

## **The Experiences of International Teaching Assistants in the U.S. Classroom: A Qualitative Study**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Most research focusing on the challenges that international teaching assistants (ITAs) encounter in U.S. classrooms employs a linguistic perspective. The present study furthers that research by examining other challenges unique to ITAs, through the lens of an intercultural competence framework. Through individual interviews with 15 ITAs, the study highlights the challenges related to competencies in knowledge and skills faced by ITAs in U.S. classrooms. Findings reveal that knowledge about the U.S. education system, expectations of the classroom culture, and assumptions about student–instructor relationships pose the greatest difficulties. Additionally, the ability of an ITA to demonstrate communication skills remains a significant challenge, including the negative perception of speaking with a foreign accent and selecting effective word choices to accurately represent content. The study findings present practical implications for training ITAs for their pedagogical duties at U.S. colleges.

**Keywords:** accent, classroom communication, intercultural competence, international teaching assistants

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The United States continues to experience an increased influx of international students (Institute of International Education, 2019). The U.S. Department of State (n.d.) recognizes an international student as any nonimmigrant from another country who requires a visa to study (elementary through university level) in the United States for a limited amount of time. According to the U.S. Immigration and Customs

Enforcement (2016), the number of international students enrolled in U.S. colleges has increased by 14.18% since 2014. As of November 2016, over 1 million international students were enrolled in U.S. colleges, with over 40% enrolled in graduate programs. Many universities that enroll international graduate students also employ them as teaching assistants, research assistants, project assistants, and part-time tutors (Gorsuch, 2003). In one form or another, international graduate students holding assistantship positions usually have pedagogical duties to teach undergraduate students in either classrooms or laboratories.

Many international teaching assistants (ITAs) experience mixed levels of satisfaction as classroom instructors because they are confronted with cultural issues that mitigate their effectiveness in the classroom. To be clear, some of the challenges that ITAs encounter in the classroom are also experienced by other domestic (U.S.-born and raised) instructors. However, ITAs also face additional challenges stemming (primarily) from their “foreignness” and a lack of sociocultural competence. ITAs may be exceptionally brilliant students in their fields of study, but the lack of competence in U.S. classroom culture creates an additional layer of challenges compared to the experiences of domestic teaching assistants (Williams & Case, 2015).

The present study unveils the challenges of ITAs from a cultural perspective using the theoretical framework of intercultural competence (Byram & Nichols, 2001). Specifically, queries are made to see how understanding (or lack thereof) the host culture (language, religion, social norms, classroom culture, gender roles, etc.) impacts the quality of ITA experiences in the U.S. classroom.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

When reporting the challenges faced by ITAs (and other international students) in the U.S. classroom, communication—particularly linguistic differences—dominates the literature (Adebayo, 2019; Ammigan & Laws, 2018). In one study, Manohar and Appiah (2016) reported that linguistic differences constitute a major barrier that ITAs encounter when communicating with American undergraduate students. To be clear, not every ITA is confronted with this challenge, as international students from English-speaking countries or those whose native language is English may not experience this type of challenge or stereotype. An ITA whose undergraduate education was at a university in the United States may face less of a challenge than an ITA whose graduate education constitutes their first academic experience in the country. A linguistic difference, often referred to as an accent, marks how nonnative speakers of English language pronounce words differently from the conventional expectations of native speakers (Lippi-Green, 1994). An accent may not indicate any difficulty with the semantics or grammar in communicating in English. The fact that many ITAs learned English as a secondary language accounts for the infiltration of the phonetic sounds from a native language (Jin & Liu, 2013).

The presence of a different accent is not, in fact, the only communication challenge that confronts ITAs in the United States. Because ITAs come from different cultures with distinct cultural practices, their classroom experiences may unsurprisingly be discordant from what is typical in their home cultures. Moreover,

ITAs also may experience negative stereotypes based not only on their accent but also on their “foreignness” or national identities (Manohar & Appiah, 2016). These experiences are multidimensional and extend far beyond linguistic differences. They are rooted in a lack of cultural competence in their “new” culture.

Previous research has reported lack of knowledge about the host culture as a major challenge for many ITAs. These studies found that many ITAs begin teaching with minimal knowledge about social systems and functions in the United States (Williams & Case, 2015; Zhang, 2015). However, limited attention is given to this challenge during ITA training. Often, ITAs’ training is focused on developing English language skills (Gorsuch, 2012) and sometimes teaching skills. However, recent studies have shown that the challenges that confront ITAs transcend merely being able to learn how to speak English or teach; challenges manifest primarily through a lack of cultural competence about the workings of the U.S. education and social system (Williams & Case, 2015). Arguably, an ITA who has little or no knowledge about classroom practices in U.S. culture is likely to experience discrepancies and challenges that limit teaching effectiveness. As such, this study’s examination of the challenges ITAs face from a cultural competence lens is significant. This framework not only focuses on the communication experiences of immigrants (in this case, ITAs) but also underscores different forms of cultural competencies that are needed to function in a “new culture.”

### **Intercultural Competence**

Deardorff (2006) described intercultural competence as the ability to appropriately and effectively communicate and behave in different intercultural contexts. Intercultural competence is not limited to communication competence alone. Competence includes a holistic (linguistic, sociocultural, attitudinal, and behavioral competence) assessment reflecting the ability to properly function in different cultural contexts (Byram & Nichols, 2001; Chen, 1990). Specifically, an intercultural context involves “a symbolic representation of an instance when communication between individuals is affected by cultural differences in the way that would not have been noteworthy in the absence of those differences” (Arasaratnam, 2011, p. vii). In this study, cultural location utilizes a conceptualization involving an individual’s country of origin/upbringing (Alexander et al., 2014). The ability to effectively communicate and behave in a way consistent with the norms and values of one’s present environment identifies the person as culturally competent (Deardorff, 2006; Wiseman, 2002).

An intercultural competence framework provides a theoretical lens to identify and characterize different required skills when relating to or functioning in a different culture. Although extant research on intercultural competence represents a diverse set of issues, the core arguments of the framework remain fairly consistent across the domain. The expectation of competence involves the following: (a) adequate cultural knowledge, (b) competence in grammar/semantics, and (c) competence in understanding the attitudes, beliefs, and values of the culture (Byram & Nichols, 2001; Wiseman, 2002). Regardless of the approach, communication operates as an inherent component of the intercultural competence framework (see intercultural

communication competence theory as discussed by Alptekin, 2002; Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Wiseman, 2002), but is not the only component. As such, communicative competence functions as a necessary but not sufficient condition for effective intercultural competence.

The foundation and application of intercultural competence framework research primarily considers investigations related to immigrants, study abroad students, and international students (Redmond & Bunyi, 1993; Zimmermann, 1995). The tenets of the theory center on the adaptation process of immigrants or foreigners in a new culture to improve competence (Zimmermann, 1995). Competence does not attempt to describe perfect or optimal behavior, rather, competence involves achieving effective and capable action and communication (Alexander et al., 2014).

As earlier mentioned, in conceptualizing intercultural competence, Wiseman (2002) argued that knowledge, motivation, and skills are congruent parts of the framework: “If an interactant is lacking in one of these conditions, the likelihood of competent intercultural communication is significantly diminished” (p. 211). Similarly, Byram and Nichols (2001) asserted that knowledge, motivation/attitude, and skills are congruent components of intercultural competence requiring more than the study of interactant linguistic competence but instead, mandate a view of the overall competence across different intercultural contexts. In other words, the experiences of ITAs in the United States are informed by a level of competence that requires consideration of more elements than the spoken words. In this study, we focused on two types of competencies—knowledge and skills—as these are the most reported challenges in previous studies on ITAs. In the following section, we review previous literature on ITAs’ knowledge and skills competence in the US classroom.

### **ITAs’ Knowledge Competency**

The component of knowledge (also known as awareness or cognitive competence) involves understanding how social groups and norms function in a particular culture (Byram & Nichols, 2001; Zhang, 2015). In the case of ITAs, the need for knowledge bifurcates into (a) the cultural and social norms of U.S. society, and specifically (b) the cultural and social norms of the U.S. classroom. Appropriate knowledge of U.S. culture may serve as a worthy precedent for understanding U.S. classroom cultural norms. Previous studies found that very few ITAs display competence in their knowledge of U.S. culture or U.S. classroom culture (Arshavskaya, 2015). This competence of knowledge is not about how much of the course content they know, but rather about their understanding of the cultural space (U.S. classroom) in which they function (Zhang, 2015). The dimensions of this knowledge for ITAs include knowledge about classroom communication, classroom management, classroom behaviors, and classroom expectations, among others (Arshavskaya, 2015; Yan & Pei, 2018).

A lack of understanding about how social groups function can lead to a violation of expectations for undergraduate students, which may impact learning outcomes. For instance, Arshavskaya (2015) found that knowledge about the instructor–student relationship and communication is a recurring challenge that ITAs face. A number of ITAs come from countries and cultures where the instructor–student relationship is

power-driven, in the sense that instructors represent authorities whose knowledge or expertise should not be challenged at any time by the students. Modeling that kind of relationship to U.S. undergraduate students proves particularly frustrating both for the ITAs and the students, as this is not a cultural practice in the U.S. classroom. Navigating instructor–student interactions could be a struggle for ITAs from power- and status-conscious societies. Adequate knowledge about expectations and understanding of U.S. cultural dynamics thus becomes an essential competence for ITAs to develop.

### **ITAs' Skill Competency**

The skills component to the study of intercultural competence focuses on an individual's ability to use knowledge of a culture to communicate effectively (skillfully) in an intercultural space, thereby fostering interpersonal relationships and interactions between the interlocutors (Spitzberg, 2000). Effective communication constitutes the central focus of the skills competence in intercultural contexts. Knowing what to say and how to say it are different tasks. Reasoning from the communication competence literature, Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) argued that intercultural competence in skills resides majorly in the communicative behaviors that an individual engages in when in an intercultural space. For instance, *how* does one demonstrate empathy to someone from another culture? Knowing that a pat on the back, a hug, or even a smile may communicate empathy is not the same thing as effectively verbally communicating empathy in that context. In other words, correctly applying one's knowledge about a culture constitutes the key factor in skills competence. In ITA research, the study of skills competence stems from the standpoint of *how* an ITA effectively communicates (both verbally and nonverbally) in the classroom (Li et al., 2011). This includes how one engages in interactions, nonverbal communication, and rapport building (Gorsuch, 2012; Williams & Case, 2015). To examine the foregoing dimensions of intercultural competence with ITAs, the present study seeks to understand the following question:

RQ: Using the lens of intercultural competence, what are the challenges ITAs encounter in the U.S. classroom?

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

Upon the approval of the institutional review board of my large Midwestern university, we recruited 15 participants through purposive sampling for a 1-hr interview. Recruitment emails were sent through the international students' office of the university specifically requesting ITAs. To qualify for the study, participants must be current or previous ITAs and nonnative speakers of English language. The sample consisted of two males and 13 females. Regarding the participants' nationalities, three were from African countries, three were from the Middle East, and the remaining nine participants were from Asian countries. The participants' ages ranged from 24 to 45 years and the length of stay in the United States ranged from 1 to 9 years. Four of the

participants studied and taught in STEM fields, whereas nine were in the humanities or social sciences, and the remaining two were in the public health field.

## **Procedure**

A one-time, in-depth, semistructured, and open-ended interview was conducted with each participant. Most interviews were conducted face to face, except for one conducted over Skype (because the participant could not make a face-to-face interview). Each of the interviews took between 25–60 min. The interviews were conducted by the first author and audio-recorded for data transcription and analysis. We generated the interview questions from a review of the previous literature on ITAs and the intercultural competence framework (e.g., what are some of the challenges you experience while teaching in the U.S. classroom, how are these challenges different from what you have experienced or might experience in your home country, and how do these challenges impact your relationship with your students). ITAs were specifically asked to discuss some of the challenges they encounter in the classroom and how their knowledge about the host culture plays a role.

## **Data Analysis**

The first stage of analysis included writing field notes after completing interviews with the participants. The field notes provided moments of reflection not only on the participants' spoken words but also the nonverbal and emotional elements of the interview. The additional information provided some deep reflection and interpretation of the information the participants provided (Schwandt, 2015). The audio interviews were transcribed, and we de-identified participants in the transcript. We read the transcribed texts to generate appropriate codes, primarily using descriptive coding (Miles et al., 2013).

In the first cycle of coding, we used a descriptive coding method. We identified elements of similarity throughout the data and grouped them into categories. Going through each of the participants' responses, we identified common themes and codes across the data. Using a thematic analysis method, themes were generated based on the pattern of codes recurring in the data.

In the second stage of coding, the themes were categorized into the two components of intercultural competence framework discussed in the literature review. Additionally, other themes that did not fit perfectly into these components (knowledge and skills competencies) were analyzed independently (Boyatzis, 1998).

## **RESULTS**

### **Knowledge Competence**

As discussed earlier, knowledge about the host culture impacts a foreigner's behaviors and experiences. For ITAs, knowledge about the U.S. culture and U.S. classroom culture becomes an important step in becoming effective in the classroom. In this study, ITAs reported a discrepancy between what they knew versus what they were expected to know.

Participants constantly reiterated that they felt ignorant and had limited knowledge of the U.S. higher education system, especially in their fields of study. In addition, ITAs reported experiencing ignorance about some U.S. classroom practices while teaching. Tabitha, an Indian recently graduated from an education program, stated that "...my experience was so very different that others did not understand... I was in an education program and they were talking about local education policies, and I didn't understand ... I don't understand the local education or the politics here." The lack of competence about U.S. classroom culture also manifested in the student–instructor relationship. Tituh, a Saudi doctoral student in the nursing program recalled that:

A student emailed me asking me to tutor her one-on-one. I didn't know if that was right? Am I allowed to do that? Another student sent me an email "could you review my paper," knowing that I will be the one to grade it, I don't have anything [manual] to tell me about that...

Tituh's statement revealed that she is challenged with knowing the boundaries of her relationship with her students; she lacked a resource to educate or guide her about the expected parameters of the relationship. ITAs observe a significant difference in this type of relationship compared with their home countries.

Additionally, ITAs reported being challenged with not knowing when to report incidents of inappropriate behavior. These behaviors varied and included examination malpractice and mental health issues, among others. In her words, Sammy, an Iranian in an engineering doctoral program, reported that "we need to know what things the ITAs should report, like cheating stuffs, [inconsistencies] findings that are not regular in their home works or their behaviors...." Similarly, Tituh specifically mentioned not being aware of her responsibilities for students especially when they have social problems: "I don't have anything to tell me about that [the available resources] ... if a student has a social problem what am I gonna do?" The excerpts reveal that the issues confronting ITAs in the classroom extend into how much they know about the cultural practices in the U.S. higher education system.

## **Skills Competence**

Two subthemes were generated for this category. This includes communication skills and technology skills.

### ***Communication Skills***

As discussed earlier in the study, one of the challenges ITAs regularly encounter in the classroom is the difficulty communicating effectively because of expectations for a native accent. Extant research has noted that nonnative English-speaking international students face the task of clearly communicating (Yook & Albert, 1999). In this study, possession of a foreign accent and communication fluency constitute a challenge for ITAs (Adebayo 2019).

*Accent.* Sensitivity to an accent focuses on the differences in phonetic sounds between a native speaker and a nonnative speaker (Subtirelu, 2015, 2017). Most of

the undergraduate students in U.S. colleges are U.S. born and native speakers of English. As such, they have limited exposure to “foreign accents.” However, a large number of ITAs are nonnative speakers of English. Due to this linguistic difference experienced by both parties, ITAs experience difficulty in being understood or even understanding their students’ linguistic variance. One of the participants in our study, Sammy, recalled that having an accent was a major struggle for her, especially at the beginning of her ITA experience. She stated that “when I came here, I had to face that big problem [of accent] for my ‘TA-ing’.” Nevertheless, she also noted that the longer she stayed in the United States while performing her ITA duties, the more she adapted. Additionally, Yatu recalled that even though she tries not focus on the challenge, accent is a major challenge for ITAs. She said,

If you are just a student it’s okay if your English is not perfect, until you become an ITA...for me, I teach in the English department; and teaching American Student about their language is very frustrating...it takes a lot, like you know, mental thinking and mental effort... it’s challenging.

Another participant also related her experience with having a foreign accent:

I remember in class...I was telling each group, a type of hospital to write about and discuss about. So, I said “you are assigned rural hospital”. One of the students looked at me and said “what”? I said “rural” [the student responded] “Oh you mean rural” (pronouncing it with an American accent) I was like “oh yeah that’s what I meant,” so that shook my confidence a little bit... [because the student couldn’t understand my accent and called me out on it]. - Tituh

Tabitha, an Indian ITA, reported that “in my teaching experience even though I taught online, my fears would have been the same...worried about my acceptance...my accent.” Tabitha reported no actual experience or example where she reported a negative evaluation because of her accent, but rather she reported the fear of this evaluation. Briuhe, a fifth-year Chinese doctoral student in the Public Health program, also reported that:

I fear the people will see me less professional because of my accent... [In] the class I used to TA... I think I’m probably the only nonnative speaker, and sometimes,...[that] may provide different message to the students such that they don’t take me seriously [do not perceive me as competent] as a TA.

Other participants reported that the awareness of speaking with an accent creates worry and significantly raises anxiety about the students’ perceptions.

**Fluency.** ITAs not only noted the challenge that comes with a nonnative accent but also noted the task of organizing thoughts and words in the English language. We labeled this challenge as “fluency” because the concept includes the effective and creative use of words (in the English language). Many of the ITAs reported having a strong background, in terms of grammar, in the English language. However, the issue of fluency resides in the choices of words used when communicating with the students



in semiformal and informal situations. In addition, many participants reported that they were trained in British English, which comes with some discrepancies (in word usage) compared with American English. This, in turn, poses the challenge of using words that may be more appropriate in British culture than in U.S. culture (e.g., lorry instead of truck, chips instead of French fries). For example, Tabitha noted that “the challenge is not actually speaking English rather, using ‘their words’...the way they will say it...the phrases they will use...” Another participant noted that “...because it is not my mother language...when we communicate in English I have to translate back to my native language... and convert back when I want to express my meaning...” In Hawa’s case, she also expressly noted that:

Not so much of my accent but how fast and how articulated, and how well articulated the sentence I am trying to say sounds...sentence structure...because in writing I can think about it and correct it. I can think of all the word the structure, the grammar... however, when I’m talking I have a lot of ideas in my head from trying to organize them and sometimes it doesn't come out as...I want it.

The experiences of these ITAs reveal that beyond the challenges of having a foreign accent, being able to fluently and effectively use words in a way that conveys meaning, is an additional hurdle faced by ITAs in U.S. classrooms.

### ***Technology***

Participants reported the use of technology as one of the major skill deficits marking an ITA in the United States. The limitation includes the technology skills needed to communicate and aid communication among students. One of the participants noted that using technology in her classes posed a major challenge. She did not (as an instructor) use classroom technology in her home country;

I did not know how to use the ...D2L [a learning management system]...like today my professor... this is my second semester she asked, “Do you know how to do this [referring to an online grading system for students]...do you know how to create discussion on D2L” [I replied] “Sorry I don’t” [It’s embarrassing] ...I think the highest challenge for us as ITAs is the online forum. Honestly, I didn’t know to do anything if not for my first-semester Professor who guided me through everything [on the job].- Tituh

### ***Other Findings***

#### ***Respect Versus Rudeness***

Many participants reported that they constantly experienced some form of disrespect from students. The participants discussed the cultural perceptions from the point of view of the home culture assumptions about how a student should relate to

an instructor. The instructor, as they noted, is the student's superior and that should guide the way the student relates to the instructor. Here are some examples:

I come from a culture where elderly (anyone older than you) people and teachers are respected... some people call me by my first name not that I don't like it but you know I just want people to call me Miss... a sense of respect is always nice... generally speaking in Western countries the way students do things, the way they respond tells you something like what you're saying is ridiculous ...if you do that back home in my country, you get kicked out of the classroom...—Tituh

Another participant noted that:

...the idea of hierarchy in Korea is very important... you would only address your professor as a professor you don't get super friendly with them... and I think I have a little bit of that in me because I grew up in a Korean family... there is such a high sense of respect for elders someone older than you or even someone with more experience than you...I slightly expect that kind of respect...I also expect them to respect me as someone who came here to help them... —Hawa

A participant from China recalled experiencing some form of rudeness or disrespect from her students:

Some students might not show respect to me while some have concern about being an Asian and being a nonnative speaker... I was sitting in a class one day and the student who was sitting next to me was not paying attention in the class, the person had earphones on and I was sitting next to him, which drives me crazy because everybody knows I am TA-ing the class and I am sitting next to you... "how could you do that to me." You need to show respect to the instructor who is presenting and [to] me a TA who is sitting next by you...—Briuhe

These examples highlight what ITAs perceive as necessary conduct for respect and how their expectations were violated in the U.S. classroom.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This study identified two broad areas of intercultural competence—knowledge and skills competence. Knowledge competence was identified as the most recurring challenge confronting ITAs. From this study's findings, we discovered that if ITAs lack ample knowledge about the classroom culture, regardless of whatever training they receive during their initiation into the system, they may still experience significant challenges. Thus, ITA training should not solely focus on administrative issues (e.g., how to grade, reporting plagiarism, writing a syllabus, etc.), but should also thoroughly focus on the unique operations of the classroom culture in U.S. colleges. In fact, this reiterates the need for university administrators to provide specialized cultural training for ITAs at the inception of their study (Urban & Palmer, 2016). ITAs should not be lumped together with other domestic TAs whose

experiences differ from that of ITAs. While we agree that orientation programs cannot holistically provide ITAs with knowledge of the U.S. education system, such programs can serve as a launchpad that ITAs can build on subsequently during their program and duties. Knowledge issues such as the U.S. education system's classroom culture, student-instructor relationships, and classroom management are important for effective pedagogical delivery (Zhang, 2015).

In addition, in this study, ITAs who have lived in the U.S. for 3 or more years reported an increase in the level of their knowledge competence about the U.S. classroom culture; thus, they experienced fewer challenges compared with participants in their first 3 years in the United States. To be clear, it is not just the length of stay that contributes to more knowledge competence about the U.S. education system; rather it is an increased exposure to the culture. In other words, the more one interacts with members of the host culture, the more culturally competent one becomes. This argument is consistent with the contact hypothesis, which posits that the more people of different cultural backgrounds are in contact with one another and relate, the better their intercultural experience (Martin & Nakayama, 2017). Similarly, the more ITAs are provided with the opportunity to voluntarily "engage" with U.S. culture (through interpersonal encounters), the more culturally competent they will become.

Regarding skills, findings from this study reveal that limiting the challenges that ITAs encounter in the classroom to issues of accent obscures other significant communication experiences for ITAs in the classroom. In our data, we found that the ability to make effective statements with appropriate word choices constitutes a more significant communication challenge for ITAs. While not disputing the findings of previous research about the challenge of accent by ITAs (Subtirelu, 2015, 2017), our study found that being able to accurately use words in the right context is more challenging for ITAs. This is a sociolinguistic challenge and not necessarily a grammatical difficulty (Williams & Case, 2015). The tests of English prescribed for international students before admission into U.S. colleges at their best are only helpful in securing an ITA position, not necessarily an indicator of a "good" or a "bad" ITA.

Furthermore, in regard to the stereotype of possessing a foreign accent, our findings reveal that ITAs have mostly worried that students were challenging them based on the accent, but not many experienced actual situations where the ITAs felt students "judged" them for not having a native accent. This raises the question of actual versus perceived experiences of judgment because of a foreign accent.

Lastly, as seen in the interview excerpts, ITAs in our study overtly state that they experienced disrespect from students. However, an interesting argument in this discourse is understanding the motivation for that perception. What is the motivation for the ITAs' feelings of disrespect? In the data, this motivation seems to originate in the ITAs' different cultural backgrounds. Many ITAs in our study reported experiencing some behaviors not acceptable in their home country. Again, this perception reflects a standard of evaluation not necessarily reflective of how respect works in the U.S. culture. ITAs possess some cultural perceptions about how students should relate to instructors stemming from their experiences with home cultural values and beliefs, and they try to navigate the U.S. classroom based on their cultural realities (Williams & Case, 2015). However, a discrepancy exists between what is

defined as “respect” in the home culture versus what becomes required for “respect” in the United States. Because U.S. culture cannot be isolated from classroom culture, this becomes a source of conflict between the ITAs and undergraduate students. This again is an issue of limited cultural knowledge.

As evident in previous studies (Gorsuch, 2012; Manohar & Appiah, 2016; Subtirelu, 2015, 2017), the goal was not only to highlight the challenges that ITAs encounter but also to uncover ways in which ITAs can develop intercultural competence amid the challenges they face in the classroom. How do ITAs develop coping or adaptive mechanisms to compensate for limited knowledge about the U.S. classroom culture? One tactic includes asking questions about unfamiliar cultural references: “Learning these cultural norms of teaching will help the ITA to offer culturally appropriate instruction for their students” (Williams & Case, 2015, p. 435). Regardless of the number of teaching orientations targeted toward TAs in general, ITAs inevitably experience some form of “shock” as they encounter the culture. Asking questions and creating a learning atmosphere for both the ITAs and their students becomes a productive step.

### **Limitations and Implications**

One of this study’s limitations is the homogeneity of the sample. Participants in this study mostly come from the same institution. The setting might account for similar challenges that may be specific to the university and not applicable to ITAs across the United States. Additionally, the sample consisted mostly of females. With the growing number of ITAs in the United States, a larger and more diverse sample size may provide more detailed, diverse, and comprehensive information about ITAs’ experiences in U.S. classrooms. Future research should expand the number of participants by increasing gender diversity (See Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In addition, future studies should shift from identifying problems to suggesting solutions to manage the situation. For example, what alternatives or cultural knowledge should an ITA possess about U.S. culture? What can educators and TA coordinators provide in the way of training for ITAs to improve teaching? Generating and testing answers to these questions provides practical assistance in helping ITAs function effectively in the classroom.

More importantly, a deliberate focus on training ITAs about the process and culture of U.S. higher education is required. A training handbook could focus on salient issues supplemented with an appropriate training program for implementation by U.S. colleges. Future research should also address the challenges undergraduate students experience with ITAs, and ways in which undergraduate students see value in the presence of ITAs in U.S. universities, thereby harnessing the benefits of diversity.

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