

Bridging Academic Culture Gaps for International Teaching Assistants

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Abstract

The International Teaching Assistants Program at Simon Fraser University has been supporting international teaching assistants and graduate students since 1992 with a curriculum specially designed to offer integrated academic communication and TA training to international teaching assistants and graduate students. This presentation will highlight the program curriculum development over the years and share training activities that achieved their learning outcomes and received positive reviews from participants and other stakeholders.

Background

The rapid increase in international/English-as-an-Additional-Language (EAL) student enrollment in recent years has changed the demographics of North American campuses. The change is not only in the feel and look of campuses, but most noticeably in the classroom dynamics. International Teaching Assistants contribute to parts of this shift. While international students and TAs bring new perspectives and diversity to North American classrooms, many post-secondary institutions have identified emerging needs to integrate diverse teaching, learning, and communication styles in order to truly benefit from the diversity and maintain academic standards.

More universities and other post-secondary institutions have come to realize that standardized language proficiency test scores are not sufficient indicators of how well prospective students would integrate into the academic system and campus culture. Furthermore, many post-secondary institutions are recognizing that preparatory and remedial courses focusing on language alone are not effective to integrate ITAs and EAL graduate students into the academic community on campus. These realizations resulted in more support programs that address the academic cultural transitions for international/EAL students and teaching assistants.

The International Teaching Assistants Program at Simon Fraser University was first established in 1992. From its early days, the program recognized that its trainees' needs were beyond perceived language proficiency issues and formulated its training curriculum accordingly. The program interviewed all interested participants before training commenced and offered small group classes based on the needs identified at the entry assessment. While many trainees' self-assessment focused on language needs during the interview process, underlining communication issues would emerge and highlight various cultural differences. These differences are both in form and substance. An example for the former is the well-cited linear presentation of logical reasoning vs. circumlocution. Differences in

substance are often culturally based. These often manifest themselves as unfamiliarity with common references and contexts in the North American academic culture. These are often narrowly identified as lack of knowledge of idioms and vocabularies and therefore more likely to re-enforce the perception of language deficiency.

The ITA Training Curriculum

With over 20 years of offering support to international TAs and EAL graduate students, the ITA Program's curriculum has integrated various aspects of academic culture and communication with instructional skills training. The curriculum components include:

- Critical Pedagogy
- Active Listening
- Teaching vs. Lecturing
- Academic vs. Everyday Linguistic Registers
- Pop Culture and Campus Life

Critical Pedagogy

This has consistently been identified as an issue of significance with international/EAL students and TAs from a hierarchical academic tradition in which authorities are seldom questioned. Learners from this tradition would demonstrate passivity in the classroom. They would seem unengaged while deferential to their teachers. As teaching assistants they are more easily intimidated by questions. Many such learners often recognize the issue as soon as they arrive at their North American post-secondary institution. Because of the recognition, the ITA program participants are receptive to training activities that reorient their learning approach based on plurality. One of the warm-up activities at the beginning of the ITA Program often involves a discussion about a commonly occurring situation in a campus setting. Participants are encouraged to share their views and suggest solutions to the situation. The discussion invariably results in a diversity of perspectives on the situation. Thus, participants experience first-hand that an apparent simple situation could result in many different perspectives, including those from people who share similar cultural backgrounds. Such recognition of the existence of multiple perspectives is helpful and conducive to critical analysis of not only academic publications but other media materials.

Example of ITA Training Activities

Group discussions: In the ITA Seminar at SFU, the instructor facilitates many discussions about Canadian culture and the cultures of the participants, encouraging students to reflect on how perspectives and behavior may impact intercultural situations. The seminar aims to highlight how intercultural communication is a common part of the Canadian experience and identity since Canadian cities and towns are characterized by pluralism, not only characterized by race and ethnicity, but also other determinants of identity (such as sexual orientation, faith, interests, political affiliations, etc.). An example of an activity attempted to illustrate the complexity of Canadian identity is by juxtaposing the Molson Canadian “I am Canadian” commercial with a clip of Canadian stand-up comedian Russell Peters, in which he talks about his Indo-Canadian heritage and his immigrant father’s humorous attempts at becoming a “real” Canadian. There are also discussions about LGBT communities to convey how ‘out’ members of these communities are part of the mainstream culture in Canada now, particularly in urban areas.

These explorations of culture and intercultural communication take place within group discussions. The ITA instructor explicitly provides suggestions and guidelines for how to successfully take part in group discussions in an academic setting. In addition to modeling best practices for leading seminar discussions, the instructor provides participants with opportunities to lead group discussions themselves. A class of up to twelve participants is divided into smaller groups of three or four to respond to open-ended questions about their cultural experiences and their opinions about topics related to culture and intercultural situations. Frequently, the smaller groups reconvene in the larger group and discussion leaders share a summary of their discussion with the rest of the class. Employing different group arrangements allows participants to experience group dynamics on various scales and to practice their public speaking in both small groups in addition to a seminar setting. Getting discussions started in smaller groups of three or four also encourages more timid participants to practice formulating their responses in a less intimidating situation before they speak in front of the whole group.

Active Listening

Although North Americans are regarded as having a “low-context” communication style, in which meanings are more clearly spelled out (Hall,

1976), participants in the ITA Program often are surprised by how much contextual clues are imbedded in familiar-sounding words. An example of this often given by seminar participants is that in many everyday encounters, they are not able to grasp the meaning of an utterance even though they know every individual word in the utterance. The strategies they have learned in previous EAL/ESL training activities, which mostly focus on words and syntax, do not help as they often cause the learners to “lose the big picture” in real life exchanges. In the ITA Program, participants learn to actively pick up non-verbal contextual clues for comprehension. For example, in watching a piece of news coverage, participants are instructed to focus on the overall context first, while paying attention to tones and expressions of interlocutors, and selecting key words for comprehending key messages. Participants report much improved comprehension in their general interactions using this technique (Steinberg, 2007).

Example of ITA Training Activities

Contextual cues: One of the activities some ITA instructors use is to play a video clip in a muted mode. Participants are forced to glean information from all the non-verbal cues such as the setting/context, appearances, facial expressions, body language etc. They are often amazed at how much information they are able to obtain without hearing a word uttered (Steinberg, 2007).

Teaching vs. Lecturing

Another major challenge that many international/EAL students and TAs encounter is the way classroom activities are organized in North American classrooms. Many of these learners are from academic cultures in which teachers wield all the answers and students are only required to take and memorize notes. If they ask questions, it is often for clarification purposes only. These learners are often at a loss when their North American professors or instructors ask for their views on a reading assignment or an experiment. This discomfort also extends into the teaching style of many ITAs. A common sight of a new ITA in the classroom is that they read from their prepared lecture notes and are often not able to handle the questions their students ask. The ITA Program explores the North American classroom dynamic and encourages students to interact more as equals with their teachers.

Example of ITA Training Activities

Asking questions: Early on in the program ITA Program participants discuss the more collegial relationships between graduate students and professors and other instructional personnel, and how learning is achieved by asking questions (which can be asked by either the students or the professors). Furthermore, the ITA participants learn that it is OK to say “I don’t know” without regarding it a failure on their part. They practice different ways of saying “I don’t know” and learn to follow up in the subsequent tutorials to achieve the desired learning results.

Icebreaker: Other ways participants are provided with opportunities to sharpen their skills as TAs and graduate students in a Canadian university are by leading icebreaker activities and by engaging in group problem-solving of various TA and intercultural scenarios presented by the instructor or by the participants themselves. Having participants role play scenarios in front of the class is not only fun, but it encourages more timid students to overcome their stage fright in a safe and supportive environment. Ultimately, these role plays, and the discussions they evoke, provide insight into a variety of situations these international graduate students may encounter in academic contexts and in everyday intercultural situations.

Public speaking: Throughout the 10-week seminar course, ITA participants give two presentations on their respective fields or the research they are currently engaged in. The goal of the presentations is to share with the group about their specializations. The instructor stresses the importance of being mindful of the audience and adapting the information they are conveying to an appropriate level so it is well suited to a group of diverse academic backgrounds. Broader discussions are facilitated by the instructor about what is good teaching and what an effective lesson/seminar presentation consists of.

Academic vs. Everyday Linguistic Registers

This is a lesser known or recognized area but one that many international/EAL students and TAs find difficult to navigate. While some may struggle with addressing their professors by their first names, they often come across as being overly casual and familiar in their verbal and written expressions. Some of this difficulty may also have their origins in oversimplified presentations of English-speaking cultures in various ESL/EAL learning materials that learners encountered

before coming to North America. In the ITA Seminar, awareness of registers is part of the communication training. Program participants are exposed to various real-life verbal and written examples. They also get to practice with email assignments that address to different recipients.

Example of ITA Training Activities

Role playing: Role playing exercises offer opportunities for ITA participants to demonstrate what they know about linguistic registers and for the instructor, in turn, to offer suggestions on how to convey appropriate registers and nuances in different scenarios. One role play that takes place during a seminar dealing with intercultural interactions presents a scenario in which an international student, who is used to more traditionally respectful forms of address in his home country, speaks candidly with his thesis supervisor to resolve his uncertainty about how to address her since he has observed Canadian students calling this professor by her first name. Another exercise focuses on linguistic registers when writing emails. ITA participants are asked to reply as TAs to a few mock student emails. Reviewing these email replies with the group offers plentiful opportunities to discuss questions of tone, formality, and forms of address in the context of email correspondence between university TAs and students.

Pop Culture and Campus Life

Campus life is a very important aspect of a student's academic career. What is experienced in other parts of the campus often carries into the classroom. While many international/EAL students and TAs want to be part of the campus life, they often find themselves isolated from the mainstream campus culture. Many ITA Program participants relate to not being able to easily make friends in class or on campus. They feel deflated with not being able to mingle at social gatherings as they do not follow a lot of the conversations that are filled with pop culture references. As a result, they stay within their own cultural group and speak their own languages. On many social media postings, international/EAL students complain that they speak less English on North American campuses than they did back home. The ITA Seminar incorporated pop culture into its training curriculum early on. The materials are rich not only in cultural contents but insight into the society and common values. Many ITA participants continue their interest in this realm long after their training with the program, and become very well integrated into their subsequent professional and social circles.

Example of ITA Training Activities

Introducing pop culture: The instructor encourages seminar participants to improve their conversational skills and observe some cultural differences by choosing an English-language program to follow (a TV show or a podcast, for example.) Opportunities are provided during the 10-week seminar for participants to casually talk about their chosen programs, and a presentation is assigned at one point to highlight an interesting cultural observation the student has about the show. This activity also offers opportunities to discuss cultural nuances that are more difficult for international/EAL students to grasp, such as North American humour.

Summary

While there are workshops and other types of training available for international/EAL graduate students who are undertaking TA positions for the first time, the ITA Seminar consistently focuses more on the communication skills and intercultural competencies they need to be able to integrate well and succeed in a Canadian university setting. Although the ITA curriculum has been revamped a number of times to answer the needs of the changing student demographics at SFU, the feedback to the training from its participants have been consistently positive. Over the years, the program has seen many of its former participants thrive in their academic careers at SFU and beyond. The program is currently seeking to work more in coordination with CELLTR (Centre for English Language Learning, Teaching and Research, a newly established EAL support service with centralized resources at SFU) and other student support organizations on campus to provide the best and most accessible support for international TAs and graduate students.

References

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