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Managing Anxiety:
A Case Study of an International Teaching Assistant's Interaction with American Students

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Abstract

This case study utilizes structuration theory to explore the complexities in the academic interaction between a Chinese international teaching assistant (ITA) and her American students. Through four semi-structured participant interviews, eight classroom observations, and student feedback, major themes and variations were identified regarding the feelings, concerns, and strategies of the ITA's interaction with American students from the ITA perspective. The assumption is that despite the possible obstacles in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural academic interaction, ITAs have the drive and potential to successfully navigate through the challenging process. Implications for improving ITA training and practices are discussed.

Keywords: international teaching assistant, academic interaction, case study, structuration theory

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In 2010, 723,277 international students were enrolled in American graduate schools (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010; Institute of International Education [IIE], 2011). This comprises about 15.5% of all graduate students in the U.S. Due to various financial constraints, colleges and universities employ graduate students—including international students—to teach American undergraduate courses. During the past three decades, the persistent presence of the international teaching assistant (ITA) has brought linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural challenges that have led to the development of research related to ITAs (Bailey, 1983; Fitch & Morgan, 2003; Gorsuch, 2003; Kaufman & Brownworth, 2006; Kim, 2009; Li, Mazer, & Ju, 2011; Smith & Simpson, 1993). Over the years, the scope of research has expanded from exclusively focusing on basic linguistic issues, such as pronunciation and intonation, to a more comprehensive set of concerns such as pedagogical, psychological, emotional, communicative, and cultural competence (Zhou, 2009).

Despite some advances, the existing research has two shortcomings. First, the bulk of the research to date relies on quantitative methods to examine the issues and challenges related to ITAs. Common data sources include surveys, questionnaires, and mid- or end-of-semester evaluations collected from American undergraduate students. There has not been adequate research attention given to the complexities in ITA teaching practices from the perspectives of ITAs themselves (Kim, 2009; Zhou, 2009). It is assumed that the problems can be solved through Americanizing ITAs based on the American linguistic and pedagogical model as well as the needs and expectations of American students. Second, the majority of the research has been conducted in the field of second-language acquisition, with the assumption that issues and challenges related to ITAs stem from their

inadequate linguistic competence. When factors beyond language barriers are examined such as pedagogy, motivation, and prejudice, they are usually treated as confounding or secondary issues (Zhou, 2009). However, teaching and learning are conditioned by complex social and cultural realities that involve more than linguistic communication (Steffe & Gale, 1995).

A particular need for more qualitative research on contemporary ITA issues and challenges exists due to at least two important trends. First, research attention to ITAs has decreased in recent years (Zhou, 2009). However, research and reports continue to highlight the need to improve ITA practices. For example, in a 2005 New York Times article (Finder, 2005), interviews with undergraduates at six American universities revealed that the number of ITAs in a department strongly influences the major that an American undergraduate decides to pursue. Secondly, as English becomes more widely learned at a much younger age in non-English speaking countries, current English oral proficiency within ITAs is likely much higher than it was ten or twenty years ago. The increasing information exchange is also likely to equip ITAs with some knowledge of American classroom culture prior to their arrival. New themes may have emerged requiring research attention into the issues and challenges faced by the ITA.

Given these limitations and contemporary trends, I conducted this case study to explore the complexities in the academic interaction between Lulu (a pseudonym), a Chinese ITA from the anthropology department, and her American students. Using structuration theory (Giddens, 1979, 1981, 1984), I attempted to understand the academic interaction from Lulu's perspective. My assumption was that despite the possible obstacles in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural academic interaction, ITAs have the drive and potential to successfully navigate through the challenging process. Furthermore, I also held that ITA practice would be improved if researchers could focus more on understanding rather than evaluation which pinpoint ITAs' problems and weaknesses.

Literature Review

The majority of the research on ITA issues and challenges were conducted in the 1980s and 1990s in response to the first large increase of ITAs in the late 1970s and the steady growth in subsequent years. These studies reached a general conclusion that ITAs usually have a solid understanding of the subject matter in their discipline, but lack the knowledge and skills in terms of language and culture of instruction (Kaufman & Brownworth, 2006; Tang & Sandell, 2000). Common data sources included student evaluations, questionnaires, and surveys that focused primarily on linguistic and communication issues, such as pronunciation and intonation, grammar, flow of speech, and vocabulary. A lack of English proficiency was identified as the most prevalent impediment for successful ITA practice (Gallego, 1990). Research also attempted to predict ITA success through standardized test scores, such as GRE and TOEFL (Dunn & Constantinides, 1991; Yule & Hoffman, 1990). The single most apparent weakness of these studies was that the complexities in the ITA practices could not be discerned from a single questionnaire or survey. The socially and culturally constructed interaction between ITAs and American students could not be reduced to variations in English test scores.

Two less dominant lines of research have emerged since the 1990s. One group of studies critiqued the overemphasis on English proficiency as both the cause of and solution to ITAs' issues and challenges, and indicated the need to explore sociocultural factors. For example, Williams (1994) made a convincing case for the need to look beyond grammar and pronunciation in explaining communication difficulties between ITAs and their students. She examined both linguistic patterns and sociocultural dynamics of the interactions, such as speaker intentions, loss of

face, and maintaining authority. She concluded that these sociocultural factors would shape attitudes and stereotypes for both ITAs and American undergraduate students. Smith (1993) used a longitudinal case study to examine the successful development of a Chinese ITA who taught in a science laboratory. She found that success depended largely upon the ITA's motivations, attitudes, and the belief that the teaching assistantship was an opportunity to achieve personal and professional goals. Rubin (1992) examined the effects of non-linguistic factors, including ethnicity and lecture topic, on undergraduates' reactions to ITAs. He concluded that even vigorous pronunciation training mattered little, because ethnic stereotype and prejudice were influential on American students' perceptions of ITA speech. Secondly, rather than Americanizing ITAs' English language use, some studies pointed out that miscommunication between ITAs and American students was the result of perceptions and behaviors of both parties, and that improving classroom interaction should be a shared responsibility (Tyler, 1995; vom Saal, 1987). Undergraduates were encouraged to adjust to ITAs' teaching practices and actively discuss and solve problems with their ITAs.

To sum up, while previous research examined ITA issues and challenges mostly in terms of ITAs' linguistic inadequacy from the perspective of American students, little research has been conducted on the complexities of the actual ITAs' teaching practices. In this case study, I focused on the academic interaction between an ITA in an anthropology class and her American students, and attempted to deconstruct academic interaction from the ITA's perspective. I formulated three research questions to guide this study: What characterizes the ITA's feelings toward interacting with students? What structural and individual factors enhance and/or hinder academic interactions? And what strategies does the ITA employ?

Theoretical Framework

I utilized Gidden's (1979, 1981, 1984) theory of structuration as the conceptual and analytical framework for this study. Giddens (1984) suggests that social life is an ongoing structuration of interplay between social structures and human agency embedded in the systems. Structures are rules, routines, norms, and resources. Systems refer to the reproduced structural and organized relations between individuals as well as those between individuals and structures. Human agency means the capability to exercise a certain degree of power and control over one's role and action.

In the case of ITAs, structures consist of rules and norms, such as the number of hours expected to spend on teaching, the expected teaching behaviors, and ethical conduct. Structures include resources such as institutions' teaching centers, international student centers, faculty mentors, and peer support groups. Further, these rules and resources over which ITAs have certain extents of control can both constrain and enable ITAs' practices. For example, not all professors clearly explain what they expect of their TAs or ITAs. Some professors give a great amount of direction and assistance, while others leave the decision-making to TAs or ITAs. ITAs can choose to deal with questions as they arise, communicate beforehand with professors for clarifications and their expectations, or seek out additional help from ITA peers or related personnel.

Giddens (1979) argues that social systems possess structural properties but are not structures in their own right. In other words, social systems are not disembodied and static entities over which individuals have no control. Instead, social systems consist of "reproduced relationships between individuals and/or collectivities across space and through time" (Giddens, 1981, p. 169). A key component is the double hermeneutic process—upon reflecting on their existing worldview and their new understanding, individuals are able to bring about changes to actions and structures by either reproducing or changing existing practices. The recognition that within certain constraints an individual's human agency is able to construct social practices supports the assumption that

motivated and willing ITAs can navigate the challenging process of teaching American students. The importance of human agency and the double hermeneutic process was reflected in the design of the study in the format of a series of semi-structured and self-reflective interviews as well as classroom observations.

Research Method

I used an interpretive case study approach for its advantage of empirically studying a single phenomenon in depth (Stake, 1995; Thomas, 2011). Following the interpretive paradigm (Willis, 2007), I viewed that individual ITAs socially and subjectively constructed their own realities of interacting with American students. For example, a college or university might have rules and regulations for ITAs; an instructor might also set expectations for his or her ITAs. However, ITAs acted not according to what they were supposed to do, but according to how they interpreted their ITA experiences. For some, being an ITA might provide an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the subject being taught; for some, being an ITA might help them improve their English communication skills; for some, being an ITA might be a means to alleviate their financial burden. These interpretations, moreover, might change as they were constructed by the ongoing interplay between ITAs and their teaching practices. In sum, the way ITAs interpreted their teaching experiences determined their actions, although the formal rules and expectations might set certain limits on their actions. This interpretive view was in line with the double hermeneutic process assumed by structuration theory, as discussed previously.

In this study, the case was an ITA's academic interaction with American students "bounded" in a class that the ITA was teaching. The case was understood from the ITA's perspective based on multiple sources of information. Further, this study was both an intrinsic and instrumental case study (Stake, 1995). This study grew out of my identity as an international doctoral student in education and my intrinsic desire to improve ITAs' experiences. More importantly, this study was instrumental in that the findings would not only shed light on ITAs' training and practices but also instigate research attention into ITAs. Similar to other case studies, this study tried not to generalize. My hope is that through rich descriptions about the study process and the case findings provided herein, readers will reflect on these details and decide whether their situations are similar enough to warrant "naturalistic generalizations" (Stake, 1995). In addition, I provide rich descriptions in the hope that readers can determine the trustworthiness of this study, i.e., whether the findings accurately capture what actually occurred in the setting and whether the findings are worthy of attention (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participant and Setting

This study was conducted at American Northeast University (ANU, a pseudonym). ANU is a mid-size, public research university with a high academic reputation. During the time of this study, ANU enrolled more than 10,000 undergraduate students and almost 3,000 graduate students. Students of color constituted approximately one third of the student population, and international students accounted for ten percent.

After gaining approval from ANU's Institutional Review Board, the office of international students emailed, on my behalf, an invitation to participate in this study to all ITAs. Four ITAs replied and were willing to participate. I used purposeful sampling to select the participant. Purposeful sampling assumes that "the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). I used four criteria to select a unique, information-rich case. First, I sought an ITA with good

command of oral English and an adequate understanding of American culture. My intention was to look beyond basic linguistic issues common in prior research. Secondly, since my focus was on the academic interaction, I looked for an ITA who was teaching an undergraduate class, rather than just grading papers or answering questions during office hours. Thirdly, I sought an ITA who seemed articulate, reflective, and willing to share feelings and experiences with me. Lastly, I sought an ITA from China, India, or South Korea, as they are the three countries where most international graduate students originate (IIE, 2011).

Lulu, a Chinese ITA from the anthropology department, was selected. Though she had a Chinese accent, she spoke clear and fluent English, and scored 110 out of 120 in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). She obtained her master's degree in English and Literature in 2009 from a prestigious Chinese university. She was admitted into the Ph.D. program in cultural anthropology with a full assistantship in 2010. During the time data were collected, Lulu was teaching American undergraduate courses for the third semester. The class she was teaching was the discussion section of a course called "Archeological Anthropology" which enrolled more than 200 students and was taught by an American professor. While being an ITA, Lulu was also taking three doctoral level courses for her Ph.D. During the time of data collection, the anthropology department at ANU ranked among the top in the nation.

Data Collection

I collected data through interviews, observations, and student written and oral feedback, in order to gain a full picture of "what is happening" in the case (Stake, 1995; Thomas, 2011). Collecting these multiple sources of data was important because no single source of information could be trusted to provide a comprehensive perspective. Multiple sources also contributed to data triangulation where researchers use different sources of information to check and increase the trustworthiness of the results (Stake, 1995).

I collected data between January and April of 2011. First, I conducted a series of four semi-structured interviews, based on Seidman's (2006) model of "the three interview series." The first interview set the stage for Lulu's reflection on her previous ITA experience. The second interview was designed for her to deconstruct the complexities of how she had been interacting with students both inside and outside of class. The third interview was to encourage Lulu to reconstruct her ITA experience, voice her concerns, and provide plans for her ITA practice for the upcoming semester. The fourth interview was designed for Lulu to summarize and reflect her ITA experience in this particular semester. The first three interviews were conducted at the beginning of the semester for 45 minutes to one hour each time, over a fifteen day period, and spaced three to five days apart to allow Lulu to reflect on the preceding interviews. The last interview was conducted at the end of the semester and lasted one hour and forty minutes. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin, digitally recorded, transcribed, and translated.

I developed the interview protocols based on the literature on ITA issues and challenges and Gidden's (1979, 1981, 1984) structuration theory discussed previously. Sample interview questions included: Can you tell me about your TA training and orientation? What do you spend most time on when you prepare the class? What best describes your feelings when you are teaching the class? What help are you getting from your program? When do you feel most accomplished as an ITA? When do you feel the least accomplished as an ITA? Do you think your teaching experiences have changed you in any way?

After the first three interviews, I made eight class observations during a nine week period, with one observation each week and a spring break in between. The one-hour class was scheduled

every Monday at noon. The classroom was labeled "seminar room" with tables placed in a rectangle. The room could accommodate 22 people, which was inadequate for the 23 students and the teacher. During my observations, I focused on how Lulu raised questions, and how she handled students' questions and comments, how she managed the whole class, how she managed small group discussions. Lulu and I also had informal conversations after each classroom observation regarding her own general evaluation of the specific class, her strategies for handling certain issues, and areas that could be improved. I did not digitally record these conversations, but took written notes.

I also collected student feedback through casual conversations with them during classroom observations, and through their mid- and end-of-the-term written evaluations. Although my goal was to understand Lulu's interaction with her students from Lulu's perspective, student feedback was useful to triangulate the data and garner a more comprehensive understanding of how Lulu's efforts were perceived by her students. During breaks while conducting observations, I asked students about their interests in the specific topic, the difficulty of the topic, the utility they perceived in the discussion led by Lulu, and their evaluation of that particular class. Notes were taken during these conversations. Lulu also asked her students to provide her written feedback on the positive aspects of her teaching and areas of improvement at the middle and end of the term. Lulu kindly shared the written feedback with me.

Data Analysis

I first analyzed interview transcripts and field notes separately, and then combined them to facilitate a comprehensive understanding. In analyzing the interview data, I followed four steps. Transcription and translation provided the first level of understanding. Translation helped me further digest the data beyond merely transcribing the words from the tape. An overwhelming theme of Lulu's anxiety towards her ITA experiences caught my attention. Secondly, I tried to condense the data by sorting out large chunks of information into deductive and inductive codes (Boyatzis, 1998). Deductive analysis, which was based on structuration theory and existing literature on ITAs, focused on such codes as rules, resources, expectations, agency, constraints, enablers, and strategies. Inductive codes emerged from the data, but had not been identified in the existing literature. I used two criteria to identify inductive codes: the number of times and amount of time Lulu discussed the code and the level of significance she placed on the code. Thirdly, I attempted to look for underlying themes. Fourthly, I looked for themes relevant to the purpose of this study and the research questions posed.

In a similar manner, I summarized the observation notes into deductive and inductive codes, and searched for recurring themes. I focused on Lulu's strategies for interacting with American students. In analyzing student feedback, I summarized the notes and students' written evaluations inductively into the following codes: students' reactions in class (engaged, disengaged, silent, lukewarm), perceived utility of Lulu's discussion (useful, useless, somewhat useful and can be improved), positive evaluation of Lulu's teaching (fair grading, organized, prompt feedback, interesting reference to her own background, useful office hours, friendly), negative evaluation of Lulu's teaching (lack of enthusiasm sometimes, uninteresting discussion topics sometimes, lack of content knowledge), and suggestions for improvement (prepare more interesting topics, be more engaged in discussion, be more confident, request a bigger classroom). Overall, for the data collected from interviews, classroom observations, and student feedback, I paid less attention to a theme's frequency than to understanding the meaning and context that shaped Lulu' feelings and

experiences. The results reported and discussed in the following section represent general trends corroborated across multiple data sources.

Findings

Lulu's own feelings of anxiety were an overwhelming theme towards interacting with American students. This was partly due to the structural barriers and partly due to her individual limitations. Structural barriers included being assigned to teach a course out of her research area and receiving little support from her program and peers. Individual limitations included lacking advanced English linguistic competence and lacking discussion-facilitation skills. Lulu employed several strategies to reduce her anxiety and engage with students. She tried to connect class discussion to her area of expertise and associate the discussion with Chinese and oriental culture. She also relied on individual and group emails, as well as office hours, as ways to build her confidence. At the same time, Lulu also resorted to several disengaging strategies to manage her anxiety. She often asked close-ended questions and gave students little time to respond. She usually distanced herself from students during small group discussions. At times, when she had difficulty responding to questions and comments, Lulu gave apologetic responses to seek understanding from students.

Anxiety towards Interacting with Students: Structural Barriers

Lulu was assigned to teach archeological anthropology, despite that her research interest and major was cultural anthropology. Not surprisingly, Lulu felt anxious and was not confident about her knowledge and understanding of the content area:

> When I was told to teach the course this semester, I was frightened, because I know little about this particular field. Last semester was better because the course was actually my area. I feel extremely nervous this semester when interacting with students, because for lectures, though I don't know much about the subject, I can prepare. But for interactions, often times I can't even understand their questions. How am I supposed to respond!

Recruiting TAs to reduce full-time teaching faculty is a major restructuring initiative in response to the increasingly constrained budget (Rhoads & Rhoads, 2005). Recruiting ITAs can be meaningful because it can provide ITAs with an opportunity to gain teaching experience as well as financial support and at the same time establish a platform for cross-cultural dialogues. Assigning Lulu to a class different from her major, Lulu's department seemed more driven by the need to meet the economic exigencies than by the potential gains for Lulu and her American students. Lack of sufficient content knowledge decreased Lulu's confidence in teaching and reduced her credibility among students. One common weakness that students pointed out in their evaluation was that they wanted more content knowledge in archeological anthropology, despite finding her expertise in cultural anthropology interesting.

Another structural barrier was the lack of systematic support for TAs and ITAs in general. Not only was Lulu assigned to a class beyond her content expertise, there were also few resources that she could rely on:

> Maybe it's just me, but I do hope there is someone out there that I can ask for help or discuss my teaching ... There are three other TAs [for the same course]. They are leading different discussion sections. Two are American and one from Brazil. We are supposed to have a TA meeting every other week. But everyone is so busy. And they all major in archeological anthropology. I guess they are doing OK…

When asked if the TA orientation or handbook was useful, Lulu shook her head:

> Not really. It's pretty short. And it's all very general information that any PhD [student] [who has gone through all these years of school] should know already… Everybody only needs to go through the orientation for their first time TAing. For me, it was before my first semester [at this university]. I was busy adjusting myself to this new environment. I was overwhelmed. To be honest, let me correct what I said [earlier about it was not really helpful]. I couldn't even remember what was talked about during the orientation. It could have been helpful. Maybe I just didn't have enough energy [to pay full attention to it].

International doctoral students working as ITAs are simultaneously juggling multiple challenging tasks, including taking classes, doing research, and teaching while adjusting to an unfamiliar learning and living environment. The kind and amount of institutional resources and support for ITAs vary across programs and institutions. Some institutions have graduate student teaching centers, TA peer support groups, and TA mentoring programs; other institutions provide nothing beyond a short orientation (Zhou, 2009). In Lulu's case, the lack of resources and support from her program and peers heightened her difficulty in teaching a course beyond her research area and expertise. Large-group orientations and training workshops are familiar inexpensive—and ineffective—professional development approaches, in that they provide little individualized guidance and few opportunities for reflection and follow-up (Sparks, 2002). Furthermore, peer support groups often need institutional financial and/or time incentives to ensure that these groups are monitoring and sustaining themselves (Sparks, 2002; Tallerico, 2005). Although Lulu's program required TAs to meet every two weeks to discuss their teaching, such a requirement fell apart as doctoral students who worked as TAs were struggling to complete multiple tasks.

Anxiety towards Interacting with Students: Individual Limitations

Two individual limitations added to Lulu's anxiety. The first limitation was her lack of advanced linguistic abilities, such as sufficient vocabulary and expressions both subject specific and vernacular. Lulu found it difficult to respond promptly to students' unsolicited questions and comments:

> I almost feel frightened at responding to students' questions or comments, because some of them are unexpected. I even need time to think them through in Mandarin. It's not that I don't know. I do know the answers. But I don't know how to organize them in English with no preparation time.

Responding to unanticipated questions or comments poses a challenge for all instructors. It requires a solid understanding of the subject matter, an ability to organize information promptly and coherently, an ability to find the right explanation method, and often sufficient self-confidence in handling such circumstances. Not surprisingly, Lulu felt anxious, because she failed to meet at least the latter two requirements. This finding is consistent with a previous study which explored the training needs of ITAs serving as laboratory assistants (Myers & Plakans, 1991). Myers and Plakans pointed out that a big challenge for ITAs is the unstructured nature of the interaction between ITAs and students. They concluded that because ITAs have little control over the direction of discussion and are required to perform a number of language functions on the spot (e.g., answering questions, critiquing, and giving advice), the effective training of ITAs should include instruction on interaction skills.

The second factor hindering Lulu's interaction with her students was her limited discussion-facilitation skills. She felt anxious when facilitating students' discussion:

> Discussion is important. I know. I try about half of the time on discussion, in pairs, small groups, or whole class. But it's hard to get them open their mouth sometimes. I can't tell. Sometimes they are cooperative, but usually they just keep silent, or talk for a few seconds, and then stop. I don't know if it's because they are tired, or the questions are boring, or they don't like me. I don't know what to do, just simply move to the next topic.

Lulu's struggle resulted from her inadequate experience with the interactive teaching style in American classrooms. She was obviously aware of the interactive style. She might have read it in her masters' study in western literature. She might have also observed some discussion-facilitation strategies in the doctoral level courses that she had taken. Yet, raised in Chinese culture where teachers hold an authoritarian, didactic position, Lulu had not internalized the interactive teaching style and could not employ the observed strategies.

> Moreover, her anxiety increased, when students were actively sharing their thoughts:
> If they are engaged in one topic and go over time, I don't know when and how to bring them back. Anxiety is always there. Sometimes one student keeps talking and talking. He is making some good points. And I want to jump in somewhere in his comment to bring it back to the topic in discussion. But I don't know where and when to jump in. I don't want to be rude.

Again, not being accustomed to the interactive classroom, Lulu felt lost in front of a whole class of students who tried to share their thoughts. Her dilemma was further compounded by her limited advanced and vernacular linguistic abilities as discussed before. As a result, teaching was not exciting for her: "I don't feel any excitement or expectation [before class], just anxiety. When thinking about the part of answering students' questions, I feel so nervous even the night before."

Ways to Reduce Anxiety and Facilitate Interaction

Despite the structural barriers and individual limitations, Lulu managed to use approaches to reduce her anxiety and facilitate academic interaction with students. She tried to connect the discussion to her area of expertise, i.e., cultural anthropology. She beneficially used opportunities to link discussions with her area of strength by expanding the discussion, making interpretations, and giving examples from cultural anthropological point of view. For example, in discussing the "out-of-Africa model" of human origin (human beings originated from Africa and emigrated to other continents), she asked students to ponder why Africa had historically been considered largely uncivilized despite being the origin of the human race. She then pointed out that African civilization had been intentionally denigrated by western civilization, and that all of our understandings of human civilization had been socially and culturally constructed.

Lulu also associated the discussion with Chinese or the oriental culture. Specializing in cultural anthropology, and raised and educated in China, a country rich in culture and ancient civilization, Lulu found it comfortable to make such connections. For example, in explaining a written assignment to devise a new writing system of one's own, she first made the point that human beings had developed every existing writing system. She then used the evolution of Chinese character and number system as an illustration. As she was writing some Chinese characters and numbers on the blackboard, Lulu said: "Oh, I'm so excited to do this!" Students laughed and became engaged in her explanation. Even the two pairs of girls who were constantly talking in class stopped to look at her and started to listen attentively.

Another example arose when she mentioned the class structure in China and India in a discussion on social class and status. In particular, when a student spoke about the ancient Chinese emperor who was buried in a large tomb with terra-cotta soldiers and warriors, she smiled, nodded, and calmly added that the scale of the terra-cotta soldiers and warriors in the tomb symbolized the emperor's status. She referred to this same example when discussing the paradox of royal necropolis:

> The royal necropolis is so precious, on the one hand. But on the other hand, the construction contains great human suffering. For example, I told you before about the first Chinese Emperor who spent 36 years building his own tomb. The whole city was created for him. Over 6,000 soldiers were made, at the expense of hundreds of human lives.

Lulu's active use of examples from Chinese culture echoed the literature. Research has shown that the use of personal cultural examples to illustrate classroom content is a key factor for classroom success for ITAs (Nelson, 1991). When asked after class whether she used such a strategy on purpose, Lulu pondered for a few minutes and responded that drawing examples from Chinese culture came natural at first. She then found that such a strategy was effective in facilitating discussions that students appeared to appreciate and enjoy. Lulu gradually used such a strategy more intentionally, and stressed that it gave her ease and confidence in class.

In addition, Lulu tried to use alternative ways of interacting with students to build comfort and confidence. Such alternative methods included individual and group emails and one-on-one communication during office hours. Lulu made it clear in the interview that she had no problem at all having discussions with individual students during her office hours. "I'm very responsive to their questions and comments, sometimes very challenging ones. We often have smooth, meaningful, and in-depth discussions." Obviously, Lulu felt less anxious in front of one student as opposed to a class of 23. Alternatively, perhaps the students who made the effort to go to the office hours were those who were willing to communicate with her. Lulu encouraged students at the end of each class to go to her office hours with any questions or comments. It might be routine for instructors to do this, but Lulu intentionally stressed the importance of office hours. She felt more competent in interacting with students individually. In fact, the help that students received from office hours was rated one of the most positive aspects of Lulu's teaching according to students' written evaluations.

Disengaging Ways to Reduce Anxiety but Hinder Interaction

In contrast to the engaging ways in which she facilitated interaction, Lulu also resorted to certain ways to disengage with students, whether consciously or unconsciously. For instance, she often asked close-ended questions and gave students little time to respond. The questions included: "Do you guys have any questions?" or "Any questions?" Giving almost no time to respond, she then said: "No?" or "No questions?" Thereafter, she quickly moved on to the next topic. Sometimes, she asked open-ended questions but gave little response time or facilitation, except with "Come on, guys! It's easy." She went on to answer the question herself, if there was still no response. As noted before, she knew the importance of discussion. She rushed through the process for two possible reasons: her lack of discussion-facilitation skills as discussed before, or her attempt to avoid greater anxiety as a result of unexpected student comments.

Another example of disengagement was the way Lulu distanced herself with students in small group discussions. During group discussions, she first explained the topic, divided the class

into groups, and asked for a group to volunteer to discuss each topic. She then sat down and looked at her own papers, notes, books, etc. with no engagement with students. Sometimes the group right next to her was completely silent. Such silence probably caught her attention, but she continued working on her own. There were a few times that she gave a sigh of relief after introducing the topics but before sitting down. This sounded clear to me sitting at the other end of the room. Facilitating students' discussion seemed to burden her.

In a variation of this theme, to offset the ways in which she managed her anxiety by disengaging from students, Lulu sometimes gave apologetic responses to seek understanding from students, when she had difficulty responding to questions and comments. With an embarrassing smile, she usually responded with: "You know, this is not my research area. I don't know the answer.", or "As you all know, my major is cultural anthropology, so I don't know about this." During interviews and casual conversations, Lulu expressed her embarrassment, frustration, and anger about these circumstances:

> [I feel] very embarrassed, very bad [at those moments]. I am the teacher and should be able to help students learn. But I don't know the answers myself…What can I do? I have my own [cultural anthropology] courses to take. I can't spend all my time reading about archaeological anthropology!

Lulu felt embarrassed when she failed to answer student questions. At the same time, she was frustrated by being assigned to teach an area unfamiliar to her. Raised and educated in Chinese culture where teachers tend to be the authority, Lulu appeared to assume that she should know all the answers. Her apologetic responses could be a legitimate way for her to shed responsibility during interactions with students, yet still defend her authority and credibility as the teacher.

Consequently, Lulu felt little achievement from her ITA experience at the end of the semester:
> I didn't feel much accomplished. I just felt relieved because it was over. Honestly, I haven't felt much passion or expectation for the teaching all along. I feel dreaded and tired. This is just how I make money, make a living as a student here.

This sounded contradictory to Lulu's career goals. She expressed her hope of becoming a great and admired teacher. She used the teacher in the movie "Dead Poets Society" as her role model. She wanted to be a guide and friend for her students intellectually, professionally, and morally. She wanted to engage students in deep and meaningful academic conversations. However, her lack of the aforementioned abilities constituted seemingly insurmountable challenges. Her only feeling before each class was anxiety. This anxiety, which lasted for a whole semester, drained her passion for teaching. Sadly as a result, her ITA experience, instead of being fulfilling, had merely become a way of making ends meet. Lulu's experience supports the findings of an earlier case study, which concluded that an ITA's motivation, attitude, and belief in the teaching assistantship as an opportunity to achieve personal and professional goals were essential to successful development of ITAs (Smith, 1993).

Implications and Conclusion

In this study, I investigated the complexities in the academic interaction between an anthropology ITA and her American students. I conducted a series of interviews and observations to deconstruct the complexities from the ITA's perspective. I grounded this study in Gidden's structuration theory and interpreted the ITA's experiences from the duality of structural constraints and human agency. I set out with the assumption that strong will could overcome the challenges of teaching in an

unfamiliar educational and cultural context. The findings, however, were more complicated. Lulu's efforts did not appear to surmount the structural barriers or to overcome her individual limitations. Though Lulu was passionate about teaching, spoke fluent English, and had some knowledge of American culture, her assignment to teach an area out of her specialization drastically decreased her enthusiasm and confidence in being an ITA. Lulu's lack of discussion-facilitation skills and the limited ITA training and support added to her difficulty in interacting with American students.

The findings led me to three suggestions for improving ITA practices. First, improving ITA linguistic competence continues to be a major challenge. This finding, though consistent with the general claim that improving linguistic abilities is a top priority, confounds the existing literature. Previous research suggests basic linguistic abilities, such as pronunciation and intonation, are the main causes of the problem. Lulu never mentioned her accent as a hindrance to communicating with students. Her students never reported Lulu's accent as problematic or undermining of their interaction. Although Lulu's individual case cannot be generalized to ITAs as a whole, this study highlights the varying levels of English speaking abilities among ITAs. Given that English is being taught at a younger age in non-English speaking countries, such as China, linguistic incompetence may become a less prevalent or important issue for ITAs.

Secondly, the problem of inadequate discussion facilitation skills corroborates previous research, which suggests that improving pedagogical competence is imperative (Zhou, 2009). This finding suggests that whilst an ITA may be aware of the American pedagogical style, this awareness is far from internalizing and using this style with confidence. Lulu's story poses a criticism of ITA training programs. Her story reveals how problematic it may be to rely on short-term orientations to transmit facts about the American culture of instruction without providing an opportunity to reflect and internalize these teaching competencies in practice. Professional development literature suggests that collective participation, use of active learning strategies, and sufficient duration are essential elements for effective training (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000). Collective participation within subject areas involves sharing and problem solving around common challenges, goals, materials, and pedagogies. Examples of active learning strategies include discussion, reviewing student work collectively, teaching observation, and joint planning with other teachers. Longer duration of training contributes to effectiveness, because it increases opportunities to incorporate collective participation and active learning. None of these elements, however, were present in Lulu's TA orientation or training. The limited number of personnel and financial constraints make semester-long training for ITAs infeasible. However, a feasible approach may be for institutions to provide incentives for ITAs and TAs to organize peer groups to share resources and lesson plans.

Thirdly, integrating cultural experiences is an enabling and engaging way to facilitate ITA teaching and interaction with American students. Most of the previous studies have attempted to identify the linguistic and pedagogical problems of ITAs, and Americanize them into the predetermined American classroom model. Such an approach has not improved the situation for at least two reasons. On one hand, it is impossible to Americanize ITA accents and instructional behaviors in a short period of time. On the other hand, this American-centric approach ignores the drives and idiosyncrasies of ITAs, and disrespects the culturally enriching perspectives that ITAs can bring to American students.

To conclude, with the increasing number of international graduate students in American higher education and with financial constraints, the presence and influence of ITAs in American undergraduate education will continue, if not increase. The inherent complexity and idiosyncrasy

among ITA practices, coupled with the limited amount of research on ITAs (Zhou, 2009), make it difficult to formulate informed implications for improving ITA practice. This study strives to renew research attention to the issues and challenges of the ITA.

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