INTERNATIONAL TEACHING ASSISTANTS AND UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS: FROM THE SAME PLANET?

This study is based on a series of observations of a graduate level teacher training course for international students preparing to work with and instruct undergraduates at the University of Utah. Observations were conducted during four separate two-hour classes over a period of five weeks. International teaching assistant (ITA) candidates presented short lessons to their instructor, other ITA candidates, and a group of undergraduate students, who were involved with a service-learning project for a course in cross-cultural communication. Observations concerning each ITA candidate included language skills, teaching skills, and classroom presence. The observer later read both the feedback on lessons, written by undergraduates, as well as self-evaluations written by the ITA candidates.

Conclusions: 1) ITA candidates are proficient in their academic area of study, though perceive themselves as being weak in language skills when compared to native speakers of American English. 2) Undergraduate students generally perceive ITAs to be less competent in both their academic field and language skills than American TAs. 3) Under such conditions, both undergraduates and ITAs need to be made more fully aware of the challenges and benefits of cross-cultural communication in order to ensure effective teaching and learning across languages in undergraduate classrooms.