

# **Implications of Student Evaluations of Teaching for ITA Development**

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**Abstract**

The present study evaluated the teaching effectiveness of international teaching assistants (ITAs) who participated in the TA English Program at the University of Minnesota. Student evaluation data were collected from 1,517 students enrolled in 115 sections of 19 different courses taught by 47 ITAs in mathematics, physics, chemistry, and sociology. Results indicated that the large majority of the respondents rated the overall teaching quality of their ITAs as good or better and that the mean ratings for all teaching behaviors and English language skills were above the acceptable point on the scale. Differences between departments were found to be significant on 25 of 29 items, while student characteristics were found to account for only six to 16% of the variance. A factor analysis found that students rate their ITAs in the same ways that they rate native English speaking TAs, that students in the same classes rated their ITAs differently, and that students who rate their ITAs as low in English language proficiency skills also identify such factors as TA rapport with students, success in creating a comfortable environment, and ability to maintain student interest in the material as crucial to successful ITA classroom performance.

### **Implications of Student Evaluations of Teaching for ITA Development**

A common reason for the initiation of international teaching assistant (ITA) development programs on U. S. university campuses is the frequent complaint of undergraduate students that the speech of ITAs in the classroom is not comprehensible. Programs for the development of ITAs most often address the problem of ITA comprehensibility through a combination of instruction and practice in the areas of English language communication skills, cultural awareness, and teaching skills. Once such a program is in operation, an appropriate question to ask is whether undergraduate students perceive the performance of ITAs who have completed the program to be at an acceptable level for classroom instruction.

The literature on how learning is affected by having a non-English speaking instructor and/or how students evaluate non-English speaking ITAs is limited. A study by Watts and Lynch (1989) suggested that having ITAs who spoke English as a second language had a negative effect on course performance. A more recent study by Horvath and Norris (1990) examined the relationship between three instructor characteristics and student achievement, and found a negative effect for inexperienced teaching assistants, but a positive effect for non-English speaking ITAs.

The literature regarding student evaluation of ITAs (Keye, 1981; Orth 1982; Bailey, Pialorsi, and Zukowski/Faust, 1984; Lalande and Strasser, 1987; and Inglis, 1988) suggests that results of student evaluation of instruction can play an important role in developing programs to improve the teaching of ITAs. How students evaluate their teachers, however, depends somewhat on the characteristics and previous experiences of the students. A review by de Wolf (1974) describes 76 different student characteristics related to student ratings of instruction, one of which is amount of travel experience the student has had. Students' lack of experience in intercultural communication also plays an important role in their ratings of ITA classroom performance (vom Saal, 1987).

Student ratings form the basis of a well-developed research literature on evaluation of teaching. Because students' ratings vary as a function of instructor, course, and student characteristics, research has tended to address the structure of the ratings and identification of variables (e.g. whether or not the course is required) that influence or confound ratings (Braskamp, Brandenberg, and Ory, 1984; Centra, 1981).

Factor analysis of student ratings has been a common procedure to determine the underlying structure of instructional effectiveness as perceived by students. Dimensions commonly identified in factor analytic studies of student ratings are organization and presentation of course material, instructor-student interaction and rapport, and communication and global teaching skill (Feldman, 1976; Kulik and McKeachie, 1975). The importance of communication and rapport between students and their instructors for effective instruction is apparent from this literature. Although communication is usually characterized more broadly than language proficiency, ratings of communication and teaching effectiveness may be affected by the instructor's ability to speak the language of the classroom. Cultural differences involving role expectations of instructors and students may also affect classroom rapport. Difficulties related to either communication or to culture may alter the criteria students use in rating teaching effectiveness, resulting in a different factor structure.

When the collection of student evaluations involves multiple classrooms and instructors, the impact of individual student differences can be eliminated by using the average class rating as the preferred unit of analysis (Abrami, 1985; Cranton and Smith, 1990). Using students pooled across classes as the unit of analysis is appropriate, however, if there are identifiable subgroups within the overall group of students who are similar in characteristics that relate to rating and who differ in terms of these characteristics from the other subgroups. These differences may lead to discernible differences in the underlying structure of instructional effectiveness as well as differences in ratings of the instructor. Given the importance of ITA classroom communication and the frequency with which students complain about ITA

comprehensibility, student ratings of ITA English language proficiency may be such a subgroup characteristic.

The present study makes use of the literature on student ratings to examine the undergraduate rating of ITAs who participated in the TA English Program at the University of Minnesota. The TA English Program assists up to 95 non-native English speaking ITAs per quarter in the development of the linguistic, cultural, and teaching skills they need for success in the U. S. university classroom. At the time of the study, ITAs enrolled in the program participated in a 27-hour course in classroom communication skills consisting of nine weeks of two hours of small group instruction and videotaped microteaching and one hour of individual tutorial.

The purposes of the study were four: (a) to describe how undergraduate students evaluated the teaching of ITAs who had participated in the TA English Program; (b) to identify disciplinary differences in student attitudes and evaluations of ITAs; (c) to determine the relevance of individual difference variables in how students evaluated their ITAs; and (d) to study the structure and dependability of student ratings in courses taught by ITAs.

### Method

A student evaluation survey was used to collect data from students in recitation and lab sections taught by ITAs. The instrument included five types of items suggested by Allen and Rueter (1990): general effectiveness, planning and organizing skills, classroom communication, interpersonal skills, and grading and evaluation practices. Of the 47 ITAs whose students were surveyed, most (91.5%) were male. For over half (57.4%), their native language was Chinese. About half (46.8%) had actively studied English for more than five years here or in their country.

A total of 1,517 student evaluation surveys were collected during the last three weeks of spring quarter 1990 from 115 sections of courses taught in mathematics (38 sections), physics (57 sections), chemistry (16 sections), and sociology (4 sections). The sections were

in 19 different courses, the large majority of which were introductory level courses. Given the nature and level of the courses taught by the teaching assistants, it is not surprising that 71.7% of the students surveyed were first or second year undergraduate students and 64.0% were male. The course being taken was a required course for 87.3% of the students.

### Results

The results are reported according to the four purposes outlined in the evaluation design. The student evaluation instrument consisted of 60 items, but results are presented here for only 29 items which have been divided into six variable types: overall rating, learning rating, specific teaching behaviors, English language skills, perceived course impact, and classroom interactions.

#### Overall results

The overall results provide a sense of how effective the TA English Program was in preparing the 47 ITAs for classroom responsibilities. The results in Table 1 indicate that the mean rating (4.2) for the ITAs' overall teaching quality was between "good" and "very good" on a seven-point scale. Over three-fourths (78.1%) rated their ITAs as "good" or better on this scale. On the five-point scale which reflected a self-rating of amount of learning, the mean (3.0) was at the "much" point on the scale. About five percent of the students said they learned "little" in the section.

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Insert Table 1 about here.

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The 16 specific teaching behaviors on the survey were positively evaluated by the students. Means were above the acceptable level for all items. The two items with the highest ratings were: the TA's knowledge of the material being presented, and the TA's fairness in

grading. The rating item with the lowest mean was for the TA's success in getting students interested in and involved with the subject matter.

Although the means for the seven items dealing English language skills were slightly lower than the means for the teaching behaviors, all means were above the acceptable point on the scale. Ratings were highest for speech volume and lowest for pronunciation and fluency. These findings are consistent with the recommendations of the 47 ITAs in the study, who indicated that they believed even more emphasis should be placed on pronunciation and fluency in the TA English Program.

Although a large majority of students did not think being taught by an ITA had any effect on either their better understanding of other cultures or their interest in learning another language, some students thought there were positive effects. About one-fourth (24.2%) saw positive effects in terms of interest in better understanding other cultures and 15.0% saw positive effects in terms of interest in learning other languages.

Finally, responses to the two classroom interaction questions suggested that students were no more or less likely to interact with their ITAs than with other TAs with whom they had studied.

These results indicate the success of the TA English Program in that the large majority of the undergraduate students of these 47 graduates of the TA English Program rated their ITAs as good or better and considered them to be at the acceptable level or greater in both language and teaching skills. The undergraduates were most critical of the pronunciation, fluency, and motivational skills of ITAs, three areas which already received great emphasis in the TA English Program but demanded even greater attention. The results also indicated that 21.5% of the undergraduates responding found ITA success in motivating interest and involvement in the subject was poor to very poor, 26.1% felt the ITA's fluency was poor to very poor, and 23.2% felt the ITA's pronunciation was poor to very poor. The TA English Program can, in general, be praised for accomplishing what it set out to do, it is clear that some undergraduate students are still not satisfied with the results.

Departmental Differences

As previously noted, studies on the evaluation of teaching indicate that differences in student ratings may be due to more factors than the instructor or the instructor's training. One area of difference for student evaluation of ITAs may lie in the ways departments recruit and supervise ITAs or in interdisciplinary differences regarding teaching strategies. Accordingly, the information displayed in Table 1 was analyzed for departmental differences. Because an agreement was made with participating departments not to identify ITA ratings in the study by department, low and high results are reported here without specific departmental designations. Table 2 lists the lowest and highest of the four departmental means for each item, only a few of which were below the acceptable level, and whether or not the differences between the four means were statistically significant.

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Insert Table 2 about here.

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For 25 of the 29 items, the differences between departments were statistically significant. The largest difference concerned the TA's use of specific teaching examples and the TA's fairness in grading, two items which are often thought to vary greatly across disciplines. Differences in the rating of each of the seven English language skills suggest that departmental differences in perceived ITA language skills were still present after the ITAs participated in the TA English Program.

These findings suggest that there are differences in the way students from different departments rate ITA classroom performance. The differences are not easily separable, however, from such things as the particular TOEFL score a department requires for admission to its graduate program, the degree to which a department emphasizes the need for excellence in

classroom communication skills among TAs, or the teaching strategies considered appropriate within a particular discipline.

### Student Characteristics

Additional sources of variation in student ratings of ITAs can be such student characteristics as year in school, college, gender, size of home community, native language, past experience with non-native speakers of English, past experience with TAs and ITAs, grade point average, expected course grade, reason for course enrollment, and self-rated motivation and ability to do well in the course. In order to examine the effect of these student characteristics on student ratings, four categories of student characteristic variables were constructed: student demographics, international experience, college status, and course expectations.

The six categories of overall rating, learning rating, specific teaching behaviors, English language skills, perceived course impact, and classroom interactions were used as criterion variables in a series of multiple regression analyses to examine the role of four categories of student characteristics variables. The results indicate that the four student characteristics variables account for only six to 16% of the variance in the six criterion variables. Table 3 lists the predictor type and specific predictors found for each of the six criterion variables.

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Insert Table 3 about here.

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The particular variables which did enter into the prediction equation were generally consistent with those noted in studies of generalizability of student ratings. An example of this is that variables representing individual differences related to the specific course (e.g. self-rated motivation to do well) were most likely to be major contributors in the significant multiple correlations. The fact that the variable of international experience added to the

predictability is consistent with much of the literature suggesting that undergraduate reaction to ITAs may be a function of their experiences with individuals from other cultures. Only a small amount of variance was accounted for with the four student characteristic variables, indicating that the background information collected on the undergraduate respondents in this study was not sufficient to explain the variation in their reactions to their ITA instructors.

#### Structure and Dependability of Student Ratings

In order to investigate additional ways that student differences that can account for ratings of ITAs, the survey data for those ITAs who taught two or more sections was analyzed once more to obtain the factor structure and estimate the dependability of ratings. In this analysis, 19 items were used, (i.e. 14 specific teacher behaviors, three overall teaching items, and two items on the impact of the teaching). Factor analysis and analysis of variance were used to determine whether the structure of the ratings was similar to that of native English speaking instructors, to identify the primary sources of variance in the ratings, and to assess whether students who perceived the English proficiency of their ITA as low had a different definition of teaching effectiveness than those who perceived their ITA's English proficiency to be at a medium or high proficiency level.

The factor structure was found to be similar to that for native English speakers, indicating that students used similar definitions of teaching effectiveness in rating both native and non-native English speaking instructors. A factor analysis of 76 classes, using class as the unit of analysis, yielded a one-factor solution which explained 31% of the variance. Loadings from nine of the 19 items exceeded .50 on this global factor, including instructor rapport with students, answers to questions, fairness in grading, comfortable learning environment, and overall rating of the course. Although factor analytic structures of student ratings vary across studies, instructor rapport with student is a commonly identified dimension.

Possible sources of variance in the ratings are the instructor, class (the unique mix of students, instructor, room, etc.), students, and questionnaire items. To generalize ratings, it

was assumed that class and items are minor sources of variance, and that the variance attributed to the instructor equals or exceeds that attributed to the students. Results indicate that the variance attributed to class and items was indeed minor, but the variance attributed to the students far exceeded that attributed to the instructor. This indicates that students in the same class rated the instructor differently by reporting different instructional experiences.

In examining student ratings of the English of their ITA instructors, it was found that students often disagreed with each other; 29 of the 47 ITAs (62%) received at least one low rating, but only three ITAs received low ratings from more than 25% of their students. In accordance with this finding, students were divided into three subgroups based on how they rated their ITA's English proficiency. The ratings for each of these subgroups were factor analyzed, using the ratings to describe students rather than instructors. If the factor solutions were found to be the same, the differences in perceived English proficiency would be judged to be unrelated to ratings of teaching effectiveness; if the solutions were found to differ, then the differences in perceived English proficiency could be added to an explanation of student ratings.

For all three student subgroups with low, medium, and high perceptions of their ITA's English proficiency, the items of overall rating of the instructor, overall rating of the course, and self-rating of the amount learned loaded on the first factor. Ratings on these three items are generally consistent with one's impression of teaching effectiveness, regardless of the ratings given for more specific items such as rapport or use of examples.

The low proficiency subgroup factor structure, however, differed from that of the high and medium proficiency subgroups. Additional items loading on the first factor for the high and medium subgroups indicated that these two groups defined teaching effectiveness as TA knowledge of material, amount of material presented, organization of material, level of difficulty of material, use of examples, and use of visuals and blackboard. These items are consistent with the commonly found course organization and structure factor. The items loading on the first factor for the low proficiency subgroup indicated that this group defined teaching effectiveness differently through such items as TA rapport with students, success in creating a

comfortable environment, and ability to maintain student interest in the material. These items are consistent with the commonly found instructor-student interaction and rapport factor. Students in the low proficiency subgroup also rated the instructional effectiveness of their ITA significantly lower.

It may be that students who define teaching effectiveness in terms of instructor-student interaction and rapport have found cultural differences in mannerisms or teaching style to be unfamiliar, which leads to a reduction of comfort and prevents them from viewing their ITA as proficient in English or classroom instruction. These results indicate that the learning preferences of students may be as important in understanding the differences in instructional effectiveness ratings as English language proficiency. Students who are not able to verbalize their discomfort with an ITA's teaching style may attribute it to insufficient English language skills.

This result not only underlines the necessity of training ITAs in techniques of establishing rapport in the classroom but also can be seen as evidence in support of establishing programs to orient undergraduate students in successful ways of interacting with their ITAs. Without such training, this subgroup of undergraduates may persist in viewing their ITAs as deficient in English regardless of their actual level of English language proficiency.

### Summary

The teaching effectiveness of 47 ITAs who participated in the TA English Program at the University of Minnesota was evaluated through the collection of 1,517 surveys from students enrolled in 115 sections of 19 different courses in mathematics, physics, chemistry, and sociology. The overall success of the program in preparing ITAs for the classroom was demonstrated by the fact that most respondents rated the overall teaching quality of their ITAs as good or better and indicated that the teaching behaviors and English language skills of their ITAs were above the acceptable point on the scale. Further analysis of the results revealed

significant differences between departments that are difficult to separate from departmental differences in admission standards, support for ITA excellence in teaching performance, and preferred teaching strategies. Student characteristics were found to account for only a small percentage of the variance, while a factor analysis found that although students rate their ITAs on the same criteria as they rate native English speaking TAs, students in the same classroom may have very different instructional experiences with their ITAs, which result in differential student ratings. Those students who rate their ITAs as low in English language proficiency skills identify such factors as TA rapport with students, success in creating a comfortable environment, and ability to maintain student interest in the material as crucial to successful ITA classroom performance and may interpret cultural differences which inhibit teacher student rapport as ITA deficiencies in English language skills.

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Table 1

Undergraduates' evaluations of international teaching assistants

Variable Type Question	x
<u>Overall Rating<sup>a</sup></u> Overall, how would you rate your TA's teaching in this lab/recitation section this quarter?	4.2
<u>Learning Rating<sup>b</sup></u> How much have you learned in this TA's lab/recitation section this quarter?	3.0
<u>Specific Teaching Behaviors<sup>c</sup></u>	
The TA's knowledge of the material being presented in this laboratory/recitation is:	4.3
The TA's organization of the material for this lab/recitation section is:	3.9
The amount of material the TA presents in this lab/recitation section is:	3.8
The level of difficulty of the material the TA presents in this lab/section is:	3.7
The TA's use of specific examples to help us understand the general concepts of this lab/recitation section is:	3.6
The material the TA writes on the blackboard or presents visually is:	3.9
The TA's awareness of how well we understand the material is:	3.3
The TA's success in getting me interested and involved in the subject of this lab/recitation section is:	3.2
The TA's success in creating a comfortable learning environment is:	3.7
The TA's rapport with me as a student is:	3.6
The TA's encouragement of student questions and discussion is:	3.6
When I or other students ask questions, the TA's understanding of what we are saying is:	3.5
The TA's answers to our questions are:	3.6
The TA's fairness in grading lab reports, assignments, quizzes, and/or exams is:	4.1
The quality of the textbook(s), handouts, and other written materials for this course is:	3.6
The quality of the facilities where this laboratory/recitation section is held is:	3.7
<u>English Language Skills<sup>c</sup></u>	
Understanding of TA's pronunciation (clear sounds)	3.1
TA's rate of speech (not too fast or too slow)	3.5
TA's fluency of speech (smooth and easy to listen to)	3.1
TA's volume of speech (not too loud or too soft)	3.7
TA's spoken grammar (correct and understandable)	3.3
TA's vocabulary (accurate and understandable)	3.5
TA's listening comprehension (understands student questions and comments)	3.5
<u>Perceived Course Impact<sup>d</sup></u>	
What effect has being taught by this international TA had on your interest in better understanding other cultures?	3.2
What effect has being taught by this international TA had on your interest in learning other languages?	3.1
<u>Classroom Interactions<sup>e</sup></u>	
How likely are you to ask this TA a question during a typical class session?	3.3
How likely are you to speak individually with this TA before or after the sessions or during office hours?	3.0

<sup>a</sup>Responses were coded on a seven-point scale from 1=Little to 7=An Exceptional amount.<sup>b</sup>Responses were coded on a five-point scale from 1=Very poor to 5=Exceptionally good.<sup>c</sup>Responses were coded on a five-point scale from 1=Very poor to 5=Very good.<sup>d</sup>Responses were coded on a five-point scale from 1=Very negative to 5=Very positive.<sup>e</sup>Responses were coded on a five-point scale from 1=Much less likely to 5=Much more likely.

**Table 2****Departmental comparisons in students' evaluations of courses taught by 47 international teaching assistants**

Variable Type Question	Low Mean	High Mean	F-ratio
<b>Overall Rating</b>			
Overall rating of TA's teaching	3.99	4.70	11.84 ***
<b>Learning Rating</b>			
How much have you learned in this TA's lab/recitation section this quarter?	3.94	4.44	15.77 ***
<b>Specific Teaching Behaviors</b>			
TA's knowledge of the material	4.07	4.54	25.53 ***
TA's organization of the material	3.63	4.00	5.64 ..
Amount of material the TA presents	3.46	3.83	4.87
Level of difficulty of the material the TA presents	3.46	3.85	15.03 ***
TA's use of specific examples	3.34	4.09	58.23
Material the TA writes on the blackboard or presents visually	3.61	4.02	5.63 ***
TA's awareness of how well we understand	3.11	3.34	1.35
TA's success in getting me interested and involved	3.06	3.30	2.24
TA's success in creating a comfortable learning environment	3.67	3.74	0.30 ...
TA's rapport with me	3.49	3.79	5.42
TA's encouragement of student questions and discussion	3.42	3.90	17.13 ***
TA's understanding of what we are saying	3.33	3.68	6.40 ***
TA's answers to our questions	3.44	3.84	15.58 ***
TA's fairness in grading	3.77	4.29	28.85
Textbook(s), handouts, and other written materials	3.50	4.00	8.95 ***
Facilities where this lab/recitation section is held	3.48	4.00	27.82 ***
<b>English Language Skills</b>			
TA's pronunciation	2.62	3.33	25.11 ***
TA's rate of speech	3.23	3.66	8.58 ...
TA's fluency of speech	2.65	3.29	23.13 ***
TA's volume of speech	3.35	3.91	14.83 ...
TA's spoken grammar	2.91	3.46	14.49 ...
TA's vocabulary	3.19	3.62	12.40 ..
TA's listening	3.44	3.62	2.85
<b>Perceived Course Impact</b>			
What effect has being taught by this international TA had on your interest in better understanding other cultures?	3.15	3.54	11.14 ***
What effect has being taught by this international TA had on your interest in learning other languages?	3.07	3.25	2.13
<b>Classroom Interactions</b>			
How likely are you to ask this TA a question during a typical class section?	2.97	3.37	3.49
How likely are you to speak individually with this TA before or after the sessions or during office hours?	2.84	3.30	19.81 ***

p ≤ .05

\*\* p ≤ .01

\*\*\* p ≤ .001

Table 3

Summary of multiple regression analysis of six student evaluation outcome variables

Evaluation Variable	Predictor Type	Predictors
Specific Teaching Behaviors	Course Expectations	Reason for enrolling Self rated ability Expected grade Motivation to do well
Overall TA Rating	Course Expectations	Reasons for enrolling Self rated ability Expected grade Motivation to do well
Self Rated Learning	Course Expectations	Reasons for enrolling Self rated ability Expected grade Motivation to do well
Evaluation of Language	Course Expectations	Reasons for enrolling Self rated ability Expected grade Motivation to do well
Impact	International Experience College status Course Expectations	Travelled abroad Studied abroad Friend non-native Instructor non-native Studied second language Year in school Recent grades Reasons for enrolling Self rated ability Expected grade Motivation to do well
Classroom Interactions	International Experience Course Expectations	Traveled abroad Studied abroad Friend non-native Instructor non-native Studied second language Reasons for enrolling Self rated ability Expected grade Motivation to do well