

#### **Title of Project:**

Linguistic Diversity and the Politics of International Inclusion in Higher Education: A Critical Sociolinguistic Study of International Teaching Assistants

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#### **Project Summary**

It is commonplace to hear institutions of higher education describe themselves as "international" or "global." Colleges and universities are eager to point to the national origins of their faculty and student body as evidence of the opportunities for cross-cultural contact and cooperation that abound on their campuses. These institutions often present themselves as places where students can come to be exposed to new people and new cultures as a way of preparing themselves for a world marked by an accelerated pace of globalization.

However, it is unclear that universities in the United States (US) are prepared to accept and support the linguistic diversity that arises out of efforts to create "global communities." Intentional planning and policy related to language and communication are likely to be necessary. Institutional efforts to deal with language and communication, however, have tended to be confined to assessing and remediating the language of those coming from abroad.

A case in point is the reception of international teaching assistants (ITAs) at US universities. For decades, researchers have pointed to problems in communication between ITAs and students (e.g., Bailey, 1984; Plakans, 1997; Fitch & Morgan, 2003). Although researchers have occasionally acknowledged that students contribute to these difficulties, most attention has been paid to ITAs' language and their other teaching-related competencies. As a result, we know relatively little about how students cope with the task of communicating with someone whose language background differs from their own. However, the abilities that facilitate communication across linguistic difference are arguably a central component of the "global competency" that many universities aspire to develop in their students.

In my dissertation, I sought to address a different type of issue than has usually been explored with respect to ITAs at US universities. Instead of asking how ITAs could be better prepared to



teach US students, I asked how institutions of higher education might be better prepared to facilitate productive communication between ITAs and students. I was particularly interested in exploring two areas: (1) how institutional policies might facilitate (or not) classroom communication at a linguistically diverse institution and (2) what strategies or orientations might empower students to help ensure that communication with their ITAs is successful (or not). I explored these questions through a case study of one internationalizing US university that I call Shrinking World University (SWU). I collected documents and conducted interviews with SWU administrators, ITAs, and students. I also observed and recorded two ITA-taught Biology laboratories several times over the course of a semester. I sought student and ITA feedback on episodes from the classroom to better understand what students and ITAs thought and felt about apparent problems in communication.

Through my research at SWU, I identified a number of ways in which institutional policy and procedure might promote successful communication between ITAs and students or not. First, many students I spoke with pointed out that large lecture courses were not particularly conducive to interaction. As such, they felt unable to clear up the communication difficulties they predictably encountered while listening to someone who speaks in a manner with which they are unfamiliar. Relatedly, even in smaller laboratory classes, I observed that when an ITA was in "lecture mode,"–presenting a relatively long monologue often with a PowerPoint–students were likewise unwilling to ask questions or to give feedback about their understanding, preferring instead to remain silent even though they often had troubles understanding. Often, the students' concerns were tied up with fears about embarrassing their instructors by drawing attention to what was perceived to be the ITAs' linguistic deficiencies.

However, students had further reasons why they often avoided ITAs. In some cases, staffing decisions aided students in their avoidance. For example, when ITAs co-taught with other instructors, students often reported avoiding communication with the ITA and instead going to another instructor often another TA who used a form of English that was more familiar to the students.

Finally, some students I spoke with echoed SWU's commitment to respecting and seeking to learn more about diverse people, and they saw communication with their ITAs as a natural opportunity to learn more and increase their ability to communicate across linguistic difference. However, other students saw communication with ITAs as irrelevant to the real purpose of their time at SWU. These students tended to see the difficulties inherent in communicating across linguistic difference as obstacles to learning course-related information, passing exams, getting good grades, and graduating.

I believe this study has several implications for institutions of higher education engaged in internationalization. First, as Dippold (2015) argues, colleges and universities need to consider how linguistic diversity affects classroom interaction. One of the simplest ways of aiding students and ITAs in communicating is to reduce class sizes wherever possible so that students feel more comfortable asking questions and clearing up communication difficulties when they arise. Although smaller class sizes, regardless of instructor language background, would create more opportunities for students to have meaningful interaction with their instructors, it is particularly important for students to interact meaningfully with their international instructors if universities wish to foster "global competence".



It is also important for universities to consider how they are preparing ITAs. At SWU, I found that ITAs usually received preparation from their academic departments, and some ITAs also took a course, offered by the English as a second language program, specifically aimed at helping international teaching assistants succeed in the classroom. The preparation that ITAs receive, however, is often focused on improving ITAs' delivery of monologic classroom instruction in a manner that resembles dominant forms of instruction in US university classrooms (i.e., lecturing with some interaction coming from student questions). Based on my observation that students and ITAs communicate most successfully in smaller groups, I argue that it would be more beneficial to focus on preparing ITAs to facilitate dialogic forms of instruction that invite students to engage in small group work with their peers and their ITAs.

Finally, I argue that universities need to take a more direct approach in preparing students to be part of a linguistically diverse community. This is relevant not only to their success on a diverse campus but also in the global community for which universities purport to be preparing students. Universities need to find places in their curricula where students can learn about and become more accepting of other ways of using English. Students may also need explicit guidance in how to engage in the negotiation of meaning that takes place in linguistically diverse settings. Furthermore, universities need to take steps toward getting students on board with the broader humanistic goals of internationalization, such as cross-cultural cooperation. Such material might be fruitfully incorporated into courses or other learning opportunities that are expected of most or all new students, such as new student orientation, first year composition courses, or courses designed to introduce students to university study.



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