

Challenges and Needs of International Graduate Teaching Assistants

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In this mixed-methods study, we surveyed 23 international teaching assistants (ITAs) and interviewed eight at a public university. Preliminary findings suggest that ITAs find developing course materials, grading, and providing feedback most challenging. The language barriers, imbalance in work and study, uncertainty in professional identity, and feeling unacknowledged exacerbate the difficulty of performing their roles. Beyond mandatory institution-wide training, they voiced a need for more training to improve students' motivation, engagement, and time management.

Introduction

Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) are important in enhancing the quality of higher education. However, their potential can be hampered by various challenges, often stemming from a lack of prior teaching experience (Chiu & Corrigan, 2019; Mills, 2011) or teacher training (Reeves et al., 2018). The situation is further complicated for international teaching assistants (ITAs) who, in addition to these challenges, grapple with cultural differences and language barriers (Avsar Erumit et al., 2021; Kim, 2009).

The professional development opportunities for ITAs encompass mandatory training provided by the universities and their self-directed professional development (PD) aimed at enhancing their instructional practices. Although training and PD opportunities were offered, most TA training courses and programs are static, prescriptive (Ke et al., 2021), and often instructor-led in a formal setting (Teasdale et al., 2019). The "one-size fits all" approach to training misaligns with the diverse needs of ITA.

Furthermore, the multifaceted challenges faced by ITAs can extend beyond the classroom, adversely affecting their mental health, work-life balance, and overall academic success and performance. In this study, we explore the challenges ITAs face, the professional development available to them, and their specific learning needs. By gaining a better understanding of their challenges and needs, we aim to provide practical implications that can improve the professional support and working conditions for ITAs. The guiding research questions are:

1. What responsibilities do ITAs perform?
2. What challenges and professional development needs do ITAs have?
3. Why do ITAs use or not use training or professional development opportunities?

Method

We used the mixed methods to examine the needs and challenges of ITAs at a large public US university. The data collection is ongoing, and we have received 23 valid survey responses and conducted eight interviews. Participants served as either solo instructors or a facilitative role (e.g., grader). Most came from Asian countries, including South Korea, China, and India. They have taught or assisted in both graduate (n=6) and undergraduate (n=13) courses, with some (n=4) involved in both levels.

The survey includes questions on demographics, prior teaching experience, and confidence levels in task performance, followed by items about ITAs' tasks, challenges, and PD they have engaged in or wish to have. We developed the survey items, referring to the responsibilities mentioned in previous research. Then, we revised the items and interview protocol based on feedback from the faculty and graduate students with TA experiences. The 30-minute semi-structured interviews via Zoom helped triangulate the survey data with deeper understanding of ITAs' challenges and needs. We performed descriptive statistics to analyze the survey data, reporting the frequencies of the responses. Interview transcripts were analyzed through thematic coding.

Results

Major responsibilities performed by ITAs

Most ITAs reported that their primary responsibilities were responding to students' questions (n=21, 91.3%) and grading (n=21, 91.3%) (see Table 1). Many ITAs also reported communication with students through email and announcements (n=20, 87.0%), providing feedback on assignments (n=19, 82.6%), and reviewing course materials (n=18, 78.3%) as their major responsibilities.

Table 1

ITAs' Responsibilities

ITAs' major responsibilities	N	%
Respond to students' questions	21	91.3
Grade assignments and report grades	21	91.3
Communicate with students via announcements and emails	20	87.0
Provide feedback on students' work	19	82.6
Review existing course materials	18	78.3
Monitor student progress (e.g., grades, assignment submissions)	17	73.9
Set up the course Canvas site	15	65.2
Communicate with instructors on assigned tasks	15	65.2
Host online or face-to-face office hours	15	65.2
Update course content, including syllabi, assignment due dates, and hyperlinks	13	56.5

Challenges and PD needs of ITAs

Responsibilities and challenges

ITAs reported grading as the most time-consuming task, followed by providing feedback, teaching, developing new course materials, and revising course materials.

In terms of the difficulty levels of their tasks, ITAs reported developing new course materials (n=11), grading (n=10), and providing feedback (n=9) were the most difficult. The easier tasks were reviewing existing course materials (n=15), communicating with instructors on assigned tasks (n=14), and communicating with students via announcements and emails (n=14).

We asked how frequently their performances were hindered by given factors. A total of 11 ITAs (47.8%) reported an imbalance between work, study, and life often or always inhibited their performance, followed by language barriers (n=10, 43.5%). The majority of ITAs (n=20, 87%) reported insufficient communication with the supervising faculty never or rarely inhibited their performance. Unfamiliarity of university policies and lack of support (e.g., training) similarly never or rarely influenced their job performance (both n=18, 78.3%).

Through interviews, we also identified several challenges and tensions that arise from language barriers, as well as assigned tasks, the expectations set for them (either clear or unclear), and their identities as TAs. Despite exhibiting fluent communication during interviews, a common challenge shared among ITAs was a lack of confidence in English when delivering courses, writing feedback on students' assignments, or engaging in discussion boards.

Two participants recounted that their contributions to the course went unmentioned in students' post-course feedback, which made them feel that their efforts were unseen and unacknowledged. The lack of feedback left them without any insights to improve their practices. This ambiguity in their identity also extended to doubts regarding their level of expertise when tasked with grading major assignments.

Needs

Most ITAs (n=22) completed the mandatory institutional training, and a few took additional training or courses offered by departments and colleges. When being asked about the areas they want to improve through the formal training programs, a total of 13 (56.5%) ITAs indicated a desire to develop public speaking skills a lot or a great deal, followed by motivating students to increase their interests in classes (n=12, 52.2%), engaging students in class activities (n=12, 52.2%), and managing classes (n=12, 52.2%). They also reported overcoming language conflicts (n=11, 47.8%) and time management (n=11, 47.8%) are areas they want to improve a lot or a great deal through formal training.

Reasons for training or PD opportunities

The survey results suggest that most participants (n=22) completed the institution-level training because it is mandatory. A few indicated receiving additional training from their program, while others had on-the-job training or mentoring. This mentoring was facilitated by supervising faculty, observation of other TAs, or participating in online courses and webinars to improve or adapt their teaching practices.

Some of them were motivated to pursue additional training to better engage students, adapt to pedagogy aligned to US culture, improve accessibility of the learning management systems, and enhance efficiency in grading. For example, one TA shared, "My style of teaching was very over-explanatory and interactive, as that's the kind of teaching I had in Asia. But here in the US, there's more structure to the course. So, to quickly adapt to that, I went to some professional development opportunities."

The participants who chose not to pursue additional PD shared that they were unaware of available resources outside their academic programs. Time constraint was another reason, as they needed to juggle multiple commitments in their coursework, research, and life in general. While several ITAs expressed the desire to enhance their teaching skills, this was not prioritized among other commitments. Lastly, several ITAs believed that with clear job descriptions, the necessity for extra training would decrease.

Discussion and implications

ITAs perform various tasks and responsibilities in the courses they serve. Among these tasks, grading and providing comments on students' work were commonly reported as challenging and time-consuming, regardless of class size. The reported language barrier can partially explain this challenge. Providing verbal and written comments requires them to know not only what should be said but also how it should be conveyed in their second language.

Related to a language barrier, ITAs wished to improve their public speaking skills. While navigating their professional identity formation, ITAs grappled with the manifesting notion and stereotyped views of their language use (Wang, 2020). In Wang's study, both students and ITAs themselves perceived the importance of delivering instruction in non-monotone and non-accented English to ensure students' comprehension of the content. Although ITAs may be proficient in pedagogical knowledge and skills,

they are placed in an inferior position because of their non-standardized English language use. Providing feedback on their English would support ITAs' development of professional identities.

Moreover, an imbalance between work, study, and life frequently inhibited their job performance, even discouraging their motivation for additional professional development. During the interviews, the majority of ITAs acknowledged that their TA experience was beneficial for future faculty positions after graduation. However, allocating more time for their TA roles seems challenging on top of managing various tasks as graduate students. Corrales and Komperda (2022) addressed the so-called "teaching-research trade-off," which implies a tendency of imbalance in multiple roles of graduate students in their article. Accordingly, participants hoped to improve their time management skills through formal training.

Lastly, several ITAs shared their struggles with engaging and motivating students, mostly domestic undergraduates. We speculate that cultural differences may play a role in this situation. Due to their diverse cultural backgrounds, ITAs may hold different pedagogical beliefs compared to their domestic counterparts (Kim, 2014). For example, in Kim's study, ITAs posed more close-ended questions and provided the answers to students faster than domestic TAs. Thus, the struggle with student engagement among ITAs might stem from cultural differences, even though ITAs in this study did not emphasize the cultural barriers as primary challenges. While ITAs might attribute student disengagement to their perceived lack of competence, cultural differences could be the real culprits. Hence, we suggest that incorporating topics on motivating and engaging domestic students in the training curriculum could help address this issue.

Conclusion

The study's findings highlight ITAs' diverse learning needs and implications for institutions in the design and development of professional development programs tailored to these needs. TAs tend to have a better perception of teaching and learning when they spend more time on their professional development (DeChenne et al., 2012). When TAs are well supported, this, in return, will benefit diverse learners that TAs work with and further promote a more inclusive and supportive environment conducive to learning.

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