

Overcoming the Anxiety of Teaching in the US Classroom: Positioning, Readjustment and Self-appropriation of ITA

Zhen Zhang, PhD Candidate

University of California, Davis, Department of Comparative Literature, Davis, CA 95616



Introduction

Background:

ITA, short for International Teaching Assistant, is an essential body of graduate students on UCD campus. Within the framework of 2020 initiative, more and more international graduate students are joining our UC Davis community, bringing in their international educational experiences as well as adding many dimensions of student diversity to Davis. At the same time, international teaching assistants are in need of support in many venues:

- 1). English as a second language;
- 2). Cultural unfamiliarity and misunderstanding;
- 3). Anxiety over difficult questions;
- 4). Controversial topics;
- 5). A sense of mutual support among ITAs

In addition to domestic graduate students' potential anxieties and excitement over teaching an undergraduate course for the first time, international graduate students usually experience many more and much intense anxieties when teaching in a less-than-familiar US classroom setting. Just to name a few moments that an international TA might find challenging: a total different dynamics of the US classroom compared to the one of his/her own country, inherent fear of making English grammar mistakes when explicating complex ideas to native English speakers and lack of confidence in dealing with unexpected situations in a classroom. And all these issues would only be infinitely amplified if he/she were not previously informed about them and if he/she could not find anyone to talk to. My project aims to answer the questions that ITAs might have before the actual teaching practice and help them ultimately overcome these anxieties when the challenges do come.

Projects:

- I will organize a seminar on the topic of the ITA's positioning before entering a classroom. Rather than addressing the common issues of being a first-time TA, this seminar puts emphasis on the ITA's identity. For example, whether or not one should disclose one's international identity to the students so that they would "forgive" you more; how to eliminate the anxiety that generates from your English accent; how to bridge the "knowledge gap" between the students and the ITAs because of different systems and expectations of education. The seminar will be conducted in the format of free interactions between the former/experienced international TAs and new ITAs after a short problem-raising speech by each participant.
- I will organize another seminar on how to adjust oneself to fit into the role of being a student and a TA at the same time. The seminar is conducted with no deliberate bifurcations of domestic and international TAs. I will invite some faculty members and postdocs, who had gone through the graduate school successfully, to share their experience with other TAs. In addition, I will put ITAs and domestic TAs to converse with each other so that ITAs become aware that they are not alone in terms of the anxieties.

Objectives:

I intend to achieve the following outcomes by the end of the workshops/discussions:

- 1). Community building: ITAs build connections with colleagues across disciplines boundaries;
- 2). Recourse sharing: ITAs know more about resources available on campus that would facilitate the teaching;
- 3). Pedagogy input: ITAs get useful tips, strategies and experiences from other more experienced TAs.
- 4). English test details: ITAs know more about the English requirement teaching at UC Davis and tips to prepare for it.

Personal touch:

The project that I am proposing for the "professor for the future" program to a large extent reflects my personal concerns working as an international teaching assistant at UC Davis. Being a teaching assistant, a graduate student and an international student, I constantly struggle with balancing these tripartite identities. I always wish to find someone of the similar situation and talk about the strategies to overcome the anxieties of being an ITA.

Post-workshop Resources

CEE (Center for Educational Effectiveness): <http://cee.ucdavis.edu/>

- 1). Make an appointment with TA consultants;
- 2). Video taping one's class performance;
- 3). Mid-term evaluation;

SHCS (Student Health and Counseling Services): <https://shcs.ucdavis.edu/counseling-services>

- 1). Academic problems;
- 2). Personal issues;

IAE (International and Academic English): <http://iae.ucdavis.edu/>

- 1). International Teaching Assistant testing;
- 2). Resources for taking the exams;

Workshop I:

How to Present Myself: Concerns of ITAs (International Teaching Assistant)

Discussants Dan Villareal, Teaching assistant Consultant, PhD Candidate
Watunesa Tan, Teaching assistant Consultant, PhD Candidate
Jae Wook Jung, Teaching assistant Consultant. PhD Candidate

Participants First-year teaching assistants across disciplines

Contents

- 1). Common concerns of being an international teaching assistant (ITA)
- 2). Types of cultural misunderstanding
- 3). Potential solutions from Center for Educational Effectiveness (CEE)

Issues discussed

1. TAs shared their experiences, anxieties or challenges when working as a first-time TA.
2. TA consultants shared the common issues that ITAs encounter in their teaching practices. Some suggestions and tips.
3. The issue of identity. Where should ITAs situate himself/herself, how should an ITA present himself/herself? To what extent should one reveal one's international education background?
4. How do ITAs balance the different values of education coming from different cultural backgrounds? For example, on lecture, notes, memorization versus more critical debates, and interaction with the students.
5. How should ITAs overcome the language barrier? For example, when they do not really catch the questions of the students, should the TA ask the students for clarification at the possible cost of authority as leader in the classroom being tarnished?
6. Sometimes accent can be considered as linguistic inadequacy. How do you avoid such a problem?
7. How to convey the information more efficiently and more accurately in a cross-cultural setting of communication?

Outcomes

In the workshop, the discussion is focused and in-depth. ITAs feel that they are more familiar with the potential problems that may happen in a classroom and have more confidence dealing with these issues. Also, one conclusion coming out of the discussion is that ITAs have advantages in that they do not assume anything and will be more catering to the student diversity.



Workshop II:

Teaching as An International TA at UC Davis: Requirement, Tips and Community

Speakers Dawn Takaoglu, International and Academic English Director
Jordan Carroll, PhD Candidate, Department of English, PFTF Fellow
Adam Liebman, PhD Candidate, Department of Anthropology

Participants

First-year and seasoned teaching assistants across disciplines, including both ITAs and domestic TAs

Contents

- 1). Test of Oral English Proficiency and strategies for preparation
- 2). Challenges of being an international student
- 3). Tips for teaching for the first time
- 4). Potential resources from Center for Educational Effectiveness (CEE)
- 5). Student diversity
- 6). How to deal with controversial issues

Outcomes:

In the workshop, speakers talk about three main issues: 1). English language test for ITAs; 2). How to deal with controversial topics; 3). Tips to answer students' difficult questions. ITAs are more comfortable to handle awkward situations, avoid conflict in class, and to lead a new class. This is a comfortable place where you can learn from experienced TAs and build connections with TAs from other disciplines.



Acknowledgements

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Professors for the Future, 2015-2016



PFTF Fellow: Zhen Zhang
Program: Comparative Literature
Major Professor: Sheldon Lu

Project Title: "Overcoming the Anxiety of Teaching in the US Classroom: Positioning, Readjustment and Self-appropriation of International Teaching Assistants."

Project Summary:

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To address these concerns, I organized two workshops. The first focused on the topic of the ITA's positioning before entering a classroom. Rather than addressing the common issues of being a first-time TA, this seminar placed emphasis on the ITA's identity. For example, whether or not one should disclose one's international identity to the students so that they would "forgive" you more; how to eliminate the anxiety that generates from your English accent; how to bridge the "knowledge gap" between the students and the ITAs because of different systems and expectations of education. The second workshop focused on how to adjust oneself to fit into the role of being a student and a TA at the same time. The seminar was conducted with no deliberate bifurcations of domestic and international TAs. I invited some faculty members and postdocs, who had gone through the graduate school successfully, to share their experience with other TAs. In addition, ITAs and domestic TAs conversed with each other so that ITAs become aware that they are not alone in terms of the anxieties.

My project aimed to answer the questions that ITAs might have before the actual teaching practice and to help them ultimately overcome these anxieties when the challenges do come.

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