International Teaching Assistants Professional Identity Development in the United States: A Multiple Case Study Perspective

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Abstract
Informed by Critical Theory and Poststructuralist Theory and the intersections of power, ideology, identity, and language, this study investigated how three ITAs construct their professional identities as instructors at a US university. To gain an in-depth understanding of ITAs' professional identities development, the researchers used a qualitative approach with a multi-case study design to examine various data and variables including a) undergraduates' feedback to ITAs' instruction and b) ITAs' English language use in academic settings and its influence on their teaching. Through narrative analysis, the researchers analyzed data from interviews, classroom observations, and research journals. Findings suggest that students' course evaluations and the ubiquity of native speaking norm influence the ITAs' professional identity formation. As a result, the ITAs have become more concerned about how their English language could influence their teaching while backgrounding their expertise in the content knowledge.
Keywords: professional identity, ITA, criticality, English language, knowledge production

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the number of international graduate students enrolled in US colleges and universities has grown rapidly, particularly for those who come from Asian countries (Lee, 2010; Waters, 2005). Based on the report from The Institute of International Education (2016), the number of international students studying in the US was 1,044,000 in the 2015/16 academic year, which is a 7% increase from the previous year. One of the main reasons for the increasing presence of international students on US campuses is the rising middle class in those booming countries and their desire to attain social and cultural capital in prestigious universities in English speaking countries (Finch & Kim, 2012). While some international students depend on their families to fund their tuition and fees, many of them are awarded scholarships in the form of a teaching assistantship. This is the main reason for the growth of international teaching assistants (ITA) in US higher education institutions, particularly in areas such as natural sciences and engineering. These ITAs typically are assigned positions that require them to teach introductory courses, grade papers, serve as laboratory assistants, and lead recitation or discussion sessions (Plakans, 1997). Expanding the number of ITAs is valuable for the internationalization of US universities and American students' intercultural education since ITAs can not only bring financial benefit to institutions but also better prepare American students for their future intercultural communication (Lee & Rice, 2007). Additionally, research (Chellaraj, Maskus, & Mattoo, 2005) using systematic econometric analysis finds that international students and skilled im migrants in the US contribute positively to overall technological and economic advancement; this finding is supported by more recent discussions on how ITAs benefit the US (Jia & Bergerson, 2008; Williams, 2011).

Given the above data as the initial impetus for our queries, this study explores ITAs' professional identity development from two aspects, namely ITAs' English language use in academic settings and undergraduate students' feedback. As student teachers and nonnative English speakers (NNES), ITAs' professional identity development comes from their classroom instruction where they enact their teaching philosophy, engage with students, and negotiate school policies. At the same time, their professional identity development is influenced by the contested label of NNES that privileges native over nonnative English speakers. Previous research in the area of ITAs' academic lives has pointed out that a large number of ITAs have complaints filed against them from students, mostly native English speakers, about ITAs' language proficiency, cultural awareness, lack of experience in teaching, and lack of content knowledge (Kang, Rubin, & Lindemann, 2014; Plakans, 1997; Rubin & Smith, 1990). For example, due to students' perception of ITAs' limited English language proficiency, classroom communication could be fraught with awkward moments when ITAs stumble on content delivery, mispronounce words, and present confusing lectures (Li et al., 2011). Because of their low communicative effectiveness and reluctance to seek help from others, ITAs' classroom environments are viewed as less effective in comparison to the

ones lectured by their American counterparts (Meyer & Mao, 2014). Back in 1990, Rubin and Smith conducted a study of undergraduates' reactions to ITAs' teaching performance in relation to their ethnicity, command of content knowledge, and accented speech, and they found that students' ratings of ITAs' lectures tended to be largely influenced by ITAs' accent. More recently, Kang and Rubin (2009) carried out a similar study to examine native English speakers' (NES) ratings of nonnative English speakers' (NNES) listening comprehension, instructional quality, and perceived accent relative to standard English pronunciation, and found that NESs' ratings were susceptible to rater expectation and stereotype. It seems that the *prima facie* of foreign ITA problems is linked not so much to their command of content knowledge but pedagogic approaches and sociopolitical and sociocultural forces at the macro level.

Specifically, this study describes how international graduate students construct their professional identities as instructors once they become international teaching assistants at a US university. We examined ITAs' professional identity development as they negotiated (a) undergraduates' feedback and (b) the influence of English language use in academic settings. Through Critical Theory and Poststructuralist Theory, we operationalized three case studies of three ITAs in the Department of Mathematics. Based on data from interviews, classroom observations, and research journals, we looked for themes and patterns pertaining to the ITAs' professional identities development.

With these purposes, the following research questions guided our investigation: How do international teaching assistants construct their professional identities at a US university?

    a. What role does undergraduates' feedback play into ITAs' professional identity development?
    b. To what extent does English language use in academic settings play a role in ITAs' professional identity development?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Language and Identity

At the core of our theoretical framework are the concepts of language and identity. While the traditional Western humanist philosophy that views culture and individuals through a lens of essentialism is well known, another interpretation that captures the temporality, dynamics, and instability of identity is rising (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Norton's theorizing of identity broadens the research scope by encompassing aspects such as gender, race, ethnicity, power, and social class. These discussions move away from an essentialized understanding of identity and help clarify how imposed, assumed, and negotiated identities are created. These variables, viewed from a poststructuralist perspective, are all involved in the production of a contested, fluid, and ever-changing identity. Similarly, French intellectual Jacques Lacan's (1977a, 1977b, as cited in

Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002) conception of identity shares the aforementioned understandings from Norton. According to Lacan, individuals develop their subject positions through their identification with discourses, which in Lacan's terms refers to master signifiers. From a central-peripheral perspective, Wenger (1999) claimed that one's identity formation lies in the process of acquiring legitimate peripheral participation, which is manifested in identification and negotiating of meanings. In the case of language minorities, minority language users need validation from the socially legitimate members of the speech community; subsequently, the language minorities form an identity of marginality due to unequal power relations. Other identity researchers have also incorporated a critical view of language in their works (Kramsch, 2009; Norton, 2000). Norton's conceptualization of identity is constructive in helping us understand "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (2013, p. 45). This conception of identity provides a new research lens in the area of language learning in that it argues for the inclusion of issues such as gender, race, ethnicity, and social class and the primacy to learner agency, multivocality, and diversity. Moreover, it allows us to refine the focus of the present study and delve deeper into the concept of professional identity.

ITAs' professional identity in this study entails the notions of plurality and performativity. In the former case, being an ITA is dissected into various identity positions including nonnative English speaker, graduate student, content knowledge instructor, classroom manager, and intercultural communicator. While some of these roles such as NNEST and graduate student are self-imposed, ITAs could also seek empowerment through performing the roles in accordance with their own understandings. Taking these considerations together, ITAs' professional identity is relational in that it is influenced by the widespread discourse of race, culture, language, gender, and ideology in educational settings (Wenger, 1999). Their professional identity development is also contested because the process of figuring out where they belong in classrooms at this US university and ways to challenge or submit to these discourses is likely to impact their existing identities that hold meaning to them (Flowerdew & Miller, 2008).

2.2 Ideology of Native Speakerism

As a result of the binary conception of native English speaking teachers - nonnative English speaking teachers (NEST-NNEST) and problematic view of NESTs' superiority in language teaching (Kang, 2015), many NNESTs have encountered confrontations and injustice in their professional pursuit (Amin, 1997; Clark & Paran, 2007; Kamhi-Stein, 2004; Mahoob, Urig, Hartford, & Newman, 2004; Moussu, 2010; Rajagopalan, 2005). For example, in their study of NNESTs' employability in the U.K., Clark and Paran (2007) sent out emails of questionnaires about school administrative information and teacher recruitment and professional development to ELT employers in private

language schools, universities and other higher education institutions, and further education institutions. Their findings suggested that over 70% of surveyed ELT employers consider NNESTs' status as lacking in the U.K. A more recent study by Subtirelu (2015) on students' evaluations of NNES mathematics instructors on RateMyProfessors.com also indicated that student ratings are manifestations of the larger language ideology in society. Using mixed method research design with quantitative corpus linguistic techniques and critical discourse analysis, Subtirelu found that compared with instructors with US last names, those with Chinese and Korean last names were evaluated negatively in terms of clarity and helpfulness. While Subtirelu did find some objections to the ideology of nativeness such as "X does have an accent but" (p. 57); this finding, however, further naturalizes the status of hegemonic discourses and makes language discrimination subtle, appropriate, and unobtrusive.

2.3 ITA Professional Identity

For some, professional identity means an imposed identity from the society that has certain expectations of a teacher and an assumed identity that connects to what teachers find to be meaningful and significant in their practices (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). Besides this line of understanding, another observation about professional identity reveals its negotiated attribute in that teacher identity is conditioned by both local practice and global ideologies (Simon-Maeda, 2004; Song & Del Castillo, 2015). For example, both fundamental beliefs about knowledge and learning and reactions to professors, graduate teaching assistants, and undergraduate students are found to be key ingredients in constructing professional identity of a graduate teaching assistant in physics (Volkmann & Zgagacz, 2004). Additionally, professional identity is also seen as plural in that teachers perform different roles in their professional work including teacher as classroom manager, learner, socializer, and entertainer (Farrell, 2011; Gee & Crawford, 1998). For Mawhinney and Xu (1997). Professional identity refers to a teacher's professional skills and qualifications to teach in a given educational context. Of particular importance to foreign-trained teachers' professional identity is their job-related English language proficiency, which is found to be one of the main obstacles of these teachers' integration into a local education system.

The notions of plurality and performativity not only reflect our previous discussions on the premise of poststructuralist theory and its applications in identity research but also shed light on teacher empowerment as in the cases of teacher identity as pedagogy in which teachers perform certain identities that conform to or challenge students' previous perceptions such as cultural assumption (Morgan, 2004; Simon, 1995). ITA professional identity in this study refers to institutionally imposed teacher identity, which is be investigated through ITAs' English language use in academic settings, student feedback, and ITAs' interaction with their supervisors in their professional work.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Setting

The study took place at a large Southeastern public university. According to the 2015 Census published by the Office of Institutional Research & Assessment at this institution (*Census Enrollment Report*, 2015), the enrolled student population was 37,100. Of this enrollment number, 1,492 students came from foreign countries. Within this population, the top five international students' countries of origin were China (820), Saudi Arabia (92), Brazil (78), South Korea (66), and India (57). At the institution where the study was conducted, all international students are required to provide proof of English language proficiency for enrollment into academic courses. Otherwise, the students can only be admitted conditionally in that they will begin courses at an on-campus English Language Institute. In addition, the institution has an International Teaching Assistant Program (ITAP) that supervises the certification of international students who are about to start their teaching assistantships. The ITAP is administered by the aforementioned English Language Institute (ELI). Its main purpose is to train and evaluate nonnative English speaking ITAs before they start teaching. The ITAP registers three categories regarding whether ITAs are allowed to teach: full pass, conditional pass, and no pass. Full pass means that an ITA has sufficient teaching and language skills for lecture-type classes. With a conditional pass, an ITA could only teach in tutorial setting in which the ITA interacts with only one student or in a lab. If the ITA were to teach in a regular classroom, then a senior teacher would need to be present. ITAs who display serious language problems and poor teaching skills will not be given any teaching responsibility.

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were recruited mainly through my personal network. The first author met Kong at an international student gathering back in 2011 in the US. The following year, Kong was invited to join a research project the first author conducted as a part of his coursework. When Kong was approached about the possibility of becoming a research participant for the current study, he gladly agreed. Kong also provided us with the contact information of other four ITAs in his department. After we sent out email invitations to those four ITAs, Jun replied my email and agreed to be a participant. Kelly and us met at a night at the museum activity, which is a community outreach program sponsored by the University. During the event, we met one of other participants, Jun, and were later introduced to his colleague, Kelly. After we talked to Kelly about our research, she became interested in the study and agreed to be a participant.

Kong (pseudonym) is a 29-year-old male Chinese doctoral candidate in the Department of Mathematics. He completed his undergraduate study in mathematics at a key comprehensive university located in Southern China and came to the US in 2010 for the purpose of continuing his graduate study in the same field at this Southeastern

university. Kong started gaining teaching experience in Fall 2013 as an ITA in the Department of Mathematics.

Jun (pseudonym) is a male ITA who was also enrolled in the Department of Mathematics at the research site. Before coming to the US for doctoral studies, Jun completed his undergraduate coursework at a university in China. Now he is teaching introductory mathematics classes to undergraduate students at this research site.

Kelly (pseudonym) was originally from Jakarta, Indonesia, went to high school in Taiwan, and worked as a Chinese Language Teacher in Indonesia afterwards. In 2006, Kelly started her undergraduate study at a community college in the US and later on attended a liberal arts college. Currently Kelly is entering her last year as a doctoral candidate at a southeastern university where she is teaching discrete mathematics as part of her teaching assistantship. Because of her passion for teaching, Kelly decided to stay in academia after graduation.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

3.3.1 Interview

While the wave of interview-based research is on the rise, scholars are cautious of the largely uncritical examination of the epistemologies, assumptions, and methodologies embedded in interview process (Block, 2000; Mann, 2010; Talmy, 2010). Block (2000) mentioned that interview researchers need to be cognizant of the position construction aspect of their data, as the speech that participants produce is not only veridical but also symptomatic (Kvale, 1996). Along the same line as Block's argument, in a more recent discussion of the theorization of interview in applied linguistics, Talmy (2010) suggested that due to its ubiquity in social science research, interview has been naturalized with certain ideologies in language and communication. This type of conceptualization of what Briggs (2007) termed the communicable cartography of interview views language as a neutral medium, interview data as reports, and interview as a research instrument to further one's approximation of the essential reality. This conception of interview does not align well with the current study, which is guided by Critical Theory and Poststructuralist Theory that view power relations as crucial in the production of truth. To increase the reflexivity of interview, Talmy (2010) proposed a conception of interview as social practice that views interview data as coconstructed between the interviewee and interviewer, interactional context as valuable for understanding interviewees' participation, power asymmetries as a critical aspect to attend to in data representation, and data analysis as process-oriented. During the interview, we used Chinese with two participants upon their request and translated the transcripts into English upon the completion of data analysis.

3.3.2 Classroom Observation

After postmodern and poststructural turns (St. Pierre, 2011), contemporary field observations are characterized with features of obtaining more than a peripheral

membership role in a research community, understanding the impossibility of finding truth through integration of observer and insider perspectives, and research subjects as collaborators (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011). Given the ITAs' teaching schedules, we conducted classroom observations of each ITA two times a week. In total, we had ten classroom observations with each ITA. During the observations, the first author was present in their classrooms for the entire session and used an audio recording device to help him document their lectures.

3.3.3 Research Journal

In the flux of changing paradigms, a researcher's reflexivity, which signals to one's deep self-reflections and understanding of participants, adds significant value in research rigor (Tracy, 2010). In this study, research journals mainly consisted of our researcher positionality and reflections of interviews and classroom observations. Research journals were documented in the form of written English texts upon the completion of one day's fieldwork.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Narrative Analysis

Characterized by what scholars refer to as the "narrative or discursive turn" (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 164) in social science, researchers in the field of sociology, psychology, and education have shown interest in using "narratives as discursive actions" (Gergen & Gergen, 2006) to understand an individual's life experience (Higgins & Sandhu, 2014). Metaphorically speaking, narrative research is known as first wave, second wave, and third wave (Vásquez, 2011). Some of the leading scholars in the first wave of narrative research, which occurred in the 1960s, include Labov (1972) and Polanyi (1985) who considered narratives to be long personal stories that were elicited through interviews and analyzed in structuralist fashions (Ives & Juzwik, 2015). In the second wave of narrative analysis-in-context, attention shifted from Labovian paradigm to post-Labovian and ethnography of communication (Georgakopoulou, 2006). While less orthodox in its scope, the second wave is critiqued for its static, neutral, and homogenizing tones in analyzing context-text relationship (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992). In the age of identity, the third wave encapsulates notions of late modernity, identities-in-interaction, and practice-based theories of genre (Georgakopoulou, 2006). It is here where the concept of professional identities comes to life via narrative analysis.

The main forms of narrative analysis focus on thematic and content analysis (Pavlenko, 2007). We used the In Vivo coding method and thematic analysis to analyze the narrative data in the study. In Vivo coding method refers to the process of extracting words and phrases from qualitative data and highlighting individuals' voices in coding (Saldaña, 2012). In Vivo coding method is commonly applied in the first cycle of data analysis or initial coding, which is constructive, to the development of researchers' ownership of their data and an easier second cycle of data analysis, which is more

analytic (Saldaña, 2012). Thus, this coding method was fruitful for understanding ITAs' teaching experience at an American university. After the initial coding, we examined the coding results and conducted the second cycle of analysis by using thematic analysis to synthesize, classify, and conceptualize his findings. Thematic analysis is a commonly used data analysis method to encode qualitative information with the facilitation of themes, patterns, and models with themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In applying thematic analysis, we referred to Boyatzis's (1998) three steps; i.e., sampling and design issues, developing themes and code, and validating and using the code.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Marginalized Status of Monotone English

On the end of semester course evaluations, one of the most frequent comments by the students was the ITAs' monotone English, which carries some negativity about the ITAs' English language proficiency. Based on the stories from the three participants, we problematized the concept of monotone English and demonstrated how it was produced, legitimized, and reproduced in the ITAs' teaching contexts. For Jun, his understanding of monotone English comes from senior ITAs who shared their course evaluations with him. Those interactions allowed him to see how the students reacted to the ITAs' English and associate his English to monotone English when teaching.

(Translation)

> *This monotone speech claim comes from senior ITAs. I used to ask them about how the students would evaluate their classes, and they all mentioned this monotone speech. I think this is my first time getting to know this so called monotone English, and then when I started teaching I kinda considered myself as a monotone English speaker as well.*

Additionally, Jun compared his monotone English to the way he speaks Mandarin Chinese by suggesting that he could feel the changing tones and emphases. Instead of questioning the legitimacy of monotone English, He hinted at the discussion that since he is a native speaker of Mandarin Chinese, he would not produce monotone Chinese. Furthermore, Jun aligned with students' comments that monotone teachers would not be the preferred teaching candidate because regardless of the content, he found it difficult to follow them.

(Translation)

> *You will see this monotone comment on my course evaluation--there's no rhythm. Let me put it this way, when we speak Mandarin Chinese, you can feel where your emphasis is at, when you get to certain point, your voice becomes higher; and in a class, if a teacher speaks with rising and falling tones I would prefer to have this teacher, because monotone teachers are hard to focus on. The more you listen to their lecture, the more likely you will fall asleep.*

In the above story, Jun suggested that monotone English might be pertinent to the fact whether someone is a second English language speaker; however, in the story below, Jun contradicted himself by saying that American TAs also produce monotone English in their classes. During the narrative, Jun legitimized the construct of monotone English through acknowledging students' comment about his monotone English. He further indicated that monotone speech is due to the level of difficulty of the topic and the instructor's lesson preparation, which is a broader understanding of monotone English. If the topic is of interest to Jun or is something for which he is well prepared, then Jun will speak with passion, which distances his speech pattern from monotone English. To justify that monotone English is not only observed among nonnative English speakers, Jun, based on his understanding of monotone English, made comments that his American colleagues also speak monotone English, which could be interpreted as a sign that they did not do well on their lesson preparation or the content is not interesting enough.

(Translation)

> *I think the students' comments about my monotone English makes sense, sometimes I can feel that myself. If the section I'm teaching is interesting, or something for which I'm well prepared, then I teach the class with passion, but if it's a very easy topic, or I didn't spend much time preparing for the class, then I might have a monotone. I've been to other American TAs' classes; their speech is very monotone as well.*

Differing from Jun's understanding of monotone English which derived from his interactions with senior ITAs, Kong's knowledge of this concept was well established by the time he arrived in the US. In Kong's interview, he mentioned that when he was in Mainland China, he was well aware that many English language learners do not pay attention to their change of tones while speaking, hence, his understanding that a significant number of Chinese people speak monotone English. In addition, Kong spoke of the importance of English language evaluation mechanism by native speakers, which would determine if someone is a monotone English speaker. In this case, when Kong was evaluated by a NEST at the ITAP, he agreed with the evaluation result and considered himself a monotone English speaker; however, when such evaluation mechanism disappears, Kong's attention to monotone English speaking grows weak.

(Translation)

> *I think many people in China know that one of the main characteristics of Chinese people's English speech is its flatness. There's no intonation, including asking questions, there's no rise, and I didn't know if I were like them, because no one was giving me an evaluation of my English speech. So you don't know if you are a monotone speaker. I got to know this during my ITAP training. The*

> *teacher told me that my English was monotone, and I agreed with her comment because she's a native speaker, but now I don't know if I'm speaking monotone English because no one is evaluating me.*

The above stories portray monotone English as knowledge produced from Jun's interactions with senior ITAs and Kong's initial discovery back in Mainland China and later encounter at an English language institute in the US. In Kelly's story, her understanding of monotone English came from formal education through which she was introduced to the monotone speech pattern. She sees monotone English from the students' perspective in that language use in her 50-minute long class would need to vary from time to time so that she does not lose the audience.

> I used to take public speaking, like a speech class, in undergraduate about monotone. If the voice is like the same the whole time, the loud and the softness, and everything, if it's the same, it's kinda monotone, because you don't hear it changing. So you kinda think as a teacher, the students have to stay for 50 minutes, you can not speak monotonely, you have to have sometimes speak louder, sometimes speak not louder, and sometimes, you speak it this way, sometimes you speak it the other way. You just want to tell them different things, you can't be monotone, and you are gonna try not to be.

In the brief discussion of the theoretical frameworks delineated in the above section, adopting a critical perspective means problematizing the status quo and deconstructing notions that are taken for granted. According to the findings from the three participants, monotone English has a negative connotation to it because students could not understand the spoken language aspect of the ITAs' lectures. To investigate how they associated monotone English with poor lecture quality, we looked at the ITAs' understanding of monotone English and where their definitions were based.

In the findings, Jun's understanding of monotone English came from his interactions with senior ITAs who relied on their students' feedback about their language as some language guidance for beginning ITAs. In Kong's case, he became aware of his monotone English through his ITAP training with a NNEST. Lastly, Kelly referred back to her undergraduate speech course in which she was presented with different types of speech patterns including monotone English. While contemplating with the participants' experience with monotone English, we started problematizing the notion of monotone English. While studies about the characteristics of monotone English and how it differs from normal tone speech are abound (Levis & Moyer, 2014), it is equally important to examine the power relations involved in determining what monotone English is and the interest groups it serves. One of the main reasons of the ITAs' strong belief that their English language is monotone English vis-à-vis the "normal English language" produced by their American colleagues is deeply ingrained in the discourse of native speakersim that normalizes language use. If native English speakers think the ITAs' English needs some improvement, there is slim chance that they would disagree with

their suggestions. Jun's story is seen through the legitimation process of monotone English, which is first produced among the students' course evaluation and then transferred to their instructors who were senior ITAs. During Jun's interactions with those senior ITAs, this knowledge of monotone English and its ubiquity among the ITAs' teaching becomes reproduced. Jun's disclosure that he thought his English was also monotone after hearing from the senior ITAs further suggests that there is tension between his students' preference of normal English language and his monotone English, or the struggle between a native norm and its various deviations. Jun mentioned that when he speaks Mandarin Chinese, his native language, he could sense the changing tones, which is a sign of non-monotone Chinese. In this case, no one gave Jun any language evaluations or informal feedback about his non-monotone Chinese; instead, his native Chinese speaker identity legitimized his claim as a non-monotone speaker.

Similarly, Kong was also partially influenced by this native norm discourse in that he accepted his native English speaking ITAP trainer's evaluation of his English as monotone. During his interactions with the trainer about presentation feedback, he was diagnosed with monotone English, a commonly seen problem he knew of among English language learners in China but was not aware that it applied to him. Both the language evaluation mechanism and the native speaker identity of his ITAP trainer made Kong believe that his English was monotone and he needed to take actions to change that. For Kong to discover and accept his monotone English, there needs to be a power relation that produces authoritative discourse about language use. When he was enrolled in the ITAP program and approached by his ITAP trainer, he was very responsive and attentive to the feedback he received in the program. After he completed the ITAP program, he was no longer in contact with his ITAP trainer who would give him suggestions about his language use. Additionally, in the classroom, his students, based on Kong's reflection, were not giving him feedback about his monotone English. In other words, the power dynamics that regulate how English language needs to be properly used in classroom is absent, thus, for the time being Kong no longer positioned himself as a monotone English speaker.

Although not considered as a monotone English speaker herself, Kelly viewed it as an unwanted speech pattern from a teaching perspective. Through her description, she first became aware of this type of speech in an undergraduate public speaking course in the US. From a critical perspective, this was when knowledge about monotone English, which is a speech pattern devoid of rising and falling tones, became produced and disseminated through schooling. Additionally, Kelly's concern that monotone English could be associated with her students' distraction in a 50-miniute class made her believe that a teacher should try not to speak monotone English. In Kelly's story, the tension was less heavy between native and nonnative English speakers, rather it was more about the relationship between a teacher and her students. In her mind, if Kelly were to speak monotone English, her students might as well not stay for the entire 50-minute session. As someone who is deeply invested in teaching and committed to teaching

professionally, Kelly did not want to see her students leave the classroom, and among her strategies to keep the students in class, avoiding the use of monotone English was a less assertive way to accomplish that goal.

5.2 Accented English

Among the literature on ITA in the US, the most frequently discussed topic is their English accent and how it is perceived by American undergraduates. In the current study, all three ITAs thought they spoke accented English and believed that accent downplayed their overall professional identity. For Kelly, accent could be used as a scapegoat when her students in fact did not comprehend the content itself.

> In the classroom, having an accent will be another thing the students will—if they don't understand you, or if they don't do well in class—it will be another thing they use as an excuse, like a scapegoat. The students will say it's hard to understand you.

At times, Kelly also advocated more about the illegitimate role of accented English. In elaborating her critical view of accented English, she discussed her recent symposium experience where an international student expressed her concern of having an accent in the job market. In relation to classroom instruction, Kelly argued that the students should equally value different accents if they are interested in pursuing their professional career on a global scale.

> So accent, this is very interesting, I just went to a workshop and there was this international student, it's a woman in a STEM symposium that said that she was having a hard time finding a job especially like teaching, because she has an accent and all the stuff. And one of the panelists said that "oh students they have to deal with it, if they want to work globally you have got to deal with it. You have to see people with different accents and they have to get used to it." So, I think that makes sense. I mean if they want to do business with people all over the world they have to listen to different accents and get used to it.

In Jun's reflection about accent, he thought that having an accent is the only disadvantage for Asian TAs, because they all tend to have a very solid foundation in their content area. His knowledge of Asian TAs' accented English came from the ratemyprofessor website, an online webpage that displays students' course evaluations of their professors and instructors. He felt that American TAs were not as well prepared with their lesson plans compared to Asian TAs.

> *(Translation)*
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> *I think having an accent is the only disadvantage of us Asian TAs. Generally speaking, Asian TAs all have a very good background knowledge about the math content; compared with Americans, they are better. And in terms of lesson preparation, I think Asian TAs are more serious about it. I've seen American*

TAs who don't take that seriously, and on that ratemyprofessor website, the comments about Chinese instructors are mostly about their accent.

Additionally, Jun seemed to agree with the claim that accent could influence someone's comprehension of an utterance. He discussed this comprehensibility issue through his teaching where a few students did not understand some of his points and his self-reflection that speaking English lowered his communicative competence in delivering ideas. Instead, he found himself to be a better speaker regarding expressing ideas when he used Mandarin Chinese.

(Translation)

I think having an accent impacts my teaching a little bit, because when you tell the students about things, and you said it not just once and got confirmation that they got it, you'll still get students' emails asking you what I said in class. So I don't know if this student got distracted in class or what. Also, I think the English language use lowers my communication competence; it's better if I use Chinese. For example, in class I can feel that my English use won't be as flexible as the way I speak Chinese.

Building on his desire to become a native speaker, Jun indicated that while he may not be so communicatively competent in speaking English, he could try to compensate for it with other aspects including classroom authority, his personality, and lesson preparation which all count toward one's teaching quality.

(Translation)

Sometimes, your classroom authority, your personality, and how you prepare your class would all influence your delivery, so as ITAs, we can do better in those areas to make up for the disadvantage in our English language. That's how I view it. If I can improve my English language, that'd be the best, and I'm willing to develop my English language level.

In the above stories, Kelly and Jun discussed how having an accent could impact their teaching from the students' perspective. Based on Kong, he not only pointed out the negative connotations of having an accent but also indicated himself as a person who does not like accents. His perception of accent comes from his first language learning experience in China in which he was conditioned to view those who spoke standard Mandarin Chinese as superior to those who spoke it with an accent. When he came to the US, such a view was still strong as he saw those who spoke standard English to be more powerful. Despite this rather prejudiced view of accent, Kong did not intend to reduce his accent in English.

(Translation)

In China we also have this concept of accent. I think it is just a feeling of superiority when you speak standard Mandarin Chinese, and I think this is

something that I grew up with. I don't know where it comes from, maybe because we all need to learn Mandarin Chinese early on, and so we think if someone can speak standard Mandarin, then this person is more powerful. So when we speak of accent, I just think of it as bad. So I think it's the same thing here in the US, You can't change your accent though, so just speak the way you used to. It is just that this word "accent" is used with this bad meaning to it; maybe those who commented on your accent don't really mean it.

In the above theme, we discussed Kelly's inclination to become a native speaker so that her lectures could be better understood. When mentioning the role of accent in her teaching, Kelly expressed her frustration that accent is often used as an excuse for the students to complain about the lectures. This finding confirms previous studies that investigated the role of accent in ITAs' perceived teaching skills (Derwing, Fraser, Kang, & Thomson, 2014; Derwing, Moulton, & Campbell, 2005). Accent is one of the many variables including ITAs' understanding of the content knowledge, their lesson preparation, and others that determine the overall quality of an ITAs' lecture. Thus, it would be misleading to comment on ITAs' lack of lecturing skills simply because their English is accented. Additionally, it links to the notion of language standardization in accented English is a language variety that deviates from the norm or standard, thus, its status should be treated as non-standard and marginalized language. Apart from the frustration with accent, Kelly was adamant that ITAs or individuals who speak accented English should ignore others' comment about their accent. In her reasoning, Kelly referred to her earlier argument about the plural language uses in the US by demonstrating the existence of multiple English accents not only in the US but also other parts of the world.

In Jun's case, he considered accent to be part of his ITA professional identity because it affected his teaching and students' understanding; in an over-generalized statement, he also thought that having an accent was the only disadvantage of most Asian ITAs because this was one of the most common themes about Asian ITAs on the ratemyprofessor website. His statement seemed to suggest that if the Asian ITAs did not have an accent, which is in and of itself problematic because it implies that there is a standard to which other varieties of language reference, then they would become as good as their American colleagues. Furthermore, it builds on an assumption that instead of pedagogy, the ITAs' English language use occupies a more important position in their teaching and professional identity development.

Kong's perception of accented English originated from his early education in standardized Mandarin Chinese in Mainland China. As a standardized language, Mandarin Chinese is a language that is the only version of Chinese taught and allowed for use in most educational settings across Mainland China. Referring back to the theoretical constructs of language standardization and ideology, such educational policy tends to receive political endorsement as it aids the development of nationalism in the

sense of "one nation, one language"; however, it marginalizes other languages that are used by indigenous people or that deviate from the standardized Chinese. Kong thus developed a sense of superiority by speaking standardized language and considered accent to be a problem that needs to be corrected.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The current study examined three ITAs' professional identity development through students' feedback about their courses and the ITAs' use of English language in academic settings. While the ITAP program on campus, the Department of Mathematics, and the ITAs are all making efforts to provide more satisfactory service for their students, the findings of this study offer implications that could further the ITAs' professional development. First of all, the component absent from the ITAP program that deliberates about teaching method and presentation skills is a Critical Pedagogy informed way of approaching English language and its use in classrooms. While English language may be the default language to use in their educational contexts, ITAs may benefit from critical engagement with the notions of monolingualism and multilingualism so that they would become less constrained by the desire to become native speakers or emulate native-like intonations. While the ITAs had all included critical thinking skills to be part of their learning objectives on their syllabi, they did not understand what critical thinking is and how to integrate it into their classrooms. One of the reasons for their inattention to critical thinking pertains to the fact that the syllabi are provided by the Department of Mathematics and circulated widely among graduate teaching assistants. Without the experience of designing the syllabi themselves, the ITAs are less likely to reflect on sections that are in the periphery such as learning objectives. Thus, another crucial task for ITA trainers and ITAs is to figure out ways to incorporate critical thinking into their existing lesson plans. It may be related to content such as critiquing a certain mathematical formula or ways to solve a mathematical problem; ITAs could also address mathematical problems from a more socioeconomic perspective. For instance, the mathematical problems in exercise sections could be embedded in a real-life situation as an indication of the interplay between mathematics and our daily life and a way to interrogate students' assumptions of monotone or accented English. After each exercise, ITAs may invite discussions from the students or briefly comment on both the problems and their implications.

What is also needed among the ITAs is awareness that their content knowledge is more important than their language use in classrooms. The institutional discourse of ITA recruitment is that graduate students are awarded teaching assistantships based on their academic performance, desire to become teaching assistants, and successful completion of ITAP program (The Graduate Student Guide, 2014). While the ITAs in this study had all obtained full pass on the ITAP program evaluations, they were, however, overly concerned with how their English language may be received by their students and

disregarded the content aspect of their professional identity as teachers. Such belief that ITAs' professional identity is more English language-based is largely produced through feedback from students who are mostly US undergraduates. In viewing the students' feedback, ITAs treated content-related comments as inconsequential and seemed to be particularly vulnerable to the spoken aspect of English language-related remarks. As Kelly pointed out in her story about accented English, sometimes ITAs' language acts as a scapegoat that shields the real classroom issues, which could be students' indolence in completing assignments and even problematic assumption about foreign teachers' professional qualification. To help ITAs understand the dialectic relationship between content knowledge, English language proficiency, and students' feedback, more participatory ITA orientations and trainings where ITAs and students discuss their views of teaching, learning, and languages are needed.

As Norton and Toohey (2011) pointed out, identity formation is a complex process that is power driven, multilayered, contested, invested, and imagined. The dissertation study has found that ITAs' professional identity development is a complicated process that involves their negotiation with the students about English language use in the classroom, their memberships in diverse communities, and their interactions with supervisors. The dominant discourse of language standardization in the society has conditioned the participants to develop the belief that native like English language proficiency is advantageous; despite their language desire, the ITAs also critiqued American TAs for their lack of professionalism in class preparation. The ITAs have also developed more sensitivity toward the students' feedback of their English language and less so with their pedagogy, which misleadingly implies that one's English language skills are the most important aspect in delivering lectures. As more ITAs begin to take teaching positions on US campuses, it becomes increasingly important for ITA trainers, administrators, ITAs, and students to critically reflect on notions of multilingualism, multiculturalism, and effective intercultural communication that would mitigate the communication breakdowns between ITAs and their students and facilitate the professional growth of ITAs.

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