Article

Check for updates

Journal of International Students
Volume 16, Issue 12 (2026), pp. 327-346
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org
https://doi.org/10.32674/rj7mpm25

"I Bring My Country into the Classroom": Transposed Identity Negotiation Among International Teaching Assistants in U.S. College Writing Programs

Scholastika Massawe
University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3653-2319

Carolyn Peterson
University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7109-8993

ABSTRACT: *International teaching assistants (ITAs) are central to U.S. higher education, yet their teaching has often been framed through concerns about language proficiency, accent, and classroom intelligibility. This collaborative ethnographic study examines how ITAs in U.S. college writing classrooms negotiate identity, legitimacy, and affect within sociopolitical teaching spaces. Drawing on transnationalism, transposed identity negotiation, critical pedagogy, and affective theory, we analyze classroom observations, fieldnotes, interviews, and researcher dialogues with five ITAs over one academic year. The findings show that ITAs' authority is not grounded in native-like language proficiency but in relational presence, reflexive self-awareness, and ethical engagement. Participants transformed multilingualism, cultural experience, vulnerability, and emotional labor into pedagogical resources, using their transnational identities to build dialogue, care, and critical inquiry. The study challenges deficit framings of ITAs as linguistic apprentices and instead positions them as co-constructors of knowledge whose teaching reshapes writing classrooms as relational and transnational spaces. We argue that institutional support for ITAs should move beyond pronunciation-centered training toward mentorship, reflexive dialogue, and discipline-sensitive professional development.*

Keywords: Affective Labor, International Teaching Assistants, Transnational Identity, Transposed Identity Negotiation

Received: 25, November 2025 | **Revised**: 30, April 2026 | **Accepted:** 3, May 2026

How to Cite (APA): Massawe, S., & Peterson, C. (2026). "I Bring My Country into the Classroom": Transposed Identity Negotiation Among International Teaching Assistants in U.S. College Writing Programs. *Journal of International Students, 16 (12)*, 327-346. https://doi.org/10.32674/rj7mpm25

INTRODUCTION

International teaching assistants (ITAs) are central to the instructional life of U.S. higher education. According to the Institute of International Education (2025), U.S. colleges and universities hosted 1,177,766 international students in the 2024/2025 academic year, representing 6% of the total U.S. higher education population. Many international graduate students serve as teaching or research assistants, making their labor integral to the everyday functioning of universities. However, ITAs have often been studied through the lens of institutional concerns about language proficiency, accent, and classroom intelligibility rather than their pedagogical, affective, and intellectual resources in teaching.

Early ITA scholarship frequently emphasized pronunciation, speech comprehensibility, and standardized language assessments, positioning ITAs as instructors who needed linguistic remediation to meet native-speaker norms (Gorsuch, 2003; Hoekje & Linnell, 1994; Rubin, 1992). Although this work identified real challenges in instructional communication, it often framed ITAs through what they lacked rather than what they contributed. More recent scholarship has challenged this deficit orientation by showing that communication in multilingual classrooms is dialogic, socially negotiated, and shaped by listener expectations, institutional ideologies, and classroom relationships (Li et al., 2011; Subtirelu, 2016, 2017). Recent studies also call attention to the institutional and identity dimensions of ITA support, including the ideologies shaping ITA educator preparation (Anderson, 2024), the transcultural characteristics of ITAs in higher education (Bursalı Boz & Karaman, 2025), and the ways transnational educators negotiate identity and positionality across research and teaching contexts (Norova & Gutiérrez, 2024).

This study builds on that shift by focusing specifically on ITAs teaching first-year college writing. Much ITA research still treats international instructors as a relatively homogeneous group, giving less attention to how disciplinary contexts

shape their experiences of authority, legitimacy, and belonging. This gap matters because writing-intensive humanities classrooms differ from courses organized primarily around technical content delivery. In college writing, language is not only the medium of instruction; it is also the object of inquiry. Instructors are often expected to facilitate conversations about identity, culture, power, rhetoric, lived experience, and social difference. For ITAs, these expectations may intensify questions of legitimacy, especially when students and institutions interpret instructors through assumptions about accent, nationality, race, culture, or native-English-speaking authority. Recent work on English composition ITAs similarly highlights how questions of authority and legitimacy are especially pronounced in writing classrooms (Kasztalska & Maune, 2024).

Guided by transnationalism, transposed identity negotiation, critical pedagogy, and affective theory, this collaborative ethnographic study examines how five ITAs in U.S. college writing classrooms negotiate identity, legitimacy, and pedagogical authority. We ask the following questions:

1. How do ITAs in U.S. college writing classrooms negotiate identity, legitimacy, and authority?
2. How do they transform multilingual, cultural, affective, and reflexive resources into pedagogical practice?
3. What do their experiences reveal about institutional support for ITAs beyond language remediation? By foregrounding ITAs' classroom practices and reflections, this study extends ITA scholarship beyond deficit framings and argues that international instructors are not merely adapting to U.S. classrooms; they are actively reshaping them as transnational, dialogic, and relational spaces of learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From Linguistic Remediation to Institutional Responsibility

Research on international teaching assistants (ITAs) has historically been shaped by institutional concerns about language, accent, and undergraduate students' comprehension of instructors. Early studies on ITAs often focused on pronunciation, intelligibility, and standardized assessments, positioning teaching effectiveness as closely tied to ITAs' ability to approximate native-speaker norms (Rubin, 1992; Hoekje & Linnell, 1994; Gorsuch, 2003). These studies made ITAs visible within higher education research, but they also narrowed the terms through which ITAs became visible: primarily as communicators whose language needed to be assessed, corrected, or made more accessible to U.S. undergraduates.

Later scholarship complicates this remediation-oriented framing by shifting attention from ITAs' speech alone to the interactional and institutional conditions surrounding communication. Chiang (2009) shows that communication problems in ITA classrooms emerge through instructional interaction, not simply from individual language proficiency. Gorsuch (2012) similarly demonstrates that ITAs' classroom practices are shaped by prior educational cultures, teaching beliefs, and the expectations of U.S. universities. Li et al. (2011) extend this shift

by conceptualizing ITA–student communication as dialogic, emphasizing that clarity and credibility are co-constructed between instructors and students. These studies begin to unsettle the assumption that communication difficulty belongs only to the ITA. Instead, they suggest that students, institutions, and classroom norms also participate in producing what counts as clear, credible, or legitimate instruction.

More recent scholars have pushed this critique further by examining the institutional ideologies that shape ITA support. Subtirelu (2016, 2017) argues that U.S. universities often celebrate internationalization while continuing to treat linguistic difference as a problem to be managed. Anderson (2024) similarly shows that ITA preparation can be shaped by competing institutional goals: supporting ITAs as developing teachers while also preparing them to meet language-testing requirements. Bursalı Boz and Karaman's (2025) metasynthesis extends this concern by calling for support programs that move beyond adjustment-based models and recognize ITAs' transcultural characteristics and pedagogical capacities. Taken as a body of work, these studies suggest that the issue is not simply whether ITAs are prepared but how institutions define preparation in the first place. ITAs are welcomed as evidence of internationalization, yet they are often evaluated through language-centered measures that obscure the broader pedagogical, cultural, and relational work they perform. This tension matters for our study because it shifts attention from what ITAs supposedly lack to how they negotiate teaching and legitimacy within institutions that both depend on and discipline their difference.

Classroom authority, legitimacy, and identity negotiation

A second body of scholarship examines how ITAs negotiate classroom authority and legitimacy. While earlier research often treated credibility as something ITAs could secure through improved speech or clearer explanations, more recent studies show that authority is also shaped by racialized, linguistic, cultural, and disciplinary expectations about who is recognized as a legitimate teacher. Hebbani and Hendrix (2014), for example, show that ITAs' classroom experiences involve emotional and relational negotiation as they work to establish credibility with U.S. students. Kasztalska (2019) similarly argues that ITAs in composition classrooms navigate tensions between world Englishes, translingualism, and student expectations of standardized English. These studies are important because they move the conversation beyond whether ITAs can communicate effectively toward the more difficult question of how students and institutions decide whose communication counts as authoritative.

This scholarship reveals a contradiction in how ITAs are positioned. On the one hand, they are expected to embody the international and intercultural mission of the university. On the other hand, their authority may be questioned when their language, accent, race, nationality, or cultural references do not align with students' expectations of the "proper" college instructor. McAllester's (2024) framework of transposed identity negotiation is useful here because it explains how international students' identities are reinterpreted across new social and

institutional contexts. Norova and Gutiérrez (2024) similarly show that transnational educators' identities and positionalities are shaped through teaching and research across multiple sociocultural worlds. Although these studies approach identity from different angles, they converge on an important insight: identity is not simply something ITAs bring into the classroom; it is continually produced through how others read, question, affirm, or misrecognize them.

This issue becomes especially visible in writing classrooms. Kasztalska and Maune (2024) examine how English composition ITAs negotiate authority in a context where assumptions about English, writing expertise, and native-speaker legitimacy shape students' perceptions of instructors. Their work is particularly important because it shows that legitimacy is not only a language issue but also a disciplinary issue. In composition classrooms, ITAs are not merely using English to deliver content; they are teaching writing, rhetoric, and meaning-making itself. This creates a sharper legitimacy problem: students may accept an international instructor as knowledgeable in some fields while still questioning whether that instructor is authorized to teach English writing. Our study builds from this tension by examining how ITAs not only respond to questioned legitimacy but also actively construct authority through relational presence, cultural knowledge, affective awareness, and reflexive pedagogy.

Writing Classrooms as Affective and Critical Teaching Spaces

Although ITA research has expanded beyond accent and intelligibility, fewer studies examine ITAs in writing-intensive humanities classrooms. This gap matters because writing classrooms differ from courses organized mainly around technical content delivery. In college writing, instructors not only explain disciplinary knowledge but also guide students through conversations about language, identity, rhetoric, culture, power, and lived experience. Writing scholarship has long shown that writing is connected to identity, discourse, and social positioning (Ivanič, 1998; Lillis, 2010; Hyland, 2015). Canagarajah (2013) further shows that multilingual writers and teachers negotiate meaning across languages, norms, and contexts rather than simply moving toward a single standard. These studies help us see that ITAs' multilingual and transnational identities are not outside the work of teaching writing; they shape how writing is explained, how authority is negotiated, and how classroom dialogue unfolds.

What remains less developed in ITA scholarships is the affective and critical labor required in these classrooms. Writing courses often invite students to connect texts to personal experience, social issues, and contested meanings. This can make the classroom intellectually generative, but it also places instructors in the position of managing discomfort, silence, disagreement, vulnerability, and risk. Recent work on teacher identity and affect helps contextualize this issue. Terashima and Dalziel (2026) show that internationalized classrooms can disrupt teachers' established professional identities when student expectations and institutional goals do not align. Du et al. (2026) similarly emphasize that teachers' emotional experiences are tied to identity construction and pedagogical action. Tan's (2026) case study of an ESL graduate teaching assistant in freshman

composition is especially relevant because it shows how a multilingual graduate instructor navigated agency, emotional judgment, and politically sensitive teaching moments in a U.S. writing classroom. These studies help extend ITA research by showing that teaching across differences requires more than linguistic clarity; it also requires emotional regulation, ethical judgment, and the ability to sustain dialogue under conditions of uncertainty.

The literature, therefore, points to an important gap. ITA scholarship has moved away from treating international instructors as linguistic problems, but it has not fully examined how ITAs in college writing classrooms transform multilingual, cultural, affective, and reflexive resources into pedagogy. Existing studies have shown that language ideologies shape ITA experiences, that authority is negotiated rather than automatically granted, and that teaching in internationalized classrooms involves emotional and identity work. What remains underexamined is how these dynamics unfold in the everyday practices of ITAs teaching first-year writing. This study responds to that gap by asking how ITAs in U.S. college writing classrooms negotiate identity, legitimacy, and authority; how they use multilingual, cultural, affective, and reflexive resources in teaching; and what their experiences reveal about institutional support beyond language remediation.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on transnationalism, transposed identity negotiation, critical pedagogy, and affective theory to examine how international teaching assistants (ITAs) negotiate identity, legitimacy, authority, and care in U.S. college writing classrooms. We use these frameworks together because ITAs' teaching experiences cannot be understood through language proficiency alone. Their classroom practices are shaped by movement across borders, institutional perceptions, pedagogical commitments, and emotional negotiations of belonging.

Transnationalism helps us understand ITAs not as temporary outsiders assimilating into U.S. academic culture but as educators whose identities and pedagogical practices are shaped across multiple national, linguistic, cultural, and institutional contexts. Vertovec (2009) defines transnationalism as the multiple ties and interactions that connect people and institutions across national borders. In this study, transnationalism allows us to see ITAs' teaching as shaped by more than the immediate U.S. classroom. Their examples, disciplinary habits, language practices, and understandings of authority are informed by educational histories and cultural worlds that travel with them into the writing classroom.

McAllester's (2024) framework of transposed identity negotiation extends this view by helping us analyze what happens when ITAs' identities are reinterpreted in new institutional spaces. McAllester (2024) explains identity negotiation as a relationship between the target, or the person's self-understanding, and the perceiver, or those who interpret that identity through their own cultural and institutional assumptions. For ITAs, this means that their self-perceptions as competent scholars and teachers may be affirmed, questioned, or reshaped by how students and institutions perceive their accent, nationality, race,

language background, or cultural difference. This framework helps us treat legitimacy not as something ITAs simply have or lack but as something continually negotiated through classroom interaction.

Critical pedagogy helps us understand these negotiations as ethical and political. Freire (1970) and hooks (1994) remind us that classrooms are not neutral spaces; they are shaped by power, dialogue, vulnerability, and the possibility of transformation. This lens is especially important in college writing classrooms, where instructors often ask students to engage questions of language, identity, culture, power, and lived experience. For ITAs, pedagogical decisions about when to speak, when to withhold, how to respond, and how to create respectful dialogue across differences are not merely instructional choices. They are also negotiations of authority, care, and risk.

Affective theory adds attention to the emotional and embodied dimensions of this work. Ahmed (2004, 2012) and Zembylas (2007, 2012) show that emotions are not only private feelings; they circulate through classrooms and institutions, shaping who feels visible, credible, safe, or out of place. In this study, affective theory helps us interpret anxiety, hesitation, humor, vulnerability, silence, warmth, and care as part of pedagogy. These affective practices show how ITAs read classroom atmospheres and respond to students while also protecting their own legitimacy within uneven institutional conditions.

Together, these frameworks allow us to analyze ITAs as transnational, reflexive, and affective educators. They help us examine how authority in college writing classrooms is built not through native-like English proficiency alone but through relational presence, ethical judgment, cultural knowledge, emotional labor, and ongoing negotiation across differences.

METHOD

This study employed a collaborative ethnographic design (Lassiter, 2005; Campbell & Lassiter, 2015) to examine how international teaching assistants (ITAs) negotiate identity, legitimacy, authority, and affect in U.S. college writing classrooms. Collaborative ethnography emphasizes knowledge-making as relational and dialogic, recognizing that interpretations emerge through ongoing engagement among researchers, participants, and field contexts. This approach aligned with our study's focus on teaching as a transnational, affective, and pedagogical practice shaped by power, mobility, and institutional expectations.

Participants and Research Site

Five ITAs participated in the study. All were doctoral students in humanities or social science fields and had completed at least a master's degree before entering their programs. Participants represented diverse regional backgrounds, including Southern Africa, South Asia, East Asia, and West Asia. All identified as multilingual and drew on English alongside two or more additional languages. Pseudonyms are used throughout the manuscript.

The study took place at a public university in New England. All participants taught sections of College Writing, a required first-year composition course for undergraduate students. The course emphasizes writing as a social, rhetorical, and reflective practice, with attention to language, power, revision, audience, and composing across modes. These features made the site especially relevant for examining how ITAs negotiated identity, authority, and affect in writing-intensive humanities classrooms. Each participant taught a small seminar-style section of approximately 12–15 undergraduate students, which allowed for close observation of classroom dialogue, instructor-student interaction, and relational teaching practices.

Data Collection

Data were collected between September 2024 and May 2025 through classroom observations, fieldnotes, semi-structured interviews, researcher dialogues, and analytic memos. Observations focused on instructors' pedagogical routines, discourse practices, classroom interactions, and moments where identity, emotion, language, and ideology appeared to shape teaching and learning. Fieldnotes were written immediately after observations and included descriptions of classroom activities, interactional patterns, tone, gestures, silences, and affective atmosphere.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in May 2025 after classroom observations were completed. Interviews provided participants an opportunity to reflect on their teaching practices, clarify observed classroom moments, and discuss how they understood their identities and authority as international instructors. These interviews also functioned as member-checking conversations, allowing participants to affirm, complicate, or revise our emerging interpretations. In addition to formal observations and interviews, informal post-class conversations became an important part of the fieldwork process. Brief exchanges in hallways, near elevators, or while walking after class often helped clarify participants' instructional decisions and emotional responses to classroom events. Although these conversations were not recorded, they were documented in fieldnotes and analytic memos and treated as part of the broader ethnographic context.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Rather than treating analysis as a separate phase after data collection, we approached it as iterative and ongoing. After observations, we wrote analytic memos, held weekly researcher dialogues, compared emerging interpretations, and refined interview questions based on patterns that were developing across classrooms. As shown in Table 1, this recursive process allowed us to move between classroom moments, participant reflections, and theoretical concepts while remaining attentive to the relational and affective dimensions of teaching.

Table 1: Coding Phases and Analytic Focus

Phase	Analytic focus	Data sources	Analytic activities and theoretical anchors
Initial coding	Close engagement with the site, participants, and data	Field notes, classroom observations, informal conversations, and interview transcripts	Conducted day-by-day and line-by-line coding to stay close to participants' lived experiences as they unfolded in the field. This phase emphasized attending to the everydayness of classroom life, capturing emerging ideas about identity, silence, emotion, reflexivity, pedagogy, and assigned teaching space. Insights from this process helped us reframe research questions and shape interview protocols. Theoretical sensitivity was guided by transnationalism, translingualism, and affective theory, which directed attention to movement, multiplicity, and emotion in classroom interactions.
Focused coding	Identification and categorization of recurring patterns across classroom observations and interview data	Aggregated data from daily observations, field notes, and interviews	Examined data holistically, treating all sources as part of the same evolving narrative. Grouped related codes and refined categories to highlight recurring affective and pedagogical patterns (e.g., silence, hesitation, assertion, negotiation). Connected these to broader constructs in transnationalism,

			translingualism, criticality, and sociopolitical reflexivity, integrating theory and data as mutually informing.
Theoretical coding	Integrative synthesis linking micro-level data with macro-level frameworks	Synthesized analytic memos, coded categories, and theoretical reflections	Worked to weave categories into conceptual themes, connecting classroom moments and dialogic reflections to theoretical frames in Critical Applied Linguistics, Transnationalism, and Affective Theory. This phase clarified how ITAs enacted pedagogical agency, emotional labor, and critical reflexivity. Although described as distinct, these phases overlapped iteratively, with each informing and reshaping the others throughout the research process.

RESULTS

To ensure analytic depth and reflexive trustworthiness, we examined recurring patterns across classroom observations, interviews, informal post-class conversations, and researcher memos. The section below illustrates how evidence from these different contexts resonated and converged to form our analytic interpretations. This iterative cross-analysis allowed us to capture the following themes:

Emotional and Affective Labor

Across classrooms, international teaching assistants engaged in what Zembylas (2012) describes as the emotional geographies of teaching, a continual balancing of vulnerability, restraint, and care. Teaching first-year writing, a course that often invites politically and emotionally charged conversation, requires constant attention to tone, atmosphere, and student affect. Participants'

classrooms revealed that emotion was not peripheral to instruction; it was part of how learning itself was made possible.

During a lesson on note-making, Sarah guided her students through a peer-review activity: "In your writer's journal, write down one to three specific moments in your essay that you want to discuss with your peer group… I'll set a timer for five minutes. Decide who will go first."

Later, she reflected, "I was anxious about teaching writing because I didn't really know what it meant to teach drafting… but that anxiety helped me understand my students' frustration." Her openness modeled process and imperfection; by naming her own uncertainty, she turned emotion into empathy and made the writing process communal.

Mary, on the other hand, her emotional labor surfaced as restraint. She told her students, "It's okay that my English isn't perfect, it's part of the process of learning together."

In interviews, she elaborated: "Spontaneous interactions make me nervous, and I often avoided politically sensitive topics because I am unsure what's safe." Her silence was not disengagement but ethical self-regulation, an attempt to maintain safety and legitimacy while acknowledging cultural distance.

In Raj's classes, however, affective labor appeared through the atmosphere. On one Friday, he replaced a lecture with a collective film viewing, explaining afterward that "students look tired at week's end and that watching together makes class "fun but still educational." On another day, he played soft instrumental music while students wrote. The music "softened the silence," the researcher noted, "and even disengaged students looked at their screens, typing intermittently." These quiet adjustments turned the classroom into a shared emotional space where calm and focus replaced pressure.

After a national election, Raj again read the emotional temperature of the room and shifted plans: "It was an anxious time for the students, so instead of discussion, I made it a free-writing day, to give them space to process their thoughts without having to speak."

This sensitivity transformed potential tension into reflection, illustrating affective ethics, knowing when silence, not speech, serves care. Together, these moments show how international instructors translate emotional strain into relational strength. In writing classrooms where discussions often move through personal and politically charged terrain, participants had to read the room across cultural, linguistic, and institutional differences. Their calmness, patience, vulnerability, and attentiveness became pedagogical tools, especially in a U.S. classroom culture where student engagement is often measured through affective cues such as "fun" or "boredom." For these instructors, such cues were not universal; they required negotiation, interpretation, and creative adjustment. Their ability to sustain connection without trivializing difficult topics or compromising authenticity shows emotional labor as both survival and pedagogy. Emotion, in these classrooms, was not ancillary to academic work; it was one of the ways care, respect, and learning were produced.

Critical Pedagogy and Classroom Agency

ITAs enacted what Freire (1970) and hooks (1994) describe as critical pedagogy, teaching that links knowledge to respect, reflection, and social transformation. In their writing classrooms, participants used dialogue, peer review, and transparency to redistribute authority and invite students into learning as co-inquiry. Difference became a pedagogical resource rather than a liability.

In Daniel's class, for instance, he reminded students, "In this class there's no pressure… In academia, people don't trust feelings; they trust research." The statement set an ethical tone: learning was rigorous but humane. By naming both emotion and evidence, Daniel blurred the boundary between affect and intellect, encouraging students to critique without cynicism. His classroom fostered what Freire (1970) calls dialogic respect, challenging ideas while preserving care for the person who voices them.

Raj extended this ethic through peer review. "When there's diversity in a classroom, that teaches us respect," he told students. "Be critical, but don't be mean." The reminder transformed linguistic and cultural differences into a lesson about discourse ethics. Through structured critique, Raj taught students to distinguish between disagreement and disrespect, cultivating the empathy that underpins genuine agency.

For Sarah, agency began with transparency. She explained, "Adult learning has better outcomes when you tell students why they're doing the thing they are doing and what's coming next. Even in my own writing, I love signposting, letting readers know what's coming up next". Those habits transfer into the classroom." Her practice of "signposting" made pedagogy visible, positioning students as collaborators rather than subjects of instruction.

Across these classrooms, critical pedagogy was not an abstract philosophy but a daily practice of tone, language, and relational ethics. Participants transformed their linguistic and cultural backgrounds into pedagogical capital, showing students that critique and compassion can coexist. Through respect, explanation, humor, transparency, and humility, they cultivated classroom agency by helping students see inquiry as a responsibility to others. Their transnational awareness heightened their sensitivity to power and voice, making the writing classroom a space where listening itself became a political act. In this sense, they embodied Freire's (1970) vision of dialogue as liberation, where understanding grows through mutual recognition and care.

Negotiating Neutrality and Risk

Teaching writing in the U.S. often requires engaging topics that are personal, ideological, and politically charged. For ITAs, these discussions carried an added layer of complexity. As immigrants, racialized, and transnational educators, participants continually assessed what could be said safely and what might jeopardize their legitimacy. Neutrality, then, was not detachment. It functioned as an ethical practice of self-protection and relational

care, shaped by the affective risks of teaching across cultural, linguistic, and political differences (Ahmed, 2004; Zembylas, 2007)

During the interview, Mary explained, "I stay neutral because I don't know what's safe. However, neutrality itself is a stance." Her comment captures the tension between wanting to participate in critical dialogue and remaining cautious about how her words might be interpreted. She added, "I rarely talk about local culture or political issues… Sometimes I feel a bit guilty because if they had a local instructor, they might have deeper conversations than with me." Mary's silence did not mean absence; it was a strategy for sustaining trust while navigating unfamiliar ideological terrain.

Barbara expressed a similar hesitation: "As an international student, I don't feel comfortable talking about U.S. political issues in class." Like Mary, she recognized that her distance from the local context required careful boundary work. Her selective participation became a pedagogical act: choosing when to speak and when to step back to preserve the openness of the classroom.

Raj approached neutrality as facilitation rather than withdrawal. "I don't discuss politically charged topics if students don't bring them up," he explained. "I let students lead and just make sure the discussion is respectful and everyone has an equal chance to express their perspectives." For him, politically charged topics required informed engagement because uninformed comments could be misinterpreted. When he offered examples, they often came from his own cultural background, where he felt able to "challenge students' perspectives to either complicate or move the discussion forward." His approach reframed neutrality as informed restraint, a way of guiding discussion through questions rather than assertions.

Across classrooms, neutrality was not the absence of position but a continual negotiation among authority, vulnerability, and care. Participants' choices reflected affective intelligence and critical pedagogy: they worked to sustain inclusive dialogue while protecting their precarious standing as international educators. In these moments, risk and silence became forms of agency, quiet strategies for preserving voice within structures that did not always guarantee it.

Transformative Reflexivity and Positionality in Teaching

ITAs demonstrated what Freire (1970) and Norova and Gutiérrez (2024) describe as reflexive pedagogy: a continual awareness of self-in-context and of how identity, knowledge, and emotion shape teaching. Rather than positioning themselves as experts simply delivering methods, participants modeled research and writing as iterative, lived processes. Their classrooms became dialogic spaces where authority and vulnerability coexisted.

Raj opened his class by naming the purpose of the unit: "The point of this unit is not to teach you how to do research, but to give you tools for doing research. I realized this when I taught this class before." He urged students to approach inquiry through personal curiosity: "You can begin from your own experiences, like if you play tennis, that can motivate a project. However, don't

let assumptions guide you; let the field speak to you." His language wove self-disclosure with mentorship, presenting research as relational rather than prescriptive. When a student referenced My Octopus Teacher, Raj replied, "You can't invest time in something you don't care about, like me doing my Ph.D. for five years." His reflections turned experience into a lesson on patience, ethics, and intellectual care.

Daniel's class embodied reflexivity through action. Moving around the room, he sketched essay structure on the board and connected it to his own research writing: "When you read my paper, you shouldn't be guessing what the writer is trying to say. Show readers you've invested time in your writing." He also used a student's book to illustrate how a table of contents signals coherence and acknowledgements reveal collaboration. By physically modeling revision and transparency, he blurred the boundary between teacher and learner, showing that reflexivity is both cognitive and embodied.

During interviews, Daniel extended this reflection to his disciplinary and pedagogical evolution:

"When you have had several years of training in a particular subject, it's difficult to just take the jacket off and become fully fledged interdisciplinary. Even though my teaching has become more interdisciplinary, history still dominates my thought process when I plan lessons. It happens naturally because it's what I'm passionate about".

His comment shows that reflexivity involves integration rather than erasure. Transformation, for him, meant acknowledging the persistence of disciplinary ways of knowing while adapting them to new contexts. The "jacket" he described was both metaphor and method: an awareness that teaching in a transnational space requires blending past expertise with present responsiveness.

For Sarah, reflexivity meant cultural repositioning. "If I was teaching in India, I wouldn't belabor that point so much," she noted, referring to her practice of explaining her linguistic credibility at the beginning of the semester by naming her English-medium education and publication experience. In the U.S. context, such disclosure felt necessary for self-legitimation; at home, it would have been redundant. Her awareness of shifting positionality across borders revealed reflexivity as ongoing calibration rather than static identity.

Sarah also invited reflexivity through curricular choice. During one observation, she selected an article connected to her home country and guided students through its thematic and rhetorical layers, asking, "What is the author's main concern? Who is he in conversation with? Why do we cite?" By linking the global context to analytic methods, she modeled how research emerges from lived experience.

Across participants, reflexivity functioned as both pedagogy and practice. Instructors positioned themselves as co-learners, integrating personal histories, disciplinary expertise, and emotional awareness into instruction. Their classrooms embodied a politics of humility: teaching not from unquestioned authority but from accountability. Through this reflexive stance, transnational instructors transformed positionality into a source of relational legitimacy.

DISCUSSION

This study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that reimagines international teaching assistants (ITAs) not as linguistic outsiders but as transnational educators whose work embodies reflexivity, emotion, and agency. Scholars have increasingly called for moving beyond the deficit framings of ITAs to recognize their multilingual and intercultural competencies as pedagogical resources (Heng, 2018). Building on this shift, our study interprets ITAs' everyday teaching practices in writing-intensive humanities classrooms as sites where identity, reflexivity, and care intersect. Similar to Canagarajah's (2013) notion of translingual practice, these instructors construct meaning across languages and contexts, positioning themselves as ethical mediators of global knowledge. Our collaborative ethnography thus situates ITAs not as subjects of institutional assessment but as co-creators of meaning—teachers whose pedagogical work is inseparable from their negotiation of belonging, legitimacy, and authority (Subtirelu, 2017).

Early scholarship on ITAs was dominated by institutional concerns over accent and intelligibility (Rubin, 1992; Gorsuch, 2003), often constructing ITAs as linguistic problems to be managed. Later research began to question these deficit framings, demonstrating that communication in multilingual/cultural classrooms is dialogic and socially negotiated (Li, Mazer, & Ju, 2011) and that listener expectations and racialized ideologies shape perceptions of competence far more than linguistic accuracy (Kang & Rubin, 2009; Flores & Rosa, 2015). Our study extends these critiques by showing that classroom clarity and legitimacy are relational achievements shaped not only by language but also by affect, reflexivity, and disciplinary negotiations that unfold in real-time teaching. Such practices affirm Zembylas's (2012) argument that emotions are pedagogical forces that sustain connection under unequal conditions.

As our study shows, reflexivity and identity negotiation become inseparable within writing classes. Participants drew on their multilingual and disciplinary repertoire to claim legitimacy while remaining alert to how they were being read by students and institutions. This mirrors McAllester's (2024) concept of transposed identity negotiation, in which transnational individuals continually reposition themselves within intersecting systems of privilege and marginalization. Classroom stories from the participants, about teaching research interests and methods shaped by one's home academic traditions or about adjusting to more horizontal professor-student relations, showed how identity work itself became pedagogy. ITAs transformed their transnational histories into epistemic capital, validating non-Western knowledge and encouraging students to see learning as a dialogue across cultures (Hebbani & Hendrix, 2014; Kasztalska, 2019). In doing so, they enacted what we call relational authority: credibility achieved not through conformity but through responsiveness, vulnerability, and respect. This form of authority challenges deficit framings of ITAs as linguistically or culturally lacking, instead portraying them as critical transnational agents who model how legitimacy in education can emerge through connection rather than sameness.

At the same time, these acts of openness were saturated with risk and emotional labor. Participants managed classroom tensions around politics, race, or global inequality, topics that, in writing courses, often invite personal or ideological confrontation. Their choices to redirect conversation, to soften critique with humor, or to invite rather than impose discussion illustrate how affect operates as a mode of ethical reasoning. This finding resonates with Ramjattan's (2019) work on the aesthetic and affective labor of racialized instructors, who must constantly read and regulate classroom atmospheres. However, our ethnographic observations add nuance by showing how ITAs transform this regulation into pedagogy: music to create calm, film to foster collective reflection, or silence to give students emotional space. hooks (1994) reminds us of these affective practices in her interpretation of Freire, love in teaching is not sentimental but radical—an ethical commitment to humanization through struggle and care.

Viewed through transnational and affective lenses, these everyday negotiations reveal that teaching across borders is both intellectual and emotional work. The ITAs in this study are continually reading their classrooms linguistically, culturally, and affectively, to sustain spaces of belonging within institutions that often value sameness. Their pedagogical moves exemplify the "multilingual turn" in applied linguistics (Canagarajah, 2013; The Douglas Fir Group, 2016), showing that learning happens through mobility, translation, and relationship rather than linguistic purity. At the same time, their experiences underscore Looney and Bhalla's (2019) call to situate ITA development within transdisciplinary, equity-oriented frameworks that acknowledge institutional responsibility. Effective teaching cannot be reduced to pronunciation or test scores; it is co-constructed through emotional attunement, critical awareness, and ethical engagement.

Implications

What began as an exploration of international teaching assistants' (ITAs) experiences and pedagogical practices became, for us, a collaborative understanding of how transnational instructors continually recompose their identities through teaching. Through the lens of transposed identity negotiation, we came to see identity not as something ITAs bring with them into the classroom but as something they do, a relational and ongoing negotiation between who they are, how they are perceived, and the institutional spaces they inhabit. Teaching, in this sense, became both a site of instruction and a site of becoming.

Our participants taught us that authority and clarity emerge not from native-like commands of language but from responsiveness, empathy, and reflexivity. Their classrooms revealed how accent, emotion, and cultural narrative—often framed as deficits—can instead function as bridges for understanding. These instructors practiced what might be called pedagogies of presence: ways of being in the classroom that made learning feel dialogic, ethical, and shared. This reimagining carries implications beyond the individuals themselves. Institutions that rely on ITAs must also recognize that these instructors perform complex

intellectual and emotional work, reading classrooms across linguistic, cultural, and political boundaries while negotiating their own belonging. Support for ITAs should therefore move beyond pronunciation workshops toward spaces for reflexive dialogue, mentorship, and collaborative learning.

Ultimately, this study shows that international instructors are not just navigating systems of higher education; they are quietly reshaping them. Their classrooms invite us to see teaching as a transnational practice, one that transforms differences into connection and mobility into meaning.

Acknowledgment

In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation in the following capacity:

☐ None
☑ Some sections, with minimal or no editing
☐ Some sections, with extensive editing
☐ Entire work, with minimal or no editing
☐ Entire work, with extensive editing

This article incorporates content generated by artificial intelligence (AI) tools. The sections where AI tools were employed are title creation and minimal editing of selected sections in the main body of the manuscript. The use of AI tools complied with ethical standards and guidelines for academic integrity. The final content has been thoroughly reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards. The authors take full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

REFERENCES

Ahmed, S. (2004). *The cultural politics of emotion.* Routledge.

Ahmed, S. (2012). *The cultural politics of emotion* (2nd ed.). Edinburgh University Press.

Anderson, R. (2024). One course, two approaches: ITA educators' diverging ideologies. *Journal of International Students, 14*(3), 344–363. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v14i3.5143

Bursali Boz, N. & Karaman, A. C. (2025). Metasynthesis of research on international teaching assistants in higher education. *Higher Education Quarterly, 79*(2), 1-21. https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.70020

Campbell, E., & Lassiter, L. E. (2015). *Doing ethnography today: Theories, methods, exercises*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Canagarajah, S. (2013). *Translingual practice: Global Englishes and cosmopolitan relations.* Routledge.

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Chiang, S. (2009). Dealing with communication problems in the instructional interactions between international teaching assistants and American college

students. *Language and Education*, *23*(5), 461-478. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500780902822959

Du, C., Ahmad, N. K. B., Jamil, H. B., Wen, M., & Wu, W. (2026). Emotional identity construction in EFL teachers: An integrative approach. *International Journal of Instruction, 19*(1), 131-156. https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2026.1917a

Flores, N., & Rosa, J. (2015). Undoing appropriateness: Raciolinguistic ideologies and language diversity in education. *Harvard Educational Review*, *85*(2), 149–171. https://doi.org/10.17763/0017-8055.85.2.149

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* Herder and Herder.

Gorsuch, G. (2012). International teaching assistants' experiences in educational cultures and their teaching beliefs. *TESL-EJ, 16*(1), 1–25.

Gorsuch, G. J. (2003). The educational cultures of international teaching assistants and U.S. universities. *TESL-EJ, 7*(3), 1-17.

Hebbani, A., & Hendrix, K. G. (2014). Capturing the experiences of international teaching assistants in the US American classroom. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 2014*, 61–72. https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20097

Heng, T. T. (2018). Different is not deficient: Contradicting stereotypes of Chinese international students in US higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, *43*(1), 22–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1152466

Hoekje, B., & Linnell, K. (1994). "Authenticity" in language testing: Evaluating spoken language tests for international teaching assistants. *TESOL Quarterly, 28*(1), 103-126.

hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom.* Routledge.

Hyland, K. (2015). *Teaching and researching writing* (3rd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315717203

Institute of International Education. (2025). *Open doors 2025 report on international educational exchange.* Institute of International Education. https://opendoorsdata.org/

Ivanič, R. (1998). *Writing and identity: The discoursal construction of identity in academic writing* (Vol. 10). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. https://doi.org/10.1075/swll.5

Kang, O., & Rubin, D. L. (2009). Reverse linguistic stereotyping: Measuring the effect of listener expectations on speech evaluation. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, *28*, 441–456. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X09341950

Kasztalska, A. (2019). International teaching assistants in the composition classroom: From world Englishes to translingualism and beyond. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education, 18*, 161–175. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2018.1545584

Kasztalska, A., & Maune, M. (2024). "What authority I have?": Analysing legitimation codes of English composition ITAs. In M. Tseptsura & T. Ruecker (Eds.)., *Nonnative English-speaking teachers of U.S. college*

composition: Exploring identities and negotiating difference (pp. 97–114). The WAC Clearinghouse. https://doi.org/10.37514/INT-B.2024.2142.2.06

Lassiter, L. E. (2005). *The Chicago guide to collaborative ethnography*. University of Chicago Press.

Li, H., Mazer, J. P., & Ju, R. (2011). Resolving international teaching assistant language inadequacy through dialogue: Challenges and opportunities for clarity and credibility. *Communication Education, 60*(4), 461–478. 10.1080/03634523.2011.565352

Lillis, T. (2010). Student writing as "academic literacies": Drawing on Bakhtin to move from critique to design. *Language and Education, 17*(3), 192–207. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500780308666848

Looney, S. D., & Bhalla, S. (2019). *A transdisciplinary approach to international teaching assistants: Perspectives from applied linguistics.* Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters. https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.22730671

McAllester, N. (2024). Transposed identity negotiation: A new conceptual framework. *Journal of International Students*, *14* (3), 225-231. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v14i3.6132

Norova, N., & Gutiérrez, J. D. (2024). Transnational voices in academia: Narratives of identity and positionality through research and teaching. *Journal of International Students, 14*(3), 109-130. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v14i3.6244

Ramjattan, V. A. (2019). *Working with an accent: The aesthetic labour of international teaching assistants in Ontario universities* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto]. Retrieved from: http://hdl.handle.net/1807/97591

Rubin, D. L. (1992). Nonlanguage factors affecting undergraduates' judgments of nonnative English-speaking teaching assistants. *Research in Higher Education, 33*(4), 511–531. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00973770

Subtirelu, N. C. (2016). *Linguistic diversity and the politics of international inclusion in higher education: A critical sociolinguistic study of international teaching assistants* (Doctoral dissertation, Georgia State University). https://www.tirfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/TIRF_DDG_2014_NicholasSubtirelu_Final.pdf

Subtirelu, N. C. (2017). Students' orientations to communication across linguistic difference with international teaching assistants at an internationalizing university in the United States. *Multilingua, 36*(3), 247–280. https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2016-0061

Tan., X. (2026). Not too harsh, too emotional, and too political: A case study of an esl graduate teaching assistant enacting agency with genAI. *Digital Studies in Language and Literature*. https://doi.org/10.1515/dsll-2025-0021

Terashima, A. V., & Dalziel, G. (2026). Negotiating EMI teacher identity in Japan's internationalized classrooms: A duoethnography. *Journal of International Students, 16*(8), 105-126. https://doi.org/10.32674/13jzda57

The Douglas Fir Group. (2016). *A transdisciplinary framework for SLA in a multilingual world. The Modern Language Journal, 100*(Supplement), 19–47. https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12301

Vertovec, S. (2009). *Transnationalism.* Routledge.

Zembylas, M. (2007). Emotional ecology: The intersection of emotional knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge in teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 23*(8), 355–367. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2006.12.002

Zembylas, M. (2012). Pedagogies of strategic empathy: navigating through the emotional complexities of anti-racism in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education, 17*(2), 113–125. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2011.611869

Author bios

SCHOLASTIKA MASSAWE is a Ph.D. candidate in the College of Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, U.S. Her major research interests lie in Multilingualism, Medium of Instruction, and language policies in education in postcolonial countries. Email: smassawe@umass.edu

CAROLYN PETERSON is a Ph.D. student in the College of Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, U.S. Her major research interests lie in the areas of ethnography, K-12 multilingual special education, and literacy. Email: carolynpeter@umass.edu