fearful*, *scared*, and *terrified* respectively at the very beginning, Blue sounded rather comfortable facing the challenge of teaching native English speakers English. It is worth noting that both of the female ITAs mentioned the encouragement they received from their loved ones and the role the encouragement played in their decision of applying for the assistantship. I may not be in the position of speaking for them, but I can definitely speak for myself that if it was not

for the Italian professor, I would not be where I am today, as far as my teaching career is concerned. This further proved the importance of our stories being told and heard; a little encouragement goes a long way, especially for females, those of whom are from Asian countries at least.

Theme II: The Accent Issue

“Is my accent a problem? No! Why would it be? Well, maybe...”

It had been widely agreed among scholars (Bailey, 1983 & 1984; Gorsuch, 2011; Rubin & Smith, 1990) that the most noticeable feature of an ITA’s speech was a non-native like accent, which was the main target of the complaints ITAs received from their students. I had personally experienced this early on in my teaching career. When I was teaching at a small Southern public university over a decade ago, a girl in my class came to me on the last day of class and said to my face, “I never understood a word you said!” While I managed to stay cool and replied then, “Well, you should have told me earlier, so that I can help you transfer to a different section.” As a result of this incident, I grew more insecure about my speech.

I would be the first to admit that I do have an accent, but never had I been told my accent was so bad that it even made my speech incomprehensible. There are several different ways to explain why I was confronted by the student. Bailey (1984) wrote “[u]ndergraduate students, while often having valid reasons to complain, sometimes respond to their non-native speaking TAs’ foreignness with an attitude of annoyed ethnocentrism” (p. 15). According to Curzan and Damour (2000), “[s]tudents often complain about ‘foreign TAs’ (in nonforeign language classes), and they often judge foreignness by accent,” and “some students respond negatively to a foreign accent.” They went on to state that, “[a]t times, some students will transfer their frustration with the material to frustration with your [ITAs’] accent” (p. 18-9). Also, it was

reported in Ates and Eslami's (2012) study that NNES GTAs experienced "subtle racism in the forms of being marginalized or being disliked and prejudiced by their students" (p. 541). In my case, Curzan and Damour's (2000) conclusion made perfect sense; it was an English Composition class, and the student was failing the class—because of her excessive absences and the poor quality of her papers, and it seemed that I became the scapegoat for her failure. Knowing this, I still found myself feeling insecure about my non-native-like accent and the intelligibility of my speech.

My experience left me wondering how other ITAs in English departments felt about their speech/accents, so during the pre-observation interviews I posed in front of the ITAs the question, "Do you think you have an accent when you speak English? If you do, do you think your accent would hinder other's comprehension of your speech? If so, to what extent?" As expected, all the ITAs acknowledged upfront that they had an accent; nevertheless, I was a bit surprised by how strongly they defended the intelligibility of their speech as well as the belief that an accent should not be a problem in a course of which the subject is composition.

When asked the questions, Angela first acknowledged that she did have an accent and explained why she did not think her accent should be an issue to concern her students:

I would say I do have an accent, because my pronunciation is not like native speaker's, that's why I would say I have an accent; however, I don't think that hinders my students, because if you deliver the speech very clearly, um, that doesn't matter, to the students, but if your speech is not clear, and it is not intelligible, that is not comprehensible, then it may hinder the speech. You know, so for me, I would say I always try to deliver my speech very clearly. Whatever I say, that should be very clear.

She further explained that “when they[students] have question that doesn’t mean they do not understand the pronunciation, rather, it means that they do not understand probably the prompt of any essay, or the concept or they need more information.” She went on and told me proudly that one of her students commented on her SETE, “your pronunciation is just too ‘wow,’ and I always try to follow your pronunciation, or your way of speaking when you speak.” Angela was pleasantly surprised by the comment, saying “how is possible, he is an American, but I am not an American, how an American can like my speech or like my pronunciation!” She concluded by saying, “I think accent doesn’t matter with me, rather if it is intelligible, if it is clear, if it is comprehensible, then it’s okay.” Overall, she sounded like she was quite comfortable about the fact that she had an accent when speaking English; she was confident that her speech was “comprehensible;” she was glad that her American student liked her pronunciation, but the fact that she insisted for me to delete the questions about accent said otherwise.

When asked the same questions, TiTi admitted right away that she did have an accent when speaking English by saying, “Definitely, I do believe that I have an accent;” she went even further and acknowledged that she did have an accent in all the languages she spoke including her mother tongue. “I do have accent in all my languages,” she then added:

I believe like having an accent is a very okay, very, even an amazing thing because somebody who has an accent, it means that person knows more than one language, so I believe that, yes, I do have accent, and I am not even a bit ashamed of it, so it never made me feel reserved or shy.

The above excerpt showed that TiTi did not consider “having an accent” as a shortcoming for individuals such as her; in fact, it almost sounded like she was proud of her accent—as long as the accent was not thick:

I do feel like I don't have a thick accent, because I feel like people can communicate with me easily, I rarely get the question of like, "pardon me?" I rarely get those questions, like comprehensive questions like "what was that again?" That's why I feel like, I am not sure whether we have the term of "thin accent" or not, but I am sure I am not, I don't have a thick accent, 'cause people can communicate with me easily.

TiTi was confident that even though she did have an accent when speaking English, her accent was not thick enough to cause any communication breakdowns, so she was not concerned about it. Notably though, the hidden message in the excerpt above was that if an individual did have a *thick* accent, people may not be able to communicate with the individual easily, in which case, then the accent became a "problem."

Nayeem, who can speak five different languages, believed every non-native speaker had an accent and he was not an exception, and he did not "take it negatively," because his accent did not "impede understanding" or his communication with others. When asked whether he had gotten any comments on his accent before, Nayeem recalled that he had received two comments from each of the two classes he taught during the previous semester, saying that he had an accent in his speech. He then quickly added, "but in the same, you see, commentary, also I found from some of my students that 'he's an excellent teacher, great teacher.'" As if he felt the need to defend himself, Nayeem brought up a study in which students were shown two different pictures—one non-American and one American—while listening to the same speech and responded differently, and he concluded that the pictures or the appearances of the speakers played a role in the students' judgement. Nayeem did not name the research during the interview, but he probably was referring to Moder's (1995) research, which concluded that "listening comprehension appeared to be undermined simply by identifying (visually) the instructor as

Asian” (qtd. in Rubin, p. 519). Even though he did not say it straightforwardly, it was implied in the mentioning of this study that he believed that it was his foreign appearance, instead of his foreign accent, that resulted in the negative comments/evaluations he received.

Blue, when asked whether he thought he had an accent when speaking English, did not answer my question directly; instead, he replied, “no, I don’t claim I speak like a native speaker,” and he then tried to defend himself by adding “I think my English is clear.” When the subject of the questions was *accent*, Blue kept his answer very short. When I followed up with the question, “so, you do think your accent wouldn’t hinder other’s communications?” he quickly replied, “No, I think it’s good.” Even though he did not explicitly say it, it could be inferred from his body language that he was “done” with this subject, so I moved on to the next question for the interview. Thinking back, I should have asked better follow-up questions; granted, open-ended questions would have gotten me some more extensive answers than yes/no questions had.

To sum up, all the participated ITAs in the current study acknowledged that they had an accent when speaking English, and during the interviews, they all claimed that they were not concerned about their accent since it would not hinder their communication with others, yet some of them asked me to delete the questions regarding their speech from the student survey because they did not want their students’ attention to be drawn to their accent. This begged the question: if they were as confident about their speech/accents as they said during the interviews, then why didn’t they want their students to pay attention to their accents? Why the hesitations? Shouldn’t they be confident and let me ask the question of their students?

After I finished processing the feedback that I gathered from the student survey, I got a chance to chat with TiTi again. Without providing any details, I shared with her how positively the students rated all the ITAs participated in the current study. At this point she finally opened

up and revealed her reasoning behind this “contradiction.” According to her, since we both were Ph. D. students in the field of linguistics, we would have a better understanding of the nature of accents and therefore would find a non-native like accent acceptable, but the majority of our American students only speak one language and may not understand a non-native like accent is not necessarily a “flaw.” In other words, it was not that she did not have confidence in her language/speech, rather, she did not trust her students in their understanding of what being bilingual or even multilingual meant and their ability to come to an informed assessment of non-native like accents.

Theme III: Knowledge of English

“Even though English is not my native language, and I have an accent when speaking the language, I know English well enough to teach you how to write in it!”

Due to the fact that I am not a native speaker of English and my students are, I always feel the need to establish my authority/credibility in front of them at the beginning of the semester. In order to demonstrate to my students that even though I am not a native speaker of English, I am knowledgeable in the subject enough to teach English composition, I have adopted different strategies over the years. For instance, I would give my students a brief grammar lesson on the first day of class. The idea is that while as native speakers, they know how to speak the language, when the subject is composition, non-native speakers, like me, actually “know better.” Medgyes (1999) once claimed one of nonnative-English-speaking teachers’ strengths is their ability to explain and teach English grammar due to their lived experiences as English language learners, and I agree. In order to show my classes that I know *standard English* better than they do, I would write the following sentences on the board and ask the students if the sentences are grammatically correct:

1. It don't matter.
2. They don't know nothing.
3. I can not agree with you.
4. Everyone should love their own country.
5. Its my job.

With their intuition, my students, from the previous semesters, were able to tell “there is something wrong with each of the sentences,” because “it doesn't sound/look right.” However, rarely was anyone in the class able to accurately name the errors with correct terms. Then, I would take the opportunity to give them a brief grammar lesson to demonstrate to them that I am indeed an expert in the subject of English and, therefore, am qualified to teach them. This “trick” works; I could see the students' attitudes change after this short “demonstration.” The students would admit that they have not had a grammar lesson for years—since fifth grade, and they seemed to become more attentive from then on. While a short demonstration like this is not enough to fully convince the students that their instructor is an expert in English, it diminishes the doubt students may naturally have towards the credibility of their instructor at the beginning of a semester, and they become more “open-minded” to the idea of having a non-native English speaker as their English instructor.

Having had this experience myself, I wonder if other ITAs would have a similar if not the same level of “sense of insecurity” and would play their own “tricks” to overcome or deal with this insecurity at the beginning of a semester. As it turns out, the ITAs who participated in my study all have their ways to convince their students that they are knowledgeable and experienced enough to teach the course, and the results of the survey show that they all have successfully established their authority in the subject they teach. Though varied in degree, all the students (94

out of 94) agreed with the statement that “My instructor is knowledgeable about the subject.” Obviously, the “tricks” alone would not be enough for them to gain this level of recognition, but they helped the ITAs, at the beginning, to establish their credibility in front of their students so that the students would show more respect to their instructors.

Angela, who only had one year experience teaching American students prior to being granted assistantship and starting teaching at the current university, believed “if you show that you are a new teacher, your students will try to dominate you, or they will not care you, and that will not be okay for any teacher. At the same time, we are international TAs.” When I asked her if she had any trick that she played at the beginning of the semester to establish her credibility/authority, she said:

From the first day of my class, I used to show them that I am kind of experienced; I am not a new teacher. Although I have like one year [experience], but I used to show them [the students] that I have several years experiences. I have been teaching this course for several years, so that they become assured that, “yeah, although she is non-native, but she has the capability to handle everything.”

In the excerpt above, Angela revealed once again how highly she viewed the importance of having teaching experiences for an instructor. As mentioned earlier, she hesitated to apply for the assistantship at the previous school because she had “only 6-months experience,” which she considered as “very short.” This explains why in order to establish her authority in the class, she chose to tell her students she had been “teaching this course for several years” when she only had “like one year” experience. Angela claimed, “That is how everything becomes OK.”

Angela’s words made me reflect on what I sometimes do in my classes; for example, I would tell my current students the stories of my previous students’, aiming to convey the

message that I have been teaching the same course for many years; therefore, I know the “game.” Looking back, I realized that even though at the beginning of my TA career, I was not concerned about my lack of teaching experience, over the years, as I have gained more teaching experience, my understanding of the importance of it also has evolved, and I have been trying to demonstrate to my students how much experience that I have in different ways.

TiTi was as insecure as I was if not more so; she admitted that before starting teaching her own classes (she shadowed and substituted for other instructors previously), she was quite anxious and did not expect being accepted. “I felt like I would be disrespected. I felt like my students wouldn’t be supportive, and I even worried,” she recalled, “the first time I taught, [during] the first week of classes, what if my students drop the classes because of me? Because of having international [instructor].” To establish her credibility and gain the trust of her students, TiTi chose to start her classes with this statement, “I know that I don’t [speak English like a native speaker], I have accent, [but] I am not here to teach you how to speak. I am a researcher, and a writer, so I know how to write more than you.” In order to make her case, she would refer to her publications, such as a book chapter she edited. “I gave a resume, and that gave me, that gives me credit,” TiTi claimed.

Nayeem, despite the differences between him and TiTi in their background, chose a strategy that was almost the same as that of TiTi’s. Early on in his TA career, Nayeem admitted, at the beginning of the semester, to his students that he was an international and therefore has an accent when speaking English, then he would go on and tell them, “I’m not to teach you accent, pronunciation, or [I am not] your speaking teacher of English, but I am your academic English [teacher], you see, I will show to how to write academic English that is totally formal.” Nayeem was very mindful of the case in which his students may not understand him because of his

accent, so he tried to ease their concern by assuring them, “If you don’t understand, please let me know so that I can clarify. I can... Yea, I’ll try my best to help you understand even though it takes me more than 2, 3 times.”

With such an extended teaching experience, Nayeem has more than one “trick” in his “bag.” In order to establish his credibility in the subject he was teaching and stop his students from judging his accent, he told his students Teaching English was his concentration (back when he was a master’s student at a different school) and that he spoke five languages, including English, Arabic, Hindi, Urdu and Bangla. By doing so, he was able to give his students the impression (in Nayeem’s words) that he was competent:

Don’t think that teaching is a very easy job, so that you will start commenting others, and learning a foreign language is not so easy. It’s not a joke, so [when] you cannot, you cannot learn even a single second or foreign language, so you cannot make comments of “Oh, what is his accent?!” or “What is his pronunciation?!” or something. So, I’m teaching in *your* language, you *should* give me credit.

Nayeem then added, “This is some *implied* my message to them, okay, so that I can create credibility, my credibility to teach them.”

As his resume expanded, Nayeem continued to update his “trick.” He recalled what he has been doing on the first day of classes since he came to the current school:

For example, in the first class, I give my profile to them [students] on the screen, like you see, I have, like my Masters, three Masters. I have like five languages, too. I speak five languages, and my concentration is that (gestured). I have, yea, ten years of teaching experience.

Instead of directly announcing “even though I am an international and not a native English

speaker, I am qualified to teach you English composition,” Nayeem, once again, chose to indirectly reveal this message behind showing his profile. “OK, so it [showing his profile] gives them [students] some kind of impression that ‘he has that authority to teach us,’” he added, “not the university just picking up someone from those wondering street and just ‘OK, go to the school.’”

Consistent with the fact that Blue agreed for me to survey his students without raising any issues regarding questions on the survey, he expressed no concern about the students’ acceptance of his presence as the instructor of an English Composition course. “Based on my experience, I think that I can, I can teach, I have confidence I can teach any course to do with language or linguistics,” he claimed in an assertive tone. Even though this was his first-time teaching in the United States, he had taught in Saudi Arabia previously, in addition to his home country. Even though this was his first-time teaching English to native speakers of the language, he had taught English to students who were EFL learners in the past. Even though this was his first-time teaching English Composition, he had taught courses such as Sociolinguistics and Discourse Analysis previously. Having had years of teaching experience prior to being assigned to teach at the current school, Blue appeared to be very comfortable with his role as an ITA from the very beginning.

Since he was not concerned about his students’ reaction, Blue did not actively try to establish his authority on the first day of class. In order to “break the ice,” he introduced himself and asked the students to introduce themselves, and he then outlined for his students “what we are expected to take in this class, what topics that we are gonna highlight for this class, and what readings they are expected to do for this class.” When I asked Blue to assess his students’ reaction, he described their response as “positive,” adding, “don’t forget this is [their] first year

which means that they [are] like, happy, and they are excited to look for new instructors, to new classes.”

To sum up, among all participating ITAs of the current study, only Blue did not feel it was necessary for him to establish his authority in front of his students and did not try to do so. For the other three ITAs, varying in degrees, they all felt the pressure to justify their presence as the instructor of an English composition course for native English speakers. While they may employ different strategies, the goal remained the same—to prove that even though they spoke a different version of English, they were qualified to teach their students how to write in standard English.

Theme IV: Innovations in Classrooms

“I am always trying to make changes to my classes to make them better.”

Every semester, before sending my students to the next English course and wishing them “good luck,” I always asked them to give me some feedback on my teaching. They were asked to make one more argument on the last day of classes, “What are the two things your instructor should keep doing and the two things to stop doing? Why?” From the feedback, I then made adjustments to my lessons in the coming semester, if there were merits in their argument. For example, in one semester, a student wrote:

The number of reading responses was a little too much to keep up with especially on weeks when our larger projects were due in class. I would suggest maybe cutting two or three reading responses out of the syllabus would be helpful for students going forward.

In the excerpt above, the student raised a legitimate issue and followed with a sound argument, so I took this suggestion and removed two reading responses from the syllabus in the following semester. Over the years, I was able to improve my classes with the feedback I gathered from my

former students.

I also amended the way I structured and managed my classes based on the experience I have had with the classes during the previous semesters. When I found something worked in one semester, I would keep doing it and even do more of it in the next semester. For example, after realizing how much my students have benefited from a “library day” in one semester, I arranged more class meetings in the library in the next semester. When I found something did not work as intended in the fall, I would either stop doing it or try to improve it in the following spring. For instance, after noticing the communication with my student by emails was not effective, I began to search for additional means and started using different apps to remind my students about the upcoming “events.”

During the pre-observation interviews, I asked the participating ITAs who have taught in the semester(s) before whether they planned on making any changes based on the experience from last semester, what they were going to change, and why. Even though the length of their previous teaching experiences varied, Angela, TiTi, and Nayeem all revealed to me the changes they planned for the current semester and the rationales behind their decisions.

Angela acknowledged that as teachers, “Always we [should] try to add something new to improve our teaching philosophy or the teaching pedagogy,” which is why she decided that instead of assigning the same activity all the time, she would give her students multiple activities. As she stated, “Like one day I will give them pair activity, another day I may give them group activity, four people in one group, and then another day parallel things going on.”

Angela then explained why she wanted to make this kind of adjustment:

I think that [assigning the same activities every day] makes my students probably boring.

If you do one thing every day, it will make you, you know, boring about that, or if we eat

like one dish every day, how do you feel? Something like that. That's why I do not want to ask them [to do] same activities every day.

Angela, when trying to find ways to better her classes, put herself in her students' shoes and tried to offer what would facilitate their learning the most, which I believe is what makes her a popular instructor among her students.

When asked how she would evaluate her teaching experience last semester and whether she planned on making changes this semester, TiTi responded right away with this statement, "There is no perfection in teaching, there is always room for improvement." Her main goal for the current semester was to make her students read more, which obviously is the goal for every instructor who teaches freshman English courses. In order to reach her goal, TiTi came up with two strategies: one is that she made sure her students were aware that for each assigned reading, they were asked to write a reflection or respond to a discussion post, and the other one is that for readings that are "long and dry," she broke them into shorter parts and asked the students to sign up for a part to read and report to the rest of the class. "By doing that, I made them read," she concluded, "I'm, I made everybody read, 'cause they had responsibility, so I feel like, yes, I'm working on how to make my students read more." Like Angela, TiTi also tried to understand the issue from the students' perspective, and she met her goal in that she did successfully make her students read more. TiTi also tried to learn from previous experiences and amended one of her course policies accordingly in the current semester. "I didn't say this to my students last semester, at the beginning of the last semester, but I did this time that late submission gets 10% lower grades for dropbox," she explained, "I did this last semester, in the middle of the semester, but I felt like I have to say it ahead." TiTi realized that trying to implement a new policy in the middle of a semester was not fair for her students, so she decided to announce this "late

submission policy” at the beginning of a semester.

Nayeem, being the most experienced instructor, still tries to improve his classes after having taught for 10 years. For the current semester, he made two changes to his teaching pedagogy. Last semester, for the most part, he outlined his lesson plans on paper, mostly for himself, and only when it was “necessary,” he turned on the computer for PowerPoint presentations. This semester, he had switched to using computer at all times, for he believed when he put the agenda of each lesson on the projector, “students are more guided. They're more informed” about what to expect next. This adjustment was made based on his observations of the students’ reactions, and he made the second amendment because of the comments he received previously. Nayeem explained:

This semester as I have received two comments from two classes about my accent, so I thought that my, so making my student understand my, you see, my message is more important than speaking so fast, so I will speak less fast, and I will stress more on their understandings, so that, yeah, they can understand, so that's why I try to speak less fast in the class, because when I speak faster, it may be because of my accent or something, there might be something which can inhibit them to understand sometimes, so if I speak slowly and I can get across my message to them, so it will be more productive.

The excerpt above shows that Nayeem was aware that his accent was concerning some of his students, and he was deliberately seeking for ways to address their concern. By putting everything in writing as a visual aid and slowing down his speech, he was working towards making sure his lectures were fully comprehended by his students.

Since this was Blue’s first semester teaching at the current school, he did not have a previous teaching experience to improve on, so I tried to get a sense of his teaching philosophy

by asking him to compare the teaching of native English speakers and that of English as a foreign language learners. His answers revealed that, indeed, he made quite an adjustment to his pedagogy. Blue said:

As a teacher of composition, I think that teaching native speakers of English, you need to focus on some areas in composition, specially how, for example, how meaning is constructed, through different features, how can you develop your voice, how can you adapt voice, academic voice....When I was teaching in Saudi Arabia, for example, for native speaker of Arabic and English as a foreign language, yes, we focus, or I'll say that the courses there focus on the *micro* level rather than *macro* level. I mean on the grammar and lexical level more than on semantical or pragmatic level.

Obviously, Blue had a deep “reading” into his “audience” and a profound understanding of his job, so when he started his TA career at the current school, he changed his goal from teaching students how to avoid grammatical errors to showing students how to construct meaning or identity through the careful use of language. Later in the interview, Blue admitted that when he was teaching in Saudi Arabia, it never occurred to him that “you [instructors] need to focus on language as a tool or as a social practice through which and by which they [students] can construct specific meanings and specific identities and the like.” This was a new realization he came to since he started teaching native English speakers.

To sum up, while we are teachers in front of our students, we are also “students” facing challenges in our career, and the ITAs participated in the study are all excellent “students” who learned from different people by varies means. They learned from experts in the field by going through TA training sessions. They learned from their mentors by attending mentoring programs. They learned from their instructors by taking classes with them. They learned from their

colleagues by observing their classes and chatting with them during office hours. They learned from themselves by reflecting on their own teaching experiences. They even learned from their student by asking and listening to their feedback. With a total of over two decades of experience, all the ITAs participated in the current study were still deliberately trying to improve their pedagogy, and this attitude may very well be one of the reasons why they have received such positive evaluations from their students.

5.2 Post-observation Interviews

In order to gain a more thorough understanding of their teaching and classroom management strategies, I requested and arranged one class observation with each of the participating ITAs. Before visiting ITAs' classes, I put together a list of issues of my interests, and I planned on paying close attention to those areas. On the scheduled dates, I went to the classrooms five minutes before the class times to get myself situated. During the classes, I audio recorded the whole class and took extensive notes about what was going on during the class session. After the classes, I listened to the recordings and referred to the notes when I was trying to put together a list of questions for post-observation interviews.

There are two different sets of questions for the post-observation interviews. The first set/half of questions focused on the ITAs' general perceptions regarding their teaching philosophy and pedagogy, such as how they handled miscommunication/communication breakdown and how they dissolved grade disputes, and the questions were generally the same. I did not ask these questions during the pre-observation interviews because I did not want to bring their attention to those issues before the class observations; this way I was able to see the interactions between the ITA and his/her students occur in a natural setting and therefore get authentic results. The second set/half of the questions were based on the individual class

observations. While I was looking for common themes and therefore asked some similar questions, I did notice the differences among the ITAs in the way they designed their classes and managed the classrooms, so some questions did not apply to all ITAs. For example, I asked all of them why they dressed the way they did, how they felt about students being tardy, and how they dealt with the phenomenon. Since only TiTi promoted the use of smart phone in class, I asked only her what the rationale behind her decision was. I asked only Nayeem how he decided to utilize YouTube videos in his teaching.

In the following section I will first discuss the results of the first set/half of the questions and then I will move on to questions inspired by the class observations and the answers to those questions.

Theme V: The First Day of Classes

“I was nervous, but the class went well.”

By the fall of 2020, I had been teaching freshman English courses, including composition and reading, for 14 years. After teaching for so many years and so many classes, I still have trouble sleeping the night before the first day of classes, worrying about my students’ reactions to my presence as the instructor of an English course. On the first day of classes, I usually get up and go to campus early, but I would not go to the classrooms until it is the time, for I do not want to be stared at by a group of “strangers” and, maybe, *judged* by them. When it is the time, I would then walk into the classroom, put the syllabi and textbook on the desk, and look around the classroom with a smile. I try my best to pretend I am calm and cool, but my hands are sweating.

“Good morning! This is English 1020, section x. Please check your schedule and make sure you are in the right classroom,” I start my classes with this announcement. After making

sure they are in the right place at the right time, I state the obvious, “I do not look American, and I do not sound American either,” and ask them, “Where do you think I am from? And why?” They usually got it the first couple of tries. I then offer my students the opportunity to ask a real Chinese person questions about China. If they remain silent, I then voluntarily give this answer, “Yes, Chinese people do eat dog, but...,” and things begin to get smooth. This—the first day of class goes smoothly—has been my experience for years, yet every semester, I am anxious before stepping my feet into the classrooms for the first time. I cannot help but wonder, do other ITAs share the same anxiety as I do?

Blue was teaching for the first time at the current school when I observed his class. When I asked him how the first day of class went, he said, “I ask the students to introduce themselves. I think it was very interesting, you know, and cool, and students, I feel that students were excited. That’s it. They are, especially they are just fresh students.” He also admitted he was “excited” and “a little nervous” the night before, but “I think it was going well, I mean it’s OK.” Blue claimed that he did not remember if anyone asked him questions regarding his non-native speaker status, or about his background, or where he was from, “I don't remember that if anyone asked me something about that,” he said. By the time when the post-observation interview was conducted, it had been several weeks since Blue taught his first classes, it is understandable that, while he was able to recall how he felt about the experience, he no longer has a vivid memory of what happened back then.

Blue was not alone when he said he did not remember the details of the first class. TiTi did not have “a very clear image of it [the class]” either, but she was certain that “it was a good experience,” because she was happy when she was done with her class. After thinking for a few more seconds, TiTi was able to recall some of the things they did back then:

We just sat in a circle form. We just talked about each other's background. I had four questions, like introduce yourself, what are you majoring at, so it's just an introductory session... I made them laugh a couple of times. I feel like that's why I felt like "OK, it's going well."

TiTi considered the fact that she made her students laugh a sign that the class went well. Later during the interview, she described her effort to use humor in her classes. Her comments revealed how highly she saw the role humor played in getting students engaged and in making her teaching effective. Even though she was "anxious the night before," and she felt like her students were "surprised to some extent," TiTi concluded, "it went well, the first day of classes."

When asked about "the first day of teaching," Angela immediately recalled the very first day of her TA career, at the previous school. "That was so horrible, because I was so nervous," she described what went through her mind then:

I was thinking how I'm gonna handle them if I do not understand anything. If they ask me any question and I do not understand it, or I do not have answer. [At] that point how I'm gonna handle that, and also as a, as an international TA, the language was one of the issues I was thinking at that time. I mean at the very first day, whether I can manage everything or not.

Angela's words brought back memories; I had the exact same concern when I first started teaching. Just like what happened to me back then, the reality faced her was much better. "When I started my class, at the very first day, I've noticed that everything went very smoothly. Everything became very natural. At that time, I felt so calm and quiet," Angela said sounding relieved. "What about the first day here?" I asked. "The first day here was not like that," she put on a smile, "It was general, 'cause I already taught one year there, and then the same course I

taught here at the very first time when I came here, so I was not nervous that much.” Apparently, previous teaching experience had helped Angela build confidence in her role as an instructor, and she found the “trick” she employed to establish her credibility worked:

Probably they expected someone native, but they were OK, what I notice, but when I told them that I'm, I'm experienced, I have been teaching this course for several years, and they felt like, “Yeah, she had the authority to teach us, and she's kind of experienced, so we should not bother about that.”

In general, Angela was quite content with her students’ reaction and was confident that she “nicely handled it.”

Nayeem’s experiences of “first days of class” were even more interesting since he had three different first days of classes. As mentioned earlier, he first came to the U.S. as a Fulbright scholar in 2010. Back then, even though he was teaching Bangla, his mother tongue, he was “very, very nervous” because the culture was new, and he had to get used to “new place, new people, new academia.” Once he got oriented in the new environment, it became “very easy” for him. Then, when he started teaching English composition courses as a TA, it felt “pressing” for him. Nayeem explained that back in his home country, he taught literature as a university instructor for seven years, but composition was a *new* course; for a non-native English speaker, the idea of “teaching American students their own language” was “very astounding.” Nevertheless, he did find it “comforting” that he was not teaching speaking, pronunciation, or listening, but academic writing, and he found confidence in the theory that “in most cases the international learners, non-native learners, have more expertise in teaching the mechanics of writing and also the conventions, writing conventions because they have more exposure [to different versions of Englishes]” and the fact that he did have exposures to world Englishes. He

took pride in the fact that he could maximize these exposures, incorporate his ideas, develop his lesson plan, and share his knowledge with his students, “so this is a very positive thing” because he could approach from multi-dimensional perspective.

At the current school, Nayeem experienced a third kind of “first day of class,” which he described as “usual.” Since he had been teaching the same courses for about four years, he did not feel any “extra tension,” he just prepared for the lesson and took it “very easy.” Unlike Blue or TiTi, Nayeem was able to recall how his students reacted to his presence on the first day of class:

Even though they were not so expressive, but from the facial expression or something, you see, their look, it could have been, you see, yeah assumed that yeah they didn’t expect someone non-native teaching them their own language, but I had to appease them and ease them by saying, “OK, yeah, I’m not teaching you how to speak and how to do this or that, so we are, this is kind of collaborative classroom, and we will share our own expertise and knowledge to better our academic writing, so writing is, uh, kind of something not perfectible, so it’s a continuous process. No matter, whether even native or non-native, so we’re all in the process of learning, so don’t take it like this.” So, this is how I tried to build up our relation and lessen the gap between me and my student.

The excerpt above shows even though Nayeem has been teaching for years, even though he no longer feels nervous the night before the first day of class, he still concerns himself about the fact that he is a nonnative speaker and that his students may question his authority in the subject he is teaching. Nayeem’s “confession” is a great testimony of how, generally speaking, ITAs feel when standing in front of a classroom full of native English speakers and trying to teach them how to write in their native language.

To sum up, even though none of them was able to recall much of the details of the day, all of the ITAs participated in the current study claimed that they had had a good “first day of classes” at the current school. While Blue revealed that he only took the opportunity to get to know his students, TiTi, Angela, and Nayeem all admitted that they spent part of the class time trying to establish their credibility in the subject of English composition. Compared to Blue, who was “a little nervous” and TiTi, who was “anxious the night before,” Angela and Nayeem were much more relaxed because it was not their first time teaching a composition course to American college students.

Theme VI: Clarifications in Classrooms

“Occasionally, I had to clarify what I said, but it was *not* because of my accent.”

I myself am not a native English speaker, and I have an accent when I speak English. My students notice that, and I know it, which is why I always acknowledge it on the first day of classes. Later on, my accent usually results in laughter other than confusion. In one instance, when I asked my students to come up with ideas for their research paper, some of them giggled. I did not think I said anything funny, so I asked them “why?”, and they told me the way I pronounced the word “idea” was funny. I also tried to take advantage of my accent in my classes sometimes. For example, in order to engage my students, I would tell my students that I have always had a hard time making my pronunciation of “ain’t” sound natural and would ask them to model it for me, and my students enjoyed being the teacher and started paying close attention in class. During these moments, my accents actually generated positive outcomes.

There were times when I had to repeat what I just stated, and it usually involved instructions for group activities. What happened was that right after I announced to the whole class what the task was and divided the class into groups, some students would raise their hands

and ask me to tell them again what they were supposed to do. When this first happened, I questioned myself, wondering was it because I did not give the students clear instructions. Then, I saw other groups were doing exactly what I told them to do. “Maybe it was not me,” I thought to myself, “then why?” Now that I have got the chance, I decided to turn to my fellow ITAs for answers.

When asked, neither TiTi nor Blue could recall any incidents when they were asked to repeat any specific words, but they acknowledged that there had been instances when they had been asked to repeat the instructions that they had given their students when assigning group activities in class. TiTi remembered, “When they[students] are doing a task or when they are doing writing tasks, and they don't get it, they tell me ‘So what are we doing now?’ Something like that.” Similarly, Blue recalled that “some students may ask for clarification sometimes on something, that just for example, when I'm giving them some instructions on how they should do an activity in class, or they might ask for more clarification.” When students asked for clarification, TiTi said that she usually would just reword it verbally, and “sometimes I use the board, too. Sometimes I also use my computer to type something, and just I model them, I model it sometimes for them,” TiTi added.

When asked if she had been asked to repeat something in class before, Angela, like TiTi and Blue, immediately recalled the circumstances when she was asked to repeat the instructions that she just gave her students:

Oh, yeah, it happens sometimes. If they do not understand any topic, particular topic, or if I give them any assignment or any class activities, if they do, if they have any confusion, they ask me “what you said?” “would you please repeat?” something like that.

I took one step further and asked Angela if her students had asked her to repeat certain words. To

make her feel comfortable sharing experience that may seem embarrassing for some people, I told her how my students giggled and commented on my pronunciation of the word “idea.” She then described for me the time when her students were not able to understand what she said because, according to her, she did not “emphasize” the right word in a phrase:

Just one time, we were sharing our experience like what we did not like before, but now we like it, so that in that example, or in that context, I used a term “raw tea,” but they did not get the term. “What is that? raw tea?” [they asked]. I had to tell it second time “raw tea,” and they said, “what?” I said, “do you understand tea, coffee, raw tea, without milk and sugar.” and then they said, “oh, raw—tea.” So, they gave emphasis on the term “raw,” I did not emphasize on the word “raw.” I said raw tea [flat tone], but they said raw tea [prolong and stress on “raw”], so that was the time they asked me to repeat the word.

In the excerpt above not only did Angela describe the case when she was asked to clarify a phrase, but she also demonstrated how she would deal with the situation, just like she claimed later on during the interview, “I usually do not write, I give them further clarification. I do not write.”

When first heard Angela telling the incident, I thought the reason why her students did not get the phrase was that “raw tea” was a new concept for them, so I shared this *hypothesis* with her. “I’m not sure whether the term is not familiar with them. I’m not sure about that.” She thought for a second and said, “Probably, that’s why, yeah, they did that, but otherwise, in the class, they did not ask about repeating any word.” It would be beneficial if I were there right then to interview the students to find out the real reason why they did not “get it.” It is cases like this that underscored the importance of semester-long observation of ITAs’ classes and interviews of the students in the class, so that we can gain a better understanding of the “ITA Problems” and

identify the real issues. In this case, is it a linguistic issue or a cultural one?

While it is uncertain whether the “breakdown” in Angela’s case was caused by a “foreign concept” or her not stressing the word “raw,” there is little doubt that the confusion Nayeem’s students exhibited in the example he gave me was due to the misplacement of stress in his speech. Nayeem recalled that:

I can remember a few weeks back this semester when I asked my student to, to open at page two-seven'ty, two-seven'ty, they thought this is two-seventeen, so time and again I said two-seven'ty. They said, “we're not getting it, what you are expecting us to open?” So, I said, when I again repeated and repeated, and they said, “oh, this is two-seventy.” So, two-'seventy. So, I then understand that I should [not] have put stress on the second syllable, on the ... I should have, yeah, I should have put stress on the first syllable, so two-'seventy, 'seventy, so when I said, “open seven'ty, two-seven'ty, so seven'ty,” they thought seventeen.

It seemed like until then, when the interview was conducted, Nayeem was still struggling a little bit trying to put the stress on the right syllable.

Like Angela, Nayeem also chose not to write anything and claimed that his pronunciation was “not so bad that the students would be frustrated,” and he added, “It [students asking him to repeat what he said] rarely happens, so when it happens, I repeat it verbally.” As someone who has had exposure to different versions of English and has taken classes in the field of linguistics, Nayeem believes the reason why some of his students asked him to repeat what he said was that they “came from very local areas” and “didn’t have any kind of contact, prior contact or exposure to any foreign people or foreign accent, so they were totally unaware that English can be spoken other ways.”

To sum up, when the participants of the current study were asked, by their students, to clarify what they have said, it was occasionally because the ITA didn't stress the right syllable in his speech, in Nayeem's case; in other words, it was a linguistic issue caused by the ITA. However, in most of the cases, the ITAs were asked to repeat the instructions they gave their students, who for some reason "didn't get it." Overall, the participants' experiences coincide with mine, with the difference being that they didn't have any doubt about their language competence, whereas I was questioning myself when asked to repeat my words; the bottom line is that they didn't share the concern with me if they had any.

Theme VII: The Students' Accent

"I had trouble understanding my students initially, but it didn't take me long to get used to their speech."

Just like my accent was *strange* to my students, some of my students' accents were *foreign* to me and demanded some "getting used to." Until this date, I still remember vividly an interaction I had over a decade ago when I was teaching for the second semester, with a student who was from Louisiana. On that day, I went to the classroom a few minutes early to set up the smartboard for the lesson. The student arrived around the time when I finished the setup, so I tried to engage him in a causal conversation. After the "how are you today?" kind of back and forth, he then asked me something that caught me off guard. I did not understand his question when he asked for the first time, so I asked him, "pardon?" He then repeated his question, but I still could not get it and asked, "What did you say?" He asked the same question for the third time, and I still was not able to make sense of what he was asking. I was so embarrassed for not being able to understand him but determined to find out what he was asking, so I put on an awkward smile and asked him to repeat his question for the third time "I didn't understand what

you were saying. Can you say that again?” He didn’t; instead, he put on his hoody, pulled the strings, closed his eyes, and said, “Never mind!”

I do not remember how, but later on I did find out what he was asking; he wanted to know what my plan for Christmas Break was. One reason for why I failed to understand this student’s question was that it was around Thanksgiving holiday, and he was asking about Christmas, so the context in which the question was asked was not “on my side.” However, the other reason of this communication breakdown, and I believe it is the main reason, was that I failed in accommodating to his accent. The student was African American and from Louisiana, and I just came from China, where British English was taught in schools not long ago. While I was able to understand most of the people I had encountered in the United States by then, this student’s accent posed a huge challenge for me. This incident was not the only time that I had trouble understanding my students, but the memory of this interaction stayed with me the longest.

I sure am not alone on this journey; all of the participants of the current study have had similar, if not the same, experience. When asked whether she had had any trouble understanding her students before, TiTi’s first reaction was to deny it, but she took it back halfway through her sentence, “I don’t have... oh, my African American students, sometimes they have a very thick accent, so I have to get closer to them, and I have to ask them to repeat, so I feel like in that case, sometimes I do have problem, but not, I mean not sometimes, it just happened a couple of times.” She claimed the reason why she was not following what the students were saying was that the students had “a very thick accent” first, she then corrected herself by adding, “a very, oh, a differ..., I don’t wanna call it a thick accent, [I would call it] a different accent, something that I had to work on my ears to develop that ear to get used to that accent, so it’s pitch perception.”

It did not seem to bother TiTi when she could not follow what her students were saying. When it happened, she just kept asking until she was told “how it’s going.” I believe her students’ reaction granted her the confidence. She recalled, “They usually laugh a little bit, yeah, they usually laugh that I don’t understand it, and then they say, ‘well this is how it is.’” There is no doubt that the sense of humor TiTi has also contributed to her relaxing attitude when dealing with this challenge.

Angela admitted that she had trouble understanding her students’ “language” at the very first time, and added, “not very much, but I had little trouble.” She recalled her time at another Southern university and described her students there as having “very heavy accent,” so she had “some problem.” “When I came here,” Angela said, “I used to face problem in understanding the Southern accent as well, but it became OK within one month.” She went on and explained to me that the reason why she faced problem when first came to the current school was that she was not familiar with Southern accent, and she had had regular interaction with the people here since she got here, she got used to the accent within one month. Angela then voluntarily shared her way of dealing with situations when she did not understand or did not fully understand her students:

So what I do if I do not understand like word by word, I try to pick two or three words from their sentence, and based on that, I try to give answer, and if I feel like I do not understand at all, I ask other students, “what do you guys think?” Although I did not understand the question, I ask, I give them further question, “what do you guys think?” Then when they start giving answer, then I understand, “oh, that was his question,” and then I give my answer.

“Teaching and learning” is a two-way process. Successful teachers not only teach their students; they also learn from their students. This is precisely what Angela had demonstrated here.

Nayeem, the most experienced ITA among all the participants, admitted that he had a hard time with the African American accent when he was teaching as an ITA during his MA program at another Southern university. Back then, in his defense, he was experiencing the African American accent for the first time, so he had much problem. Now after teaching in the United States for over five years, he still *sometimes* has trouble understanding every single word of his students. Having come into contact with people from all over the world, Nayeem was fully aware of the fact that English could be spoken in different ways, so it did not seem to bother him when he could not understand “a word or two or some expression” his students had used, he would simply try to figure out what his students meant to say by *reading* “the whole stresses of their conversations and their appearances.”

Understandably, Blue, the ITA with the shortest teaching experience here in the U.S. also had trouble following his students sometimes, “especially this was at the beginning of the semester,” he added. Instead of “blaming it” on the students’ *accent* or calling out the students for talking or speaking too fast, Blue reasoned it was because he was not familiar with the way in which “words are pronounced” by his students. However, when I asked Blue if he could give me any specific example, he thought for quite a while but could not recall anything. Just like what happened to all the other participating ITAs and me, “with time” Blue became “more and more familiar with how some students pronounce/articulate words.”

There is no secret that a new accent takes some “getting used to.” Both ITAs and their students are exposed to a different accent at the beginning of the semester, but the time it takes them to overcome the difference varies greatly. While the ITAs participated in the current study actively tried their best to understand their students, and they claimed it didn’t take them long to familiarize themselves to the accents of their students, some students who took class with ITAs

still complained about their instructors' accent at the end of the semester; case and point, a student of mine told me she never understood a word I said on the last day of class. I would argue that the attitude they, ITAs and their students, hold towards a different accent played a big role here; where there is a will, there is a way. Anyone who speaks two languages can probably agree that it is much easier for an individual to understand his/her native language being spoken by a non-native speaker than trying to understand a language other than his/her mother tongue.

Theme VIII: Grade Disputations

“I offer plenty of time and explanations for my students.”

Previous studies show that while USTAs and ITAs differ in aspects of, including but not limited to, language competence, culture background, and teaching pedagogy, they share almost the same complaints from their students. According to Luo, Bellows, and Grady's (2000), “too much homework” and “overly critical grading” (p.364), are the two common ones among the top five student complaints listed on their evaluations. Since all the ITAs at the current school have adopted the same syllabi provided by the department, the workload of the course was not the sole decision of theirs; therefore, the current study did not probe into students' opinion in this aspect. With regarding to complaints on grading, both the interactions I had with my students in person and the comments I received online prove that there is truth to the findings of Luo, Bellows and Grady's (2000) until this date.

Even though it rarely happened, every once in a while, a student would come to me and ask why he/she was getting the grade he/she did. Unlike gradings tests of math-based courses, grading the works in a composition class, in most of the cases, papers, is totally a subjective behavior—there isn't a standardized answer key. During the most recent semester that I taught, there was a student in one of my classes who sent me an email asking why he received the grade

he did every time the grade of a major paper was posted. While he was not trying to be difficult by asking the question, it was not easy for me to explain to him and for him to understand why his paper was not “very strong” but just “strong.” Over the years, I have had multiple students telling me, “I’ve never got a B in English, and you gave me a C on this paper.” Even more interesting is that regarding my grading practice, some of my previous students left contradicting comments on ratemyprofessors.com:

1. A comment from December 3rd, 2012 says, “She’s very helpful. ... [S]he isn’t hard very fair if you are fair to her.”
2. Another student wrote on October 21st, 2013 that “She is helpful, but grades really hard on papers.”
3. A third comment was posted on January 11th, 2014, and it, which I believe was responding to the last one, reads, “I found her to be very helpful with papers, and she wasn’t too harsh of a grader.”

In response to these comments, I have adopted two strategies in my teaching. One is that I send my students the rubrics for their papers along with the assignment prompts, and in order to ensure that they are aware of what I am looking for in their papers, I ask them to print out and attach the rubrics to the final drafts and turn both of them in on the due dates. The other one is the policy on revisions; if the students are not content with the grade on their final draft, they have the opportunity to revise their paper and turn in a revision for a more desired grade. By employing these two strategies, I was able to ease the concern students have regarding my grading practice quite effectively.

Have other ITAs gotten similar if not the same response from their students when handing back students their papers? How did they manage the situation when they were

challenged on the grades they gave? During the classes I observed, none of the ITAs handed papers back to their students, so I did not get the opportunity to witness, in real time, any student asking anything regarding his/her grades, and therefore I had to turn to the ITAs for answers during post-observation interviews. None of the ITAs reported any cases when they were confronted by their students regarding their grades. While Blue did recall a conversation that he had with one of his students about a grade, he did not think the student was seriously complaining about it, rather “He’s kind of joking,” because “He is a good student” who received a 97 and “He is a funny student in the class.”

The other male ITA could not recall any cases when he was questioned because of the grade he assigned either. “No, I can’t remember anything like that,” Nayeem stated, “nobody questioned or challenged or asked me, ‘OK, why you gave me these? because I did very excellent.’” He went on and explained that in their papers, he tried to give his students “more formative and summative comments,” and even though he did not use “explicit expression” to justify the grades he gave, “from the overall comment, they get some suggestions to improve their paper, so then from these I think they can figure out ‘yeah, why I have received this grade and where I should improve.’” Despite of Nayeem’s belief that his comments provided enough feedback for revisions, he did recall there were instances when some of his students turned to him for suggestions on how they could improve their grade or asked him if they could do anything to make up what they have missed, and that, according to Nayeem, was how his students “approached” him.

TiTi also denied any of her students had ever brought up the issue of grading with her. “No, never,” she replied with a definite tone immediately when asked whether she had had any students questioning the grades she gave them. She continued:

I give my students permission to work on their grades on their assignments as much as possible, if they want, unless it is a pop quiz or something like that, so in that case, I can't let them work on it. However, for the final major assignment, they are allowed to work on and resubmit it and again I will regrade them, so, yea, they usually don't have any *miscommunication* for grades.

Obviously, TiTi took a different approach when trying to eliminate the potential grade complaints or in TiTi's words, "*miscommunication* for grades." Unlike Nayeem, who believed students would simply accept their grades as long as he had done his part and provided enough feedback/comments, TiTi understood it was not satisfying enough, for some students, to just let them know what they did wrong, it was more important that they were given the opportunity to correct their mistakes and receive better grades. Hence, she was quite "generous" with her time and is willing to "work with" the students to improve their grades if they were willing to put in the work.

Out of all the ninety-four participants of the current study, only one of Angela's students thought his/her instructor was a hard grader and his/her grade would suffer because of it. However, it appeared that this student of hers did not bring his/her concern to Angela's attention. "Not specifically. They did not query about that," Angela claimed stating that her students have not questioned her about their grades because of the measures she has taken. Strictly, she allowed herself two weeks to grade and comment on each major paper, and then she told her students, "You will have to check your grade, you have to check the feedbacks in the eCourseware." In addition to the individual written feedback, she also spends some class time addressing "some general mistakes that they do." Like TiTi, Angela offers her students the

option of revising their paper for a more desired grade as well. “This is how I deal with the grades, but they did not query me why did you give me this,” Angela concluded.

To sum up, none of the participants reported any serious case of grade complaints. In Blue’s case, he only recalled a *funny* student who jokily complained about his grade not being a 100. In the cases of Nayeem, TiTi, and Angela, they claimed that they had never been questioned about the grades they assigned or the grading criteria they used, for which they credited the preventive measure or measures they have taken. While one of Angela’s students did express his/her concern over his/her grade because Angela “grades hard,” the student did not approach her to address his/her concern. This could be for two different reasons: the preventive measures Angela had taken worked, so the student agreed that even though she graded hard, she was fair, thus, no complaint; or, the student did not think it was going to make any difference, so he/she did not bother raising this issue with Angela. Based on the rest of the answers the very student gave on the survey, it is safe to conclude that the former might well be the case—since all the comments the student had for Angela were positive.

Theme IX: One-on-One Interactions

“They are beneficial for both instructors and students.”

As I mentioned earlier, on the last day of classes, I always ask my students to give me some suggestions for my future classes, and one of the most common suggestions I have received is that I should schedule more individual conferences because they were “very helpful.” From my perspective, those conferences have been beneficial, too. In order to provide students more personalized feedback, each of my students was asked to sign up for a 15-minute individual conference to discuss their paper with me. They were expected to bring any specific question(s) they had regarding their paper so that we could precisely target those issues and make the

conferences more productive. Most of them did follow my instruction, so we quickly finished the “business” and spent the rest of the time chatting and learning about each other. At the end of the individual conferences, I not only helped my students improve their paper but also bonded with them emotionally; therefore, I believe one-on-one interactions like these are effective ways for ITAs to build a rapport with their students and should happen more often. I was interested in other ITAs’ view on this, so I asked the participants to evaluate their experiences.

Students are one part of the equation, thus their opinion matters. The results of the student surveys show that the majority of the students, 72 out of 94 (76.6%) have had one-on-one interaction(s) with their instructor, which means the majority of them did feel comfortable reaching out to their instructor when the circumstances arose. Among those 72 students who have had these interactions, almost half of them (33 out of 72) chose to talk to their instructor after class, and a slightly more (39 out of 72) students approached their instructor during his/her office hours. Meanwhile, only 6 out of the 94 students believed the availability in and outside classes was the biggest strength of their instructor. The combination of these two results demonstrated that even though most of the students did reach out to their instructor individually, they did not see one-on-one interactions as of importance.

On the other side of the equation is the ITAs, and their assessments vary. Among all the participating ITAs, TiTi agreed with me to the highest degree; she even shared some of the same vocabulary I would use to when describing the feeling she has towards one-on-one conversations with her students. “It’s amazing,” she said, as soon as I brought up the topic. I then asked her to compare those conversations with the ones that took place during classes. TiTi answered,

Obviously, it’s much better when you have like a portion of time individually and privately with the student, and it’s just like, you kind of like make that bond very quickly.

It's like, it's just making community in count of three. You just make it very quickly and then they just, they open up discussion. They open, they start talking about their challenges and something like that.

She agreed that these one-on-one conversations are more positive and expressed her wish that she could have more than one individual conference with her students each semester. TiTi regretted the fact that even though she *asked* her students to come to her office hours, “they usually don't show up,” because when they did show up, “it's really beneficial both for students and for teachers.” Unfortunately, most of her students only went and talked to her when she made it an obligation and offered them a grade when they did so. This behavior of her students matched with the results of the student survey mentioned in the previous paragraph.

Angela, the other female ITA, did not speak as highly about one-on-one conversations as TiTi did. In addition to individual conferences that are required by the department, some of Angela's students did voluntarily come to her office to “talk about their progress, especially if they are not regular in the class and they miss some classes.” When asked to compare the interactions she had with her students during office hour with the ones in classrooms, Angela said:

I feel like these two settings have two different purpose. So the classroom is a large setting, you have one kind of preparation for that, and but the office is an informal setting, and you are not worried about it, but all the time teachers are worried about their class whether she or he has everything ready at her hand. But if you are in the office, I would say it's very informal and we're not, you know... that is very informal.

I then pushed her a little further and asked whether she agreed that the individual interactions were more productive. She did not share my assessment:

I would not say that is more productive, but I'm telling about the setting. I would say classroom is the more productive because in the classroom, we always give, I mean, all information what they need to do, but in the office room if they have any specific query or any specific problem then they come. Obviously, that is good if students and teachers have like one-on-one session, especially the conference is very good, but that time is very short as well. Like you are there for 10 minutes, 15 minutes, and if you come with a specific problem then it's fine. It's good for him. But in general, I would say classroom is the perfect place to know about topic or to work with their peers. That is a good place.

Obviously, Angela had a different definition for if something is "more productive." According to her, the interactions in classroom were more productive because she could give all information to all of her students during one class period whereas in the office, only a few students would benefit from the individual sessions within the same amount of time.

During the semester when this study was conducted, Blue was teaching for the first time; therefore, it is understandable that he had not had many students visited him. "My office hours... I remember one, yes," he said, but he did not detail what happened during the only visit; instead, he spoke in a general sense regarding the difference between one-on-one conversations happened in classroom and those in ITAs' office:

Yes, I mean, when a student comes or to visit you, I mean, in the office, he might have, maybe a specific question, you'd like, would like to answer to that question, but in the class, I mean you find some students asking, I mean, I think not specific question, but I would say that just less specific questions about, for example the readings or the assignments that they have or...

According to Blue, the main difference between conversations in the office and those in classroom was the questions being asked and answered. “It’s not that different... between the situations in class or in the office,” he claimed and credited the way he engaged his students to “break the ice” in his class. “For example,” he said, “like I give them like short breaks, like one minute or two minutes during activities or exercises, so we can chat, and we have, some students might have a joke or say something like that.” In fact, I did experience the casual atmosphere in his classroom when I was observing his class; he joked about the class being over in the middle of the class, and the class laughed about it.

Among all the participating ITAs, Nayeem has had the longest teaching history in the United States, so he has the most experience with one-on-one communications and was generous with words in his answer. Same as Blue, Nayeem also believed the topics being discussed in the classroom and the office were different due to the fact that the classroom was a public setting and the office a private environment. In his answer, Nayeem verbally *wrote* a standard body paragraph of an essay:

In the classroom, you see the students are very, very public, like you see, they can share only what they, that is very comfortable for them before the public, maybe some general questions, but one-to-one connections, they come with their personal problems, like OK, for example.... This is, it’s something happens, sometimes students come.... Last semester, one student came....and this is how, you see, it works, so very personal.

This *paragraph* started with a topic sentence, in which Nayeem stated his opinion, and then in the middle, he offered three concrete incidents when his students approached him to discuss “personal problems.” Lastly, he briefly summed up his answer.

Nayeem also believed, compared to one-on-one conversations in the office, the

interactions in the classroom were more productive, “because you are in a structure, you design your class time with a lesson plan; these are the things you will do.” He then explained that during class time, he could carry out his lesson plan by giving presentations/lectures to the *whole class* and engaging *all the students* in different activities. In addition, in the class setting, when one student asked a question, all students who might have the same question heard the answer given by their instructor: *one stone, many birds*.

To sum up, all participants agreed that one-on-one conversations in the office are beneficial for both students and their instructors; however, when asked whether they thought these conversations were *more productive* than those took place in the classroom, they had different answers. I did not get the chance to confirm this, but my understanding is that the differences were rooted from the different definitions they had for the expression I had chosen, *more productive*. It appeared that TiTi and I share the same idea; to us, a conversation was *more productive* when the outcome of it was healthy, even if only one student has been seen. Whereas for Angela and Nayeem, conversations were more productive when more students benefitted from those conversations.

Theme X: The Dress Code

“I chose formal/casual attire because...”

It is no secret that “what you wear and the accoutrements you bring will affect how you feel about yourself as a teacher and how your students view you” (Curzan & Damour, 2000, p.13). Even though I have never received any formal instruction regarding how I should dress as an instructor in my classrooms, I have been following the “dress code” modeled by the professors I have had over the years. Balance is the key; I have always tried to present myself in a way that is formal enough to show my students that I take my teaching job seriously and to

establish my authority in the classroom and casual enough that I would feel comfortable, and my students would not be intimidated to approach me and ask questions.

During the class observations, I noticed the ITAs dressed quite differently: Angela, following her religious belief, was dressing in the traditional clothes of her home country and had her hair covered with a hijab. TiTi had on more of a casual outfit, a nice top with a pair of jeans, and she had her hair down and pulled to the front. Nayeem was in a set of dark suits, and he even had a matching tie on—quite a formal look. Blue was wearing a sweater of light color and khaki pants, and he had a scarf on when came to the classroom and took it off before the class. I was interested in finding out the thinking behind the way they dressed that day and, in general, their belief in how, as an instructor, they should present themselves in front of their students, so I asked them if they had a philosophy of their own regarding how instructors should present themselves.

On the day I observed Angela's class, she came to the classroom in the traditional dress of her home country. When I asked her what her philosophy, as far as how an instructor should present him/herself in the class, was, she told me that she was not following any dress code of the school; instead, she chose to wear the traditional dress because of her religious belief. "American people follow at least some kind of same dress code," Angela said, "but as an international, I have to say that and I would like to give thanks to the Almighty that He keeps, He creates some environment for me here that I do not have to leave my religious costume." The United States of America, being a melting-pot, allows people of different backgrounds to maintain their way of living without being judged or discriminated; this could be one of the reasons why top scholars from all over the world have been drawn here. Angela recalled that when she explained to her students why she was not dressed "fashionable" but wearing

traditional clothing, one of her students commented, “You still look very smart” and “You look so nice, we especially like your hijab.” It is the feedback like this kept Angela worry-free about her look; instead, she was able to stay focused on providing the best materials and instruction for her students.

The other female ITA participating in the current study took a different route and chose to dress in more of a casual manner. On the day I visited TiTi’s class, she was wearing a simple but nice top with the sleeves to the elbows and a pair of jeans. I was curious about her choice of outfit that day, so I asked her to share with me why she dressed that way and if she had any philosophy on how she should present herself in the class. “I do [have a philosophy],” she said, “I feel like face matters, and I feel like having a kind of formal outfit affects students’ behavior ... It's a matter of social status ... You're a teacher. You want to look like a teacher.” She then started talk shop, “It’s like thinking about your audience, the thing that you constantly tell our [sic] students. You have to think about your audience in your writing. You have to think about your audience when you are wearing something.” This probably was one of the reasons why all of TiTi’s students agreed that she was knowledgeable about the subject of writing; she could easily tie the topic at hand to the subject she was teaching.

Nayeem definitely kept his students in mind when trying to decide what to wear on the days he taught and had his philosophy as to how he should present himself in front of his students. In order to create a distance between his students and himself and prevent the students from trying to run over him as the authoritative figure in the classroom, he deliberately chose to put on a formal attire. He stated:

That is kind of [what] my perception is, you see, even though I'm very friendly with my students, I am not different, so I'm in a position, you see in a position, I have to clear my

position here that I, you see, I am your teacher, and there might be some kind of, you see, even though the class, everything interacting, but we have a positional gap. OK so if I put on casual dress up and behave like that, so I my perception, yea, they might misuse this and maybe the whole ambiance, academy ambiance will be disrupted. That's why.

Nayeem believed the gap between the students and their instructor was a necessity, because it “gives them a reminder that you cannot take over the position.” In addition, he admitted that this, putting on a formal attire, was another way for him to establish his authority in the classroom. He then added:

You have to have authority in the classroom. ... Otherwise, why, why should they accept you, so this is the rhetorical, the response to the rhetorical situation. When you argue for something, if you do not create a perception or belief on the audience that you are expert on this, the audience will not listen to you. Why should I listen to you in something, for example, in chemistry, he's not of chemistry background, why should I listen to him about chemistry? so you have to create the credibility and establish the authority that you are, you're the expert on this, so this is kind of, “He is our teacher. We should, we're not to take over the role here.”

In the excerpt above, Nayeem began to talk shop, too. He pointed out the similarity between students reacting to the authority of their instructor's and audience responding to the rhetorical situation. He continued and made a strong case for the need to demonstrate one's expertise in order to convince the audience with regards to the authority an individual had on the subject that was being discussed.

Quite the opposite from Nayeem, who was in a suit and a tie, Blue arrived at the classroom in a casual sweater and a pair of pants on the day I observed his class. Not only did

Blue dress in a casual style, but a casual “dress code” he followed. “I think it’s [my dress code is] a mix. It’s better. Sometimes you might dress casual or sometimes formal or...,” he explained. He did not try to establish his authority by dressing in certain manner; he had two reasons for his choice of attire: one is to avoid looking boring, and the other is the weather.

To sum up, the school in which the current study was conducted did not have a written dress code for ITAs, or at least none of the ITAs was aware of it if there was one. Since all of them were granted the liberty, they followed their own philosophies when deciding what to wear on the days they teach. Angela followed her religious ritual, TiTi and Nayeem took the chance to further establish their authority in the class, and Blue free styled.

Theme XI: The Use of Visual Aids

“I have a form of visual aids for every class because...”

Even though I have had more experience teaching English composition courses in the United States than any of the participants of the current study, I learned a lot from them during the interviews as well as the class observations. One of the aspects I am yet to improve is the utilization or lack thereof of visual aids for the students while giving lectures. For every and all my lessons, I always had a plan outlined on a notepad. I brought the notepad to my classroom along with any teaching material I needed and carried out my plans accordingly. I had my visual aids—the notes I made for myself, but I rarely prepared any visual aids for my students; I simply presented the course material and checked my students’ understanding of my lectures verbally. It never occurred to me that students always need some form of visual aids in order to follow along with my lectures more efficiently. I did occasionally write on the white board or turn on the computer, type something, and show it through the projector, but I had never considered visual aids a must.

During the classes I have observed, the ITAs used one form of visual aids or another. TiTi arrived at the classroom a few minutes prior to the class time and wrote down her agenda on the white board, and Angela, Nayeem, and Blue all had a PowerPoint prepared for the lesson. During the interviews, I took the opportunity to ask them the thoughts they put in their choice of visual aids. “It just gives kind of time management ability to me and kind of clarifies what you want to do in class to students, so it has like, kind of, two functions for me,” TiTi claimed and told me she provided some form of visual aids for almost all classes, writings on the white board or a PowerPoint, unless the class was a peer-review session. She went on and recalled how this practice came along. Prior to independently teaching her own classes, she shadowed some American TAs for a semester, during which she witnessed how they had slides for their students and asked the students to take photos of the slides just to make sure the students were following the instructions. TiTi justified her decision to provide visual aids for her students by saying:

I felt like even as American teachers, they’re doing this, because students are, undergrads, they just get distracted in the count of three, so in order to make sure that they are following what I wanna cover in class, I do that, and it has been beneficial for all of us.

Even though she did not explicitly say it, in the excerpt above she tried to make it clear to me that she adopted the use of visual aids because undergraduate students got distracted easily, *not* because she had any concern about the intelligibility of her speech. I came to this conclusion because early on during the interview she insisted that she was only asked to repeat instructions she had given, never any specific words she had said.

Angela had a PowerPoint for her lesson on the day I visited her class, and during the post-observation interview, she revealed the two reasons she had for using PowerPoints “on most

of the days.” Back when she was in Missouri, where she received her first training as an ITA, her supervisor mentioned to her that “it is good to have something in the board, so that if anything looks confusing to the students, they can literally see, and then they can listen, so it will engrave in their mind clearly.” This advice was engraved in her mind clearly, and she had been using PowerPoints in her classes ever since then. The second reason was that these PowerPoints were very helpful for those students who missed classes:

Every day I upload those PowerPoints in the eCourseware, so if anybody miss the class, they have the scope to go to the eCourseware and check the PowerPoint, and then they can know what is, what was going on in the class, and then if they have any question, they immediately email me because I put everything there: the homework is due next class, this is what we were, are gonna do this class, so she or he comes, knows everything about it.

These PowerPoints had been proven handy for her as well; they saved her from repeating the same talk with her students if any of them missed the same class and tried to find out what was going on in the class afterwards. Without the PowerPoints, she would “have to talk about it again and again, so it’s good to tell him, ‘go to the PowerPoints and check what was going on and then come up with a specific question. What is your specific question?’” By the end of the interview, Angela convinced me that even though it might be a lot of work at the beginning of one’s teaching career to put together PowerPoints for the lessons he/she teaches, it pays off in the long run.

Nayeem’s experience of having a PowerPoint for every class, compared to his over a decade long teaching career, was relatively short, just two semesters by the time when the current study was conducted. Previously, he had been using PowerPoints in his classes, but only

for some classes or some portions of a class; “I used to use PowerPoint sometimes but for a particular, maybe for a particular presentation in classes, maybe for repeatedly I used to use the PowerPoint, but for particular lectures,” Nayeem added, “for example, 15-minute lectures, I open the PowerPoint, and I give the lectures.” Back then, he did his lesson plan in paper and kept it in his hand, which is something I had been doing throughout my teaching career, until this date.

Nayeem had grown more dependent on PowerPoints in his lessons in the last two semesters, and according to him, it had been beneficial both for him and his students. They helped him stay well-paced:

For last two semesters, I put everything in the PowerPoint, even the lesson plan. That means what I'm gonna do, one after another I follow, so that I chronologically follow the steps, and I'm in order. Because time management is important, maybe I have so many steps to, you see, cover up in my class, the time will not support me, so when this [the PowerPoint] is out there, I will turn to a kind of reminder, yeah, you have to fill up those. If I see that OK, maybe my steps are getting used up, but I have some, still more time, so it can give me a space of thinking yeah how long you will prolong your, this activities[sic] or that activities there.

Nayeem claimed that not only did PowerPoints help him remain organized, also they prepared his students mentally for the class. “When they see at the beginning, the agenda, they are get [sic] mentally prepared,” he said; since the agenda he had for the day was present from the beginning and throughout the whole class, his students knew what was expected of them next, be it an in-class writing activity or a group discussion, and therefore better prepared. As an instructor who believed in collaborations in the classroom, Nayeem also tried to engage students

using PowerPoints, by asking them to add something to the agenda of the day every once in a while.

Even though he was the least experienced ITA teaching at an American university, Blue was experienced in teaching in general, and he also used PowerPoints in his classes. He justified his choice of PowerPoints by saying, “because you can just organize information that you want to give to students” and “help students understand the structure of the idea, or I mean the such of the lesson and the ideas that you are gonna give to them as a teacher.” In addition to the prepared PowerPoints, Blue stated that he would also write on the white board when he needed to simplify some concepts or when he felt it would be better for him to write on the board.

To sum up, all participants of the current study used some type(s) of visual aids in their teaching. All of them claimed that they had been using PowerPoints for the lessons. Angela, Nayeem, and Blue did have a PowerPoint on the days I visited their classes, and TiTi chose to write on the board during the class I observed. All of them agreed that both instructors and students benefit from visual aids of any kind and get prepared before classes, only Blue mentioned that he would write during lectures to clarify something, but none of them attributed their use of visual aids to any concern about the intelligibility of their speech. TiTi even went as far as highlighting the fact that she learned to use PowerPoints from her American counterparts to prove that her choice had nothing to do with her status of being a non-native speaker of English.

Theme XII: Classroom Management Issues

“It bothers me when they come late and/or start packing early, but they are not worth of spending class time addressing.”

Coming from China, where students are expected to come to class on time, sit straight up,

and not eat anything during classes, I experienced a huge cultural shock when I first started attending classes in a public university in central Arkansas. When I saw my classmates casually walking into the classroom late, putting feet on the chair in front of them (facing the professor), having lunch while the professor was lecturing, my jaw dropped, but the professors did not even raise an eyebrow, so I learned that those behaviors are acceptable on university campuses in the United States. A year later, when I started teaching freshman composition classes as an ITA, my students presented behaviors of the same nature in my classrooms. I felt so torn; even though I had learned from my professors that those behaviors were normal/acceptable in American universities, my previous educational experience or the culture I grew up in told me those behaviors are not appropriate and should be addressed. Therefore, I would address the policies on those behaviors at the beginning of each semester and readdress the issue whenever those behaviors reemerged. It did not take me long to realize that no matter how many times I had addressed these issues, these behaviors always came back, so I decided the first day of class would be my only time bringing this up and not any more in the rest of the semester.

ITAs, by default, were educated in another country prior to their arrival in the United States. While the culture of their home country may not necessarily be different from the culture of the host, in the case of the current study, the participants were from Iran, Bangladesh, and Jordan, all of which host a culture that is different from that of America, I was curious to see how they would manage their classrooms and what were acceptable classroom conducts in their mind. During each class that I observed, there were students coming to class late, and none of the ITAs appeared bothered by this; they just kept on with what they were doing. Therefore, during the post-observation interviews, I asked each of them whether they were bothered by this, what I would consider, a “disruptive behavior,” and whether they had addressed this issue to their

students.

Having had such extensive teaching experience, Nayeem would have seen enough to know how to deal with students' disruptive behaviors, such as coming to class late, I assumed. As expected, there were students who showed up late during Nayeem's lecture, and he did not address those students at all; I wondered it was because he was so used to this kind of behaviors and had grown numb to them. It turned out that he made the conscious choice of not paying any attention to those students because he saw his addressing this issue right at the moment as a distraction, and he believed that "[this] kind of distraction will distract the whole class." Therefore, even though it really bothered him, he chose not to confront the students right away. According to Nayeem, in mild cases, when students were only late for a few minutes, he notified them by sending them an email or simply posting the attendance information online. In more severe cases, students who were late by 30 minutes or longer were *welcomed* by "some humorous remarks or sarcastic remarks," like "congratulation for coming to my class" or "welcome to my class," which he meant to use as "soft reminders."

On the day I observed TiTi's class, a couple of her students came to class late. TiTi just eyed them for a second and continued with her lecture. It did not seem to have bothered her a bit; however, when asked whether students being late bothers her, TiTi admitted *right away* that it did, but because of the rule on "verbal violation," she took a different route—not talking about this issue in class at all. "Students can easily, like, come to you after the class, saying 'well, you hurt my feelings. I don't want to hear that,'" she explained and then added, "As a teacher, you can't tell them that 'you hurt my feelings because of not coming to class on time,' and like even if we're talking about feelings, [it's] mutual hurting, and you can't use these approaches because they're undergrads." Therefore, she decided to deal with this issue on an individual base and

privately. “If I feel like it’s kind of being a routine thing,” she said, “I sent an email, and I asked them to come and meet with me, I *make* them come and meet with me and talk about it.” During the interview, she also mentioned that she had been using the attendance website to bring to the students’ attention the fact that their attendance or lack thereof had the potential of jeopardizing their grade. Meanwhile, trying to be fair to the students who do come to classes on time, TiTi stated that she would “value them more than the ones who are just like come to class like 5 minutes or 10 minutes late.”

Angela’s way of dealing with the attendance problems is both strict and flexible. Even though it did bother her when her students came to class late, she said, “I do not want to give concentration to that,” and “I don’t wanna mention it;” she would simply put “tardy” down for those students who would then receive automatic notification from the attendance website, and their advisors would “take care of it.” Angela gave special considerations when the situations called for them. For example, on the day when I was in her class, she excused one of her students for being late. She noted, “she [the student] is having problems, family problems. She shared that with me, and that’s why sometimes I excuse her.” She also gave permissions to students who had to leave early as long as they let her know ahead of time; when the time came, the students could just leave the classroom without interrupting her lecture. Obviously, she values the flow of the class more than disciplining students.

Like all three ITAs mentioned earlier, Blue did not spend any class time on the issue when some of his students arrived at the classroom late on the day when I visited his class; instead, he simply closed the door after each one entered and moved on with his lecture. During the post-observation interview, I asked whether it bothered him when his students came to class late, Blue immediately replied, “sure, yes,” and he revealed that he had addressed this issue in

class before and had asked his students to come to class on time, because “I don't like anyone coming just after class [has started] because this would distract us as a class, as a whole.”

However, since “students are students,” he did not react to students’ behaviors like this every time they emerge and only addresses it “sometimes.”

To sum up, even though all the participating ITAs admitted that they were bothered when students came to class late, they dealt with the issue differently. Since Nayeem, TiTi, and Angela have been in the United States for some time and have gotten used to the campus culture here, they did not see students being late as a problem that is worth of spending class addressing, and therefore they chose to take care of the issue outside the class through emails, office hour meetings, or attendance website. Blue, despite of the fact that he has taught at college level for several years and has had plenty of experience dealing with “college kids,” was teaching in an American university for the first time then, and he was the only ITA who addressed the issue in class but only “sometimes.”

Another behavior related to attendance that troubles me is that students start packing before the instructor dismisses the class; I believe this behavior is not appropriate for two reasons. On the one hand, it is disrespectful and distractive for the instructor. For instance, when I notice my students were not paying attention to what I was saying, I get offended and lose my train of thought. On the other hand, it is counter-productive for the students; from my experience, students need to be reminded of what is coming next, so I have been trying to do just that at the end of the class. When my students check themselves out during the last few minutes, they miss these crucial reminders. Since the participating ITAs are on the same page with me on the issue of students being late for class, I wondered whether they share the same opinion with me on this one. To my surprise, even though they all admitted that it bothered them when students stopped

paying attention and started packing during the last few minutes of a class, none of them has ever addressed this issue to their students.

During the post-observation interviews, the participating ITAs gave me different explanations to why they chose to overlook this. Blue admitted that it bothered him when the students started packing as he tried to wrap up, “Yes, sometimes, yes, it bothers you, sure, because I feel like that students just want to finish and maybe, I understand that students might not like this class, and they want to just to take off.” Then, when asked whether he had addressed this issue to his students, he said, “no,” and explained, “because, honestly, I didn't feel always like students want to, maybe sometimes maybe I find one or two students do this, but it's not, I mean, it's not something that repeatedly or frequently do, so....” In other words, Blue did not see students trying to leave early a problem that is worth spending time addressing.

Nayeem, the other male ITA admitted that even though this behavior—students start packing when “it is the time” even though the instructor is still lecturing—was not common in Bangla culture, he did not “take it very negatively” when his American students checked themselves out before he dismissed the classes. Nayeem explained:

No matter how long you teach in, in our culture, back in Bangladesh, the students will not, you see, pick up their bags or anything. If it happens that you exceed 30 minutes, 40 minutes, then someone might, you see, inform you the time's over, the time's over. But [here when it is] just 5 minutes till, you [still] have 5 minutes, 6 minutes, the students are packing their bags and others getting up, this [is] kind of giving the reminders. I do not take it very negatively, because some students have classes too, maybe in other faculty, takes 10 to 15 minutes, so I take it like, OK this might be a kind of reminder to me “don't exceed, don't, don't exceed the, you see, the time frame. It's fine that we're here from

12:00 to 2:05, but don't exceed this time frame." I take it like this kind of soft reminder to me, because they're not leaving my class I, you see, before I, before I end, end it.

For this reason, Nayeem said, "I never tell them, 'okay, don't, don't do this or that, don't close your bags.' So sometimes I say, 'I have something more to share with you, OK, just please, yeah, yeah, yeah, let me, let me give you announcement' or something."

After I revealed to him how much it bothered me when my students tried to pack during the last few minutes of my classes, Nayeem, being a good teacher, naturally started sharing with me how he dealt with the situation when his students behaved the same way:

Sometimes, you see, sometimes I give them some..., yeah, it happens that I pretend not to see them who are packing, so towards the, at the end I say, "OK, thank you for your patience till the end of my class and listening to me and cooperating me." So, yeah, yeah, so it gives me, give them some kind of, you see, motivation to those people who are already preparing, because I say in such a way that I appreciate their patience, and so, "oh, I shouldn't do this or that." So, this is how, these kind of tactics [I use].

While Nayeem did not confront his students or directly address the issue in his class, in an indirect way, he let his students know the expected behaviors in his class and hoped his expectations were met.

TiTi also cited the fact that the students may "have a long walk" to the next class when explaining why she was lenient to students getting ready to leave a couple of minutes early. While she did admit that this behavior did bother her, she also said, "It doesn't hurt my feelings," and since "everybody does it," she felt like she had to "get along with it." Given the fact that she was teaching a 55-minute-class, and "they[students] usually do that like two minutes before the end of the class," she was never under the impression that she needed to address it in class;

instead, she would just raise her voice and make some loud announcement when she wanted her students' attention. This was not an issue for her also because she was inspired by one of her professors into believing that announcing the plans for the week at the beginning of the first class of that week helped students focus. Knowing her students would not remember the plans anyway, she suggested her students to take pictures of the PowerPoint she showed, and she used an app. called "Remind" to keep them posted. She is much more relaxed when dealing with the issue at hand.

Angela was not shy to express her feeling towards students getting ready to take off a few minutes early, "If it is very end, then I feel like it's OK, but sometimes it bothers me if I want to catch their attention, but they do not [pay attention]." Even so, she did not think it would be necessary for her to address the issue, and she offered the following explanations:

1. If I find that the [students], they are so busy with their backpacks and I really need to talk about something important, [pounding the table and say] "guys, listen!" They just shut down like that and then it, it is done, they listen to me. If I ask them something specifically, they listen to me, but if I feel like OK, I'm just wrapping up everything. I'm almost done, OK, so do this, do this, do this, done! I don't care about that. At least they should have some freedom in class. Just few minutes earlier, I feel like it's OK.
2. Why I do not take it very negatively? [sic] Because as a student I do that, too, so to whom I should give blame? so I'm a student too. I cannot give them blame. I, I do those stuff and I was doing this stuff. We also arrange your [our] backpack like few minutes earlier, so all the time I do not take it negatively, but sometimes it bothers me.
3. We do that, and our professors do not bother about that, they do not tell us every time, "hey do not become busy with your backpacks and others." Just, so we, I think we have

to learn something from our, we have many things to learn from our processors as well.

4. I am always, I, I should say that I'm, I'm not flexible, but I keep balance in everything. If you, if you become so strict... probably, I, I think that I'm not gonna get very positive product from them[students]. I want to make sure that everything has balance... I'm kind of flexible about, like small issues.

Obviously, Angela chose not to address the issue and to be “flexible” when her students left early, mentally, because she considered it a “small issue.”

While the way in which Nayeem dealt with the issue surprised me to some extent, because I thought one would manage his or her class the same way in which classes are managed in his home country/culture. My hypothesis was that when the culture ITAs grew up in did not agree with the culture in which they currently work, there would be conflict. However, it was not the case with Angela, Blue, Nayeem, and TiTi, who were able to be flexible and adapted to the

Theme XIII: English majors make better ITAs? !

Dalle and Inglis (1990), in their paper, suggested the reason why ITAs' students misunderstood their speech was that “[m]any ITAs have not studied English composition and are unfamiliar with the English system of rhetoric or may not have thought about how it applies to the formal speech of the classroom” (p. 3). Being an English major for both Master's and Doctoral degrees myself, I definitely had taken quite a few courses in which I studied “English composition” and familiarized myself with the “English system of rhetoric;” I had taken courses literally titled “ESL writing,” “Composition Theories,” and “Rhetoric.” In the past 15 years, I had been trusted with two to three sections of composition classes in two difference universities and had never received any complaint about my teaching performance. I alone may not be enough to support Dalle and Inglis's suggestion, so I turned to the participating ITAs for further

evidence. I did not get the opportunity to read any of their writings, but I had had extensive conversations with them, during which they demonstrated their ability to compose standard English paragraphs verbally.

As discussed earlier, Nayeem “wrote” a standard body paragraph for an essay when trying to explain why instructors had to have authority in the classroom:

You have to have authority in the classroom. Even though the class is very facilitative, environmental interactive, but you have to establish your authority, because otherwise why should they accept what you say? so this is the rhetorical, the response to the rhetorical situation. When you argue for something, if you do not create a perception or belief on the audience that you are the expert on this, the audience will not listen to you. Why should I listen to you in something, for example, in chemistry, he’s not of chemistry background, why should I listen to him about chemistry? so you have to create the credibility and establish the authority that you are the expert on this, so this is kind of, “He is our teacher, we should, we’re not to take over the role here.”

This *paragraph* started with a topic sentence, followed by detailed elaborations with an analogy as well as a concrete example, and ended with a concluding sentence. Also, in the excerpt above, Nayeem mentioned the concept of “rhetorical situation,” which further proved that he was well equipped to teach a composition course.

Similarly, TiTi also demonstrated her mastery of the subject of English composition with the explanation of her philosophy for how an instructor should present himself/herself in the classroom:

I feel like face matters, and I feel like having a kind of formal outfit affects students’ behavior as students. It’s a matter of social status. Like you’re a teacher, you wanna look

like a teacher. So obviously when you're hanging out with your friends, you don't dress like that. You might just go to your friend's in just shorts and tops on. It's like again, it's like thinking about your audience, the thing that you constantly tell your students. You have to think about your audience in your writing. You have to think about your audience when you are wearing something.

In the excerpt above, TiTi stated her point of view, backed it up with examples her audience could easily relate to, and then tied the last example with the issue being discussed here. Like, Nayeem, TiTi also mentioned a key concept in the subject of composition—thinking about your audience, which showed TiTi was knowledgeable in the subject matter.

Angela was loved by her students for two reasons: she proved her authority on the subject matter, and she showed her ability to sympathize with her students. She demonstrated both of these traits of hers when stating her opinion on the issue of students starting packing before she dismissed the class:

Why I do not take it very negatively? because as a student I do that, too, so to whom I should give blame? so I'm a student too. I cannot give them blame. I do those stuff, and I was doing this stuff. We also arrange your [sic] backpack like few minutes earlier, so all the time I do not take it negatively, but sometimes it bothers me.

The sentences in the excerpt above were short and vocabulary were basic, but all that were needed to form a standard paragraph were present: a topic sentence, some supporting evidence, and a concluding sentence. To make it even better, in so few words, she demonstrated how she was capable of sympathizing with the students; therefore, it was no wonder why her students would nominate her for the Teaching Award during the previously semester.

Like all the other participated ITAs, Blue also composed standard paragraphs during the interviews. For instance, when being asked whether he thought the interactions happened in the classroom were of no difference to those took place in the office, he said:

Yes, I think so. I always bring the class, try to break the ice always in my class, so students can, yes, we can chat, and during, for example, like I give them like short breaks, like one minute or two minutes during activities or exercises, so we can chat, and we have, some students might have a joke or say something like that, so I think it's not that different, I mean, between the situations in class or in the office.

Blue stated his opinion right away, then he provided some detailed explanations, and lastly, he ended his answer with a restatement of his opinion. Not a very polished paragraph, but all elements were included.

To sum up, our experiences, both mine and the participated ITAs', may serve as great testimonies to Dalle and Inguis's suggestion that if ITAs had studied English composition and were familiar with the English system of rhetoric or had thought about how it would apply to the formal speech of the classroom, then they would be able to do a better job as instructors. All the participating ITAs had their B.A. and M.A in English, meaning they all had extensive education in the subject of English, and the answers they gave during the interviews were great illustrations of their knowledge of English composition and rhetoric. Then, it was not coincident that all of the students surveyed strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that their instructor was knowledgeable on the subject of English composition.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Results of the Study

Even though compared to the total population of ITAs on any American university campus, the number of those who are assigned to teach English composition classes to native English speakers is small, their experience is unique and should be heard and even studied. Considering the fact that the ITAs who participated in the current study are quite successful, in that that the feedback and comments I gathered from their students are mostly positive, these ITAs share some common characteristics:

1. They are knowledgeable in the subject they are teaching, and they successfully convinced their students of this. At the beginning of the semester, they planted the seeds of trust with their statements and resumes, then throughout the semester, they further proved their authority in the field of English composition by giving well-prepared lectures and offering helpful feedback for their students.
2. They made it known to their students that they cared about them, and they had built strong rapport with their students. Angela knew about the personal issue one of her students was facing because the student trusted her and told her about it, and she gave the student the permission to leave the class early to deal with her issue. While it was definitely not the only case, TiTi took the time to prepare some special treats from her home country to share with her students on the last day of class, and her students expressed their appreciation by giving her hugs before leaving the classroom for the last time.
3. They all appreciated the opportunity to teach and tried to provide the best learning experience for their students. They all had an ice-breaking activity arranged at the beginning of a class. They all included some visual aids during the lectures to ensure

that their students can follow. They all periodically emailed their students to keep them informed, and TiTi used Remind, an APP to remind her students of the homework and due dates for upcoming assignments.

4. They are active learners, both academically and culturally, who were not taught by being lectured; instead, they learned how to be an efficient instructor by observing. All of them have mentioned that they have learned something from their professors, their colleagues, and their students. For example, TiTi learned from her professor in her master's program that she could ease the gap between her and her students by using body languages like casually sitting on the desk during lectures; she learned from her fellow American TAs that she could make sure her students were following the agenda of the classes by using visual aids such as PowerPoints in her classes, and because of this experience, she suggested that it would be beneficial for ITAs if they were given the opportunity to shadow some experienced TAs for some time prior to teaching their own classes independently; she also learned from her students what was expected from her as an instructor and how she can best facilitate their learning.

Significance and Implementation of the Study

The ITAs participated in the current study received mostly positive evaluation from their students, and interviews and class observations revealed why. The next question is what can we learn from the results of the current study?

1. For American universities: The current study demonstrates, with the right supports, international students make excellent teaching assistants; the practice of granting them teaching assistantships is a legitimate action and should be continued.

2. For ITA training programs: The current study points directions for the future of these training programs. Elements such as the information regarding the dynamic of the classrooms in American universities, the opportunity to shadow experienced TAs, both American and international ones, and training in subjects of English composition and English system of rhetoric should be added to these programs.
3. For ITAs: The current study provides inspiration for other ITAs; there are practical ways for them to improve as instructors, for instance, they can try to build rapports with their students or use some form(s) of visual aids to facilitate students' learning process, and, therefore, they should be more confident.
4. For American students: The current study draws vivid portraits of ITAs. It is inevitable that American universities will award more assistantships to more international students; the sooner students learn about ITAs and understand them, the faster they would be able to benefit from these intercultural experiences.

Limitations of the Study

All studies have limitations; mine is no exception:

1. The questions asked during pre-observation interviews and the first half of the post-observation interviews were, for the most part, based off my personal experiences; as a result, they may not answer all questions of other researchers. The second half of post-observation interview questions were inspired by the performance of participating ITAs during a sole class observation; therefore, there may be questions that were missed because nothing that could have triggered such questions happened during the observation.

2. The current study was done within the department of English of only one mid-south public university, and only four ITAs were observed and interviewed, and ninety-four valid student surveys were collected and analyzed; therefore, the results may not apply to the ITAs in English departments at other universities.
3. Another limitation of the current study is that all the participants were from Asian countries; they all had a noticeable “foreign look” in addition to a foreign accent. Due to the fact that the questions I initially had in the student survey were eliminated upon the request of three of the four ITAs who participated, this study failed to identify which of the two created more challenges for the participating ITAs.
4. I only administrated one student survey towards the end of the semester; as a result, I was not able to prove if and any students had changed their attitude/opinion towards their instructors before and after having had sufficient interactions (to make such assessment) with them. In addition, as previously discussed, upon the request of some of the ITAs, I had to delete the question about accent
5. I did not arrange any follow-up interviews with the surveyed students to get them to clarify some of their answers they gave; therefore, I could only speculate the answers to some of the questions.

Suggestions for Future Studies

1. For future studies, interview questions should cover more topic than the current study did. The questions asked in this study were mostly based off the researcher’s personal experience, future studies should explore more aspects of the story of ITAs in English Department so that ITAs of other departments can benefit from the findings of such studies.

2. Since the current study was done on the campus of one Southern university and there are only four participants, the results may not speak for all the ITAs in English departments throughout the United States. Future studies should recruit more ITAs from multiple universities of different parts of the country. For example, students from the City of New York may react differently to their English instructors who look and/or sound foreign from those from the deep South, because of the previous exposure to culture diversity.
3. For future studies, it would be interesting if the researchers could limit the variables to just one and find out if a foreign look or foreign accent would cause more challenges or difficulties regarding teaching and classroom management issues for ITAs. For instance, future studies can include ITAs from European countries, who don't look much different but only sound different and ITAs or TAs who sound native but look foreign, so that the researchers can compare the role each factor plays in the way students respond to their English instructors.
4. For future studies, in order to demonstrate whether and how interactions between ITAs and their students changed the students' assessment of their instructor, two student surveys should be arranged, one at the beginning and another at the end of a semester. The results of the two surveys then should be compared and analyzed.
5. For future studies, in order to extract more detailed opinions about the ITAs from their students, it would be helpful if interviews with the students were arranged and conducted soon after the class-observations.

Appendix A: Interview Guide (Pre-observation)

Conducted before the class observation

1. Where are you from? How many years have you been studying English? Have you taken English proficiency test(s)? Would you mind sharing the result(s)?
2. Do you think you have an accent when you speak English? If you do, do you think your accent would hinder other's comprehension of your speech? If so, to what extent?
3. Have you taught before (teaching as an ITA here)? For how long? What and where did you teach? Do you consider yourself an experienced instructor? Why?
4. When did you find out that you had been assigned teaching duty? How did you feel?
5. How did your family/friends respond when you first shared the *news* (that you are going to teach English composition to mostly native speakers of English) with them? How did their response make you feel?
6. What did you expect to face before started teaching here? Like, how your students would react when meeting you in class for the first time? Did you have a plan?
7. How would you evaluate your teaching experience last semester? Did you plan on making changes this semester? In which area(s)? Classroom management? Course policies? Or, how you would interact with your students?

P.S.: Each ITA was asked slightly different follow-up questions.

Appendix B: Interview Guide (Post-observation)
Angela

Conducted after the class observation

I. Questions related to ITA's general experience:

1. Can you recall how the first day of the class went? How did you feel the night before? How did your students react when finding out their English composition instructor is not a native speaker of English?
2. Have your students asked you to repeat something in class? Do you remember what was it? How did you deal with it? Verbally or in writing? Why did you choose to do so?
3. Have you had trouble understanding your students during conversations/interactions? Can you recall what happened? What do you think was the cause of the breakdown of the communications?
4. Have you had students questioning the grade you gave them? Can you recall the conversation(s)?
5. Have you had one-on-one conversation with your students during office hours? How did that go? How would you compare that with interactions in classroom? Do you see any differences?
6. In general, does the experience you have had with the students meet the expectation you had?

II. Questions related to class observation:

1. You arrived early on the day I visited your class. Do you always go to classroom early? None of your students approached you on that day, have they before?
2. I am not familiar with the way people from your home country dress, so I can't tell if you "dressed up" for your class. I am wondering if you have any "philosophy" on how you should present yourself in class? Formal/casual? Older/you?...
3. You initiated a casual conversation with your students at the beginning of the class, is it planned? I am guessing this is one of the warm-up activities that you do, what are some other tricks you have in your bag?
4. After the warm-up activity, you explained the agenda for the day with PowerPoint, could you tell me why you chose to do so? You didn't just orally outline the agenda, nor did you choose to write on the board.
5. When the class was in session, students kept showing up. I noticed you just glanced at the student and went on with the class. Does it bother you when students coming to class late?
6. When introducing the upcoming assignment, Writing Research, you asked the students what "research" means to them. You first asked the students to orally answer these questions, then, you asked them to write down their answers in bullet-points and share with the class afterwards. Was it planned? If so, why? If not, why did you make that adjustment?

7. You asked the class, “have you got the point?” multiple times throughout the class period. When do you ask this question? I mean, what makes you ask the question? What did you notice before asking this question?
8. When discussing the reading, you gave a brief summary of the reading. Do you do this for every reading? If not, how do you decide whether to do it or not?
9. During the time when the students were working on the Discourse Community & Midterm Reflection, an exchange between you and one of your students caught my attention. After explained to a girl sat in the front how the reflection should be formatted, you said to yourself “two paragraphs for each question” in a joking tone. A boy in the back heard you and asked, “you were just kidding ...” Why do you think he asked if you were kidding? Was it because he didn’t get the joking tone? You did try to explain to him again why you gave them questions.
10. You had a student collecting the reflections for you. How did that come alone? Volunteer? Same student helps you gathering the in-class writings during all the classes or the students take turns helping?
11. You had students working in pairs during the class I visited. Do you ask your students work in bigger groups? What are the considerations when trying to choose from different group sizes?
12. Does it bother you when students start to pack towards the end of the class? If it does, have you addressed this issue to the class?

Appendix B: Interview Guide (Post-observation)
Blue

Conducted after the class observation

I. Questions related to ITA's general experience:

1. Can you recall how the first day of the class went? How did you feel the night before? How did your students react when finding out their English composition instructor is not a native speaker of English?
2. Have your students asked you to repeat something in class? Do you remember what was it? How did you deal with it? Verbally or in writing? Why did you choose to do so?
3. Have you had trouble understanding your students during conversations/interactions? Can you recall what happened? What do you think was the cause of the breakdown of the communications?
4. Have you had students questioning the grade you gave them? Can you recall the conversation(s)?
5. Have you had one-on-one conversation with your students during office hours? How did that go? How would you compare that with interactions in classroom? Do you see any differences?
6. In general, does the experience you have had with the students meet the expectation you had?

II. Questions related to class observation:

1. On the day I visited your class, you dressed casually. What is your belief on how instructors should present themselves in classroom? Dress code? The dynamics of the class? Later, you sat on the desk when engaging students in a class discussion.
2. You shared a childhood picture of yours at the beginning of the class. Was that your warm-up activity for the day? What are some of other tricks you have in your bag?
3. You had a PowerPoint for the lesson that day, do you prepare a PowerPoint for every class? Why?
4. Students came to class late, you didn't stop, but simply closed the door and continued lecturing. Does it bother you when students come to class late? Have you addressed this issue before? If not, why not?
5. After giving an introduction of the autoethnography assignment, you checked the students' understanding by asking, "any questions?" How do you decide when to check students' understanding? For example, after finishing a point? When noticing students look lost? When students are quiet?
6. You made a joke when students didn't ask questions by saying, "that's it for today." Do you often make jokes in class? Do they always come across? Was there any didn't work? Why so?
7. On the day I visited your class, you arranged two group/individual activities. In both cases, you asked them to orally discuss the questions. Do you assign in-class writing? How do you decide which form to assign?

8. You didn't take roster until almost the end of class, why then?
9. On the day I visited your class, you ran out of time. Are there days you finished what you planned early? How often does this happen?
10. Does it bother you when students start packing before you dismiss the class?

Appendix B: Interview Guide (Post-observation)
Nayeem

Conducted after the class observation

I. Questions related to ITA's general experience:

1. Can you recall how the first day of the class went? How did you feel the night before? How did your students react when finding out their English composition instructor is not a native speaker of English?
2. Have your students asked you to repeat something in class? Do you remember what was it? How did you deal with it? Verbally or in writing? Why did you choose to do so?
3. Have you had trouble understanding your students during conversations/interactions? Can you recall what happened? What do you think was the cause of the breakdown of the communications?
4. Have you had students questioning the grade you gave them? Can you recall the conversation(s)?
5. Have you had one-on-one conversation with your students during office hours? How did that go? How would you compare that with interactions in classroom? Do you see any differences?
6. In general, does the experience you have had with the students meet the expectation you had?

II. Questions related to class observation:

1. On the day I visited your class, you dressed very formal, do you always dress formal for classes? Why so? How would you like to present yourself in front of the class?
2. At the beginning of the class, you asked your students how their Fall Break was. Do you always start class with some warm-up activity like this? Any other tricks in your bag?
3. Following the chat, you introduced the agenda for the class with PowerPoint. Do you have a PowerPoint for every class? Why so? Any alternatives?
4. When students came in late, you didn't stop but just kept going. Does it bother you when students come late? Have you addressed this to class? If not, why not?
5. "Class Journal Writing," do you do this every day? (It seems to me that students are familiar with this task) You then asked them to verbally answer the question after they put their answers in writing. Why doing both writing and speaking?
6. You played a YouTube video about voice after giving a brief intro to the subject. Why did you choose to do that? How do you think the video helps explaining the topic? How do you decide when to use YouTube?
7. When moving on to the reading, you gave a lecture about some part of the text and ask the class to work the other part of the text in groups, why did you do so?
8. You tried to ask students how they could avoid using the original words when paraphrasing; the students didn't seem to get it (the questions), why do you think that was the case? (They didn't read closely?)
9. It seemed to me that you slowed down your speech in class. Did you? Why?

10. Does it bother you when students start packing before you are done talking? If so, have you addressed this to the class? If not, why not?
11. You didn't verbally check students' understanding of your lecture, but I did see you constantly tried to make eye contact with students. Is this how you check? Is "making eye contact" a common way to check others' understanding in your home country?

Appendix B: Interview Guide (Post-observation)
TiTi

Conducted after the class observation

I. Questions related to ITA's general experience:

1. Can you recall how the first day of the class went? How did you feel the night before? How did your students react when finding out their English composition instructor is not a native speaker of English?
2. Have your students asked you to repeat something in class? Do you remember what was it? How did you deal with it? Verbally or in writing? Why did you choose to do so?
3. Have you had trouble understanding your students during conversations/interactions? Can you recall what happened? What do you think was the cause of the breakdown of the communications?
4. Have you had students questioning the grade you gave them? Can you recall the conversation(s)?
5. Have you had one-on-one conversation with your students during office hours? How did that go? How would you compare that with interactions in classroom? Do you see any differences?
6. In general, does the experience you have had with the students meet the expectation you had?

II. Questions related to class observation:

1. You dressed casual on the day I observed your class, would you share with me why you dressed the way you did? Do you have any "philosophy" on how you should present yourself in class? Formal/casual? Older/you?...
2. You arrived at the class prior to class time to write down the agenda on the board, why did you choose to do so?
3. You initiated a casual conversation with your students at the beginning of the class, is it planned? I am guessing this is one of the warm-up activities that you do, what are some other tricks you have in your bag?
4. When the class was in session, students kept showing up. I noticed you just glanced at the student and went on with the class. Does it bother you when students coming to class late?
5. You allow students to use electronic devices in class; do you have any concerns that they may get distracted?
6. "In-class writings," how often do you assign them?
7. A student asked a question you didn't have answer for, and you told her you will think about it and get back with her later. It seems to me that you feel comfortable telling your students you didn't have the exact answer right then, any concerns about losing authority by saying that? (I would)
8. When talking about the assigned reading, you did not lecture at all; instead, you asked your students to summarize it. Why did you choose to do so?

9. You made some announcements before starting the discussion over the reading, in other words, you didn't wait until the end of the class to take care of the "house-keeping" issues, why so?
10. Does it bother you when students start to pack towards the end of the class? If it does, have you addressed this issue to the class?

Appendix C: Student Survey (Version I)

1. What year are you?
 - a. Freshman
 - b. Sophomore
 - c. Junior
 - d. Senior

2. What is your major?

3. Have you been around people who speak a different language other than English as their first language? Name the language(s) if you can.

4. Have you had foreign teacher/instructor before? If yes, what was(were) the class(es)?

5. (If answered yes to question #4) Circle the statement that best describes your previous experience(s) with foreign instructor(s):
 - a. Overall, my experience with the foreign instructor(s) was great.
 - b. Overall, my experience with the foreign instructor(s) was decent.
 - c. Overall, my experience with the foreign instructor(s) was disappointing.
 - d. Overall, my experience with the foreign instructor(s) was terrible.

**** Questions below are about the instructor of this English composition class****

6. I _____ with the statement that, “My instructor is knowledgeable about the subject.”
 - a. strongly agree
 - b. somewhat agree
 - c. don’t quite agree
 - d. don’t agree

7. Have you had any one-on-one interaction with the instructor outside class? If you have, how would you describe your experience(s)?
 - a. I have never talked with him/her outside class.
 - b. I have talked with him/her right after classes to get my questions answered; since there was limited time, the conversation was short.
 - c. I have talked with my instructor during his/her office hours; there was plenty of time, but our conversation was short and focused.
 - d. I have talked with my instructor during his/her office hours; since there was plenty of time, our conversation was extensive, and we got to know more about each other.

8. Circle the statement that best describes your feeling about the speech of your instructor:
 - a. My instructor doesn’t have an accent.
 - b. My instructor has an accent, but I have never had problem understanding him/her.
 - c. My instructor has an accent, and I have trouble understanding him/her sometimes.
 - d. My instructor has an accent, and I often have trouble understanding him/her.
 - e. My instructor has an accent, and I have been having a hard time understanding him/her.

9. What do you think is the biggest strength of this instructor?
 - a. He/She is knowledgeable about the subject.
 - b. He/She cares about his/her students’ success.
 - c. His/Her availability in and outside classes.
 - d. He/She is passionate about teaching.

10. What do you think is the weakest point of this instructor?
 - a. His/Her foreign appearance
 - b. His/Her foreign accent
 - c. His/Her understanding of the American culture
 - d. His/Her teaching style
 - e. His/Her unavailability in and outside classes
 - f. None.

11. Having a non-native English speaker teaching me English has been a (an) _____ experience.
- exciting
 - interesting
 - shocking
 - surprising
12. Circle your biggest concern about your grade in this class:
- My grade may suffer because writing has never been my strength.
 - My grade may suffer since I have been having a hard time keeping up with the assignments.
 - My grade may suffer due to my attendances in this class.
 - My grade may suffer since instructor grades hard.
 - My grade may suffer because I have been having trouble communicating with my instructor.
 - None.
13. Circle the statement that best describes impression about this course?
- This has been an eye-opening experience, and I am glad that I chose to take this course with this instructor.
 - This has been a challenging experience, but I don't regret taking this course with this instructor.
 - This has been a disappointing experience; I should have dropped the course or switched to a different section earlier.
 - I don't really care who the instructor is; I am taking this course simply because it is required.
14. Circle the statement that best describes your overall impression about the instructor who is teaching this course:
- Overall, the instructor has done a great job teaching this course.
 - Overall, the instructor has done a decent job teaching this course.
 - Overall, the instructor has done an average job teaching this course.
 - Overall, the instructor has done a poor job teaching this course.
15. Would you like to take the same instructor for your next English course if it is possible?
- Sure! My instructor is great!
 - I guess, I don't really care.
 - Probably not, I would like to try new instructors.
 - No, thanks!

Appendix C: Student Survey (Version II)

1. What year are you?
 - e. Freshman
 - f. Sophomore
 - g. Junior
 - h. Senior

2. What is your major?

3. Have you been around people who speak a different language other than English as their first language? Name the language(s) if you can.

4. Have you had foreign teacher/instructor before? If yes, what was(were) the class(es)?

5. (If answered yes to question #4) Circle the statement that best describes your previous experience(s) with foreign instructor(s):
 - a. Overall, my experience with the foreign instructor(s) was great.
 - b. Overall, my experience with the foreign instructor(s) was decent.
 - c. Overall, my experience with the foreign instructor(s) was disappointing.
 - d. Overall, my experience with the foreign instructor(s) was terrible.

**** Questions below are about the instructor of this English composition class****

6. I _____ with the statement that, “My instructor is knowledgeable about the subject.”
 - a. strongly agree
 - b. somewhat agree
 - c. don’t quite agree
 - d. don’t agree

7. Have you had any one-on-one interaction with the instructor outside class? If you have, how would you describe your experience(s)?
 - a. I have never talked with him/her outside class.
 - b. I have talked with him/her right after classes to get my questions answered; since there was limited time, the conversation was short.
 - c. I have talked with my instructor during his/her office hours; there was plenty of time, but our conversation was short and focused.
 - d. I have talked with my instructor during his/her office hours; since there was plenty of time, our conversation was extended, and we got to know more about each other.

8. What do you think is the biggest strength of this instructor?
 - a. He/She is knowledgeable about the subject.
 - b. He/She cares about his/her students’ success.
 - c. His/Her availability in and outside classes.
 - d. He/She is passionate about teaching.

9. Having a non-native English speaker teaching me English has been a (an) _____ experience.
 - a. exciting
 - b. interesting
 - c. shocking
 - d. surprising

10. Circle your biggest concern about your grade in this class:
 - a. My grade may suffer because writing has never been my strength.
 - b. My grade may suffer since I have been having a hard time keeping up with the assignments.
 - c. My grade may suffer due to my attendances in this class.
 - d. My grade may suffer since instructor grades hard.
 - e. My grade may suffer because I have been having trouble communicating with my instructor.

11. Circle the statement that best describes impression about this course?
- a. This has been an eye-opening experience, and I am glad that I chose to take this course with this instructor.
 - b. This has been a challenging experience, but I don't regret taking this course with this instructor.
 - c. This has been a disappointing experience; I should have dropped the course or switched to a different section earlier.
 - d. I don't really care who the instructor is; I am taking this course simply because it is required.
12. Circle the statement that best describes your overall impression about the instructor who is teaching this course:
- a. Overall, the instructor has done a great job teaching this course.
 - b. Overall, the instructor has done a decent job teaching this course.
 - c. Overall, the instructor has done an average job teaching this course.
 - d. Overall, the instructor has done a poor job teaching this course.
13. Would you like to take the same instructor for your next English course if it is possible?
- a. Sure! My instructor is great!
 - b. I guess, I don't really care.
 - c. Probably not, I would like to try new instructors.
 - d. No, thanks!

Appendix D: Instructors' Consent to Participate

Teaching in a Foreign Land: International Teaching Assistants' Expectations towards and Experiences with Students of English Composition Classes and Students' Evaluation of ITAs

Dear Instructor,

You are being invited to take part in a research study about international teaching assistants. You are being invited to take part in this research study because you are an international student and an instructor who teaches English composition classes at The University of Memphis. If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of five people to do so. Please read the information provided in this document carefully and take your time in making your decision. If there is any information you do not understand, please ask me.

The person in charge of this study is Wei Chen of The University of Memphis Department of English. She is being guided in this research by Dr. Emily A. Thrush of The University of Memphis, Department of English.

The Purpose of the Study

Through this study, we hope to learn about the international teaching assistants' expectations towards and experiences with their students and the freshman composition courses they teach. These findings may help ITAs to be more successful as instructors and other faculty members to be more efficient when facilitating ITAs.

Participant Requirements

You may volunteer to participate if you are over 18 years of age, you teach a section of freshman composition class, and you are an international student enrolled at The University of Memphis.

Research Procedure

For each participant of this study, a classroom observation will be arranged. The participation in the observation is based on your willingness.

In addition to a classroom observation, you will be asked to participate in two individual interviews, one at the beginning of the semester and the other after the classroom observation, and each interview will last approximately for 30 minutes. The participation in the interview is based on your willingness.

Both the classroom observation and interviews will be audio-recorded using a digital audio recorder and transcribed.

Risks or Discomfort

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study.

Confidentiality

We will make every effort to keep private all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, you will not be personally identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private. We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. You will be given a different name in the study and all data will be kept on a password-protected computer.

Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal

You should only participate in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study, to please the investigator or your instructor. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will not be any penalty or any loss of benefits when the subjects withdraw or decide not to participate.

If the researcher learns of new information in regards to this study, and it might change your willingness to stay in this study, the information will be provided to you. You may be asked to sign a new informed consent form if the information is provided to you after you have joined the study.

Questions and Concerns

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Wei Chen at (901) 496-8526 or wchen4@memphis.edu, or her advisor, Dr. Emily A. Thrush at ethrush@memphis.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, please contact the Institutional Review Board staff at The University of Memphis at 901-678-2705. We will give you a signed copy of this consent form to take with you.

As a volunteer participant in this research study, you are expected to understand the following:

- a) You have the right to decide not to participate in this study on any point during any designated research activity or withdraw from the study at any time. Partial refusals to participation in the research activities or complete withdrawal from this study at any point will be treated as a discretion of the participant(s) and will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject or participant is otherwise entitled.
- b) The researcher is bound to adhere to your decision and make sure that your decision will

not lead to any penalty or loss of benefit and confirm that there are no adverse consequences (physical, social, economic, legal or psychological) for a subject's decision to withdraw from the research at any point.

- c) If the researcher wants to publish the findings of his research, she is bound to keep your identity confidential.
- d) Although interviews will take place with pseudonyms chosen either by the participants or assigned by the researcher, the researcher will request participants not to disclose the identity of co-participants.

By signing this form, you acknowledge that you understand the nature of the study, the potential risks to you (if any) as a participant, and the means by which your identity will be kept confidential. Your signature on this form also indicates that you are 18 years old or older, and that you give your permission to voluntarily serve as a participant in the study described and to digitally record your interviews.

Thank you for volunteering and I appreciate your efforts for sparing time for this research study.

Sincerely,

Wei Chen
Ph.D. candidate, Applied Linguistics
The University of Memphis
Memphis, TN USA

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

Date

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

Name of [authorized] person obtaining informed consent

Date

Appendix E: Students' Consent to Participate

Teaching in a Foreign Land: International Teaching Assistants' Expectations towards and Experiences with Students of English Composition Classes and Students' Evaluation of ITAs

Dear Student,

You are being invited to take part in a research study about international teaching assistants. You are being invited to take part in this research study because you are a student of an instructor who is an ITA (International Teaching assistant) at The University of Memphis. If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of over a hundred people to do so. Please read the information provided in this document carefully and take your time in making your decision. If there is any information you do not understand, please ask me.

Participant Requirements

You may volunteer to participate if you are over 18 years of age, you are enrolled in a section of freshman composition class at the University of Memphis, and your instructor is an ITA at the Department of English.

Research Procedure

For each participant of this study, a classroom observation will be arranged. The classroom observation will be audio-recorded using a digital audio recorder and transcribed. In addition to the classroom observation, a survey will be administrated at the end of the semester. The participation in taking the survey is based on your willingness.

Confidentiality

We will make every effort to keep private all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, you will not be personally identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private. We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. You will be given a different name in the study and all data will be kept on a password-protected computer.

Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal

You should only participate in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study, to please the investigator or your instructor. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will not be any penalty or any loss of benefits when the subjects withdraw or decide not to participate.

If the researcher learns of new information in regards to this study, and it might change your willingness to stay in this study, the information will be provided to you. You may be asked to sign a new informed consent form if the information is provided to you after you have joined the study.

Questions and Concerns

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Wei Chen at (901) 496-8526 or wchen4@memphis.edu, or her advisor, Dr. Emily A. Thrush at ethrush@memphis.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, please contact the Institutional Review Board staff at The University of Memphis at 901-678-2705. Upon request, we will give you a signed copy of this consent form to take with you.

By signing this form, you acknowledge that you understand the nature of the study, the potential risks to you (if any) as a participant, and the means by which your identity will be kept confidential. Your signature on this form also indicates that you are 18 years old or older, and that you give your permission to voluntarily serve as a participant in the study described and to digitally record your interviews.

Thank you for volunteering and I appreciate your efforts for sparing time for this research study.

Sincerely,

Wei Chen
Ph.D. candidate, Applied Linguistics
The University of Memphis
Memphis, TN USA

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

Date

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

Name of [authorized] person obtaining informed consent

Date

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