

Methodology Design

If International TAs MOO, Will Anyone Listen?:
Using MOOs to Train ITAs

Problem

Within university scholarship and lore, there are many studies and anecdotes about the problems that mainstream students have in classes taught by International Teaching Assistants (ITAs). As a result, some scholars, mostly linguists, have conducted studies that examine patterns in how students and ITAs respond to each other or examine the effectiveness of experimental training techniques. Yet the bulk of this scholarship is aimed at making the ITAs more tolerable to mainstream students. Only a few scholars have approached this problem from the counter perspective: mainstream students' problems with ITA are mostly attributed to their own prejudices or lack of familiarity with foreignness. Furthermore the institution provides no accommodations to ITAs by teaching students the value of this cultural opportunity, nor are there examinations of alternative pedagogies or ITA training that facilitates this accommodation.

Background

Previous Research: The previous research on ITAs can be divided into two categories: 1) how do ITAs and students interact, and 2) an examination of various ITA training techniques. Despite these two bodies of research there is one issue that overarches most of the studies: pronunciation.

ITAs and students interaction: In a section of her 1997 book about language and discrimination in the United States, Rosina Lippi-Green argues that the problems between ITAs and their students is not an issue of the ITA's poor language proficiency, instead the problem is institutionalized biases against international students in society and the academy. University policies and procedures for screening ITAs and previous studies about this interaction support her argument. The University of Michigan has developed a test for screening their ITAs to guarantee that their students can have a working relationship with the instructor; many major university campuses have adopted this screening test. Lippi-Green also cites Donald L. Rubin's 1992 study. In this study American students identified an Asian accent in the recording of a lecture spoke by a Caucasian from Ohio when they were looking at a slide on an Asian lecturers. Further more the group that listened to the "Asian-spoken" lecture had more difficulty comprehending the content. In spite of this evidence of blatant discrimination, Lippi-Green acknowledges that universities have only tried to accommodate their money-paying undergraduate students, and they have not tried to develop any means of accommodating the ITAs as constant victims of discrimination.

Previous studies seem to anticipate Lippi-Green's critique in the ways that they have observed the interaction between ITAs and their students. Similar to Lippi-Green's study Mary I. Bresnahan and Min Sun Kim (1993) studied the correlations between receptivity of ITAs and societal factors such as authoritarianism, communal orientation, dogmatism, and individualism. They too conclude that undergraduates' complaints

about ITA are not solely accounted for by language proficiency. Barbara S. Plakens' study (1997) follows up W. Fox's study that uses a very detailed survey to identify how certain demographic populations respond to ITAs. After altering Fox's study, Plakens learned that the most animosity towards ITAs comes from sophomores and juniors, students from rural communities, and students whose GPA is at a C-average or below. In 1993, George Yule and Paul Hoffman advocated using undergraduate students to help in the screening tests of ITAs because they were the audience for ITAs performances. Their tests showed that there were minimal discrepancies between the students' and professional rating of ITAs. Despite these last two studies which demonstrated that discrimination against ITAs may not be as bad as Lippi-Green would argue, Susan Jenkins and Rubin (1993) demonstrate the discrimination can be a two-way street with ITAs. In their study of Chinese TAs, they learned that this population of graduate students often carries ignorant perceptions of American minorities which negatively affects their interaction and evaluation of these students. They recommended that ITAs should be formally trained how to be culturally sensitive, and should be under the discipline's surveillance.

Teacher Training: Richard Young (1990) traces the development of curriculum for training ITAs through three phases: 1) an initial phase that responds institutional pressure to accommodate complaining students and parents; 2) a reform in the curriculum that begins to consider the interested parties, especially the ITAs themselves; and 3) a curriculum renewal that questions whether we really understand all of the issues surrounding the training of ITAs. Through his analysis of these three phases, he makes five recommendations for the future curriculum to train ITAs: 1) The need for theoretically grounded model of effective instruction by ITAs; 2) The need for research into the evaluation of ITA training programs; 3) The need for a valid and reliable test of interactive spoken English proficiency for ITAs; 4) The need to investigate and describe roles for ITAs besides that of lecturer; and 5) The need to investigate native speaking undergraduates' contributions to communication failures in interactions with ITAs. Where Lippi-Green has responded to Young's fifth recommendation, some scholars have made attempts in the last decade to try to fulfill his first recommendation.

Where earlier studies have focused on traditional classroom instruction, recent studies have tried to "capture" ITAs discourse to be used by the ITA for developing their language and pedagogical skills. In 1994, Isobel Stevenson and Jenkins assigned their ITAs journal writing assignments to give them a "risk-free" space to practice their language proficiency. Although the students resisted the assignment, the researchers concluded the assignment is profitable as a means of showing the students that they are receiving institutional support. Also this study, is unique in how it bring literacy proficiency into the development of the ITAs. Video recordings have also been used to "capture" ITAs discourse and classroom behaviors. Dan Douglas and Cindy Myers (1989) splice video clips of their successful ITAs together to create a developmental video for their potential ITAs who did not pass the screening test. These ITAs who were trained with these videos performed more successfully on their next screening test. Although these ITAs were not examining their own practices, the video is effectively used in developmental curriculum to discuss and demonstrate features of the classroom. In another use of video and audio recordings, Catherine E, Davies, Andrea Tyler, and John J. Koran, Jr. solicited the help of American undergraduates to participate in

discipline related discourse with potential ITAs. These conversations were later analyzed to discuss differences between the ITAs current language proficiency and their audience's expectations for their language proficiency. This study is effective in "capturing" the ITAs discourse to be analyzed for knowledge of the subject matter and language proficiency.

Research Questions: For this study I want to move the classroom of a writing intensive course that would be taught by a ITA into a MOO environment to examine how characteristics of virtual educational spaces may differ from real world educational spaces.

- Since MOOs eliminate the issue of pronunciation, what cues reveal ITAs' "otherness"? How do the students respond to these cues? How much of the ITAs subjectivity is hidden by the technology?
- Does the MOO's capability to "capture" everything in the class help the language and pedagogical development of ITAs?

Design

Overview: This study will be an ethnography that will examine the training of ITAs who will be teaching a writing intensive course in a MOO space. I have chosen ethnography for a few reasons. First, most of the research that examined the training of ITAs were ethnographies or case studies. The second reason for choosing ethnography is that this research methodology allows me to "observe many facets of the writers [and instructors] in their writing [and teaching] environments over a long period of time in order to identify, and operationally define, and interrelate variables of the writing [and teaching] act[s] in its context" (Lauer and Asher, p. 39). Because the entire MOO environment (the dialogue, the movement, and the interaction) can be captured in this entire space, this type of study almost begs for ethnographic framework. This obviously does not account for what occurs in real time spaces, such as the teacher training, but it provides an interesting contrast. Because of the varying environments, this is a very context related study. In particular, ethnography is useful tool for examining international students because it allows us to analyze "the institutional context of the schooling, together with the societal pressures on teachers and students" (Watson-Gegeo, p. 586).

Site: Currently I am undecided on a specific site for this study. Although most ITAs tech classes in the hard sciences, like physics, mathematics, and engineering, I would like to conduct this study in a writing intensive course. Some possibilities include Instructional Design, Curriculum Education, Applied Communication, and Freshman Composition. I would have to find a course in a program that has a fairly large ITA population, have an invested interest in the development of their ITAs, and is willing to explore the implications of the technology. My first reason for wanting to explore a writing intensive course is the fact that my pedagogical training is in writing instruction which helps me to examine the effectiveness of the teaching strategies as a factor. If I did a science or engineering class, I feel that I would be mostly examining the literacy event that occurs in the various MOO spaces, but I would not be able to contribute to the discussion the classroom pedagogy. I am not arguing that all writing instruction is the

same; rather I am acknowledging that from a rhetoric/composition position, I may have something to add to the conversation about other discipline's strategies for literacy development. Furthermore, in the triangulation of data, a writing intensive course may yield important comparisons between the ITAs' literacy development and the students' literacy development. The study will occur in three sites, one real time and two virtual: 1) A three hour weekly face-to-face ITA training session taught by an expert in the respective discipline and a linguist; 2) the MOO space where the class is held; and 3) the MOO space where the ITAs hold an unsupervised forum.

Participants: The participants will include five to seven ITAs who are teaching a writing intensive course in a MOO space as they are being mentored. I would like these ITAs to be experienced at teaching this course in real time, so that learning the overall pedagogy of the course is a minimal factor. This study will also examine the students of these five to seven ITAs. Ideally, there will only be fifteen to twenty students per class. The final two participants will conduct the training sessions; they will be an expert in the respective discipline and either a linguist with training in writing or a composition scholar with training in TESOL. These "experts" can be professionals or advanced graduate students. Ideally, their respective disciplines will give them release time (or other suitable compensation) to participate in this study. The discipline specific scholar is needed to facilitate the pedagogical development of the ITA, while the linguist will address the lingual concerns of the ITAs.

Researchers: I suspect that I, as a participant-observer, will be the only researcher for this study. Although I am concerned about my role as the observer of the ITA MOO; I wonder how my surveillance will affect the dynamics of this atmosphere. Therefore, if I were to incorporate another researcher, I would maybe ask another researcher to observe this space.

Data Collection: Prior to the collection of data there will be a pretest to work through many of the issues that could arise because of the technology.

Pretest:

Use MOO space for the two potential mentors to do a pilot of the course that their mentees will teach the following semester. Either each mentor will teach one section each or they will team-teach two sections. This would be enacting participatory action research because the researcher and the two mentors would be studying the process of the course to make suggestions how to revise the process. During this semester the researcher will observe the classes, discuss the class with the two mentors, and read the transcripts from the class sessions. At the same time and after the semester, the researcher and the two mentors will collaborate on pedagogical strategies that may need to be addressed in the teacher training the following semester.

- Look at common problems with the technology or how the students responded to the technology.
- Study the various contexts to determine what activities are most successfully completed. For example, examine how well the instructors' instructions were completed by the students.

- Get students to respond to how conducive this space was to their academic development in this course. From the students' responses, determine how comfortable they felt in this space.
- If either mentor has an international background, examine the effect of the language proficiency on the student's response in this space.

Teacher Training

In the weekly mentoring session the two mentors (the discipline-specific expert and the linguist) will help the ITAs develop their pedagogical strategies, especially in computer mediated classrooms, linguistic proficiency. The training will begin the week prior to the semester to get the ITAs acquainted with the technology. For three hours each week, during the semesters, the students will study the transcripts from each ITA's class to discuss issues of language proficiency, pedagogy, and classroom management.

- In these meetings, the researcher will act as a participant/observer and take notes on the behavior and interaction between all of the participants.
- The mentors will take notes on the ITAs' work in these meetings and what they can do to facilitate the training of each ITA.

The Teaching Module

The assignments and activities will be similar to the goals of the real-time course, but altered to be conducive to this technological space. I anticipate that some of the class time will be held both synchronously and asynchronously. For this study, each participating ITA will be asked to maintain uniformity with their mentors' prescribed syllabus.

- The transcripts will be records of every action, interaction, and manipulation that occurs during the class session.
- Student assignments (classwork, homework, and essays) can be helpful in two ways. 1) These works are products that reflect how the students are responding to the ITAs' instruction; 2) Depending on the subject of the course, these assignments may elicit responses from students about subjects such as technology use, subjectivity, ITAs that reflect the students attitudes towards these subjects. The ITAs' response to these works would also be useful data.
- ITA Responses will be collected four times throughout the semester to be compared to conversations in ITA MOO. These responses will address questions of comfort with the technology, relationship with the class (maybe commenting on particular students), comments on assignments and activities, and general comments or concerns. These will be collected and examined by the researcher only.
- Student Responses will be collected four times throughout the semester (about once every four weeks) to trace the students' attitudes throughout the semester. The questions are meant to be general, and to a certain degree obvious, to give the students the freedom to elaborate on specific features of the class that they personally want to highlight. Students will be asked to respond to these questions:
 - Describe: the courses' goals, the effectiveness of this technological space, the use of class time, and the instructor's communicative skills.

- What have you learned from this instructor?
- Have you felt that your expertise has exceeded instructors' at something? If so, what? How did you feel about this?
- Campus facilitated Student Evaluations can provide information that students may not have given in the student responses.
- Research Notes will be taken on the researchers occasional visits to each ITA's class (at least once or twice a semester). This will provide information to compare to other data collected.

ITA MOO

This listserv-like forum provides a space where the students can discuss issues of language proficiency, pedagogy, and classroom management without being supervised by the mentors (yet being observed by the researcher).

- The transcripts from this space will allow the researcher to study the students' language proficiency when they chat apart from their student and mentor audiences. The language proficiency here will be compared to the language proficiency in the Module.
- These transcripts also provide the ITAs' feelings about the class, the syllabus, their students, and the technology. Many unrelated topics may be discussed here too.

Analysis: In Figure 3, I have designed how the data collected in each of the three spaces will overlap with data collected in another space. I also illustrate how language proficiency, as it is practiced, and discussed, will be central to the analysis of the data. Both the data related to the discussion and practice of pedagogy and classroom management will be analyzed as a tangential force that affects the proficiency and further affects the students' attitudes towards the ITAs in the MOO space. Yet the data collected may reveal that this space inverts the relationship between language proficiency and pedagogical competency as the primary feature that students respond to.

Conclusion

Problems: I anticipate the following problems...

- This project is daunting. There is a lot of factors that have to be incorporate into this research project to make it work. Finding a site may be a problem because I need to find a discipline that at the very least values writing, values the development of their ITAs and respects technology. And the discipline has five to seven section of the same writing intensive course to dedicate to this pilot experiment. Then I will have to find five to seven ITAs within this discipline who would be willing to experiment with the technology. And I would have to hope anywhere from seventy-five to a hundred students would be willing to take a class that is being offered in MOO space. Furthermore, I would have to find a discipline-specific expert and a linguist that would be willing to participate in this yearlong study. And I would have to gaurantee that all participants are properly compensated. This raise the issues of *qui pro qou*, what can I offer to the participants of study? My initial response to this

question is that they receive an alternative, and hopefully more effective teaching space for their ITAs. But I am unsure if this is enough.

- This project may not get at the issue of subjectivity the way that I want it to. The way that the study is currently design, it seems to attempt to eliminate the ITAs' subjectivity so that the students do not have to deal with this issue. In essence, this seems to ignore the issues that this study is designed to address. But since this would be a pilot study, I would want to use this as an opportunity to evaluate how the students respond to limited subjectivity cues. From this evaluation I can draw some implications for gauging how much of the ITAs subjectivity should be forefronted in future uses of this pedagogical space.
- Because a lot of the scholarship on training ITAs concentrates on their speaking abilities, and I am asking ITAs to work in spaces that only focus on the their writing abilities, I will have to extrapolate from the scholarship linguistic generalities that cross the divide between orality and literacy. But I anticipate that it may be difficult to construct parts of my theoretical framework because of minimal analysis of "written accent" in non-essay discourse or the "written accent" of ITAs.
- I am wondering if there needs to be a comparison of the work produced by students taught in these modules to students taught in the real-time versions of this course. But since this study focuses more on the development of the ITAs, I wonder how tangential this data would be.
- Technology is a "wild card" factor. Because the technology may be so new to some students, it will be difficult to filter out which data results are caused mostly by the technology and which results can be attributed to other features of the study, such as the foreign subjectivity of the ITA.

Hopes:

- I do not want to learn that that this space eliminates subjectivity, rather I hope that this study reveals that MOOs are a conducive space for students and ITAs to learn and explore how subjectivity is constructed both virtually and in real time spaces. This would be the ideal way for subjectivity to be addressed in this study.
- I hope the literacy event eliminates issues of pronunciation, even as it is manifested in written access.
- The study should raise some questions about MOOs being conducive for the training of any teaching assistants. Mostly MOOs have the capability to record the events of the class which the mentors and TAs can study later to discuss pedagogical development or in the case of ITAs, language development as well. This would eventually lead into inquiries about the panoptic surveillance of the TAs over the students and the mentors over the TAs (a possibly the institution over the program).
- I hope that this study stimulates further inquiry for scholars concerned with training ITAs to teach courses in the hard sciences.

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