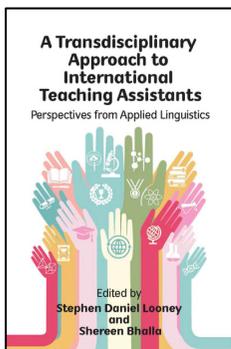


© *Journal of International Students*
Volume 11, Issue 1 (2021), pp. 266-269
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
doi: 10.32674/jis.v11i1.3344
ojed.org/jis

A Transdisciplinary Approach to International Teaching Assistants: Perspectives from Applied Linguistics

Stephen Daniel Looney & Shereen Bhalla (Eds.), *Multilingual Matters*, 2019. 200pp. Paperback. ISBN-13 978-1-788-92553-2

Reviewed by Heidi Fischer, *Old Dominion University, USA*



In the Fall 2018 semester, almost 30% of graduate teaching assistants at U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs) were international students. Moreover, of the HEIs that hired international teaching assistants (ITAs), 41% enrolled 50 or more ITAs and approximately one third enrolled 100 or more ITAs (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). These statistics alone warrant a closer look at the practices, preparation, and evaluation regarding ITAs on college campuses. The editors of *A Transdisciplinary Approach to International Teaching Assistants: Perspectives from Applied Linguistics* also make the case for the intentional intersection of research

and practice on the topic of ITAs so that research can impact ITA practices.

The edited volume situates ITAs as “multilingual, skilled, migrant professionals who participate in and are discursively constructed through various participant frameworks, modalities and activities” (p. 13). Viewed through an applied linguistics lens, the chapter authors highlight their contribution to a transdisciplinary approach to the study of ITAs and review extant literature on the topic, before sharing results of studies with ITA participants. The volume as a whole makes the case for why conducting explicitly transdisciplinary research on the topic is essential to better understanding the complexities of ITA identities.

The editors lament the fact that so much of the discourse surrounding ITAs among undergraduate students, parents, and ITA policy developers has been deficit-oriented: ITAs fail to be understood in the classroom. In fact, much of the

literature on the topic is dated and lacks theoretical support. Furthermore, the editors argue, research regarding ITAs must go beyond pronunciation and grammar to include ITAs' interactional skills and identity development through participation in various communities of practice.

The book contains three sections in addition to an introductory and concluding chapter. The structure of the book matches that of its paradigmatic lens: second language acquisition (SLA). SLA consists of three components: micro, which includes semiotic factors; meso, which refers to sociocultural factors; and macro, which contains ideological factors. Combined, these three components produce SLA viewed through a transdisciplinary lens and shape the identity of ITAs. The three chapters in the micro section of the book explore verbal and nonverbal communication and social interactions among ITAs who were observed in lecture halls, laboratories, and during office hours. The chapters conclude with calls for paradigm shifts of research on ITA communication. First, researchers and practitioners alike should consider ITAs as co-participants in discourse along with their students. Second, there is a need to understand classroom interaction and embodied communication to effectively prepare ITAs for their roles. Finally, ITA studies should be placed in the context of intercultural education, as authority is exercised and understood differently in different cultures.

At the meso level, the book explores ITAs' social identities and social contexts. One chapter in this section advocates for a World Englishes approach to ITA assessment, moving away from testing for "Inner Circle English." The authors also make the case for positive structured interactions between U.S. undergraduates and ITAs who are embedded into courses or existing workshops, such as orientation programming. Enhancing the undergraduate students' interactions with and their affect toward ITAs is a valuable first step for HEI practitioners. This step can be enhanced by a deeper understanding of ITAs' identity creation and navigation of their various communities of practice.

The two chapters that consider the macro level of SLA examine recruitment practices for international students and ITA instructional planning, thus situating ITAs in foreign policy and higher education studies. This section of the book recommends that HEIs explicitly describe in their policies the value that ITAs add to the institution. This value should not only reflect ITAs' contributions at the institutional level, but also at the national level. Examples include the diversity and cultural knowledge ITAs bring to the classrooms of students who may have limited interactions with people outside their home society. Furthermore, the authors make the case for using course logic to evaluate the input factors and outcomes of ITA preparatory courses.

The book concludes with a call for ongoing institutional support structures for ITAs as well as an urging for researchers and practitioners to act as change agents who advocate for ITAs against monolingual ideologies. Practitioners must recognize that ITAs have individualized experiences based on their involvement in communities of practice. The curriculum to support these international students should be shaped as ongoing professional development, moving beyond linguistic remediation to supporting ITAs as the multilingual professionals they are.

Programming to support ITAs must involve undergraduate students and the ITAs themselves where possible. Future research should contribute toward a national standard for ITA preparation, beginning with an updated textbook. Finally, the authors insist that the TOEFL and its monolingual ideology be revisited, and that ITAs be placed on the agenda for advocacy at relevant national organizations.

Throughout the book, the authors frame their conversation about ITAs with a positive regard toward the international students' abilities and expertise. Yet, by referring to ITAs as "immigrants" (p. 23) and "foreign" (p. 76), the authors inadvertently contribute to the dated and value-laden discourse about teaching professionals who are first and foremost international students. Further, although the introductory chapter seems to indicate that the book will take a North American approach to the topic of ITAs, the vast majority, if not all, of the studies included in the volume were conducted at U.S. HEIs.

A second edition of the volume would benefit from an additional chapter on intercultural competencies in the micro section of the book. A transdisciplinary view of SLA must include this essential concept that impacts verbal and nonverbal communication alike. Intercultural competence is defined as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2004, p. 194). ITAs have to navigate an intercultural context on a daily basis, and their ability to effectively communicate with their undergraduate students, colleagues, and supervisors is critical to their success.

Nonetheless, this is an important read during the time of a global pandemic, as ITAs who are already studying abroad make an even more significant contribution to campus internationalization while outbound mobility is curtailed. The book will be a beneficial read for practitioners who work with international students at the graduate level and who want to understand the challenges of working in an ITA capacity. *A Transdisciplinary Approach to International Teaching Assistants* not only adds to the sparse literature on ITAs, but it also provides practical suggestions for HEI administrators who work with ITAs and who seek to implement preparatory programming and evaluation procedures. The editors recommend that ITA practitioners and supervisors engage with ITAs in their institutional communities of practice. This engagement entails faculty and staff who work with ITAs having a comprehensive understanding of ITAs in their classrooms and laboratories, research teams, and departments. ITAs would benefit from the resulting fruitful relationships between ITA administrators and supervisors that might lead to a thoughtfully co-constructed training curriculum. Perhaps a novel recommendation of the book is for these administrators to engage with ITAs through their student organizations. This engagement would support a holistic understanding of international student perspectives, which would ideally lead to a more enriching experience for international students who serve as ITAs.

REFERENCES

- Deardorff, D. K. (2004). *The identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization at institutions of*

higher education in the United States (Order No. 3128751). ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (305165880).

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary System. (2018). *Graduate teaching assistants by race/ethnicity: Fall 2018*. <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>

HEIDI FISCHER is a Ph.D. candidate in the Higher Education program at Old Dominion University (ODU) in Norfolk, Virginia. Originally from Germany, Heidi completed her higher education in the U.S. South. She previously worked in the education abroad field, advising hundreds of students on education abroad opportunities. Throughout her career, Heidi also created and managed dozens of exchange partnerships with universities abroad, and oversaw the annual planning of short-term, faculty-led programs. Currently, she works as a Graduate Research Assistant in the Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership at ODU. Her research interests include critical discourse analysis, narrative inquiry, campus internationalization, education abroad outcomes, and community colleges. Email: hfisc002@odu.edu
