Perspectives

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THE ISSUE

International Teaching Assistants in Higher Education: New Perspectives and Possibilities

THIS YEAR'S *PERSPECTIVES* COLUMN ON international teaching assistants (ITAs) launches with an anchor piece by Darren K. LaScotte, entitled "The 'Foreign TA Problem' Forty Years On." This anchor piece revisits the history of international and English learning graduate students serving as instructors in North American universities and offers the University of Minnesota as a case. Since naming ITAs as a "problem" (Bailey, 1984), many universities have drafted and implemented language policies requiring nonnative-English-speaking TAs to be additionally screened and tested to ensure adequate language proficiency levels. At the same time, our field of applied linguistics has become more woke. We can now unpack the challenges and inconsistencies that are embedded in language policies, given new understandings of the linkages among language, race, and "appropriate" language. As LaScotte says, "just as language policies are colored by the ideologies of their policy makers, so too are the decisions that teachers and administrators make with regard to policy implementation and enforcement" (2022, this issue, p. XX). The commentaries rise to the occasion by exploring the issues through various critical lenses. Yi-Ju Lai takes up the issue through a lens of materiality, highlighting the embodied multimodal, context situated, and heteroglossic nature of instructional practices of ITAs. Tim McNamara tackles ITA testing by considering fairness and justice, a discussion that opens up asset-based approaches to ITA language use and teaching skills. Cynthia Zocca DeRoma turns the problem back to the ITAs' students, typically the American students who bring listener biases, racism, and ears that are not welcoming to unfamiliar accents from their teachers. Vijay A. Ramjattan explores the issue through the possibility that ITAs are asked to do aesthetic labor—that is, model a certain way of looking and sounding in academia. Stephen Daniel Looney, like DeRoma, offers us a commentary from the perspective of those who work directly with ITAs. He weaves together ways of centering the perspectives of stakeholders and the transdisciplinary and policy-laden nature of this work. Finally, Mostafa Papi, a former ITA, reminds us of the emotions, stress, and threats to one's identity when an "accent" is a central part of the power dynamic. This personal account of the pressure ITAs feel reminds us of the responsibility that our field has to support the well-being and progress toward degree of ITAs. Taken in its entirety, this *Perspectives* column will offer a historical as well as a state-of-the-art view on the topic of ITAs in North American higher education.

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THE POSITION PAPER

The "Foreign TA Problem" Forty Years On

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For decades, U.S. national policies, initiatives, and organizations have worked to recruit international students to complete their studies in the United States, contributing to the nation's fortunes, power, and world influence (see Harklau & Coda, 2019). Indeed, since the late 1970s and early 1980s, many universities across the United States have relied on international graduate students for a substantial part of their teaching labor (Looney & Bhalla, 2019), especially in the areas of science and technology, hiring students as teaching assistants (TAs) to teach introductory and often high-stakes, "gatekeeping" (see Rubin, 1993) classes to audiences of American undergraduate students. At a national level, these students are and have been clearly seen as a resource benefiting universities and U.S. economic and political interests in preparing a qualified workforce. At a local level, however, policy perspectives regarding these same international students have often been "problem-oriented" (Ruiz, 1984) or even deficit oriented, positioning international graduate students as an issue needing to be addressed, due in large part to the teaching role that these students have held.

Like many (if not most) TAs who are thrust in front of a classroom for the first time, these ITAs often begin these positions with little training, preparation, or otherwise transferable experience (Gorsuch, 2003); to compound this further, these positions also require them to use their second language (L2), English. As a result, it became clear early on that some ITAs struggled to effectively communicate course content to their students; and in response, many universities created ITA programs and other resources to help L2-English-speaking students improve their communication skills and intelligibility vis-à-vis their students (e.g., Acton, 1984; Hinofotis & Bailey, 1978; Mestenhauser et al., 1980; Stevens, 1989); in tandem, many universities also enacted local language policies to alleviate the concerns of their stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, administrators, legislators).

Forty years on, what can be said about the evolution of such policies and practices regarding ITAs? How have such language policies been revised to reflect the changing needs and circumstances of institutions and of the students and communities that they serve? How have various discourses surrounding these policies evolved along with them? And what challenges and inconsistencies are embedded in such policies given current understandings of language, race, and "appropriate" language? In this perspective paper, I take up these questions and use the University of Minnesota, where I teach, as an illustrative example of changes to ITA policy, practice, and discourse over time—changes that, I argue, may very well be representative of national trends. As background, I first recount the history of how this particular language policy came to be. This overview is a valuable reminder of how language policies are often colored by the ideologies of their policy makers and other stakeholders (individuals who are not language specialists). Then, I apply intertextual and interdiscursive discourse analysis to better understand the evolution of these policies and their surroundings discourses over time.

ZOOMING IN: A HISTORICAL RECOUNT OF THE INTERNATIONAL TEACHING ASSISTANT LANGUAGE POLICY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

At the University of Minnesota, the first communication skills for TAs course was offered in the winter quarter of 1978. At that time, there was no university-wide standard or language policy for English proficiency among TAs. The course was offered strictly on a voluntary basis to international graduate students who recognized the need for such training and/or whose departments recommended the course, and between the winter of 1978 and fall of 1983, more than 100 TAs participated in this voluntary course (Wallace, 1983). However, in May of 1983, two representatives of the Minnesota Legislature—Connie Levi (Republican Party of Minnesota—Dellwood) and James Swanson (Minnesota Democratic–Farmer–Labor Party–Richfield)—became aware of what was sometimes termed the "foreign TA problem" (Bailey, 1984) because of the experiences of their children enrolled in classes at the university's

Institute of Technology (Oberdorfer, 1983). Reportedly advocating on behalf of their children, students, and other constituents, Representatives Levi and Swanson persuaded their colleagues to include in a major spending bill (Laws of Minnesota, 1983) a request that the university develop a plan for "insuring [sic] that teaching assistants are proficient in speaking, reading, and writing the English language as it is spoken in the United States" (Laws of Minnesota, 1983, sect. 6, subd. 2c, para. 5). Screening for "nonnative" English-speaking TAs began pursuant to this 1983 legislative request and subsequent iterations of the request were included in the Laws of Minnesota (1984, 1985) to develop, report on, and maintain a plan of action. The resulting version of this language policy still exists today (see Language Proficiency Requirements for Teaching Assistants, 2021).

At the time of this 1983 law, stories about the "foreign" TAs and their students quickly circulated in news media discourse, and the University of Minnesota was quick to respond with their plan of action. Students like Ms. Kendra Benham, quoted below, were positioned as victims, complaining that their TAs' accents were "too thick" and impossible to comprehend:

> Kendra Benham said her upbringing in Prior Lake hadn't prepared her for the surprise she got when she entered the University of Minnesota last fall. She couldn't understand one of her teachers. By the second day of the math class, she said, she realized that the teaching assistant's foreign accent was too thick for her. So she signed up for another class. (Oberdorfer, 1983, p. 1A)

Faced with the decision of whether to stay in the course and possibly compromise her overall understanding of the course content or sign up for another class, some students like Ms. Benham chose the latter. Others, such as Mr. Rob Walsh, who stayed and worked to "master" their TAs' accents in addition to the course content, were depicted as resilient and able to succeed in spite of their TA's communication deficiencies: "Another freshman, Rob Walsh, had the same problem. He said he struggled for two quarters to master the accents of two teaching assistants as well as the mathematics they were explaining" (Oberdorfer, 1983, p. 1A). In solidarity with undergraduate students, representatives from the University of Minnesota also agreed that this was a problem that they were working to resolve. Working with central administration and the Office of Academic Affairs, the Graduate School began to require department chairpersons and heads to identify all nonnative English-speaking TAs or prospective TAs "whose spoken English has deficiencies" (Wallace & Holt, 1983, para. 1) or "whose spoken English may be problematic" (Wallace & Holt, 1983, para. 2) and refer them for additional language proficiency testing. Based on those test results, TAs might be recommended or required to complete additional training by enrolling in the English as a Second Language Program's course in communication skills for TAs before starting or resuming their duties as TAs.

Forty years on, how has this specific policy evolved? International graduate student numbers continue to grow in U.S. higher education, especially in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (e.g., Congressional Research Service, 2019; Okahana & Zhou, 2019; Wingfield, 2017), and ITAs continue to teach introductory courses for their departments as part of their tuition funding packages. How has this language policy been revised to reflect the changing needs and circumstances of the university and of the students and communities that it serves? And how have various discourses surrounding this policy evolved along with it? As is evident in the 1983 legislative request that TAs be proficient in English "*as it is spoken in the United States* [emphasis added]" (Laws of Minnesota, 1983, sect. 6, subd. 2c, para. 5), language policies are greatly influenced by the ideologies of the policy makers, as are the ways in which individual actors at the institutional level choose to interpret and enforce these language policies (Hult, 2010). Taking into consideration the historical body of the discourses evident in and surrounding this language policy over time helps us to understand the importance of these discourses and of individuals' agency in language policy and planning processes, and it brings to light how language policies relate to individual experiences and beliefs about language (Hult, 2010).

In consideration of this plausible evolution of the university language policy for TAs and the discourses surrounding it over the past 40 years, the present study asks the following research questions:

RQ1. What is the language policy for TAs at the University of Minnesota and how has this policy evolved over time? How has this policy been communicated across departments?

RQ2. What discourses are evident in and surrounding this policy and how have these shifted over time?

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

To answer the study's first RQ, data were collected from the Minnesota Legislative Reference Library, the University of Minnesota's Policy Library, the University of Minnesota's Digital Conservancy and University Archives, and the International Teaching Assistant Program housed in the Center for Educational Innovation. In collaboration with the Deputy Director of the Legislative Reference Library and a university collections archivist, Minnesota laws and legislative texts, policy documents, reports, publications, committee meeting minutes, and current and archived websites were retrieved using a keyword search for singular and plural versions (marked by "/s") of the following terms and phrases: "international teaching assistant/s," "international TA/s," "nonnative teaching assistant/s," "nonnative TA/s," "foreign teaching assistant/s," "foreign TA/s," "ITAs," "international graduate student/s," "nonnative graduate student/s," "foreign graduate student/s," "English as a second language," "nonnative English teaching assistant/s," and "nonnative English speaker/s." An abridged version of this list was first generated by the researcher and new words and phrases that referenced either the policy in question or the specific population of students were added as they appeared in documents. In addition to this collection of documents, data also include a 30-minute interview with the university's current ITA program director and supporting documents that were mentioned during this interview and forwarded to the researcher upon request. The interview took place over Zoom teleconferencing software in November 2021 and was video recorded. At the time of this interview, the interviewee had been directing the ITA program for 16 years.

To answer the study's second RQ, news articles and the previously mentioned laws and legislative texts, policy documents, reports, publications, committee meeting minutes, and current and archived websites were analyzed. News articles came from *The Minneapolis Star and Tribune* (now called the *Star Tribune*)—a local newspaper and Minnesota's largest—and the University of Minnesota's student newspaper, *The Minnesota Daily*. These two newspapers in particular were chosen because of their proximity and connections to the university. Articles from these two news media outlets were retrieved from the newspapers' online archives and the University of Minnesota's physical collection of newspaper archives using the same list of key terms and phrases presented in the previous paragraph.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a combination of intertextual and interdiscursive discourse analysis to show revisions to the policy, how the policy has been communicated across departments, and how discourses evident in and surrounding this policy have shifted over time. Johnson (2015) distinguishes between vertical intertextuality, which is meant to analyze how lexicogrammatical features of texts change, take up, and/or derive meaning from features of previous texts (e.g., past iterations of policy documents), and interdiscursivity, which refers to the past and present connections between a variety of discourses and texts. In examination of these intertextual and interdiscursive connections between texts and across discourses over time, analysis of the data aims to draw connections between the written lexicogrammatical structures (e.g., words, phrases, verb tense, modality) that appear in the texts and the sociodiscursive practices that may have shaped or been shaped by the texts. To name and give shape to those larger sociodiscursive practices evident in and surrounding the texts, this study applies Gee's (2011) "big 'D' discourse" analysis tool.

Gee (1990) introduced the term *Discourse* with a capital "D" (so-called big "D" discourse; see Gee, 2013) to refer to the ways in which particular social groups act out distinctive identities and activities through language, whereas the term *discourse* (or little "d" discourses) simply refers to language in use. For example, evident in the initial language of the 1983 law cited in this paper's introduction, "the English language as it is spoken in the United States," a big "D" discourse of an ideal language standard is present. The authors of the legislative text first ignorantly assume that there is but one variety of English spoken in the United States and then position that variety as ideal—a "correct" variety that international students need to demonstrate achievement and mastery of. This discourse of language superiority appears in concert with other discourses such as the foreign TA problem, thick foreign accents, and victimized students. By crafting the language of the legislative text in this way, the Minnesota Legislature enacts an identity of what it means to be proficient enough in English for a teaching position at the university. The English used in that space must be a particular variety of English spoken in the United States and not another variety, despite the fact that the United States does not

have and has never had a single variety of spoken English. "The English language as it is spoken in the United States" here more likely refers to an academic English or English most often associated with the White, educated middle class (see, e.g., Flores & Rosa, 2015). Through language, the legislature enacts this identity of an ideal (White) English language speaker, resulting in language policy action and uptake of similar language in university policy documents and news media coverage (as shown via interdiscursive analysis).

To discern the distinctive identities enacted through language by particular social groups, the data were categorized into one of the two groups based on where the text originated: (a) news media texts (i.e., newspaper articles), and (b) legislative texts and university communication (e.g., committee meeting minutes, interdepartmental communication about policy). The data were read and reread repeatedly by the researcher throughout and upon completion of the data collection process. After sorting the texts into one of the two larger social groups, each text was coded based on big "D" discourses or themes evident in the text surrounding ITAs. In repeated reviews of the data, these discourses and themes were scrutinized and either collapsed or created, as further investigation suggested.

FINDINGS

RQ1. What Is the Language Policy for Teaching Assistants at The University of Minnesota and How Has This Policy Evolved Over Time? How Has This Policy Been Communicated Across Departments?

In application of vertical intertextual analysis (Johnson, 2015) on the collected policy documents and corroborated by the interview with the current ITA program director, it appears that since the university began to test the oral language proficiency of nonnative English-speaking TAs in 1983, a few key elements of the policy have changed. Table 1 presents iterations of the language policy over time, focusing on changes to lexicogrammatical features of the policy, underlined for emphasis. Dating back to 1983, the policy in question was referred to as the "University of Minnesota Policy on Oral Proficiency for TAs." From the fall of 1983 until December 2002, the policy stated that all nonnative English-speaking TAs must take the Speaking Proficiency English Assessment Kit (SPEAK) test and score above 55 in order to be eligible for a TA position—the modal "must" here communicating a strong social obligation or even legal requirement (see, e.g., Yule, 1998). A score of 50 would require the TA to concurrently enroll in the communication skills for TAs course as they teach in their department, and a score below that would make the TA ineligible for a teaching assistantship. A definition of nonnative speakers of English was not given in this iteration of the policy.

Amended in January 2003, the policy title was changed to "Language Proficiency Requirements for Teaching Assistants." Highlighting the importance that TAs "demonstrate proficiency in English appropriate to the demands of their teaching assistantship," this version of the policy begins to place more of an emphasis on proficiency needed for teaching and less on general language proficiency. This revised version of the policy also includes a definition of who constitutes a nonnative speaker of English: This is a person who grew up in a home where English was not the primary language, regardless of their citizenship or whether their elementary, secondary, or undergraduate education were in English. In fact, this negative particle "not" is emphasized in capital letters, which may suggest that there had been some push back or at least a fair amount of questioning in regard to past schooling experiences and medium language of instruction, as well as questions concerning students' nationality.

In 2010, the text of the policy was revised again, this time prefaced with a note about the university's high standards for teaching and expanded to include not only graduate teaching assistants but also undergraduate teaching assistants. By prefacing the policy in this way, the University of Minnesota foregrounds the importance of teaching in this language policy—a move that appears to have begun in 2003 with the previous iteration that required students to "demonstrate proficiency in spoken English appropriate to the demands of their *teaching* assistantship" [emphasis added]. In addition to these bigger policy changes, it is also of note that the modal changed from "must" to "will": TAs "will demonstrate proficiency in spoken English appropriate to the demands of their teaching assistantship." The modal "will" communicates an implication of future intention, prediction, or even promise (Yule, 1998), which is arguably less forceful when compared to the strong obligation or requirement associated with "must." Other, less notable, changes to the policy include the replacement of the SPEAK test with the Internet-Based Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL iBT) and an added option of the Spoken English Test for Teaching Assistants (SETTA) test.

TABLE 1
Vertical Intertextual Analysis of the Language Policy Over Time

Information	1983–2002	Amended: January 2003	Amended: June 2010	Amended: February 2012
Title	University of Minnesota Policy on Oral Proficiency for TAs	Language Proficiency Requirements for Teaching Assistants	Language Proficiency Requirements for Teaching Assistants	Language Proficiency Requirements for Teaching Assistants
Policy Statement	Current University of Minnesota policy requires that all nonnative English-speaking TAs or prospective TAs who are or will be assigned to teaching, tutoring, or advising duties (including office hours) must: 1. Take the SPEAK test 2. Score 55 or 60 on the SPEAK test	All nonnative English-speaking Teaching Assistants (TAs) must demonstrate proficiency in spoken English appropriate to the demands of their teaching assistantship. This proficiency will be assessed by (…)	High standards of English language proficiency are required for nonnative English-speaking graduate and undergraduate students who are appointed to teaching assistant (TA) positions. All nonnative English-speaking graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants (TAs) will demonstrate proficiency in spoken English appropriate to the demands of their teaching assistantship. Proficiency is assessed in one of the following ways…	High standards of English language proficiency are required for nonnative English-speaking graduate and undergraduate students who are appointed to teaching assistant (TA) positions. All nonnative English-speaking graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants (TAs) will demonstrate proficiency in spoken English appropriate to the demands of their teaching assistantship. Proficiency is assessed in one of the following ways…
Definition for Nonnative Speaker of English	[not given]	Nonnative speaker of English: Person for whom the primary language in the home during childhood was not English. Country of citizenship and language of elementary, secondary or undergraduate education are NOT factors in this definition.	Nonnative speaker of English: Person for whom the primary language in the home during childhood was not English. Country of citizenship and language of elementary, secondary, or undergraduate education are NOT factors in this definition.	Nonnative speaker of English: A person for whom the primary language in the home during childhood was not English, and who received all or most of their elementary, secondary, and undergraduate education outside the United States.

TABLE 1 (*Continued*)

Information	1983–2002	Amended: January 2003	Amended: June 2010	Amended: February 2012
Updates to the policy	Implementation: Screening process for nonnative English-speaking TAs begins.	Title is revised. Information is added, including a definition for nonnative speakers of English.	Policy is expanded to include undergraduate TAs. The TOEFL iBT test replaces the SPEAK test. SETTA test option is also added.	Definition of a nonnative speaker of English is changed for clarification.

Abbreviations: SETTA, Spoken English Test for Teaching Assistants; SPEAK, Speaking Proficiency English Assessment Kit; TOEFL iBT, Internet-Based Test of English as a Foreign Language.
Note: Changes are identified with underlining.

Finally, in 2012, the policy was amended to clarify the definition of a nonnative speaker of English. Taking into consideration the TA's previous education experiences, the current version of the language policy identifies nonnative speakers of English as individuals who grew up in a home with a primary language other than English and who "received all or most of their elementary, secondary, and undergraduate education outside the United States." TAs must now meet both of these conditions in order to be considered nonnative speakers of English.

Now in its present state, the "Language Proficiency Requirements for Teaching Assistants" holds high standards for teaching, applies to both undergraduate and graduate students, and is targeted toward international students who have received most of their education outside of the United States, as opposed to domestic students from multilingual households. In consideration of these revisions to the ITA language policy, the second part of this RQ asks: How has this policy been communicated across university departments?

Since the screening process for ITAs began in 1983, the process for identifying individuals for additional testing of English language proficiency—once general spoken proficiency and now characterized as proficiency appropriate to the demands of their teaching—has remained largely unchanged. Administrative officials working in areas such as the Office of Academic Affairs, the Graduate School, the Center for Educational Innovation (previously known as the Center for Teaching and Learning Services), and/or Human Resources send communication (e.g., memoranda, emails) at the beginning of the academic term to department chairs and heads, directors of graduate studies, TA coordinators, and/or graduate program staff members across the university campus. In these communications, they remind recipients of the university-wide language policy using text taken from or linked to the policy directly (see Table 1), mention any departmental costs associated with this policy (if applicable), and reiterate the strong desire of full compliance and support across departments. Table 2 includes excerpts taken from the three sample communications found in the data (1983, 2000, 2018). Emphasis marked with underline was included in the original documents.

It is interesting to note that since the implementation of the language policy for TAs in 1983, the onus of complying with this policy has been put almost entirely on departments, and enforcement of this policy has been based largely on the

TABLE 2
Intertextual Analysis of University Communication Regarding Language Policy Over Time

Characteristic	10 November 1983	15 August 2000	21 December 2018
To	Department Chairpersons and Heads	Department Chairs and Heads, Directors of Graduate Studies, TA Coordinators, and Graduate Program Staff Members	Directors of Graduate Studies, Assistants, and Graduate Program Coordinators
RE	Monitoring and Improving the English-Speaking Proficiency of Teaching Assistants	Update on University of Minnesota Requirements for Nonnative English-Speaking Teaching Assistants (TAs)	English Proficiency Policy for Teaching Assistants
Text	Department chairpersons and heads have the following two responsibilities which are crucial to the success of the program. A. Department chairpersons or heads (or their designees) will review the teaching assistants in their departments who will have classroom teaching responsibilities to identify and refer for testing those whose spoken English may be problematic. Classroom teaching is defined for this purpose as direct classroom instruction, laboratory instruction, and one-on-one tutorials. B. Departments will bear half the instructional costs—$150—for each of their teaching assistants who enroll in the training program. The deadline for referral for testing is 30 November 1983. It requires the cooperation of all departments across the University to solve this problem. We are grateful for your help.	This is to remind you of the current University of Minnesota policy regarding all nonnative English-speaking TAs (including those who have degrees from institutions in the United States or in other countries where English is the medium of instruction). Due to the University's commitment to the policy described below and its strong desire for 100% compliance with it, Central Administration will cover the cost of coursework for all nonnative English-speaking TAs or prospective TAs who need to enroll in communication skills classes in the Center for Teaching and Learning Services for the 2000–2001 academic year. Current University of Minnesota policy requires that all nonnative English-speaking TAs or prospective TAs who are or will be assigned to teaching, tutoring, or advising duties (including office hours) must: 1. Take the SPEAK test; 2 (…) (…)	If your department employs graduate or undergraduate teaching assistants whose home language growing up was not English, now is the time to check UM Reports (*English Language Proficiency—Eligibility for TAs*) to make sure that they have attained the proper English language proficiency (ELP) rating to hold a TA position. Please inform nonnative English-speaking students who will be TAs (or graduate student instructors) and whose ELP rating is lower than "1" that the University's policy requires them to either: -enroll in International TA program course; or, -take the SETTA *if* they wish to raise their ELP rating. (…) Departments may request exemptions to the English requirement by emailing the student's name, ID#, and reason for the exemption (…)

TABLE 2 (*Continued*)

Characteristic	10 November 1983	15 August 2000	21 December 2018
		The continuing cooperation of each academic department in maintaining high standards of English language communication skills for all nonnative English-speaking TAs on the Twin Cities Campus is of the utmost importance in promoting quality undergraduate education (…)	

Note: Formatting reflects emphasis as marked in the original communication.

subjectivity of department chairpersons and heads. In reference to the 1983 communication that appears in Table 2, departments were first informed that they were required to review the TAs they had for their courses and then identify individuals "whose spoken English may be problematic." This begs the question: problematic for whom and under what circumstances? Certainly, the context in which TAs communicate with their departmental colleagues and supervisors differs vastly from the way they need to communicate with their undergraduate students. Delivering a lecture, leading a lab group, and facilitating class discussion require a different set of communication skills than, say, one-on-one interaction with departmental colleagues and/or supervisors. And whereas one might argue that department chairpersons and heads could use information from end-of-term student evaluations to identify whose spoken (instructional) English may be problematic, it is important to keep in mind that after its initial implementation in the fall of 1983, this policy was targeted toward students before they began their first academic term as a TA. Nevertheless, the subjectivity of this policy allows a lot of flexibility in terms of each department's compliance with identification and testing. And, in consideration of the fact that until August 2000, departments were required to pay half of the instructional costs related to the communication skills for TAs classes, one might imagine that many department chairpersons and heads who are faced with budget constraints might forgo this potentially added cost and hurdle for their graduate students.

Possibly in recognition of the bias some departments and programs may have against referring students to testing due to the added costs they would incur, Central Administration at the University of Minnesota began to cover the full cost of TAs or prospective TAs who needed to enroll in the ITA Program classes for the 2000–2001 academic year, attributing this change to the university's strong commitment to the policy and strong desire for total compliance. Since that time, Central Administration has continued to pay these costs, which come out of a central pool of university instructional funds that each department and college pays into (J. Lindgren, interview communication, 1 November 2021). In addition to this update about the change in cost structure for departments, the 15 August 2000 communication referenced in Table 2 also underscores (emphasis in the original) that the continuing cooperation and compliance of all departments in maintaining high standards of English language

communication skills is of the utmost importance in promoting "quality education." As was demonstrated earlier in this section in terms of the lexicogrammatical changes made to the text of the language policy itself as it was revised over time, it appears that communication about this policy too has begun to move more toward an emphasis on communication skills needed for high-quality teaching as opposed to general proficiency measures.

Finally, in the most recent communication of the language proficiency policy for TAs in 2018, we see that softer language is used to communicate the requirements of the university-wide policy. Referencing students' "home language" as opposed to native language, this email communication requests graduate program coordinators to check students' reports through their admissions files to ensure that students have a high enough rating to hold a TA position. It does not require them to identify "problematic" students based on their own subjective opinions or interpretations of the terms—as was done in 1983—or require that all nonnative English-speaking students be sent for testing—as was outlined in 2000. Graduate program coordinators have access to language proficiency scores that were submitted to the admissions office during the application process, but this is an additional step they must take to view the reports for each TA or prospective TA (J. Lindgren, interview communication, 1 November 2021). It is also noteworthy that this communication is the first of the three to disclose that exemptions to this policy may be possible, and further contact information is given to individuals who might want to explore that possibility.

RQ2. What Discourses Are Evident in and Surrounding This Policy and How Have These Shifted Over Time?

In response to the second RQ, the study applies interdiscursive analysis (Johnson, 2015) with Gee's (2011) big "D" discourse tool to trace how discourses evident in and surrounding this policy have shifted over time. This findings section presents the big "D" discourses surrounding ITAs and categorizes the data sources based on where the texts originated: (a) news media texts (i.e., newspaper articles), and (b) legislative texts and university communication (e.g., committee meeting minutes, interdepartmental communication about policy).

Table 3 presents these discourses surrounding ITAs in the news media. When the Minnesota Legislature first requested that the University of

TABLE 3
Tracing Big "D" Discourses Surrounding the ITAs and the Language Policy in the News Media

Source	Year	TA Foreign Accent/Speaking = Problem	TA General English Proficiency = Problem	TAs Need Communication Skills for Teaching	Foreign TA Brings Unique "Global" Perspective	Teaching Skills = Culturally Specific	ITAs Gain Confidence/Are Grateful for the Program
Star and Tribune	1983	×	×	–	×	–	–
Minnesota Daily	1984[a]	×	×	×	–	–	–
Minnesota Daily	1996	–	×	×	×	×	–
Minnesota Daily	2002	×	×	×	–	–	–
Minnesota Daily	2009	–	–	×	–	–	–
Minnesota Daily	2009	–	–	×	×	×	–
Minnesota Daily	2012	–	–	×	–	×	×
Minnesota Daily	2017	–	–	×	×	×	×

Abbreviation: ITA, international teaching assistant.
Note: "×" indicates the presence of a Discourse; "–" indicates its absence.
[a]Two other pieces from the same source and same year involved the same configuration of Discourses.

Minnesota solve its "TA problem," popular discourses that surrounded this new language policy enacted an identity of the TAs as being linguistically deficient, lacking general English language proficiency, and burdening their students with incomprehensible lectures delivered with accents too thick to understand.

As shown in Table 3, these discourses continue through the early 2000s and then taper off, giving way to other discourses framing the language policy as a requirement in place to improve TAs' communication skills necessary for teaching. Here, the identity of a linguistically deficient TA appears to give way to that of a TA who is improving their communication skills with the goal of helping their students achieve a high-quality education. Beginning also near the start of the 21st century and gaining traction in the late 2000s, these necessary communication skills for teaching begin to be framed as culturally specific. In other words, the TA is recognized as an expert in their content area and also of the teaching pedagogies of their home cultures, bringing with them a new and unique global perspective to the American classroom. In order for them and their students to be successful in their respective roles, however, the pedagogies that may work in their home culture need to be exchanged for those of the host culture. And finally, in most recent years, ITAs have begun to have their voices included in the narrative. These articles position ITAs as content experts who are grateful for the chance to improve their teaching and to gain confidence in their English communications skills with the goal of being the best instructor they can be for their students.

Similar to the shifts seen in Table 3, these same discourses surrounding ITAs also appear to have moved discursively from enacting an identity of a linguistically deficient ITA as the problem and toward that of an ITA who is improving their communication skills for improved quality of teaching. See Table 4 for evidence of these shifts across policy documents and university communication. In viewing Table 4, it is important to note that all of the texts from the Minnesota Legislature and a large majority of university correspondence and communication about this policy are dated prior to 1990. As can be inferred from these data, there was a lot more communication about the policy and the specific student population impacted by it in the first few years following the policy's implementation. Ten years later—that is, after 1993—very few documents can be found. So, whereas the shift in discourses from these social groups may not appear as striking as the shifts demonstrated and discussed in Table 3, this may be due to the absence of documented texts in discussion of the policy decades after its implementation.

In summary, as can be seen in Tables 3 and 4, the discourses surrounding this language policy, and ITAs more specifically, seem to have shifted substantially over the past 40 years. Whereas the language used to describe this student population in the 1980s and early 1990s enacted an identity of ITAs as being linguistically deficient and a problem to solve, the big "D" discourses surrounding this policy appear to have shifted to a need for improving communication between teachers and students with the ultimate goal being high-quality instruction. In fact, it is possible to imagine an arrow moving from the top-left quadrants down toward the bottom-right quadrants in Tables 3 and 4, illustrating this shift in discourses over time.

DISCUSSION

In review of the study's two RQs, findings for both demonstrate a gradual shift away from a focus on English language proficiency per se and toward a focus on the need for effective communication for teaching and high-quality education. Vertical intertextual analysis (Johnson, 2015) revealed key revisions to lexicogrammatical features of the language policy text across its four iterations. These changes placed more of an emphasis on proficiency needed for teaching and less on general language proficiency, foregrounding the reason for the policy with mention of the university's high standards for quality education. In addition to these revisions highlighting the importance of teaching, analysis also revealed changes in modality to soften the language of the requirement and the inclusion of keyword definitions to clarify to whom this requirement does and does not apply (i.e., who is identified as nonnative).

Similar to the revisions made to the text of the language policy itself over time, communication about this policy has also evolved, despite the fact that the process for actually implementing and enforcing this ITA policy across departments has not. As was shown with the changes to the text of the policy documents, university administrators responsible for communicating to departments about this university-wide language standard for TAs have also moved away from framing the policy as a crucial solution to a linguistic deficiency, one that required 100% compliance, and have moved toward softer, less demanding language that frames the policy as a way for department chairpersons and heads to confirm that their

TABLE 4
Tracing Big "D" Discourses Surrounding the ITAs and the Language Policy in Policy Documents and University Communication

Source	Year	TA Foreign Accent/Speaking = Problem	TA General English Proficiency = Problem	TAs Need Communication Skills for Teaching	Foreign TA Brings Unique "Global" Perspective	Teaching Skills = Culturally Specific	ITAs Gain Confidence/Are Grateful for the Program
Minnesota Laws	1983	–	×	–	–	–	–
Response to Legislature	1983	×	×	×	–	–	–
Board of Regents	1983	–	×	–	–	–	–
Comm. to Depts.	1983	×	×	–	–	–	–
Minnesota Laws	1984	–	×	–	–	–	–
Minnesota Laws	1985	–	×	–	–	–	–
Board of Regents	1986	–	×	–	–	–	–
Board of Regents	1990	–	–	×	–	–	–
Self-Study Report	1996	–	×	×	–	×	–
Comm. to Depts.	2000	–	–	×	–	–	–
Comm. to Depts.	2018	–	–	×	–	–	–

Abbreviations: Comm. to Depts., communication to departments; ITA, international teaching assistant.
Note: "×" indicates the presence of a discourse; "–" indicates its absence.

students have met the requirements to hold their TA positions.

Analyzing these and other texts for evidence of Gee's (2011) big "D" discourses and enacted identities through language, results demonstrate that the trend seen in the findings for the study's first RQ do not appear in isolation. Beginning in the early 1980s with discourses enacting an identity of TAs as linguistically deficient, with thick accents and general lack of proficiency, the discourses evident in and surrounding this policy have shifted to give way to those of a TA who is improving their communication skills with the goal of helping their students achieve a high-quality education. This shift in discourse appears so prominently, in fact, that it is imaginable to trace a line from one competing discourse to the other.

So, 40 years later, what can be said about the evolution of this language policy, and why does this matter? As international graduate student numbers continue to grow in U.S. higher education (e.g., Congressional Research Service, 2019) and as ITAs continue to teach introductory courses for their departments, it is important to take into account how the historical bodies of specific social actors (e.g., administrators) and of discourses evident in and surrounding this policy have evolved over time. Clearly, in the case of the University of Minnesota's Language Proficiency Requirements for Teaching Assistants (2021), what once began as an explicit language policy has moved discursively from resolving a general English language proficiency problem to a pedagogical one—focused on communication skills for effective teaching. Such a move then begs the question: If the policy is now interpreted as ensuring that graduate and undergraduate students alike possess the high-quality communication skills necessary for teaching, why should this policy not extend to all TAs—international and domestic? Why does this policy only apply to multilingual students with a majority of their formative education outside of the United States? What policies are in place for domestic students who may only claim one language, English, as their home language but who nevertheless have trouble communicating with their students?

In addition to this discursive move away from language and toward teaching, Hult (2010) reminds us that "language policies are colored by the ideologies of policy makers" and that an individual's "professional training and experience will relate to how they interpret and implement educational language policy" (p. 12). Recognizing the subjectivity of language policy implementation and enforcement, such as in the context of ITA language proficiency screening described in this case study, highlights the importance of the agentive and sometimes biased processes involved in language policy and planning. Clearly, not every department chairperson or head, director of graduate studies, or TA coordinator would screen ITAs in the same way. Some who have had fewer opportunities for intercultural communication or cross-cultural collaboration with students and/or colleagues from diverse backgrounds may have a lower threshold for spoken accents and differing speech patterns, and/or they might have a more fixed mindset of how instruction should be carried out. It is presumed that individuals such as those described here would be more likely to send students for additional testing, as opposed to others who have had greater opportunities for intercultural communication and cross-cultural collaboration. Obviously, the subjective beliefs and ideologies held by administrators across different university departments—made already unique by their distinct academic disciplines and theoretical schools of thought—may lead to a disproportionate number of ITAs from certain departments and colleges enrolling in these programs, in relation to the total number of graduate students who hold TA or graduate instructor positions across the university. Given current understandings of language, race, and appropriate language—and the obvious challenges and inconsistencies that are embedded in such ITA language policies—future research would benefit from uncovering department administrators' interpretations and beliefs about this language policy, and how it is (or is not) enforced in their departments or program areas, and whether such policies are really serving the university and its communities.

In summary, the present study has applied intertextual and interdiscursive discourse analysis to present and past legislative texts, policy documents, reports, publications, committee meeting minutes, and current and archived websites to better understand (a) how the University of Minnesota's language proficiency policy for TAs has been revised over time, (b) how communication between and across academic departments about this policy has changed over time, and (c) how various big "D" discourses evident in and surrounding this policy have evolved over time with these revisions. Findings suggest a gradual shift away from a focus on English language proficiency and toward a focus on the need for effective communication for teaching and high-quality education. Just as language policies are colored by the ideologies of their policy makers, so too are the decisions that teachers and administrators make with re-

gard to policy implementation and enforcement. In recognition of this subjectivity, questions are raised regarding the implications for extending this policy to all TAs (whether native speaking or nonnative speaking, domestic or international).

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THE COMMENTARIES

Reframing "the Foreign TA Problem" as "the American Listener Problem"

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Many of us working with international teaching assistants (ITAs)[1] have noticed, at least anecdotally, a shift in the roles of ITA programs over the years, and it is useful to see a case study that zooms into what this shift looks like more concretely. In his study of how ITA policy, practice, and communication have evolved over time at the University of Minnesota, LaScotte points to a welcome discursive shift from a focus on overall language proficiency to "a focus on the need for effective communication for teaching and high-quality education" (p. X). From my years of interactions with other practitioners working with ITAs, I concur with LaScotte that these changes "may very well be representative of national trends" (p. X), therein my interest in responding to his findings and conclusions. In this commentary, I argue that in spite of the shifts observed in Minnesota and other institutions, not much has changed in these 40 years in the sense that most, if not all, ITA work is still directed at some perceived inadequacy in the ITAs themselves, and rarely, if ever, at the ITAs' audience or context.

Before moving on, let me address an issue that often arises when I try to have conversations about our potential role in legitimizing and perpetuating harmful linguistic ideologies. Those of us working directly with ITAs are there because we care about them. We want to see them thrive. And so, to suggest that we might be working under some racist, exclusionary, otherizing ideology may sound not just preposterous but outright offensive. This feeling has been dubbed "the altruistic shield" by Gerald (2020a), defined as "a psychological mechanism used by educators that allows us to outright deny or otherwise defend ourselves from anticipated or in-the-moment accusations of racism because of what we consider to be the altruistic nature of our work" (p. 22). In other words, it seems paradoxical that we, in our commitment to our ITAs, could be perpetrators of discriminatory linguistic practices. Still, careful reflection on our policies and practices, together with a closer look at the literature, might reveal otherwise.

There is evidence that a listener's perception of an accent does not always correspond to objective characteristics of a speaker's speech and can lead to what Fought (2006) called "accent hallucination." For example, in Rubin (1992) and Kang & Rubin (2009), the same recording produced by a native speaker of "standard" English was perceived by subjects to contain a foreign accent when played in conjunction with a picture of an East Asian model, as opposed to no accent being heard when a picture of a Caucasian instructor was shown.

The shift in focus that LaScotte identifies reminded me of the discussion in Flores & Rosa (2015) about bilingual education that aims to build on, rather than erase, the home languages of immigrant children. These additive approaches aim to help with the development of standardized, academically appropriate language skills while honoring the value of minoritized home languages. While Flores and Rosa saw these approaches as a much-needed response to subtractive approaches, they pointed out that additive approaches still reinforce views that conceptualize standardized, "appropriate" language as a unique set of objective linguistic forms that, if mastered, will lead to success regardless of who is using them. The authors claim that this view of standardized language relies on what they called "raciolinguistic ideologies," which "produce racialized speaking subjects who are constructed as linguistically deviant *even when engaging in linguistic practices positioned as normative or innovative when produced by privileged white subjects*" (Flores & Rosa, 2015, p. 150; emphasis added). Flores and Rosa's critical view of appropriateness-based approaches thus is that they insist on teaching what is seen as an objective set of normative linguistic practices that a "White listening subject" may still hear as deficient when performed by racialized speakers.

A raciolinguistic perspective can help describe the cases of accent hallucination in Rubin (1992) and Kang & Rubin (2009): Listeners will hear a foreign accent solely based on what they expect to hear after seeing a racialized face (in this case, Asian), even when what they heard was speech produced by a speaker of a standardized variety. In other words, the listener's perception is constructed based not on the objective linguistic

features nonnative English speakers can spend years adjusting to, but mainly on expectations that a person of Asian appearance will speak in certain ways.

The consequences of raciolinguistic ideologies go beyond hearing imagined accents. For example, Rubin (1992) and Kang and Rubin (2009) also reported lower scores in a comprehension test for students who believed their lecturer was Asian. In other words, the belief that a lecturer had a foreign accent, even when there was none, negatively affected how students absorbed the material. These findings tie in with comments from students reported elsewhere, such as this one in Subtirelu (2017): "After a while, like, when you realize you can't understand her, you just kinda zone out (…) (Charlotte, pseudonym)" (p. 259). When students "zone out" or score lower in comprehension tests for reasons they attribute to their instructors' alleged linguistic deficiencies, it is hardly surprising that university administrators and elected officials feel compelled to make ITAs' language a matter of policy, like in Minnesota.

Language ideologies are so pervasive that they will bubble up even among the most well-intentioned advocates. Flores and Rosa (2015) highlighted how appropriateness-based approaches to help multilingual students master a standardized variety of English, in spite of their efforts to honor these students' home languages, still reinforce the same racial normativity of subtractive approaches in that they fail to take into account how they "plac[e] the onus on language-minoritized students to mimic the white speaking subject while ignoring the raciolinguistic ideologies that the white listening subject uses to position them as racial Others" (p. 155). In short, despite our good intentions in serving our students, we must understand that whatever we do with them at a micro level is still inserted in a societal context soaked in ideological stances that can render our good intentions futile.

Just as LaScotte found shifts in the discourse around ITAs in the past 40 years, Subtirelu (2015) reported on an unexpected finding from his analysis of students' comments in an online public professor-rating platform that seems to show a shift from what Shuck (2004) had reported over a decade earlier when looking at students' attitudes to foreign faculty. While Shuck's findings portrayed hyperbolic and highly stereotypical comments from students, Subtirelu found a prevalence of attempts to minimize the negative effects of an accent (reflected in the title of his article, "She does have an accent, but…"). However, the author highlights that although this seems to suggest students' rejection of the ideology of nativeness, the fact that an accent was mentioned at all in evaluations of nonnative English speakers shows that this ideology is so ubiquitous that it has been naturalized (in the sense of Fairclough, 2001) as obvious or a matter of common sense. In other words, students felt compelled to comment on a foreign TA's accent, even if it was with the good intention of stating that it was not a problem for them. Unsurprisingly, comments about quality of language, either positive or negative, were absent in the ratings of native English-speaker instructors.

With these considerations about raciolinguistic ideologies, I would like to draw a parallel between Flores and Rosa's (2015) critical view of appropriateness-based approaches and the shifts LaScotte identifies in his piece. Just like Flores and Rosa recognized these approaches as an improvement over subtractive approaches that try to erase home languages, I see the shifts pointed out by LaScotte as positive changes insofar as they, as he states, have "moved away from framing the policy as a crucial solution to a linguistic deficiency" (p. X). My question, however, is: Have they really? According to LaScotte, "what once began as an explicit language policy has moved discursively from resolving a general English language proficiency problem to a pedagogical one—focused on communication skills for effective teaching" (p. X). Maybe the policy is not explicitly about language anymore, but if the pedagogical focus is on communication skills for effective teaching, is it not ultimately implicitly still about language after all? LaScotte does point out that the move begs the question that "if the policy is now interpreted as ensuring that graduate and undergraduate students alike possess the high-quality communication skills necessary for teaching, why should this policy not extend to all TAs—international and domestic?" (p. X). It is indeed an excellent question, and I propose that the answer is because, in practice, it is still all about language.

In a sense, this is akin to Flores and Rosa's (2015) observations about appropriateness-based, additive approaches. The changes in policy better respect ITAs' Englishes and, instead of demanding that ITAs erase their "deficient" English, call for adding communication skills specifically relevant to effective teaching. Nevertheless, from a raciolinguistic point of view, it seems little progress has been made, as the policy changes continue to place the onus of improved communication entirely on the language-minoritized ITAs, even though research has shown repeatedly that adhering to

majoritized linguistic (or communication) practices is no guarantee that majoritized native speakers of English will recognize these practices as such.

LaScotte insightfully emphasizes that "just as language policies are colored by the ideologies of their policy makers, so too are the decisions that teachers and administrators make with regard to policy implementation and enforcement" (p. X). In the specific case of the University of Minnesota, the author points out that this leads to differences among departments and programs' interpretations of the policies, affecting how their ITAs are ultimately treated. The policies in Minnesota, like in many other places, focus on the quality of the undergraduates' education and do not seem to take the interests of the ITAs themselves into account. For those of us working directly with ITAs, it is crucial that we are ready to identify our own ideologies in our decisions regarding implementation of the policies and how to best serve our ITAs. Looney and Bhalla (2019) contended that while policy drives ITA practice, it is not informed by research, and urged that researchers and practitioners be agents of change. To be true agents of change, the first step is to lower our altruistic shields and identify what our potential role might be in enforcing, legitimizing, and thus perpetuating language ideologies.

Shifts like the ones LaScotte identified in Minnesota, which advance our treatment of ITAs but do not effectively challenge raciolinguistic ideologies, transpire in many conversations I have witnessed among practitioners around the country. None of us would classify our students' English as deficient, and we are all extremely committed to serving this population. In doing so, we often talk of moving the focus of our programs from language testing toward adapting to North American classroom expectations, more effective pedagogies, intercultural communication, genre awareness, intelligibility, and so on. These are all essential aspects that will help ITAs beyond teaching as they become full academics. Nevertheless, we continue to place the responsibility for effective communication entirely on the ITAs and rarely, if ever, address the role of majoritized speakers in facilitating this communication. Reversing this trend is the shift that will really bring about change but is also the one that will not likely happen any time soon, at least at the policy level.

While we wait for truly transformative policy change that may seem beyond our control, we can take our own small steps. First of all, as we struggle to meet short-term needs in testing and programming for ITAs, we should never lose sight of the ideologies behind them. Gerald's (2020b) suggestions for teachers seeking to decenter whiteness in English language teaching can easily be adapted to ITA professionals. If there is buy-in from the institution or at least from departments, Subtirelu et al. (2022) provided an excellent model for interventions with undergraduate students to foster more collaborative approaches to communication across linguistic differences. Finally, efforts like LaScotte's in documenting and tracking changes in policies, how they are communicated to stakeholders, and their implications are essential to illustrate ideological trends in very concrete terms. I will close with the words of Gerald (2020a): "There is no guarantee the problem will be lessened or solved if you confront the situation, but there is a guarantee it will not be solved if you do not act" (p. 24).

NOTE

[1] I will be using the term ITAs loosely to refer to graduate students from non-Anglophone countries who are studying in the United States on scholarships that require teaching undergraduate students in some capacity. Different institutions might use the terms teaching fellows or graduate student instructors and might define "international" in different ways.

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The "Foreign TA Problem" as a Demand for Aesthetic Labor

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Using the University of Minnesota as a case study, LaScotte provides a detailed analysis of how university language policies in the United States have evolved in response to what Bailey (1984) first called the "foreign TA problem," an alleged problem positing that the spoken English of international teaching assistants (ITAs) is inadequate in communicating course material to undergraduate students. As LaScotte carefully notes, there has been a shift away from "remedying" ITAs' overall English language proficiency to helping them obtain various communication skills necessary for teaching. But even with this more positive framing of ITAs in language policy, LaScotte reminds us that there are inconsistencies and challenges to confront. For example, if better teaching is a matter of overall communication rather than language proficiency per se, then why is policy and training solely targeted at ITAs and not their domestic counterparts? Moreover, given how language policies are always ideologically produced, it is important to consider how those pertaining to ITAs continue to uphold White, middle-class perspectives on what constitutes "appropriate" English or communication.

In this commentary, I continue to explore these types of inconsistencies and challenges by noting that the "foreign TA problem" must be understood as a demand for ITAs to sound a particular way as academic workers. Having to perform what is called aesthetic labor, ITAs are obliged to perform such labor due to the neoliberalization of North American universities as well as their role in upholding White-coded manners of speech as the standard for oral communication (Ramjattan, 2021).

AESTHETIC LABOR IN THE NEOLIBERAL UNIVERSITY

Before expanding on this point, it is important to provide a cursory overview of what is meant by aesthetic labor. Colloquially known as the work of "looking good" and "sounding right," aesthetic labor describes how employers actively seek out workers with a desired set of bodily and vocal attributes that employers can then manipulate and exploit in order to appeal to the senses of customers during service encounters (see Warhurst & Nickson, 2020). Specific examples of this labor might include retail workers who must model the merchandise of a clothing store to entice customers to buy the same merchandise and call center workers needing to memorize scripted language or adopt a particular tone of voice to portray themselves as caring about the needs of their callers. While aesthetic labor is mostly seen in such sectors as retail, hospitality, and call center work, this is not to say that it is absent in other sectors. In fact, an additional area to consider is the university.

Understanding universities as sites of aesthetic labor first requires an understanding of how universities are neoliberal enterprises. Especially in the North American context and elsewhere in the Global North, universities have increasingly been subject to neoliberal policies and ideologies that have made them into businesses constantly in search of revenue and thus offering education as a kind of "exclusive good" to be purchased by student customers (Holborow, 2015). LaScotte alludes to this point with frequent mentions of how the University of Minnesota currently aspires

to offer students high-quality education, which requires the use of high-quality communication skills. While communication skills are often vaguely defined, Urciuoli (2020) noted how they are typically conflated with spoken language. Returning to LaScotte's question about why ITAs need to improve their communication, but not their domestic peers, this is where a possible explanation can be offered. If communication is tied to speech and the speech of ITAs is perceived as too "foreign-sounding" for the proper provision of high-quality education, then it is their responsibility to remedy their speech in order to ensure that they are effective providers of this commodity (Kim, 2020). Therefore, even if they are encouraged to undergo general communication skills training, ITAs may nevertheless be obliged to change aspects of their speech, which then becomes another instance of needing to perform aesthetic labor.

However, given that aesthetic labor typically involves employers recruiting workers with desirable embodied characteristics, it seems strange to classify ITAs as aesthetic laborers. That is, as Harklau and Coda (2019) asked, if ITAs are perceived to be lacking in specific areas of their spoken English, then why are they being recruited as academic workers? One answer to this question is that while they do not initially satisfy the sounding right component of aesthetic labor, ITAs do look good for universities. This is first in the sense that international students are "cash cows" for universities not only in terms of having to pay higher tuition fees but also with regard to being the means for universities to secure international grants and heighten their reputation around the world (see Harklau & Coda, 2019). Furthermore, for higher education institutions seeking to advertise their ethnoracial diversity, the increased presence of an array of international students on campus can serve to underscore a commitment to equality and inclusion (e.g., Kim, 2020). In the end, then, because their bodily presence secures symbolic and material rewards for universities, these institutions are perhaps willing to invest in ensuring that ITAs appeal to the aural senses of student customers.

THE RACIAL AESTHETICS OF LABOR

Even though the neoliberalization of North American universities can begin to explain why ITAs are required to perform aesthetic labor, it does not provide the full story. To better understand, it is necessary to also pay attention to the type of aesthetic to which ITAs must conform. Here, I argue that sounding right for ITAs is never ideologically neutral but rather tied to racialization and racism. This is because universities in the United States and Canada are sites that uphold raciolinguistic ideologies, those that deem the language practices of racially minoritized people as perpetually deviant when juxtaposed with those of their privileged White counterparts (Flores & Rosa, 2015). The primary reason why these institutions support such ideologies is due to policies, curricula, and practices that uphold one variety of English as the communicative norm—all of which speak to histories and ongoing systems of settler colonialism (e.g., Sterzuk, 2015). In LaScotte's case study, we get a sense of one particular raciolinguistic ideology pertaining to how the "international" in "ITA" gets conflated with nonnativeness in English. As seen in the most recent iteration of the University of Minnesota's language policy, "nonnative English speaker" becomes defined as someone who did not use English at home during childhood and completed primary, secondary, and tertiary education outside the United States. The problem with this definition is that it not only reinforces a monolingual conception of nativeness in English, which requires no other language to be used in a home or nation, but also, creates racialized distinctions between native and nonnative speakers. For example, whereas a White Australian student would not be required to undergo ITA training due to the assumption that English is the dominant medium of communication in both homes and schools in a stereotypically White Australia, an Indian student who may have exclusively attended English-medium schools in India but uses Hindi or Gujarati at home would be classified as nonnative to English, even if they identified as a native English speaker. This specific language policy highlights an important point: Any alleged deficiency in the English of particular groups of ITAs, who may be classified as nonnative speakers, is not actually of their own doing but instead determined by institutional perceptions of this English.

Returning to aesthetic labor, then, ITAs who work in universities that deem the spoken English of a White Australian as automatically better suited for teaching than that of an Indian, for instance, may come to realize that sounding right for work entails sounding White. However, rather than coming to this realization through reading an official policy document, ITAs might take note of this institutional expectation in everyday interactions. One widely noted example of this point pertains to ITAs' speech accents as allegedly being unintelligible. While the overall "foreignness"

of their accents is often a source of complaint for students, who cite it as a reason for their failure to grasp course material, ITAs racialized as non-White are subject to even more criticism than their White counterparts (e.g., Ramjattan, 2020, 2021; Subtirelu, 2015). When students are under the influence of raciolinguistic ideologies that disparage the accents of non-White ITAs and are also treated as customers in the neoliberal university, they may feel entitled to offer "implicit" directives on what ITAs should sound like.

Consider, for example, the following story from Tao, a participant from a small study I completed on the experiences of engineering ITAs in Ontario, Canada:

> The professor needed me to give a lecture for this undergraduate class (...) In the lecture, I had to use the word 'theory' a lot. But at the time, I couldn't say the TH very good. So every time I said the word, I saw two white students who look confused and were laughing (…) When the students were doing group work, I went over to see if they had questions. One of them actually said, 'It's hard to understand Chinese accents, so I didn't understand some words you were using.' So this situation made me want to improve my pronunciation of TH and other words for students to understand my ideas better. (Ramjattan, 2020, p. 8)

In addition to conflating her difficulty with the "th" sound with the alleged unintelligibility of all Chinese accents, it is important to note how, through their comments, the students provided Tao with "customer feedback" on her pronunciation. That is, instead of completely taking offense to what they said, Tao used the students' comments to improve her pronunciation of "th" in English and thus be a better service provider. However, given that the inability to produce the "th" phoneme in English rarely, if ever, interferes with intelligibility (Derwing & Munro, 2015), Tao's commitment to producing this phoneme is more about "whitening" her pronunciation to match that of her students, especially because their pronunciation is likely considered "standard Canadian English" in her particular university.

TOWARD SOLVING THE "FOREIGN TA PROBLEM"

By thinking about the foreign TA problem as a demand for aesthetic labor, I wish to emphasize that this problem cannot be resolved by pedagogical interventions designed for the ITA because the problem itself is an institutional creation. In other words, interventions must be directed at universities themselves. Suggesting what needs to be reformed within universities is easier said than done, because their current state as neoliberal and settler colonial institutions calls for a larger structural project for social change, which is beyond the scope of this commentary. Yet, some progress can be made by encouraging universities to develop equitable language policies. If the aesthetic to which ITAs must subscribe in their labor is based on a single variety of White-coded English, then this requires (a) policies that allow for a range of language practices to be used in academic communication, and (b) critical language awareness training ensuring that faculty, staff, and students understand how there is nothing deficient about these practices (Sterzuk, 2015). One of the pitfalls of aesthetic labor is that workers come to blame themselves for not satisfying the aesthetic requirements for work, which are actually arbitrary decisions made by institutions (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020). But when universities allow ITAs to determine what sounds right for themselves, this can make their job a little bit easier.

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Fairness, Justice, and the Certification of Teaching Competence for International Teaching Assistants

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How can we be certain (or at least relatively sure) that people are sufficiently competent to teach university-level subject matter in which they have expertise, given that they are using a second language to teach? LaScotte examines the changing policies of one U.S. university that were designed to establish confidence in the ability of nonnative English-speaking international teaching assistants (ITAs) to carry out their roles. His position paper raises questions that are central to issues and discussions of validity within language testing research.

Like many similar institutions, the University of Minnesota, where LaScotte conducted his study, has used standardized tests to implement its policy in relation to ITAs. Originally, it relied on the Speaking Proficiency English Assessment Kit (SPEAK) test developed by the Educational Testing Service, which was discontinued in 2010. It now uses either the speaking subtest of the Internet-Based Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL-iBT) or a spoken language test that has been developed specifically for ITAs—namely, SETTA (Spoken English Test for Teaching Assistants). There has thus been a shift from general measures of spoken proficiency, assessed using standardized speaking tasks without human interaction, to more complex performance-based tests. These in turn may be relatively indirectly related to the target setting (TOEFL iBT, which simulates aspects of the roles required of international students at English-medium universities) or specifically targeting the role of ITAs (SETTA). Elsewhere, even more complex methods may be used. On a visit some years ago to the University of Copenhagen, I was shown a room in which professors who were teaching their subject matter in English rather than Danish (i.e., not ITAs but regular staff) were asked to teach a short class in their field, with other professors who were to be assessed acting as students. The teaching performance was videotaped (the room was full of high-tech equipment) and then assessed by those responsible for certifying the competence in English for teaching purposes of the professors (Dimova & Kling, 2018). This was an elaborate and expensive exercise, one that would probably be judged to be unaffordable (and possibly likely to encounter resistance from those required to take it) in many contexts.

The variation in methods used to assess the competence of those doing university teaching in a language of which they are not native speakers responds to constraints of time and cost on the one hand (the shorter and cheaper the better) and questions of relevance, accuracy, and fairness to candidates on the other (the closer to the target situation the better). What is gained or lost by using these various methods? This question goes to the heart of the issue of the validity of such language assessments.

One way of thinking about this issue is to distinguish between the fairness and justice of such language assessments. The justice of language assessment involves the defensibility of the policy determining the requirement that a person be assessed, and can be distinguished from the fairness of assessment, a narrower conceptualization of what is required of a defensible assessment practice (McNamara et al., 2019). Fairness is a procedural and technical issue. For example, given that assessments involve necessarily subjective judgement of communicative readiness on the basis of the evidence of test performance, do different judges agree on their assessments? This is true not only of assessments of the Danish type or SETTA described earlier but also in more general assessments of spoken production such as the SPEAK test. Another issue of fairness is the extent to which an indirect

measure (ability to manage a conversation with an examiner in a speaking assessment such as in the International English Language Testing System [IELTS] test, or performance on speaking tasks, whether complex ones as in TOEFL iBT or simple ones as in SPEAK) can be used as a substitute for a more direct one (observation of performance on a task that simulates critical aspects of the real-world context of teaching, as in SETTA or the Danish example)—this can be explored via statistical correlations, for example. There are many such technical issues that can invalidate the inferences drawn from an assessment and render the assessment indefensible. Indirect measures are invariably quicker and cheaper, and appeal to both candidates and administrators. This is becoming clearer as automated measures of language proficiency become more efficient and ever cheaper. In the assessment of communication skills for intending international students at English-medium universities in the United States and elsewhere, automated assessments such as the Pearson Test of English (PTE Academic) are competing with performance-based tests that simulate, at least to some degree, the communicative demands of the role of student in university settings, such as TOEFL iBT and IELTS. These latter performance-based tests are far more labor intensive, and therefore expensive, and relatively slow to deliver results. The narrowing of the construct in such automated tests of speaking is defended on the grounds that what is being measured successfully predicts performance on more complex, realistic tasks. A doctor who wants to assess your risk of heart disease may take a simple measure such as blood pressure to predict such a risk, rather than requiring a patient to undertake a range of stressful tasks associated with the risk of a heart attack. Why should a language test be any different, if it can yield a reliable proficiency measure?

But decisions about the method of assessment involve more than practical decisions and considerations; they involve the justice of the assessment and the defensibility of the policy of assessment altogether—not just the quality of the assessment instrument (its fairness). This is true of the shift from the use of general measures of language proficiency such as the SPEAK test to the more recently adopted performance-based assessments. In the latter, not only the task required of the candidate (the content of the test) has changed (candidates teach something from their professional field) but also the criteria by which the performance is judged (the construct of the test)—in this case, things in addition to language proficiency are included in the assessment criteria. This change in the criteria for assessment has implications for the defensibility of the assessment practice altogether.

The introduction of the context of teaching, including the relevance of the mastery of subject matter on the part of the teacher, changes everything. As Canagarajah (2018) has shown in his study of TAs, the ability to teach effectively depends crucially not only on language proficiency but on teaching skills more broadly understood, including the ability to sequence the subject matter in a presentation, the use of the whiteboard and diagrams, and secure knowledge of subject matter. All of these factors were critical in distinguishing more from less successful teachers—not only language proficiency. Canagarajah went on to argue that the desire to separate language proficiency from other aspects of context is a legacy of structuralism. In research on clinical communication that I conducted many years ago as the basis for the Occupational English Test, a clinically based communication assessment for health professionals (McNamara, 1996), I encountered a migrant doctor who failed the communication demands of a hospital placement. The organization of the discourse of his interaction with a patient was at fault: He had exhausted the patient with questions, whereas in a successful interaction, the questioning would have been organized around a clinical hunch as to what was wrong. As this doctor's medical knowledge was weak as a result of his training, he had no clinical hunch and no basis for organizing the discourse of his interaction with the patient in order to make it both efficient and less stressful. The integration of professional knowledge and communication skill was clear in this case.

In order to develop criteria for judging performance, Sally Jacoby proposed the necessity to study "indigenous assessment" in English for specific purposes settings, that is, the way in which novice task performance is evaluated by more experienced participants (Douglas, 2001; Jacoby & McNamara, 1999). Jacoby (1996) studied rehearsals of brief conference presentations by a team of junior physicists and analyzed the feedback they were given by the senior professor who headed the team. The junior physicists included both native and nonnative speakers, the latter varying in language proficiency. She showed that what counted was not language proficiency (unless things such as the pronunciation of key words made important aspects of the presentation unintelligible) but organization, subject matter knowledge, clarity, and so on—in other words, aspects

of general presentation skills. A series of studies of indigenous assessment in the health professional context has reached similar conclusions (Elder & McNamara, 2016). Why should the clinically based communication skills of migrant doctors, nurses, and other health professionals be assessed using tasks and criteria on which not all native-speaking health professionals would succeed?

In conclusion, two aspects of the justice of the assessment are raised by the shift to performance-based assessment that LaScotte has described. The first is that all aspects of the ability to teach successfully need to be included in the assessment, and that a sole focus on language proficiency omits features of the construct of the assessment that are relevant to the context. Students who have confidence in the subject–matter knowledge of their teacher and their ability to sequence instruction and accompany the verbal input with diagrams and skillful use of the whiteboard space will easily excuse weaknesses in the language proficiency, narrowly conceived, of their teachers. Second, if the assessment includes teaching skill more broadly understood as part of the assessment, then the policy of assessing only nonnative speakers is hard to defend, as LaScotte points out. But extending the assessment policy to all teachers is expensive and will no doubt also encounter resistance from native speaker teachers. More broadly, the issues involved in the assessment of the teaching readiness of TAs represent a wider problem for the assessment of languages in specific-purpose contexts.

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Beyond Language: Reframing the Foreign Teaching Assistant Instruction Through Materiality Perspective

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On January 21, 2022, the Biden–Harris White House messaged its "continued" commitment to recruiting global talent, especially those in the STEM disciplines—that is, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—to strengthen the nation's economy, security, and global competitiveness. Meanwhile, the U.S. Departments of State and Homeland Security announced their new actions to advance opportunities for foreign-born professionals to "continue" to make meaningful contributions to the nation's scholarly development and innovation communities (White House, 2022). At the national (federal) level, more progressive initiatives have been planned and launched to attract and welcome international students and professionals to study, work, and/or immigrate to the United States. Meanwhile, colleges and universities persist in having questions and concerns about ITAs' ability to teach (work) in the English language. In his careful analysis of how language requirement policies for foreign-born TAs have evolved over time at the University of Minnesota, LaScotte observes a gradual discursive shift away from solving the target-language proficiency problems and toward the pedagogical needs for effective communication for teaching and high-quality education. It seems that these narratives surrounding ITAs, as LaScotte further notes, have shifted from enacting an identity of a linguistically deficient ITA as

the instructional problem and toward an identity of an ITA who works to improve their communication skills for teaching.

Unfortunately, these narratives surrounding ITAs reflect a neo-racist ideology of "native-speakerism" (Holliday, 2006)—an ideology within the English Language Teaching profession whereby native speakers of English are considered as better language models and to embody better Western teaching methods than nonnative speakers of English. This neo-racist, native-speakerism ideology makes extensive use of what Holliday termed "cultural disbelief," questioning if ITAs can make meaningful contributions to their areas of expertise and U.S. higher education. This ideology positions ITAs as linguistically–culturally inferior and as those who are in need of training in the "correct" Western/White methods of instruction. Moreover, the native-speakerism ideology fails to fully recognize that communication of knowledge is discipline specific and interactional in situ through intertextual readings of embodied multimodal resources (such as disciplinary registers, everyday languages, or gesture movements) deployed by participants to negotiate and construct meanings.

In this commentary, I apply a materialism-informed, spatial orientation that highlights the embodied and ecologically situated nature of meaning making to frame the instructional practices of ITAs, particularly the practices in the STEM disciplines. This materiality perspective challenges and moves beyond the deficit ideology that positions ITAs as problems with multilingual Englishes (problems with not sounding White enough) rather than recognizing ITAs as resources with rich disciplinary knowledge, expertise, and experience that can contribute meaningfully to scholarly communities and higher education.

MATERIALITY PERSPECTIVE: EMBODIED MULTIMODAL, CONTEXT-SITUATED NATURE OF INSTRUCTION

New materialism (e.g., Latour, 2005) reconceptualizes the role of materiality in the framework of human experience and the interconnection between embodied multimodalities and material objects (e.g., laboratory equipment) with a vision of "object agentivity" (Bennett, 2010). A consideration on the agentive nature of material objects provides a nuanced method to "understand the role of objects together with language in contributing to meaning-making across time and space" (Kell, 2015, p. 423). Within this vision, agency is not ontologically prior to a given context but arises from the embodied multimodal and sociocultural dynamics of that specific context situated in the moment-by-moment interaction. The materiality perspective decenters the roles of human actors as the primary social actors in meaning making and of language as the main medium of communication (Toohey, 2019). In some contexts, such as in the STEM disciplines, language can play a relatively minor role and operates in conjunction with other multimodal resources and scientific registers from the relevant fields (e.g., mathematical symbolic systems) in meaning making in interaction (Lai, 2020).

One key feature of new materialism is that human actors, embodied multimodalities, and material objects are changing together moment-by-moment in interaction to form new assemblages. Applied linguist Canagarajah (2018) used the term "spatial repertoires" to refer to the interactivity among individuals, embodied multimodal repertoires (including languages), and material artifacts worked as an assemblage in meaning making in a spatially situated activity. This materialism-informed, spatial orientation allows researchers to contextually (re)configure (Goodwin, 2000) the constituent parts of language in meaning making simultaneously deciphering the discursive, material, and ideological components of communication (Barad, 2007).

Research work that applied the materiality perspective to examine the instructional practices of ITAs has documented the dynamic relations between individuals, embodied multimodal resources, material objects, and spaces that come together as assemblages for meaning making in STEM educational spaces (e.g., Lai, 2020; Sharma, 2020). This work has illustrated how material objects, embodied multimodalities, and spaces contribute to the moment-by-moment sequential order of instructional practices between STEM ITAs and their (undergraduate) students. The findings have demonstrated how nondiscursive and material components are entangled with discursive (or linguistic) resources in developing instructional competence of multilingual STEM professionals in instructional spaces. The ways the international STEM professionals use scientific registers to construct meaning and expertise through translanguaging and multimodal resources can violate the cumulative and linear progression of second language development (Canagarajah, 2018). The materialism-informed, spatial orientation highlights the sequential and simultaneous contributions to meaning making that are mediated through embodied

multimodalities and material artifacts audible and visible to participants in interaction. Moving beyond the native-speakerism ideology that privileges language proficiency over other repertoires, the materialist construct of spatial repertoires sheds light on the diversity, complexity, and dynamism of instructional communication between foreign-born TAs and their (undergraduate) students across varied academic contexts.

MATERIALITY PERSPECTIVE: HETEROGLOSSIC NATURE OF INSTRUCTION IN INTERACTION

In his analysis of how local news media texts and the university language requirement policies have evolved over time, LaScotte observes that the shift toward the effective communication skills for high-quality teaching is framed as culturally specific. Here, we can ask the following question: Whose culture? The "correct" Western/White methods of teaching and learning? The ITAs are often recognized as experts in their areas of expertise and of the teaching pedagogies of their primary cultures and bring with them intercultural perspectives to increase diversity in U.S. higher education. However, these intercultural perspectives (including the instructional practices that may work in their home cultures) need to be transformed for the students of the host cultures. The juxtaposition between identities of content expert and instructional novice can create instructional consequences for ITAs and their situated identity as course instructors vulnerable for negotiation of instructional authority (Chiang, 2016). The shift toward the effective communication skills for high-quality education connotes the neo-racist, native-speakerism ideology of "cultural disbelief" (Holliday, 2006), labeling ITAs as the "instructional *Other*s" or the "*Other* instructors" who are in need of training in the "correct" Western/White methods of instruction. The term "culturally specific" thus becomes a euphemism for race, representing "an imagined, problematic generalized [instructional] *Other* to the unproblematic Self of the 'native speaker'" (Holliday, 2006, p. 386). Furthermore, the labeling of ITAs as "instructional *Others*" or "*Other* instructors" represents a discourse that keeps the native-speakerism ideology alive in U.S. higher education, which goes against its commitment to advance diversity and inclusion on campus.

The ways that individuals construct knowledge are diverse, reflecting their "points of view on the world, forms of conceptualizing the world in words" (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 291–292). These constructions can be "realized only in the process of active, responsive understanding" (Volosinov, 1986, pp. 102–103), that is, in interaction between "the participation of objects, procedures, and consumers of knowledge" (Carr, 2010, p. 18). In the Bakhtinian lens, knowledge constructions are thus heteroglossic (multivoiced), noting the diverse meaning-making resources individuals can employ to display their stances and negotiate their understanding with others toward specific discipline-situated activities.

As argued in this commentary, the instructional communication between ITAs and their (undergraduate) students—through the many and multivoiced interpretations of a scientific or social phenomenon—are in constant dialogue and ideological tension with the less numerous and more unitary academic register(s) of a particular discipline. As Carr (2010) noted, meaning making is inherently "ideological because it is implicated in semistable hierarchies of value that authorize particular ways of seeing and speaking" like a competent and legitimate member of the community (p. 18). This ideological tension can be present every time when individuals speak and shapes each other's positionings in interaction. The ideological tension can emerge between the centralizing centripetal force of power in which academic discourse maintains its status as an ideologically constructed unitary language and the decentralizing, centrifugal force of power that enables diverse voices or approaches to meaning making (Barwell, 2014; Busch, 2014). The materiality perspective concerned with the heteroglossic nature of discourse practices and demonstrations allows for a closer examination of how discipline-specific and institutional ideologies, linguistically and multimodally, shape the knowledge construction in interaction between ITAs and their (undergraduate) students (Lai, 2020). Within these heteroglossic (multivoiced) spaces, students who struggle with disciplinary ways of meaning making can still be engaged rather than excluded from classroom socialization activities.

TOWARD INTERNATIONAL TEACHING ASSISTANTS AS RESOURCES

ITAs are a vital source of labor for the training of undergraduate students in the United States (especially in the STEM fields) and other English-speaking countries. It is critical to document how instructors' and students' construction of disciplinary knowledge in classroom interactions can contribute to the instructional practices of ITAs. Scholarship on academic discourse socialization

between ITAs and students needs to further consider how embodied multimodalities, material objects, and instructional spaces are entangled with discursive (linguistic) resources in developing disciplinary knowledge of students as well as instructional competence of ITAs. Language is not "the legislator of meaning" (de Freitas & Sinclair, 2014, p. 123)—rather, it is part of the material assemblages or spatial repertories for meaning making in classroom instruction. Academic language programs designed for ITAs thus need to consider the proficiency of varied meaning-making assemblages for pedagogical design.

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Ideology, Policy, and Potentials for Dialogue

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LaScotte's history of the International Teaching Assistant (ITA) Program at the University of Minnesota and his analysis of the evolution of language policy at the university and the media discourse surrounding ITAs make a significant contribution to the field at a critical moment when ITA practitioners and researchers are assessing their place in the broader fields of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) and applied linguistics and coming to terms with the practical imperatives of the multilingual, multimodal, and "trans-" turns (Hawkins, 2018; May, 2014; Mondada, 2016; Nevile, 2015). LaScotte traces how ITA policies and practice have evolved from a deficit perspective to focus on assessing and developing English for teaching

purposes, a trend that is consistent with developments in TESOL and applied linguistics.

This commentary picks up on two threads from LaScotte's piece—ideology and policy—to explore challenges that arise out of the competing interests of various stakeholders and to globally position ITA research and English-medium instruction (EMI) as sister subfields of TESOL and applied linguistics. I begin by asking why it is we have seen a decrease in the frequency of popular publications about ITAs from the 1980s through the 1990s until now and if this signals a change in public attitudes about language and education. I then discuss the underlying ideologies that drive ITA policy—namely, language superiority and consumerist views of education. Next, I look at language policy at universities around the world, not only regarding English but also other languages, and I ask what a dialogue between ITA professionals and their EMI colleagues might yield. I conclude with a discussion of how ITA practitioners and administrators might begin repositioning ITA research and revisiting policy from the top down and the bottom up. I am not necessarily providing answers but instead asking questions and probing potential pathways for future research, pedagogy, and partnerships.

IDEOLOGY, POLICY, AND PUBLIC OPINION

A principal challenge for administrators, teachers, and researchers in the ITA community is the plethora of stakeholders, their various interests, and ideologies about language and education. While delving deeply into all these divergences is beyond the scope of this essay, I will touch on a major one—ideologies—that involves or affects policy makers, faculty, administrators, students, parents, and ITAs. In a transdisciplinary conceptualization of ITA research, stakeholders are at the center of the framework, and language ideologies exist in the macro level (Looney & Bhalla, 2019), but it is important to remember that ideologies do not exist separately from the bodies who construct them. Ideologies include linguistic values, educational values, political values, economic values, and cultural values. LaScotte argues that language ideologies drive both policy and public discourse, and language policies are written by policy makers who are not language specialists. The result is biased and misinformed policy. The primary ideology driving ITA policy and discourse, according to LaScotte, is one of language superiority, specifically the superiority of Standard American English. This is reflected in the verbiage of the Minnesota state law and in public discourses about the "foreign TA problem" (Bailey, 1984), thick foreign accents, and students victimized by speakers of accented English. LaScotte's intertextual discourse analysis is supported by academic research and popular media (Clayton, 2000; Finder, 2005; Fitch & Morgan, 2003; Plakans, 1997; Subtirelu, 2015), and the trajectory he traces from a deficiency framing of ITAs to a professional support model mirrors the evolution of the field more generally (Looney & Bhalla, 2019).

LaScotte notes a decrease in the frequency of popular publications about ITAs from the 1980s through the 1990s until now. One might imagine this reflects a shift in public opinion about ITAs, but I suggest it instead reflects an acquiescence on the part of undergraduates and parents to the inevitability of having an ITA as part of education at a large research institution. Concurrently, the tastes of educated and cosmopolitan elites have shifted so that conversation about racialized groups' language abilities might be taboo in polite public arenas such as *The New York Times*. Nonetheless, I still overhear students complain about their ITAs' English on campus, and about 2 years ago, talk about ITAs emerged in an unlikely venue: a midday sports talk show. In May 2020, a contributor to a local sports radio show to which I was listening complained about ITAs. He had attended the local university and acknowledged that an ITA he had in the early 1990s was knowledgeable in his field but insisted the ITA could not communicate his knowledge to the students due to his lacking English proficiency. He then invoked his status as a parent who is currently paying tuition for his child to attend the same university and said the situation had not changed since his time. The audio of this statement is no longer online but I took note of it when it happened, and the statement is consistent with what others have said in various virtual and in-person forums (Fitch & Morgan, 2003; Subtirelu, 2015). People typically couch criticism of ITAs in complimentary, and arguably diminutive, commentary such as calling ITAs smart or cute. They do not use explicitly racist or malicious language and may even recognize the responsibilities undergraduates have in effective communication, teaching, and learning.

The example from the radio show and student reports in research and media suggest that, while linguistic superiority is an ideology driving ITA discourse, a capitalist–consumerist ideology is at work too. Clayton (2000) cited rising college costs and "consumerism in higher education" for grievances against ITAs. Fitch and Morgan (2003) reported students saying they are paying

good money to receive a good education, and they could not be receiving an adequate return on their investment if they cannot easily understand their ITA's speech. A consumerist view of education positions teachers as service providers and student as consumers. The service teachers provide is easily digestible knowledge. It appears from the available data that easily comprehensible speech is a requisite aspect of that service. A consumerist view of education juxtaposes service provider teachers with students who are relatively passive consumers, much like patrons of an amusement park or airline passengers. They have purchased the ticket and now they are taking the ride. The ITA is the pilot, flight attendant, chef, mechanic, and traffic control for the entire semester-long flight, and the student expects first-class service and amenities with little to no turbulence or delay. It is a view of education that ignores the role students must play both in their education, broadly speaking, and their role in the specific task of communicating with others.

LaScotte highlights language superiority as the driving force behind ITA policy and gives a nod to the White supremacy that is inherent to such language ideologies. These interlocking ideologies are most unambiguous in the fact that ITAs from countries, many of which are former British colonies, in which English is a national language or the medium of public education are also subject to ITA policies. These ideologies are not restricted to the ITA discourse but emerge in discourses around immigration and language choice in the United States and Canada. They are pervasive and institutionalized and inform pathways to citizenship, education, media coverage, and foreign policy. At the same time, we must recognize how another interlocking strand, capitalist–consumerist ideologies—which conceptualize education as a service, teachers as service providers, and students as consumers—also propel the ITA discourse.

LANGUAGE POLICY AND PRACTICE AROUND THE GLOBE

I turn now to language policies, which are not unique to North American universities, in higher education. Advertisements for academic positions in European countries such as Sweden and Denmark regularly state that applicants must demonstrate proficiency in the country's official language within a specified period after accepting the position. Such policies differ from many ITA policies in that they apply to faculty and allow teaching before proficiency has been demonstrated. This could be due in part to the fact that teaching at many European universities can be conducted in English. Institutions around the globe use EMI, and policies mandating English proficiency exist in these institutions (Dimova et al., 2015; Fenton–Smith et al., 2017; Macaro et al., 2018; McKinney & Galloway, 2022). EMI scholars and teachers have broad interests that intersect with ITA concerns from policy to practice to identity. There is little engagement between ITA and EMI practitioners and researchers except for a couple of EMI presentations at meetings of TESOL International Association, to the best of my knowledge. This is a place we can learn from each other.

Two potential avenues for dialogue between ITA and EMI practitioners and researchers are establishing guidelines for assessment and development of English for teaching purposes and decentering the White perceiver. The first avenue involves establishing what intelligible and comprehensible speech is as well as operationalizing pragmatic and interactional competence in academic settings. Developing such guidelines is no small task. It is well documented that intelligibility and comprehensibility are influenced by numerous factors including pronunciation, grammar, listener experience with varieties of English, and listener familiarity with the topic. It is also unclear exactly what pragmatic competence in English might be across contexts. Cross-contextual studies of students' perceptions, teacher talk, and academic interactions in EMI and ITA settings could give us a starting point to generate a better generalizable understanding of what intelligible and comprehensible speech is and the characteristics of reasonably tolerant listeners (Sok et al., 2022).

International guidelines for what constitutes effective use of English in academic settings might put us on a path to decentering the so-called White listening subject (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Students and teachers are not usually White in countries like Ethiopia, China, Vietnam, Nepal, Japan, and Kuwait. If the guidelines that practitioners and researchers develop include perceptions from L2 English speakers, we can start to move away from standard native speaker ideals. It must be recognized though that monolingual ideologies and preference for standard varieties of English exist among multilingual populations. Thus, ITA and EMI practitioners might once again find common ground in the struggle against language superiority and the myth of standard languages.

Dialogue between practitioners and policy makers might also be productive in helping

develop ITA programs that provide sustained support instead of serving as gatekeepers. What might this look like? As I mentioned previously, many universities in Europe allow faculty multiple years to demonstrate proficiency in the national language. Some universities in the United States allow students to teach while they take English courses or workshops, but many, including LaScotte's university and my university, do not. Students must pass an exam and/or coursework before teaching. This positions ITA programs not as providers of support and professional development, but as gatekeepers—which is not how ITA practitioners view themselves. A sustained professional support model might include concurrent teaching and coursework, follow-up observations after assessment and courses, and integrated support from ITA practitioners working together with ITAs' departments. Such an approach would provide practitioners with the insights and time they need to adequately address the sociocultural and linguistic needs of ITAs while also giving ITAs the time and mediation they need to develop as multilingual professionals.

CONCLUSION

ITA practitioners and researchers are aware of the ideologies that drive the policies mandating the programs in which they work. They know their programs are viewed by many as out-of-touch gatekeepers aiming to whitewash ITAs' pronunciation and practice. Nothing could be further from the truth. The move from "foreign" TAs to "international" TAs seems trivial now, but it shows that even in the 1980s and 1990s, ITA professionals were grappling with the complexities and contradictions of their work. Perhaps no contradiction is starker than between the ideologies that led to ITA policies and the ideologies that guide the people who put those policies into practice. At the ITA Professional Symposium at the University of California, Davis in February 2020, I suggested that we might consider distancing ourselves from the inherently othering ITA moniker. This would involve rethinking how we frame ourselves and what we do from preparing ITAs to work with U.S. students to preparing multilingual professionals and undergraduates to participate in translingual settings in which English is the lingua franca. This reframing would require us to conceptualize language use and teaching as inextricable and situated, a perspective consistent with the practices already in place in many ITA programs (e.g., using microteaching to assess English proficiency) as well as current conceptualizations of language use in applied linguistics (Douglas Fir Group, 2016).

In addition to repositioning ourselves in the fields of TESOL and applied linguistics, it is time for ITA practitioners, administrators, faculty senates, and state legislatures to revisit policies and legislation regarding ITAs and English proficiency in higher education. Many of these policies are dated and do not reflect advances in our understanding on language and interaction or the values of the university. We should also reflect upon how we are interpreting policy and putting it into practice. The bureaucratic wheels move slowly, but one advantage of small programs—as ITA programs typically are—is that practical changes can be instituted much more quickly than policy can be revised. It might take 2 years to get official policy language revised, but how we interpret policy can start to change now.

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International Teaching Assistants Offer More Than Their English Accents: A Response to "The 'Foreign TA Problem' Forty Years On"

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In "The 'Foreign TA Problem' Forty Years On," LaScotte presents an overview of the evolution of policy and discourse around international teaching assistants (ITAs), which highlights "a gradual shift away from a focus on English language proficiency and toward a focus on the need for effective communication for teaching and high-quality education" (p. X). I welcome this shift here as a former ITA and a current teacher educator and scholar interested in language learner psychology.

I took the Speaking Proficiency English Assessment Kit (SPEAK) test in 2012[1] before I was hired as an ITA at Michigan State University, even though I had completed English-medium bachelor's and master's degrees in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), had several years of English teaching experience, had high scores on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and had published four manuscripts in English in major venues in the field of second language acquisition. Luckily, I passed the SPEAK test and qualified to teach undergraduate courses in my area of expertise. As an ITA teaching a course for the first time, I felt overwhelmed and anxious. I was provided with some PowerPoint slides to teach the course, but I knew in my heart that only lecturing to my students would not be the best approach. I spent most of my time preparing for the class, trying to master the content and teach in engaging ways. At the same time, I was navigating a completely new culture, which was confusing and disorienting, to say the least. Adjusting to the new local culture, learning the academic culture, completing doctoral coursework and research studies, performing research assistant duties, improving the content of the new course I had been assigned to teach, looking for ways to teach it in an engaging way, and at the same time trying to maintain my physical and mental health were the things I had on my mind in those days. I hated teaching a class in which my students were disengaged and distracted on their laptops. I felt I was not doing my job right when that happened. So, I sought help. I asked other ITAs for advice; I asked my students for early feedback on my teaching, and I met with my supervisor to ask questions even though that was my last resort due to her evaluative role over me. My first teaching experience was not good. I received mediocre student evaluations and many harsh comments. I was anxious whether I would be given another chance to teach and got excited when I was. I started revamping the course right after my first semester ended. I studied students' comments one by one and spent my holidays working on my syllabus and developing new tasks, activities, games, and techniques to make

my class more engaging and effective. I asked for other ITAs' syllabi, developed new assignments, and created new PowerPoint slides. I felt more prepared than the first time. I taught my second class in spring and was excited to see that my students enjoyed it. I had learned the academic culture at MSU better now, knew more about what my students found engaging, learned how to give them constructive feedback, make them feel confident and appreciated, and build good rapport with them. My students reciprocated my efforts in kind and were incredibly helpful in helping me adjust and adapt my teaching to their needs and preferences.

Drawing on my experiences as a former ITA and a current teacher trainer and scholar, in this response, I (a) discuss different challenges that new ITAs face when they move to the United States to study and work at a university, and (b) argue how the new perspective toward ITAs could contribute to an adaptive learning experience for ITAs and to the quality of their instructional practice, among other things.

A NEW LANGUAGE IS A NEW WORLD

Learning a new language is a personal and spiritual challenge. It involves learning about new ways of seeing the world, which may disturb the comfort one experiences living in one's own bubble. Language learning is exciting, and it is stressful. It involves becoming vulnerable and exposing oneself to judgments by sounding like a child trying to speak their mother tongue—except that our mistakes may not sound as cute, not to everyone. They may in fact be embarrassing. That is why anxiety is a common emotion experienced while learning a new language. The experience of language learning anxiety could be intensified for ITAs due to their position in a paradoxical situation where they are assigned to teach a subject matter class in a new language that is likely spoken as a mother tongue by most of their students. In this situation, the ITA may feel confident due to being the experts in the subject matter while feeling anxious due to their weaker linguistic and cultural position compared with their students. The newly appointed ITAs have to not only learn how to communicate effectively with their students using the target language but do so with an understanding of the broader societal culture as well as the academic subculture of the community in which they are trying to become a new member.

The ITAs, however, are mostly aware of such difficulties and have accepted to take on the challenges they face on their path to academic and professional success. These students are, arguably, among the best and most competent students in their own countries. They are highly motivated, resilient, and goal oriented (Papi & Hiver, 2020). They have left their home countries, after all, and eagerly moved to a new country where they welcome new challenges as growth opportunities that living and studying in the U.S. context can present. They could thus be great role models for their students. These students might, however, feel underappreciated when their identity as future scholars, educators, and professionals is reduced to their English accent—which might be seen as a deficit rather than an asset—and their teaching qualifications are judged not by their unique knowledge, experiences, expertise, and instructional methods but by their performance on a standardized English proficiency test. Such a limited and deficit-oriented view of ITAs has likely contributed to their feeling of insecurity about their English (e.g., Hebbani & Hendrix, 2014; Kasztalska, 2019; Ozdemir & Papi, 2021), communication anxiety (Roach & Olaniran, 2001), and linguistic, pedagogical, and cultural challenges in their academic interactions (Adebayo & Allen, 2020).

THE WELCOME SHIFT

According to LaScotte, policy makers and stakeholders have gradually moved away from the strictly linguistic and ethnocentric view that ITAs "must demonstrate proficiency in spoken English appropriate to the demands of their teaching assistantship" (p. X) and speak "the English language as it is spoken in the United States" (Laws of Minnesota, 1983, sect. 6, subd. 2c, para. 5, as cited by LaScotte, p. X) to a more developmental perspective in which the ITAs "will demonstrate proficiency in spoken English appropriate to the demands of their teaching assistantship" (p. X). The switch from "must demonstrate" to "will demonstrate" is a welcome one that could lead to radically different learning and teaching experiences for the ITAs. The verb phrase "must demonstrate" represents a reductionist and summative evaluation of the ITA as a potential employee that "must" meet some vaguely and arbitrarily defined and operationalized English proficiency requirements before they are allowed to offer to their American students quality instructional experiences from a "a new and unique global perspective" (p. X).

From a psychological perspective, the difference between "must" and "will" is of great theoretical significance. This distinction is notably at

the core of Dweck's (1999) theory of mindsets. According to Dweck, there are two mindsets or lenses through which we can look at human ability and competence. One view, called the fixed mindset, is the belief that one's intelligence is an inborn entity that cannot change. The other theory, called the growth mindset, represents the belief that one's intelligence and abilities are malleable and can change over time through effort and experience. Viewing performance on an English test as a requirement for TA-ship reflects a fixed mindset toward potential ITAs, whereas a developmental view of their English proficiency as something that evolves over time reflects a growth mindset. Forwarding a growth mindset in policies toward ITAs can have substantial effects on their experiences as teachers and graduate students in the United States. Having the opportunity to improve their English proficiency over time can take a large amount of pressure off the ITAs and put them in a growth language mindset that leads them to adopt learning goals (Lou & Noels, 2017), seek more feedback on their English (Papi et al., 2019), feel more motivated to improve their English (Waller & Papi, 2017), and show better academic achievement (e.g., Yeager et al., 2016). Making performance on an English test a requirement for ITA qualification, however, can put ITAs in a fixed mindset that could lead them to adopt performance goals concerned with proving their English abilities (Lou & Noels, 2017), avoid feedback on their English (Papi et al., 2019, 2020), have poor English learning motivation (Waller & Papi, 2017), and feel more anxious when speaking in a new language (Lou & Noels, 2019).

The link between mindsets and ITAs' emotions was investigated in a study conducted by Ozdemir and Papi (2021). The researchers examined the relationship between the mindsets of 92 ITAs teaching at U.S. universities and their English-speaking anxiety and self-confidence. The study showed a clear pattern of results: A growth mindset toward language learning was positively associated with the ITAs' English-speaking self-confidence and a fixed mindset was negatively associated with the ITAs' English-speaking anxiety. The results were not affected by the gender, length of teaching experience in the United States, or role of the ITA (instructor of record vs. assistant to instructor of record). Even though we need more studies and evidence for the role of mindsets on ITAs' development and teaching effectiveness, the results of the study by Ozdemir and Papi provide preliminary support for the role of a growth mindset in the psychological well-being of ITAs and, potentially, the quality of their teaching practice.

LaScotte's analysis of the ITA-related policies at the University of Minnesota also demonstrates a gradual shift away from a reductionist focus on language proficiency as the criterion for (dis)qualifying ITAs toward a focus on effective communication and high-quality instruction. This represents a broadening in scope of qualifications important in the appointment of ITAs. English learners concerned with the image costs of making errors while speaking the language have been found to experience high levels of speaking anxiety (Ozdemir & Papi, 2021) and show maladaptive learning patterns such as avoiding feedback (Papi et al., 2021). In contrast, when ITAs realize that the basis for the judgment of their teaching effectiveness is not how they may sound while speaking English but rather the effectiveness of their communication and the quality of their teaching, the perceived image costs of making English-speaking errors would decrease, which can in turn alleviate their English-speaking anxiety, and lead to more adaptive English learning patterns, and, more importantly, a more confident approach to improving the quality of their teaching. If anything, the ITAs' accent should in fact be considered another asset that they bring to the classroom as a cross-cultural communication resource that could help their students effectively communicate with billions of people who speak English with different accents than the ones commonly found in the United States. Learning the English accent of people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds might in fact be the least one might need to do to be able to succeed in an increasingly multilingual world. Valuing the ITAs' accent as a cultural asset and resource for the students could thus help not only eliminate the ITAs' accent-related anxiety and increase their confidence to share their unique linguistic and cultural resources with students in American classrooms but it can also, in the long run, help the students become more successful global citizens in the new world we live in.

I have argued that the shift in ITA policy reflected in the change of the English proficiency requirement the ITAs "must demonstrate" to the English proficiency they "will demonstrate" represents a developmental perspective aligning with a growth mindset theory that can have numerous emotional, motivational, behavioral, and learning benefits for the ITAs. In addition, extending the scope of target ITA qualifications to communicative effectiveness and teaching quality and viewing the ITAs' English accent as a cultural asset

could decrease the anxiety associated with speaking English and lead to positive psychological and learning patterns among ITAs. Such adaptive patterns could naturally lead to a more positive trajectory for ITAs in their instructional practices, which can in turn benefit students in American classrooms. By adopting the developmental and asset-oriented perspective that has become more common in various universities such as the University of Minnesota, policy makers and stakeholders can thus promote the ITAs' teaching trajectory and English proficiency at the same time, thereby improving the learning experiences of students in American classrooms (Rattan et al., 2015).

ITAs are not only ITAs. They are also doctoral students who aspire to become future researchers, professionals, and educators in their fields. Their well-being should thus matter. They are very motivated employees and, if given the opportunity, they will try their best to learn how to provide quality education for their students. Preventing ITAs from teaching college courses based on strictly linguistic criteria can not only deprive students of the unique pedagogies and perspectives that these ITAs bring with them but will also promulgate a deficit-oriented preoccupation with ITAs' accents that could lead to maladaptive psychological patterns even among those ITAs who have met the required English proficiency benchmarks to teach those courses.

It has been almost 10 years since I was assigned to teach a course as an ITA for the first time at Michigan State University. I completed my doctoral studies in second language studies in the fall of 2015. Currently, I am an Associate Professor in the Foreign and Second Language Education Program at Florida State University where I have directed the program and have taught numerous courses in methods for teaching English as a second or foreign language, cross-cultural communication for language teachers, second language acquisition, and second language research methods. Over the last decade, I have published numerous articles in elite journals and chapters in major edited volumes; I have also coedited a volume on the topic of learner psychology and individual differences in second language acquisition (Routledge). My work has been widely cited and I am often invited to give talks at different universities. I have trained hundreds of undergraduate preservice primary and secondary education and ESL teachers and advised dozens of master's and doctoral students pursuing teaching and research careers in the field of language education, and I am humbled by being kindly nominated for multiple college and university teaching awards. Had I failed the SPEAK test and lost doctoral funding in 2012, none of that might have happened.

NOTE

[1] It appears that Michigan State University is currently using the test under the label "MSU Speaking Test," which an international teaching assistant would have to take except if they had a TOEFL iBT speaking score of 27/30 or higher or International English Language Testing System (IELTS) speaking score of 8/9 or higher. ITAs would have to receive a score of 50/60 or higher to qualify for teaching assistantship. The MSU Speaking Test includes 12 questions, and test takers will have 30–90 seconds to respond to each question.

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