



## Considering interlocutors in university discourse communities: Impacting U.S. undergraduates' perceptions of ITAs through a structured contact program



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### ABSTRACT

In discussions of non-native speakers in ESP settings, the importance of discourse communities has been emphasized (e.g., Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002). Native speakers are often the primary members of these discourse communities, especially in inner circle countries such as the U.S. ITA (international teaching assistant) researchers and practitioners have long emphasized the importance of U.S. undergraduates in ITA program design (e.g., Bailey, 1982). ITA research shows that the attitudes of U.S. undergraduates impact their perception of ITAs' comprehensibility, accentedness, and teaching ability (e.g., Kang & Rubin, 2009). These negative perceptions can be mitigated by ITA programs which introduce opportunities for structured contact between undergraduates and international students. Structured contact programs can offer benefits to undergraduates, promote collaboration, and enjoy institutional support, among other features. The current study investigates the impact of this contact on U.S. undergraduate students' perceptions of ITAs' speech and teaching ability. In addition, specific details about the contact program are provided in order to offer suggestions to ITA coordinators. Findings have important implications for other ESP settings beyond the context of ITAs.

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of discourse community is central to an ESP perspective on teaching and curriculum development (see e.g., Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002). A discourse community, as defined by Swales (1990), has six defining characteristics, including common goals, specific communicative genres, and specialized lexis. Within ESP and EAP literature, non-native speakers (NNS) are generally encouraged to learn the conventions and genres appropriate to the university discourse communities they wish to join (e.g., within a specific discipline) (see e.g., Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002). In the case of international teaching assistants, this means learning the shared goals, genre and lexis commonly used in the U.S. classroom. However, such modifications may not be enough to ensure successful membership in university discourse communities. As recently discussed in Kubota and Chiang (2013), social categories of NNSs (e.g., the race, nationality, or accent of the

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NNS) might influence communication between the NNS and their NS interlocutors. Thus, [Kubota and Chiang \(2013\)](#) suggest that critical needs analysis for ESP should account for these influences. While previous research in ESP has often emphasized linguistic differences between NNSs and their NS interlocutors (e.g., [Pickering, 2001](#)), it has tended to downplay intergroup dynamics and the impact that NS perceptions can have on interactions between NSs and NNS interlocutors. In addition, although negative perceptions of U.S. native speaking undergraduates (USUGs) of international teaching assistants (ITAs) have been acknowledged (e.g., [Bailey, 1982](#); [Smith, Byrd, Nelson, Barrett, & Constantinides, 1992](#)), more research is needed to determine the most effective ways to mitigate those negative perceptions. In this article we argue that consideration of NS interlocutors is an important aspect of successful ESP program design, specifically focusing on communication between ITAs and USUGs. We emphasize the impact that USUGs' perceptions of ITAs have on ITAs' successful communication within their discourse communities and suggest efforts to mitigate these perceptions.

International graduate students currently account for up to 44% of students in U.S. graduate programs ([Council of Graduate Schools, 2011, p. 13–14](#)), and U.S. universities routinely rely on them to serve as especially in fields such as the sciences and engineering ([Chiang, 2009](#)). Since the 1990s, ESP programs across the U.S. have been developed to address proficiency problems of ITAs and to improve the communication skills of NNSs who are teaching in North American universities (e.g., [Gorsuch, 2006](#)). However, many USUGs continue to perceive ITAs as unqualified to teach, in part due to their perception of NNSs' accents and comprehensibility ([Kang, 2010](#); [Rubin & Smith, 1990](#); [Smith, Strom, & Muthuswamy, 2005](#)). Students' perceptions have in fact long been a focus of ITA research (e.g., [Bailey, 1982](#); [Smith et al., 1992](#)). Studies have shown that USUGs' attitudes towards ITAs impact their ratings of ITAs' accent, comprehensibility, and teaching quality ([Kang, 2008](#); [Kang & Rubin, 2009](#); [Smith et al., 2005](#)). These results have led a number of ITA researchers to recommend communication training of USUGs as well as ITAs ([Bailey, 1982](#); [Fitch & Morgan, 2002](#); [Smith et al., 1992, 2005](#)).

In the field of social psychology, the contact hypothesis ([Allport, 1954](#)) has long recognized the importance of positive contact between groups that experience tension and 'othering'. A great deal of empirical research has also shown that, under ideal circumstances, contact can change negative perceptions ([Rubin & Lannutti, 2001](#)). A few studies have applied this hypothesis to the ITA context, with some positive results ([Kang, 2008](#); [Smith et al., 2005](#)). However, more research is needed, especially regarding how to implement contact within ITA program design. In fact, some ITA programs already provide opportunities for U.S. students to interact with NNSs in general (or ITAs in particular), but addressing USUGs' perceptions of ITAs is not of specific concern.

This study focuses on a program designed to provide optimal contact conditions to improve communication between USUGs and ITAs. The paper both investigates the impact of this contact on U.S. students' perceptions of ITAs' accent, comprehensibility, and teaching ability and provides detailed descriptions on how such programs can be implemented in higher education institutions. Ideas for embedding the contact within ITA program design are offered, as well as a discussion of how ITA coordinators can collaborate with the university at large, using minimal resources.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Critical ESP and native speaker interlocutors

One of the primary goals of EAP/ESP is to help learners gain access to the discourse of a particular community, which necessarily involves looking at the "social processes in which academic [and specialized] discourses are sited." ([Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002, p. 9](#)). These social processes in part unfold through interactions between NSs and NNSs within a discourse community ([Inglis, 1993](#)). Critical ESP examines hierarchies within such communities and recognizes their socio-political aspects ([Benesch, 2009](#)). Critical ESP also acknowledges that "only certain speakers (or writers) will be recognized as in possession of the legitimate language and have not only the 'right to speak' but also the 'power to impose reception' (to be listened to)." ([Starfield, 2013, pp. 463–464](#)). Thus, both mainstream but especially critical approaches to ESP recognize the importance of NSs in determining the success of NNSs within discourse communities. [Kubota and Chiang \(2013\)](#) suggest that critical needs analysis for ESP should take into account the fact that learners' experiences in a particular discourse community may be shaped by their race, nationality, accent, or other factors. Other proponents of critical ESP argue that learners should be encouraged to question the communicative practices of a discourse community and to pursue changes if necessary ([Benesch, 2009](#)).

In this article we argue not only for a recognition that USUGs' attitudes towards ITAs contribute to the successful communication of ITAs, but also focus on a way to address the imbalances that ITAs face in relation to their NS peers (domestic TAs), namely through structured contact between USUGs and international members of the university discourse community. The contact program described here contributes to larger avenues for social change, and thus dovetails with other efforts within critical ESP to promote the discourse of NNS in an increasingly globalized world ([Benesch, 2009](#)). It promotes ITAs as a positive development in the process of internationalizing the university, rather than a problem for ITA programs to fix.

We should acknowledge that the issues that ITAs face may also be faced (in a different respect) by members of minority groups and speakers of non-standard dialects. While this study targets USUGs' perceptions of ITAs in particular, the issue of USUG perceptions is by no means limited to this population.

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