International Teaching Assistants’ (ITAs’) Experiences with Language Learning, Learner Autonomy, and Technology as Students in a Requisite Oral Communication Course

A dissertation presented to
the faculty of
The Patton College of Education of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Lara R. Wallace

December 2014

© 2014 Lara R. Wallace. All Rights Reserved.
This dissertation titled

International Teaching Assistants’ (ITAs’) Experiences with Language Learning, Learner Autonomy, and Technology as Students in a Requisite Oral Communication Course

by

LARA R. WALLACE

has been approved for

the Department of Educational Studies

and The Patton College of Education by

Jaylynne N. Hutchinson

Associate Professor of Educational Studies

Renée A. Middleton

Dean, The Patton College of Education
Abstract

WALLACE, LARA R., Ph.D., December 2014, Cultural Studies

International Teaching Assistants’ (ITAs’) Experiences with Language Learning, Learner Autonomy, and Technology as Students in a Requisite Oral Communication Course

Director of Dissertation: Jaylynne N. Hutchinson

Spoken English intelligibility in the US classroom is expected, and international teaching assistants (ITAs) are often required to take a course if their speech is not sufficiently intelligible. Yet despite the financial importance of a teaching assistantship contract, many ITAs feel they cannot place priority on improving their English when they have so many other responsibilities as graduate students, teaching assistants, and members of communities in another country. Thus, many ITAs are unable to pass an oral assessment after taking a requisite oral communication class. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to learn about ITAs’ experiences in such a course: what has helped and hindered their learning, how to more effectively implement technology into the ITA preparatory courses, and how to provide more opportunities for the ITAs to develop learner autonomy. Thirteen ITAs documented their experiences in a reflexive photography project that they shared in peer focus groups and further expanded in individual interviews with the researcher. Four thematic topics emerged from the data: the ITA preparatory class; speaking opportunities; general English language skills improvement; and obstructions to spoken English improvement. Overall, it seems that the predetermined circumstances (such as their major areas of study as well as their cohort and instructors) in which the ITAs found themselves as well as the agency they
exercised within those circumstances, along with the dual linguistic identities they embodied, shaped their experiences. The participants who made English language studies obligatory and sought interactions with native speakers and/or used technology scored higher on the assessment than the participants who did solely what was required for the class. Using technology to learn and practice was a hallmark of the learners who displayed learner autonomy, as was engaging in speaking opportunities with native speakers for purposeful practice. Furthermore, the participants who viewed their use of an American accent as a tool more than an identity marker scored higher on the assessment than those who worried that they might be rejected by their own L1 group for being inauthentic. The participants’ use of technology was woven into most of their experiences, predominately to their benefit.
This dissertation is dedicated to all of the past, present, and future international teaching assistants in the ITA preparatory classes. I am in awe of your bravery and appreciate the hard work you dedicate to your many pursuits. I hope that this research serves to ease some of the burdens you face. I also dedicate this to my great grandfather, Hyme Loss.
Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to all who have been involved with helping me in this immense undertaking, whether intentional or incidental, starting with Barbara Wallace Garcia. Without her help, I would not have come so far. I also want to express my sincere thanks to Dawn Bikowski, a true role model.

As for my committee, I could not be happier with another group of people. Dr. John Hitchcock, Dr. Jaylynne Hutchinson, Dr. Greg Kessler, and Dr. Jenny Nelson, you made an excellent team, and I have learned much from you. The expert guidance that Dr. Jaylynne Hutchinson gave me throughout the process is particularly appreciated.

I’d like to extend a special thank you to my classmates Laura, Christie, and especially Cynthia Tindongan for supporting me throughout this endeavor.

It’s difficult to complete a Ph.D, and even more so while working full time and starting a family. For that reason, I would like to offer my sincere thanks to everyone who has helped to care for the twins, especially Khadija; without her loving attention and support, there is absolutely no way that this research would have moved forward.

Most of all, I owe my gratitude to Rachid, my ever-supportive and extremely capable husband. And to my young children as well, much love. Thank you to my family who supported me by making numerous trips to visit when we were unable to.

Of course I am also grateful for my colleagues in the field and in my department, including the Pronunciation Lab tutors. Thank you as well to my friends who are inspiring me to finish so that I have time to play and learn. There is much to enjoy in this world.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 1: Introduction</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose Statement</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background of Study</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher Positionality</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitations of Study</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of Study</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Profiles</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of Study</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter 2: Literature Review | 40   |
| Reticence and the Student-Centered Classroom’s Role in Reducing Reticence | 41   |
| A Constructivist Framework to Understand Student-Centered Learning and How to Achieve Learner Autonomy | 42   |
| Technology’s Role in Promoting Autonomy in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Learning | 49   |
| ITA Training Programs   | 55   |
| Summary                 | 58   |

Chapter 3: Methodology     | 68   |
| Theoretical Framework: Phenomenology | 70   |
| Research Participants    | 72   |
| Methods                  | 76   |
| Procedures               | 80   |
| Data Preparation         | 87   |
| Coding                   | 92   |
| Data Analysis            | 93   |
| Summary                  | 97   |

Chapter 4: Topical Findings | 99   |
| Preliminary Thematic Topics | 100  |
| Reduced Thematic Topics   | 103  |
| Conclusion               | 106  |

Chapter 5: Analysis and Discussion | 100  |
| Existential Themes Overview | 162  |
| Interpretation of ITAs’ Experiences | 163  |
| Answering the Research Questions | 189  |
Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 201
Chapter 6: Reflections, Implications, and Directions for Research ..................... 203
  Summary .................................................................................................................. 205
  Researcher Reflections .......................................................................................... 205
  Implications for Practice ....................................................................................... 211
  Directions for Future Research ............................................................................ 216
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................. 218
References ............................................................................................................... 219
Appendix A: Questionnaires .................................................................................... 240
Appendix B: Directions for the Reflexive Photography Project ......................... 246
Appendix C: Directions for Focus Groups ............................................................... 248
Appendix D: Interview Questions ............................................................................ 249
Appendix E: Frequency Counts of Codes Under Each Broad Topic ................. 251
**List of Tables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.1:</td>
<td>Participant Demographics</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.2:</td>
<td>SPEAK Test Scores by Participant</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.3:</td>
<td>Procedural Timeline of Data Collection</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.4:</td>
<td>The Broad Topics Analyzed for Each Research Question</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.1:</td>
<td>Content Analysis of the Photographs</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.2:</td>
<td>Ways Technology Was Used (Divided into the 4 Topics)</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.1:</td>
<td>SPEAK Test Score Patterns</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table E.1:</td>
<td>Frequency Counts of Supporting Codes for How the ITA preparatory class helped</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table E.2:</td>
<td>Frequency Count of Supporting Codes for How Speaking Opportunities Helped</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table E.3:</td>
<td>Frequency Count of Supporting Codes for How General English Language Skills Improvement Helped the Participants</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table E.4:</td>
<td>Frequency Count of Supporting Codes for Obstructions to Spoken English Improvement</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>(Polly) Work</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>(Arya) Time</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>(Isaac) Class</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>(Mei) TED Talk</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>(Isaac) Native Accent</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>(Mei) Native Accent</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>(Arya) Leading Discussions</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>(Sanu) Discussion</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>(Evelyn) Team work in Video Production class</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>(Sanu) With native speakers (students)</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>(Evelyn) Strangers</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>(Jon) American sitcoms</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>(Lili) Speaking English</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>(Sting) Hiking trip</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>(Evelyn) Recording software</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>(Lili) Native Accent</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>(Lili) Keep a diary</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>(Jon) Native Accent</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>(Sanu) Apples</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>(Jolod) Bundle of joy</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>(Jon) Roommates from India</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>(Mei) Chinese TV shows</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>(Isaac) Non-native friends</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>(Arya) Thoughts</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Introduction

Teaching assistants (TAs) are an integral part of higher education. The US Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013) estimated that 114,980 graduate teaching assistants were employed in US higher education institutions. This figure is within the range estimated in the report by JBL Associates for the American Federation of Teachers (2008), who set it between 64,000 and 130,000, noting that the teaching assistants (TAs) “represent[ed] 19 to 32 percent of the college and university instructional workforce at public research institutions” (p. 3). Of this group, it is unknown how many of these teaching assistants are from other countries, but it is clear that they have a noticeable presence for better or for worse. More often, the attention from students, professors, administrators, and legislators has been negative since many international teaching assistants (ITAs) are non-native speakers (NNS) of English whose accents (Finder, 2005), teaching style, and relatively small amount of prior teaching experience has often led to complaints from US undergraduate students (Bailey, 1984; Yook, 1999). This situation forms the basis of what is often referred to as “the ITA Problem,” and the ITAs’ low-level oral communication skills are a main contributor to this dynamic (Bailey, 1984; Dick & Robinson, 1994; Fisher, 1985; Fitch & Morgan, 2003; Pialorsi, 1984). Fitch and Morgan (2003) analyzed narratives from interviews with 25 US undergraduate students from a variety of disciplines taking a course on intercultural communication in order to better understand their perceptions of ITAs. The authors found that the “overwhelming majority” of the stories about ITAs were negative (Fitch & Morgan, 2003, p. 303), due in large part to the ITAs “poor speaking ability” (p. 302).
Those few positive stories about the ITAs that Fitch and Morgan (2003) heard “usually involved the overarching complication of misunderstanding” wherein the ITA would initiate an attempt to repair communication (p. 305). While the ITA problem was the primary focus of much of the ITA English language teaching literature in the 1980s and 1990s (Bailey, 1984; Dick & Robinson, 1994; Pialorsi, 1984; Yule & Hoffman, 1990), it continues to underlie many of the studies done in recent years (Coimbra, 2002; Gorsuch, 2014; Li, Mazer, & Ju, 2011) due to the timelessness of the problem of spoken English proficiency in the classroom.

This dissertation examined ITAs’ experiences as English language learners (ELLs) in the context of a required course they must take when their spoken English is deemed insufficiently intelligible to pass the university-required assessment. Specifically, these ITAs were taking an oral communication course to improve their speaking skills so that they could be cleared for teaching. In universities across the United States, ITAs’ spoken English is assessed through a screening process or spoken English exam, such as the SPEAK Test (Speaking Proficiency English Assessment Kit), that determines whether a person has an adequate level of spoken English intelligibility in order to teach in US college classrooms. Although beyond the scope of this investigation, much of the literature addresses these assessment practices (Dick & Robinson, 1994; Isaacs, 2008; Noor, 2004; Papajohn, 2006; Xi, 2007; Yule & Hoffman, 1993) as well as programs, topics, and teaching methodologies that can be used to increase teaching and speaking skills (Anderson-Hsieh, 1992; Anderson-Hsieh & Dauer, 1997; Capraro, 2002; Davies, Tyler, & Koran, 2002; Graham, 1992; Myers, 1995;
Salomone, 1998; Stevens, 1989). Little however, has been written about the role of technology in the teaching of oral communication skills to ITAs, and the voices of the ITAs themselves are rare in the literature, especially regarding oral communication skills.¹

While poor English speaking skills is a “problem” for undergraduates and the institutions in which they study, it is not the only problem; ITAs have numerous challenges of their own to resolve—speaking English intelligibly is just one of them. Madden and Myers (1994) in their book, Discourse and Performance of International Teaching Assistants, point out that "[a]lthough ITAs are, in essence, second language learners, their needs are simultaneously more and less complex than the majority of university-bound or enrolled international students" (authors’ italics, p. 2). As an instructor of the ITA preparatory course at a Midwestern state university for over seven years, I investigated how ITAs experience English language studies. It was my goal to provide a space for the voice of the ITAs regarding their experiences in order to better comprehend what helps these language learners and what holds them back.

This chapter is a brief overview of the study, beginning with the context in which the ITAs find themselves, and followed by my research questions. I then share the significance of the study as well as its background. This includes my early assumptions when I first began teaching the class, and how my views changed once I shifted my

¹ I ran an EBSCO using combinations of the terms “ITA, foreign TA, oral communication, experiences, technology, pronunciation, intelligibility, ESL, learner” and came back with 3 relevant hits; these are accounted for in the dissertation. Several dissertations examine ITAs’ experiences with teaching and intercultural competence, but none examine ITAs’ experiences as English language learners.
authority as teacher to a more student-centered atmosphere, along with the resulting effects on the ITAs’ behavior and performance. Following this, I discuss my positionality as teacher-researcher. Finally, I end with the limitations of the study, definitions of key terms, and the organization of the study.

**Purpose Statement**

When I first began teaching the ITA preparatory class, I was frustrated by the lack of effort many of the ITAs contributed to the improvement of their oral communication skills despite the practical importance of speaking English clearly and the heavy consequences that could result from not doing so. Some ITAs barely spoke in class and others completed little homework—what homework they did submit was often done without regard to the assignments’ directions. Because advisors from departments across campus often stress to the ITAs that their funding is tied to their ability to teach in English, I incorrectly assumed that ITAs would make their English language studies a top priority. Thus, their behavior was startling to me.

Through my conversations with ITAs before undergoing this study, however, I came to learn that there was often much more at stake than improving their speaking skills. For many, this was their first time teaching; they were also in a different country whose culture, customs, and language required more of an adjustment than if they had begun graduate school in their countries of origin. They were far away from their families and friends, and many were faced with unfamiliar tasks (such as finding a place to live, establishing and using a bank account, cooking for themselves, and even cleaning). In terms of their teaching assignments, ITAs graded stacks of homework,
essays, and exams. Some were expected not only to teach, but also to plan their classes. For others, the academic side of being a student and a researcher required them to study or spend time in a lab conducting experiments. Each of these serious responsibilities was time-consuming; while arguably self-defeating, it is understandable how English language studies could take a backseat in the prioritization of the ITAs’ time.

Due to the complexity of their situations (Fisher, 1985; Madden & Myers, 1994), it is necessary to offer the ITAs the most effective classes possible so that they not only have sufficient practice inside of class since student oral participation facilitates improved oral communication (Nunan, 1995), but are also able to work effectively outside of class. What enables students to have sufficient practice communicating in class is when the spotlight is removed from the teacher and the students are given the opportunity to interact with not only the teacher, but with each other as well. This is a key benefit to the student-centered oral communication classroom (Nunan, 1995). This study helped me understand more about the ITAs’ experiences in taking the ITA preparatory oral communication class so that I, and perhaps others in the field of English language teaching, may gain insight into effective teaching practices with ITAs from their perspectives. To do so, I took a multi-faceted approach to the research in order to gain sufficient depth of knowledge about the ITAs’ experiences in the ITA preparatory course, including a reflexive photography project, focus group discussions, and individual interviews supported by observations, student work, and questionnaires. Reflexive photography is a photo-elicitation technique where participants photograph their experiences and reflect on them in interviews; the content of the photographs as well
as their role as a springboard to discussion are valuable (Schulze, 2007). I asked participants to engage in reflexive photography to find out how they themselves would both visually and verbally describe their experiences as English language learners in a requisite ITA preparatory class, first through their photos, then through the discussion of them in focus groups, and finally in the interviews. As a result, this research helped me to understand which elements of the class promoted learning and learner autonomy, and which elements needed to be improved, as well as what role technology played in the ITAs’ English language learning.

**Research Questions**

Specifically, what I investigated can be summarized in the three research questions below:

RQ 1. What is the lived experience of learners with spoken English intelligibility in the ITA preparation/oral communication course?

RQ 2: In what ways do ITAs demonstrate learner autonomy?

RQ 3: What role does technology play in the ITAs’ lived experiences?

**Significance of the Study**

While much has been written about teaching oral communication and using technology to do so (Engwall & Balter, 2007; Hincks & Edlund, 2009; Seferoglu, 2005), there is a scarcity of research that focuses on this specific population of learners: international teaching assistants. I believe that it is of utmost importance to design the ITA preparatory oral communication class in order to promote success to the largest amount of learners possible. Although it can be very stressful for any student to study
abroad, I argue that ITAs are uniquely challenged due to their added responsibilities as teachers. Therefore, I hope that this study of their experiences as ELLs will add to the research literature that focuses on improving ITAs’ oral communication skills, and contributes to addressing the ITA problem.

**Background of Study**

In this section, I describe the ITA preparatory oral communication course that I teach, why it is offered, and discuss how my approach has shifted towards a student-centered class over the years. I conclude by highlighting important features of the class during the term in which the study took place in order to demonstrate some of the ways I aim to promote learner autonomy.

The ITA preparatory course was designed to help graduate students improve their oral communication skills in the classroom, specifically by working on pronunciation and building fluency through discussion, presentations, and interaction. This course is required for any non-native English-speaking (NNS) ITA who scores between 190-220 (ETS 38-44) on the SPEAK Test or its equivalent on the Test of Spoken English (TSE). The ultimate goal of the course is to improve their English proficiency to the point of passing the SPEAK Test.

The SPEAK Test is a standardized test from ETS that measures the intelligibility of one’s spoken English through a series of impromptu speech tasks that the student records in response to prompts given by a recorded speaker, whose script they follow in the test booklet. This free-of-charge test is given once per term for all students who have
scored below 55 on the TSE and / or who hold a TA contract. It is given in compliance to a state law from July of 1986 that requires that:

The board of trustees of each state university, college of medicine, technical college, state community college, community college, and the board of trustees or managing authority of each university branch shall establish a program to assess the oral English language proficiency of all teaching assistants providing classroom instruction to students and shall ensure that teaching assistants who are not orally proficient in the English language attain such proficiency prior to providing classroom instruction to students. (“Ohio Laws and Rules”)

While this law is meant to ensure that a standard of English proficiency is applied to all ITAs, it also serves as a safeguard for the ITAs and their departments if students complain that they cannot understand their teachers, a problem that is often rooted in racism or other social, rather than linguistic, problems (Fitch & Morgan, 2003). It should be noted that not all states in the U.S. have such a law; hence, not all universities require this testing process for ITAs.

Although the law and the ITA preparation course are well intended, there are unintended, stressful consequences for students who are not cleared for teaching. Imagine for a moment that you are an international student who has just arrived at a US university with a scholarship and a graduate teaching assistantship, perhaps from a prestigious university in your country or even one of the top students in your graduating class. You arrive at the end of August to this new country, whose language, customs, and educational practices are not yet entirely familiar. One of the many appointments you
have during your weeklong whirlwind of an orientation is to take the SPEAK Test.

Bleary-eyed and still jet-lagged, you arrive at the testing center early in the morning and join the rest of the sixty to eighty ITAs who also must take the test. You do not know many people, but you spot someone from your country that you have recently met, and the two of you make small talk in your native language. Suddenly, everyone begins to line up outside of the testing center’s computer lab with student ID in hand.

When it is your turn, you are directed to a Macintosh computer where you take your seat and wait. The proctor asks you to fill out a piece of paper, and keeping with her routine, tells you and the other test-takers that this is a test of spoken English that is used to determine whether your accent is intelligible enough to American undergraduate students to allow you to teach. The proctor goes over a few directions, tells you what the scores mean and when they will be available, and then gives you a few last-minute tips on how to take the test. You put on your headphones, and when prompted to speak, your voice is added to the cacophony of the 16 other people’s voices in the lab. When you finish the test, you go on your way. By this time, you have registered for your courses, and it looks like this will already be a very demanding term between the three or four classes you have to take and the class that you will teach, not to mention the weekly T.A. meetings you must attend but have yet to be scheduled.

The next day, as you are finishing your orientation, dealing with housing, perhaps dealing with the physical symptoms of adjusting to a new diet and sleep schedule, trying to figure out when to Skype with your family, buying textbooks, and preparing your class, you find out that you got a 220 (ETS 44) on the SPEAK Test, and are required to
take the ITA preparatory class. You realize that this class is supposed to help you speak English more intelligibly, but at this point it is a major inconvenience with which you have to deal in that it is one more class for which you must study and somehow fit into your already busy schedule.

With this in mind, you take your seat in the class on the first day. Now, you must struggle to balance your obligations as a T.A., to prove yourself as a student in your department, and to do homework for an English class, which is frustrating since you already speak English. Grading takes a long time, and you commit yourself to long hours of study. What little free time you have, you enjoy spending some of it in the company of other people from your country who speak the same language, share familiar cultural values, traditions, and cuisine. At the end of the day, English just does not seem as important, especially if you have been speaking English since elementary school, so you do only what is necessary to pass the class. Chances are, with the borderline score of 220, all you need to do is adopt a slightly American-sounding way of speaking and know how to take the SPEAK Test; if you fail to perform on the day of the test, however, you will find yourself in the same situation next term: retaking the ITA preparatory course. As can be inferred from this example, the class, although important, adds an extra burden of time to ITAs’ already demanding schedules.

The ITA preparatory course in this study met twice a week for a total of three hours over the term, and required that the ITAs complete two hours of work outside of class for each of these three credit hours. The purpose of the work was to allow the ITAs

---

2 In this study, the term was ten weeks. The university switched to semesters the following year.
to practice the skills needed to meet the objectives of improving their spoken English intelligibility, developing the speaking skills necessary for the classroom, and increasing their awareness of US academic culture. ITAs worked with pronunciation tutors for a minimum of 30 minutes per week, and worked with pronunciation software for one hour per week. In total, ITAs had 4.5 hours of regular practice per week for this class, leaving an hour and a half a week for the other assignments, such as the two audio journals, the formal presentations, and leading a class discussion.

Although it is common for high-scoring students to test out at the end of the term, those who do not will usually take the course again the following term. Adopting new ways of speaking takes both time and focus, typically in short supply during a graduate student’s first term. Furthermore, the predetermined circumstances of the ITAs’ programs of study, the time they spend alone or with others, and whether there are others who share their native language determine, in part, their exposure to English. When ITAs find themselves in the circumstances of having little opportunity to interact by listening to and speaking in English on a daily basis, it may take longer to adopt a new accent. Repeating this class or even taking it the first time can have either a highly motivating or a demoralizing effect on the student and the teacher can play a role in influencing either effect.

When I began teaching this course in the Fall of 2006, I was not aware of the complexity of the ITAs’ situations nor their motivation (or lack thereof) to speak more intelligibly. I assumed that ITAs would prioritize this class because if they did not pass the SPEAK Test within their departments’ time frames, they could lose their teaching
assistantships, and would perhaps have to discontinue their studies. Furthermore, I assumed that teaching would be easier for them when they spoke English more intelligibly. I was frequently met with resistance, often in the form of what Shor called “playing dumb” or “getting by” (1992, p. 132). ITAs would tell me that they had forgotten that assignments were due, or they would do them incorrectly. They would skip the required pronunciation lab sessions, and they would limit their (unenthusiastic) participation to what we were doing in the classroom rather than spend time outside of class improving. Because of this resistance, I included regular quizzes in the hopes that the ITAs would work harder to pass the SPEAK Test. However, these measures did not promote deeper learning or better results on the SPEAK Test. As Shor sagely noted, “[t]eacher-centered pedagogy provokes student resistance” (1992, p. 143).

During that term and in the following year, my ITA Preparatory classes were unequivocally top-down, teacher-centered. The course was rigorous, and in keeping with the requirement of two hours of homework for every credit hour of class time, I dutifully ensured that my students had a great deal of work. As I experimented with new and different activities and assignments to help the students improve their pronunciation and learn about academic culture in U.S. universities, my syllabus grew to nine pages, detailing all of the policies and the seven different types of projects we would work on in ten weeks’ time (including making audio recordings). Clearly, this was too much homework, as my students frequently did not do the assignments correctly or “forgot” their homework. Although the value of these text book-based assignments was clearly
spelled out in the syllabus, the students’ complacent attitudes belied their lack of interest in adequately engaging the coursework.

In this top-down approach, the students had no input in what we were to do and how we would do it. Instead, I chose topics that I imagined would be helpful to them, and I used a textbook that seemed to adequately explain the topics, although the presentation of the topics was plain, technical, and uninteresting. I always knew that motivation was a determining factor in student success; nevertheless, at the time, I could not yet conceive of how I could teach a student-centered university class that made sensible use of technology. After a few terms, I abandoned this frustrating, top-down approach for one that created a less antagonistic atmosphere.

In my desire to provide an effective and comfortable class for the ITAs, I shifted towards a student-centered pedagogy with the ITAs as subjects, agents of the class construction and their own learning. I was able to, as Dewey stated (1938, p. 59), “[lose] the position of external boss or dictator… [and take] on that of leader of group activities.” At this point, I was able to include the ITAs’ ideas in the creation of the syllabus, course content, and evaluation from the beginning. I maintained my authority and responsibility as instructor; at the same time, the students gained authority and responsibility by stating what they wanted to do in the class. Shor (1992) explains how in this teacher-student dynamic, together, “the learning process is negotiated, requiring leadership by the teacher and mutual teacher-student authority” (p. 16). During one particular term, there was an outspoken group of ITAs who was quite candid in telling me what they desired, and we were able to negotiate a way to balance their needs with the course requirements.
Because the ITAs now had a say in the planning, the content, and their own evaluation, voicing their desire served as the impetus for change, for as Dewey (1938) said, “desires are the ultimate moving springs of action” (p. 70). Furthermore, I felt that the enthusiastic participation of the ITAs in this student-centered approach in this ITA preparatory / oral communication class had been due in large part to having “[sent] a powerful signal from the very start, a signal that learning is participatory, involving humor, hope, and curiosity” (Shor, 1992, p. 26). These ITAs made it clear what they wanted, and through working with them in the spirit of collaboration to deliver this, class time seemed more effective.

Over time, and through varying degrees of student-centeredness, I sought to tailor each class to the students’ needs. I brought different activities and pedagogical styles to each of the classes in an attempt to motivate the ITAs and provide them with the best tools possible, and promote learner autonomy out of care for them as individuals and their roles in the university community. I worked towards creating a safe space in my classrooms for students to feel comfortable working with their English pronunciation, while being mindful that safe spaces are only the beginning.

Teachers must also seek “to grow in relationship with their students by rendering themselves vulnerable and at risk without necessarily requiring their students to do the same” (Garrison, 2004, p. 94). Some teachers might be taken aback by this idea of being vulnerable. Vulnerability arises as the result of sharing the teacher’s decision-making power with the students. When consistency is applied in a relationship of mutual respect and shared goals, however, the teacher need not experience this vulnerability as
something negative. Rather, the teacher should recognize that it is the byproduct of no longer having absolute control over nearly every aspect of the class. To clarify, the teacher still “leads and directs the curriculum, but does so democratically with the participation of the students” (Shor, 1992, p. 16). Shor (1992) explains that “[t]he teacher brings lesson plans, learning methods, personal experience, and academic knowledge to class but negotiates the curriculum with the students and begins with their language, themes, and understandings” (p. 16). Thus, students and teachers both can grow when the teacher steps away from the center of the stage. Rather than focusing on the teacher, the students can focus on themselves and their classmates, and this can result in increased learning and improved student-teacher relationships. This decentralizing of authority enabled me to understand the ITAs’ experiences more directly so that I could better tailor the class to their needs during this demanding period in their academic careers.

The overall atmosphere in terms of student attitudes, my attitude, and our motivation improved greatly after abandoning the teacher-centered, top-down model. Little wonder, for as Shor (1992) notes, research indicates that student engagement in their own learning promotes motivation and deeper learning. With the ITAs engaged in their own learning and playing a part in the formation of the syllabus, content, and both self and peer evaluation, it became more possible to utilize the valuable experiences that they have had and apply the learning to life as they experience it. As the instructor, I determined the how these experiences were used for learning and when, integrating them into the course work and working mindfully towards the goals of the class. I gave the students feedback on their work, and they gave each other feedback to the best of their
abilities. By shifting towards a student-centered approach, I believe that the ITAs showed more interest in their English language studies and about their classmates’ progress, as well. I sought ways to involve and motivate the ITAs more deeply towards their learning because without this care and concern, there would be little impetus for change.

Sidorkin (2002), in fact, places these relationships of care in a position of utmost importance in education. He believes that caring is essential to learning, and that schools should shift their focus away from learning as evidenced by testing, towards caring relationships since learning springs forth from positive and mutually beneficial relationships within and without the classroom. He posits, “to exist is to relate” (Sidorkin, 2002, p. 95). Naturally, as relational beings, we learn best when we are able to relate to others. As an example, Sidorkin (2002) advocates learning through peer-group relations since students are “very likely to be influenced by peers” (p. 117). Dewey (1938) as well recognized that learning is often a social process, and we learn through experience; thus, “that development of experience comes about through interaction means that education is essentially a social process” (p. 58). When the teacher recognizes the value of relationships in schooling and sees students as individuals rather than test scores, the students will undoubtedly feel more motivated to learn. De-centering authority in the classroom has served to strengthen the ITAs’ agency as learners and to create a caring and helpful community of peers.

During the time period over which this study took place, there were many student-centered features of the class I instituted that aimed to strengthen peer relations and to
promote learner autonomy. In class, for example, each ITA had a turn at leading a discussion based on a theme generated from the concerns the ITAs expressed going into Fall term. These subjects included what the student-teacher relationship should be like, how we, as teachers, can be successful in the classroom, how we can deal with students who pressure us, balancing our obligations, and studying for the SPEAK Test. Outside of class for self-study, the ITAs had access to an online pronunciation software program, Native Accent, which allowed them to learn how they could change their accents to improve intelligibility. This software had video for demonstration purposes, hours of exercises, and a feature called “intelligent tutor” that recorded the student’s progress and continually updated a curriculum or study program, that the ITAs could follow. Because the software required the users to be proficient with computer skills, a Native Accent liaison was designated so that ITAs could bring their questions about the software to an actual person on campus. These were just a few ways in which the class was not teacher-centric.

In conclusion, the student-centered approach with a relation of care positively impacts ITAs’ attitudes and learning, but as Burbules (2004) notes, the “teacher must make considered choices about the social aims and benefits that can be achieved in specific circumstances, and at what cost” (p. xiv). In this case, I was fortunate to have access to instructional technology and the freedom necessary to design how I could facilitate this course, since this student-centered approach may help to promote learner autonomy and to foster improved attitudes towards and positive participation in the class.
**Researcher Positionality**

Currently, I am a full-time English language lecturer at a Midwestern university. Because I very much enjoy working with people from other countries and helping these non-native American English speakers improve their communication skills, I decided to pursue a Ph.D. in Cultural Studies in Education to further my knowledge as a teacher. This career choice did not become apparent until after I taught English in both a foreign language setting abroad (in Spain and Mexico) and in a second language setting here in the United States, learning about people’s struggles to express themselves.

The importance of self-expression became clear to me when I lived abroad since I struggled to make myself understood at a deeper level than the day-to-day superficial and often formulaic interactions. Although I could communicate well in Spanish, I needed to learn the particular accent, region-specific lexicon, grammar, and cultural competencies to be able to express myself. I began learning Spanish in high school and earned a Bachelor’s degree in it as an undergraduate in large part because I was bored and uneasy with the seemingly homogenous culture in which I was raised in suburban Cincinnati. Everywhere I looked, I saw the culture in which I grew up reflected in books, on TV, in advertisements, and at school; I was part of the dominant culture and this did not sit well with me somehow despite the inherent privilege it bestowed. Living abroad allowed me the experience to learn new perspectives and ways of life, and to be an outsider. This perspective both enhanced my appreciation for and admiration of people from non-dominant cultures as well as my understanding of the culture and circumstances in which I was raised.
Looking back, my experiences have certainly informed me as a teacher and a researcher, specifically, learning Spanish as a foreign language, studying the language abroad, living and traveling abroad to over ten countries in four different continents, and having had more friends than I can count who are of different nationalities than my own. Not only is it easy for me to empathize with my students since I know what it is like to study abroad, but I also understand that I must listen to each student since his or her experience, though similar in many ways to mine and other students, is unique. Balancing empathy with individualized attention helps me to be a good teacher.

Understanding that cultures have differing values also informs my teaching. I recognize, for example, that many of the students in my classes come from high-context cultures that value group harmony over self-expression. With this in mind, I have sought a pedagogical approach to satisfy this need for harmony and balance it with the expectations of low-context cultures like the US that value self-expression. To me, a student-centered class allows people from both cultural contexts to flourish. Low-context learners and teachers may express themselves, and high-context learners can work with each other towards group harmony and cohesion—especially in the context of small group and pair work. To determine whether this is a beneficial approach, it was important to study the students’ experiences as learners.

To be a good researcher, I recognized the individuality of the participants and examined my assumptions. I questioned my thinking, such as assuming that ITAs would be motivated to improve their English based on funding, assuming that when they do not do their homework well they are displaying resistance, assuming that small groups are
more homogenous or varied than they actually are, assuming that a student-centered classroom is the best approach, or assuming that students are not sufficiently motivated if they do not seek more opportunities to practice speaking. In other words, it was important to examine the data for disconfirming evidence.

**Delimitations of Study**

The immediate purpose of this study was to improve instruction of the ITA preparatory courses at a particular university. Thus, the data collected in this study was from one term and taught by one instructor at that university. Similar ITA preparatory programs might benefit from the results because of the transferability of situations. Therefore, it will be the responsibility of the readers to understand what is presented, and to consider whether the findings are applicable to their settings and populations in order to inform their own programs. Because of the scope of this phenomenological study, this sample of participants—although diverse—is not intended to be representative of all ITAs in the U.S.

**Limitations of Study**

Any study has both known and unknown limitations. Although some might consider the combined role of teacher and researcher as a limitation, I argue the contrary. Firstly, the confirmability of the research is established in the study’s research design with my observations and interpretations tempered by the content of the photography, the focus group discussions, and the SPEAK Test scores (see Ch. 3). Secondly, the years of experience and communication with ITAs from previous ITA preparatory courses was an asset as well, especially with informing the interview questions. Apart from the
disappearance of Arya’s interview recordings, the only perceived limitation of this study was that it was conducted over the course of only one term. Had I followed the participants who did not pass the SPEAK Test into the next term, I suspect that the findings might have been of a slightly different nature since this was the first time that each of the participants were enrolled in an ITA preparatory class.

**Definition of Terms**

Below, I will define and describe the primary operational terms that ground my study:

**CALL**: Computer Assisted Language Learning, or “learners learning language in any context with, through, and around computer technologies” (Egbert, 2005, p. 4). This extends beyond the traditional computer in the classroom to devices such as cell phones, MP3 players, video recorders, and so on.

**ELLs**: English Language Learners

**Empowering education**: An empowering pedagogy encourages students to have and use their voice in a democratic classroom atmosphere rather than the traditional top-down, teacher as lecturer approach. While Shor (1992) assigns the broad agenda of “self and social change,” (p. 15), my goal in using this is the focus on the self, where students “develop skills and knowledge as well as high expectations for themselves, their education, and their futures” (Shor, 1992, p. 16).

**Intelligibility**: “the degree to which a listener understands a speaker” (Derwing, 2009, p. 29).
**ITA:** International teaching assistant. Graduate students who come from another country “who teach basic undergraduate classes in their disciplines” (Gorsuch, 2008, p. 162).

**Learner autonomy:** This does not imply learning without interacting with others; rather, it refers to the “capacity to manage one’s own learning” (Benson, 2007, p. 23). In other words, knowing what one needs to learn, how to do so effectively, and learning.

**Lived Experience:** “a reflective or self-given awareness which is, as awareness, unaware of itself” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 35). These experiences gain meaning when they are brought together though the remembering of them (Van Manen, 1990).

**NNS:** Non-Native Speaker- in this context, a non-native speaker of North American English.

**Phenomenology:** “Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9). It is a philosophy and research method that “…recognizes that all research involves an interaction, a relationship between the researcher and the researched” (Langellier and Hall, 1989, p. 201).

**SLA:** Second Language Acquisition. An area of research for linguists that investigates how other languages are acquired. Unlike purposeful learning, it is more “similar to the process children use in acquiring first and second languages. It requires meaningful interaction in the target language…in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying” (Krashen, 1981, p. 1).
Social constructivism: Proponents of Social Constructivism, in particular, believe that “all learning is…intimately tied to experience and the contexts of experience, no matter how or where that learning takes place” (Swan, 2005, p. 2).

SPEAK Test: The Spoken Proficiency English Assessment Kit is a standardized test from ETS that measures the intelligibility of one’s spoken English through a series of impromptu speech tasks that the student records in response to prompts given by a recorded speaker, whose script they can follow in the test booklet.

Student-centered pedagogy: A pedagogy in which the teacher’s primary role is that of facilitator who “leads and directs” rather a lecturer disseminates knowledge (Shor, 1992, p. 16). The learners may have input in the topics covered, the types of projects they do, and contribute to course content creation while spending much of the class time discussing, sharing their understanding of the material, and practicing the topics at hand with each other.

TA: Teaching assistant. This is a job position for graduate students in U.S. universities wherein the TA teaches a class him or herself, or helps the instructor of a class in exchange for experience and a stipend.

Teacher clarity: The quality of teaching in a clear way. This goes beyond pronunciation to encompass grammar, organization, the use of visuals, and more.

Test of Spoken English (TSE): A standardized test from ETS that measures the intelligibility of spoken English for non-native English speakers.
Participant Profiles

The following profiles of each participant are based on my observations, a mid-term homework assignment (audio journals in which they talked about the two most important things in their lives at the moment), the reflexive photography projects, and the interviews with each participant.

Arya. A first-year Ph.D. student in Chemical Engineering, Arya was a 23 year-old Iranian whose top priorities are his education and enjoying life. In the interview, he revealed that he felt somewhat guilty about being far from home while some of his friends in Iran had disappeared or had been jailed for dissidence. Immediately after the interview, he said that the interview was the longest period of time that he had spoken in English since he arrived four months before. In class, Arya sat apart from his classmates and often had a serious demeanor. His self-professed loneliness and isolation were made apparent through the images and captions in his reflexive photography project.

Ciela. Ciela was a 28 year-old first-year student in the Physics Department from Nepal. Her top priorities were studying Physics and increasing her spoken English skills. Both in the interview and in class observations, it was clear that Ciela worked hard to improve her speaking skills. In class, she maintained high grades and frequently volunteered and initiated conversation with her classmates. Documented both in her photography as well as in the interview, Ciela felt well-supported by the Nepalese community at the university; many Nepalese are in the Physics department. They helped her find housing and establish herself once she arrived. She described this community as follows: “It’s kind of like having family members because they really care about all the
things.” Unlike other participants, Ciela had immediate family in the US. Her sister in California helped her open a bank account and buy a cell phone before the start of the school year.

**Evelyn.** Evelyn was a 26 year-old student in the one-year Masters program in Media Arts and Studies. She was interested in making documentaries. Keeping up with coursework and maintaining a positive attitude were the two most important things in her life. Evelyn shared with me that she grew up in poverty in rural China where both of her parents were elementary school teachers. After her father’s death, she said that she “was deprived of the opportunity to enter high school.” She explained that after much hard work, she returned to school, and eventually was accepted with a full scholarship to Shanghai University where she earned her first MA. In class, Evelyn was seen to be consistently supportive of her classmates, helping them with technology concerns and encouraging quieter students to participate. **Isaac.** A true polyglot, Isaac grew up speaking Ewe, Ga, and English in Ghana, later learning French and Spanish. In his interview, this 23 year-old shared his sincere love of teaching. He explained that despite the shock of the need to take an English class, he decided to improve his spoken English intelligibility for the sake of the students in his Spanish class who might need to communicate with him in English during office hours. Time management was one of Isaac’s top priorities, and his student record for the class showed that he struggled with it, often turning in his homework late. Despite this difficulty with keeping up with the work, Isaac participated actively while in class. He listened carefully to his classmates and supported them respectfully in discussions, urging them to participate as well.
**Jolod.** Of all of the participants in this study, Jolod had the most experience as a TA since she completed her Masters at another Midwestern university. A thirty-five year old Ghanaian in her first-year in Mathematics, she was also the primary caregiver of her two year-old daughter since the father was attending university elsewhere in the state. She frequently came to class late and was visibly tired. Regardless, Jolod was often smiling and interacted with her classmates. In class, she was supportive of others and sought help from them as well. For her, family and her job as a T.A. were the top priorities.

**Jon.** At 22 years old, Jon was a first year student in Mechanical Engineering and the youngest person in the study. Although his student record shows satisfactory performance on his coursework, Jon’s reflexive photography project showed that outside of class, he watched US TV and movies and attended sporting events. In the interview, he explained that by cultivating these shared interests with his classmates from the U.S., he could participate more easily in conversation with others. In fact, Jon was the only participant to mention the importance of being culturally literate in order to increase speaking opportunities. Jon also had a friend from his hometown (who had been studying in his department for a year) serve as his NAE pronunciation mentor. As he explained in the interview, this friend helped him hone the self-analysis skills that ultimately allowed Jon to adjust his accent successfully for non-Indian listeners.

**Lili.** Lili was a 24 year-old first-year student in Fine Arts from China. Although she passed the TOEFL, she admitted in the interview that she had forgotten much of what she studied; therefore, she spent some of her spare time during her first term translating
Chinese vocabulary to English for review. The course observation record clearly documents how Lili struggled simply to understand; most of her homework was done incorrectly or poorly, several times she asked classmates to translate what the instructor said, and she had difficulty engaging in class discussion. She did not interact much with her classmates though many attempted to interact with her. Instead, she was often falling asleep in class or looking downward with slumped shoulders. Outside of class, as documented in her photos and the interview, she interacted with people from the U.S. through the sharing of food. She had dreams of opening her own art gallery someday in the US to display her work. Mid-way through the term, her top priorities were to study hard and adapt to the environment.

**Liu.** For Liu, coursework and his teaching assistantship were the top priorities at mid-term. This 23 year-old from China proved himself to be a good student with the high grades he attained in class combined with excellent attendance. Unlike many of his classmates, Liu initiated conversations in English with his Chinese classmates. A first-year student in Neurobiology, Liu shared in the interview that he lived alone and conducted much of his lab research alone; consequently, he did not have the opportunities for interaction that he knew he needed. To make up for this, Liu used technology in a variety of ways to create opportunities for speaking.

**Maryam.** Maryam was a 30 year-old Education Administration major in her third year. She stated in the interview that she initially refused to believe that she had not passed the SPEAK Test since she had been at the university for nearly two years. One of this Ghanaian’s primary concerns was being an excellent Akan teacher. She stated in the
interview that she felt that involving her students in her accent-changing process seemed to be the key to her success. This willingness to involve others seemed to carry over into the ITA preparatory class as well. In class, she interacted frequently with her classmates and participated regularly, often urging quieter classmates like Lili to speak up.

**Mei.** Mei, too, had been at the university for several years since she completed her undergraduate degree at the same institution. This 25 year-old Computer Science major mentioned in the interview that she preferred interacting with humans rather than computers since true communication is her interest. In fact, although she was always quick and effective in helping her classmates and the instructor with technology concerns, she explained that she was mainly studying CS because of the demand for programmers. Instead, she preferred to work as an editor, something she did in China before coming to the US. Studying well in order to get a job was one of her top priorities.

**Polly.** Like Liu, this first-year Neurobiology student from China explained in her interview how she overcame her lack of interaction with others through the use of technology. A serious student, Polly did more than complete her ITA Preparation assignments well; she made it a habit to improve her general English skills by reading, chatting online, posting to Twitter, and more. One source of inspiration to her was a senior friend and colleague who did not work to improve her oral communication in English, and thus was required to take the ITA preparatory class for far longer than most ITAs. In fact, it could be seen in her reflexive photography project that what most
seemed to help Polly were her relationships with others: her advisor, other teachers, and other T.A.s. This 25 year-old diligently applied herself to her homework.

**Sanu.** Sanu was a first-year Physics student whose top priority were the core classes in her major. The 26 year-old Nepalese woman stated that she would often practice her new pronunciation patterns mentally, even though she knew that speaking and listening to recordings of herself (as in the audio journals) would be more helpful. In the interview, she explained that when she spoke out loud using this new accent, she had a sense that she was “pretending.” Despite this feeling of playing a part, Sanu said that what helped her to truly gain confidence in her spoken English was speaking in front of her students since she felt they were obliged to listen.

**Sting.** Sting was 26 year-old student in Molecular and Cellular Biology from India who described himself as a shy listener, though the observation record shows his love for sharing through conversation. Sting used the photographs from the reflexive photography project as a springboard for discussion, engaging both strangers and acquaintances. In the interview, Sting revealed that he sought opportunities to meet and interact with people, whether it was through the university’s hiking club, the student union, or in everyday life. When he was in class, he was friendly and participated actively, often engaging his classmates in conversation. Although he had been speaking English since he was a child, he realized that if his accent was too difficult for people to understand, he would not be able to communicate. Or in Sting’s words, “[It] doesn’t matter how expensive the car is if the tires are flat.”
Organization of Study

This chapter provided the introduction to and the context of my study. In the next chapter, I will review the literature on reticence and student-centered learning in order to set the foundation for the constructivist paradigm as a form of pedagogy that leads to learner empowerment through building learner autonomy. I will then look to the literature to elaborate on CALL’s role in promoting learner autonomy, and how it is used in the classroom to do this plus teach pronunciation and speaking skills to ITAs. In Chapter 3, I will explain my research methodology. In Chapter 4, I describe the thematic findings. Chapter 5 will serve as an analysis of those findings, and Chapter 6 will contain the discussion, recommendations for further research, and my conclusion.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The review of the literature addresses four strands: reticence, understanding how student-centered learning promotes learner autonomy through a constructivist framework, technology in language learning, and ITA training programs. As it was explained in the introductory chapter, ITAs’ roles as language learners are unique in that a failure to improve their spoken English could have negative consequences both in the short term with communication problems, and in the long term with potential loss of funding (Gorsuch, 2011). Yet, their primary responsibilities as graduate students require much of the ITAs’ time and attention. Therefore, it is necessary for the instructors of these ITA training programs to find the most effective means possible to facilitate the improvement of their students’ speaking skills. In order for instructors to do so, it is important first to understand how learning does and does not take place.

Drawing from the fields of education, communication studies, and applied linguistics, this chapter will begin with an examination of student reticence. Next, student-centered teaching will be discussed as a method to combat this. A constructivist framework of learning will be shared as a lens through which one may understand student-centered learning and promote learner autonomy. I will end the section with a clarification of the concept of learner autonomy.

In the next section, the role of technology in SLA will be discussed, particularly, in how technology may be used as a tool to promote learner autonomy, and what teachers must consider in its implementation in the classroom. This section will conclude with a look at how technology has been used for improving oral communication.
From there, the focus of the literature review will shift to the ITAs and ITA training programs. Of particular importance will be how these programs address the topic of oral communication and how technology has been implemented in these programs. The way in which the present study will fill the gap in ITA literature will end the review.

**Reticence and the Student-Centered Classroom’s Role in Reducing Reticence**

Language learning and second language acquisition are made easier in the absence of communication apprehension (CA) or reticence. CA can be described as what a person experiences when associating feelings of fear, embarrassment, and discomfort with communicating with others, sometimes to the extent that the individual may avoid speaking (Cooper & Simonds, 2007). In ITA training courses, a lack of oral participation in class can be a problem for ITAs looking to improve their spoken American English; nonetheless, many learners come from places such as China, Japan, and Korea, where education systems have different expectations that lead to such behavior.

Although Pennycook (2001) cautions against ascribing generalized, fixed traits to a culture, there are some educational tendencies that can be noted. For example, Zhang (2005) describes many Chinese classrooms as far different than the typical “egalitarian” U.S. college classroom (p. 109). The author states that “traditional Chinese teaching... places the premium on information-packed lecturing, students’ attentive listening, assiduous note-taking, and mechanical memorization skills” (Zhang, 2005, p. 111). This style is no exception in China’s English language classrooms (Naizhao & Yanling, 2008; Rao, 2006). With this lack of speaking practice, there is little wonder why ITAs from
China test much lower on the SPEAK Test as compared to most of their counterparts from other first-language (L1) backgrounds (Gorsuch, 2011). Through an examination of the incoming SPEAK Test scores of ITAs’ from China, India, Korea, Taiwan, and Turkey at a university between 2008 and 2010, Gorsuch (2011) found that 75% of the Chinese ITAs, in fact, would not be cleared to teach based on their scores. The Korean ITAs’ incoming scores were the same as the Chinese ITAs’ score on average (Gorsuch, 2011). This lack of communicative competence likely contributes to ITAs’ hesitance to speak for fear of losing face with an incorrect answer or by making grammatical errors with their spoken language (Wu, 2009; Zhou, Knocke, and Sakamoto, 2005), thus creating conditions for CA.

The relative silence of many East Asians in the US classroom is often labeled as “reticence” in the literature (Kim, 2006; Lee and Ng, 2010; Wu, 2009; Zhou, Knocke, and Sakamoto, 2005). Some of this reticence seems to be attributed to CA and other types of anxiety associated with language learning (Hilleson, 1996), but other authors cite additional reasons such as a lack of language competency (Tsui, 1996) or the complex considerations of face in interpersonal relationships (Wu, 2009). Through Wu’s (2009) explanation of face makes it clear that face is a complex topic, generally speaking, face refers to the ideas of reputation and moral character of a person and the people with whom the person interacts. Thus, students may hesitate to speak for fear of losing face or even causing the teacher to lose face if the students’ production is inaccurate since the teacher taught them how to express themselves accurately; the onus is on the students to learn. Apart from reticence, inadequate language competency, and fear of losing face,
specific teaching behaviors can also contribute to reticence, such as accepting a single correct answer and not allowing enough wait time (Tsui, 1996), along with the way that teachers interact with students in general (Lee and Ng, 2010).

Another side to reticence is active resistance, or what Kohl (1994) terms “not-learning” (p. 4). As he explains, not-learning “involves closing off part of oneself and limiting one’s experience. It can require actively refusing to pay attention, acting dumb, scrambling one’s thoughts, and overriding curiosity” (Kohl, 1994, p. 4). In his book *I Won’t Learn From You*, he shares his experiences with not-learning both as a teacher and as a student. He details many examples of not-learning: the Spanish-speaking grandfather who refused to learn English for fear that his grandchildren would lose part of their history and identity if he did not speak with them in Spanish, a student who opted to take special education classes instead of classes with racist teachers so that she could still graduate, and even his own not-learning of Yiddish because he did not want to exclude his non-Yiddish-speaking mother from conversations. Not-learning also involves the refusal to learn racist and sexist language, exclusionary narratives, war, and more. He is careful to explain that although it is often categorized as failure to learn by school systems, not-learning is distinct, purposeful, and as the above examples show, not necessarily something negative. The difference between not-learning and failure, Kohl (1994) states, is that with not-learning, there is “the will to refuse knowledge” and with failure, there is a “mismatch between what the learner wants to do and is able to do” (p. 6). In other words, it is impossible to conclude that students have failed at certain endeavors that they have never attempted in the first place. This not-learning seems to be
related to Krashen’s (1983) idea of the affective filter, or a mindset that can block learning. Learners might have a high affective filter if they have a negative view of the speakers of the target language, lack self-confidence, or are in a situation of high anxiety. The result of a learner having a high affective filter would be minimal learning or acquisition. Regardless of the reasons behind high affective filters, not-learning, or even communication apprehension or reticence, it is clear that the way that class is conducted can influence the level of student participation and learning.

Building upon my mention of the pedagogical value of a student-centered classroom in Chapter 1, a student-centered classroom not only promotes participation but can also decrease reticence. At the heart of this kind of classroom is the relationship between the teacher and the students; students have a say in many areas of the class and contribute to course content creation while spending much of the class time discussing, sharing, and practicing the topics at hand with each other while the teacher serves as a facilitator. In other words, as Vassett (2010) explains, this pedagogy “… is built upon relationships that value negotiation, power sharing, feedback, experimentation, and discussion” (p. 55). Student-centered teaching is in opposition to the top-down, lecture-based, banking-style teaching that Freire spoke against (1999, 2005). Freire’s (1999) described banking education as “an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (p. 53). Freire (1999) recognized that students are not depositories; instead, they are individuals who have their own experiences from which to understand the world,
and the student-centered classroom both recognizes this and builds upon it. By the teacher setting a democratic rather than an authoritative tone (Freire, 2005), there is space for students to speak up and collaborate, thus increasing student participation. Although students might initially find this arrangement awkward to navigate if they are from cultures where hierarchical roles are valued (Wu, 2009), there may be less pressure on them in the sense that there is relative safety with speaking in small groups of peers as compared to a lecture situation where they might need to speak in front of the entire class. If the teacher effectively helps learners prepare for small group work, students will be more apt to participate (Lee & Ng, 2010). Whether from collectivist or individualist cultures, by and large, when students contribute to class content and feel that their voices are valued, there is less reticence.

John Dewey recognizes the importance of the students’ life experiences in learning, and that these experiences are not formed in isolation. Although Dewey’s focus is on children, much of what he has written can be applied to adult learners as well. As Dewey (1998) stated, “school is primarily a social institution” (p. 281). Recognizing the social nature of learning, he sees school as a place for “[the child] to use his powers for social ends” (Dewey, 1998, p. 281). He also understands that because school is a social institution and community, the lessons students learn need to come from the students’ experience and be applied to the present situation, “becom[ing] a part of the life experience of the child” (Dewey, 1998, p. 282). In his *Middle Works, Volume 9*, Dewey (1980) explains that the classroom is a “miniature social group in which study and growth are incidents of present shared experience” rather than a place set apart from the rest of
society for learning (p. 368). A student-centered class creates an opportunity to build upon students’ experience for immediate use in the present community. This is made possible because the students are involved in knowledge creation (Bullock, 1997) and have ample opportunity to interact with one another.

The relationship between the students and teacher, in fact, was found to be the determining factor in student reticence in Lee and Ng’s (2010) study on the role of teachers in student reticence. The authors found that the students’ communicative behavior was affected by the ways in which teachers interacted with the students. With student-centered lessons, where students engaged in small group work without the interference of the teacher, the students participated well, showing few signs of reticence. There was also more participation from the students when the teacher acted as facilitator, allowed longer wait time, and personalized the dialogue towards the students’ experiences. However, in the teacher-fronted scenario where the teacher spoke for most of the lesson, student reticence was clearly observed. Cooper and Simonds (2007) also point towards moving away from teacher-fronted lecture classes and grading for oral participation. Instead, they suggest a mixture of small group peer work and activities done alone in order to increase student participation among both high and low CA learners. Within the learner or student-centered environment, “learning occurs through discovery, experience, and modeling, and meaning is negotiated democratically between learners holding potentially diverse perspectives” (Hyslop-Margison, 2004, n.p.). The teacher’s role in reducing reticence and CA to promote participation in the classroom by decentralizing their authority is indeed an important one.
By redefining the relationship between teacher and students and creating the opportunity for students to interact with one another in the process of learning, students will not only participate more; they may be more motivated to participate, as well. Sidorkin (2002) goes so far to say that this should be the focus, in fact: rather than focusing on the production of assignments destined for the recycling bin, the focus should be on the cultivation of relationships since people learn in relation to others. Dewey (1998) supports this notion of the importance of relationships in learning, saying that “the social life” is what gives meaning and context to what is learned in class (p. 282). By allowing space for the students to interact, they can feel more comfortable with participating. If the teacher can help to make an atmosphere in which the students may be friendly with each other and are encouraged “to express their ideas, opinions, desires, emotions and feelings,” then the students will be better poised to learn because they are at ease and perhaps even motivated, or as Krashen (1983) describes it, because of the “lowering [of their] affective filter[s]” (p. 21). The common thread between these three authors is the importance of creating space for students to relate with one another for the purpose of learning.

In conclusion, a student-centered classroom empowers the students and the teachers to have a more fluid and expansive context whereby they can learn from and interact with each other. Not only will it reduce it prepares ITAs to be independent communicators in a second language and a foreign culture. In terms of language

---

3 In the field of Linguistics, Krashen draws a distinction between learning and acquiring language. Although I agree with Krashen that learning is more rule-based and acquiring is what is done when people pick up the language, I will most often use the term “learning” because of its common usage for the education audience.
learning, the Constructivist paradigm provides a theory of knowing and learning that can facilitate just that, and it is there where I will turn my attention next.

**A Constructivist Framework to Understand Student-Centered Learning and How to Achieve Learner Autonomy**

The Constructivist paradigm, both epistemologically and theoretically speaking, is one lens through which to view student-centered pedagogy since it is based on the understanding that “meaning is imposed on the world rather than extant in it” (Swan, 2005, p. 1). In other words, we create meaning, or as Crumley (2006) writes: “knowledge is constructed by learners based on their experience and… knowledge exists as a mental construct” rather than being something out in the world for which we search (p. 30). LeFoe (1998), however, may have said it best by describing it as follows: “Learning is an active process of constructing rather than acquiring knowledge” (p. 454). This constructing of knowledge is done individually and in relation to others; it does not appear. In other words, meaning making is not imposed on the learner by the teacher; instead, the teacher acts more as a guide or facilitator who creates the space for learning to happen.

Much of the groundwork that has been done on elaborating this theory of how people learn and know has been done in the field of Psychology with the cognitive learning theories of Jean Piaget being central. Piaget believed that meaning is created through interaction with the environment, and that “Learning occurs… through the cognitive processing of environmental interactions and the corresponding construction of mental structures to make sense of them” (Swan, 2005, p. 2). He referred to these
structures as schema, or “action-schemes” which Piaget and Inhelder (1969) define as “the structure or organization of actions as they are transferred or generalized by repetition in similar or analogous circumstances” (p. 4). This idea clearly dismisses the notion that learners are empty receptacles in which to deposit information; instead, it is possible to utilize their previous knowledge schemas on which to scaffold, then assimilate, new information.

Proponents of social constructivism, in particular, believe that “all learning is…intimately tied to experience and the contexts of experience, no matter how or where that learning takes place” (Swan, 2005, p. 2). Of particular salience here in terms of language learning are these theories of social constructivism, whose basic tenets come from Vygotsky’s theories of language and learning, which were not made popular until the 1960s. It is commonly explained in the literature that one of the primary conceptual understandings of social constructivist thought comes from Vygotsky; he believed that “all learning results from social interaction, and that meaning is socially constructed through communication, activity, and interactions with others” (Swan, 2005, p. 4) not only in certain social groups and institutions, but also within one’s own society (Savery & Duffy, 2001). Vygotsky (1978) points to learning as being social in nature. From this, one can understand that knowledge comes from experience, which is derived from interactions with others.

One of the oft-cited tools for enabling an environment where interaction is possible is through technology (LeFoe, 1998; Jonassen, Peck, & Wilson, 1999). Although the term “social constructivism” is not often discussed in the literature on
CALL, there is a palpable undercurrent of it, especially because of the emphasis on learner autonomy that technology and CALL can facilitate (Egbert, Hanson-Smith & Chao, 2007; Hubbard, 2004; Kessler, 2009, Kessler & Bikowski, 2010). The role of technology, as Jonassen, Peck, and Wilson (1999) see it is that “Technology is merely a tool to enable students to construct knowledge. Understanding cannot be conveyed to students through teachers or technology; rather, students construct understanding themselves through tools such as teachers and technology” (n.p.). There are many ways that technology can be used in learning, whether it is through manipulating information and ideas, watching or listening to native speakers, or providing an easy way to take notes and look up information. Technology can also facilitate meaningful interaction between students, such as through collaborating on a document in a wiki, having a conversation by chatting or through synchronous video, and even getting to know each other better on social media.

While much learning in the classroom takes place in relation to others, students must ultimately be able to synthesize these ideas for themselves to be autonomous language learners. With the prevalence of personal computers and mobile devices on university campuses in the US, the possibilities of using technology to promote autonomous language learning are enormous. This does not imply learning in isolation; rather, it refers to “the ability of a learner to acquire a language deliberately and systematically… outside the confines of a formal classroom, sometimes with guidance…, and sometimes without such guidance” (Hubbard, 2004, p. 50). It can also be used in other ways, as Benson and Voller (1997) point out:
1. for *situations* in which learners study entirely on their own;
2. for a set of *skills* which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
3. for an inborn *capacity* which is suppressed by institutional education;
4. for the exercise of *learners’ responsibility* for their own learning; [and]
5. for the *right* of learners to determine the direction of their own learning. (p. 1).

Autonomy has been discussed among educational researchers since the 1970s, and perhaps earlier (Reinders, 2009, Benson & Voller, 1997).

Related to autonomy is self-regulated learning. McCombs and Marzano (1990) define self-regulated learning as “the outcome of choosing to engage in self-directed metacognitive, cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes and skills” (p. 52). The authors argue for a self-as-agent framework of learning that integrates both the cognitive skills of self-regulated learning along with the desire (or “will”) to do so, and that this desire outweighs the skills in terms of importance. To be capable of this desire, it must come from the students themselves: “students must realize that they are creative agents, responsible for and capable of achieving self-development and self-determination goals, and they must appreciate and understand their capabilities for reaching these goals” (McCombs & Marzano, 1990, p. 51). Numerous education researchers (McCombs & Marzano, 1990; Pressley, 1995; Winne, 1995) agree that teachers can help students develop this understanding, and it is emphasized that nurturing relations with others can provide the necessary “positive socioemotional support” for its development (McCombs & Marzano, 1990, p. 63). Regardless of whether it is referred to as self-regulated learning or learner autonomy, agency is a necessary component; the learner must take the
initiative to learn since the learner constructs the meaning. The learners’ construction of meaning is part of the process of becoming an autonomous learner. In the following paragraphs, I will illustrate other authors’ ideas on what the teacher’s role is in promoting learner autonomy and how this can be accomplished.

Littlewood (1996) put forth a framework for autonomy in foreign language learning for teachers that consists of communication, learning, and the learner’s personal life. This framework, he maintains, can be used as a basis for language teaching methodology. His rationale behind it is that “since the over-arching goal of all teaching is to help learners act more independently within a chosen range of domains, an appropriate methodology in language teaching is also, by definition, a methodology for furthering autonomy” (p. 428). He broadly defines autonomy as “a capacity for thinking and acting independently that may occur in any kind of situation (including, of course, a situation where the focus is on learning)” (Littlewood, 1996, p. 428). Littlewood (1996), like McCombs and Marzano (1990), recognizes that in order for a student to be autonomous, s/he must have the skills and the desire to do so, and that teachers can assist the students in developing autonomy by creating activities and opportunities that address and support the six areas of autonomy that he lists, namely: “communication strategies,” “learning strategies,” “independent work,” “creation of personal learning contexts,” “expression of personal meanings,” and “linguistic creativity” (p. 432). When this is done, students can be autonomous communicators and autonomous learners both inside and outside of the classroom.
The goal of language learning, especially in oral communication, is to be able to use one’s second language (L2) accurately and spontaneously; thus, it is certain that the learner must achieve some manner of autonomy. This however, can be a challenging task, especially for those who learned languages through rote memorization and grammar rules rather than in a communicative fashion. This detached-from-context way of learning a language often results in its learners’ acquisition of a predominately passive knowledge of the language; that is, the learner might be able to read and understand, but certainly would have difficulty in creating spontaneous speech. During spontaneous speech, self-monitoring is important for acquiring new speech patterns (Ellis & Zimmerman, 2001). Ellis and Zimmerman (2001) break self-monitoring into three phases: “forethought, performance, and self-reflection” (p. 208). For students accustomed to being corrected by others rather than correcting themselves, this can be challenging. Naizhao and Yanling (2008) recognize the need to promote autonomous learning in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes in China. The authors report on the finding of a two-year experimental investigation that “examine[d] the effectiveness of autonomous learning in EFL at the Shanxi University of Finance and Economics” (Naizhao & Yanling, 2008, p. 6). Learner autonomy in this context refers to “learning to learn,” which is done by the student

… taking charge of his/her own learning; setting realistic goals and plan \textit{sic} programmes of work; using learning strategies effectively and develop strategies for coping with new situations; creating and making good use of study
environments; and evaluating and assessing his/her own learning process. (Naizhao and Yanling, 2008, p. 7)

Ultimately, it was found that students were able to take charge of the learning; thus, there were significant differences between the scores received by students under the traditional teaching model and students participating in the autonomous teaching model. Naizhao and Yanling (2008) are not the only authors to show this positive connection between English language proficiency and the use of an autonomous learning model. Dafei (2007) also showed similar results among students in China who needed to pass the Practical English Tests for College, particularly, that “learner autonomy and the English proficiency of the participants are significantly positively and linearly correlated” (p. 13). Dafei (2007) believed that these findings indicate that “the more autonomous a learner becomes, the more likely he/she achieves high language proficiency” (p. 15). These two studies illustrated a link between increased English proficiency and using a teaching methodology that develops learner autonomy, regardless of the previous learning styles teachers have imposed. In the next section, I will turn to the area of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) to examine how technology has been used in second language learning and acquisition to promote learner autonomy.

**Technology’s Role in Promoting Autonomy in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Learning**

With the nearly ubiquitous nature of technology, ESL (English as a Second Language) instructors have a broader variety of teaching materials at their disposal. Using technology both in and out of the classroom has been a popular topic that first
came to the fore in the 1980s along with the wider availability of the personal computer (Hubbard, 2009, p. 3). Although technology is referred to in the literature in a number of ways such as learning technologies, instructional technologies, TELL (Technology Enhanced Language Learning), MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning), and CALL, I will use “CALL” since it is the most prevalent in the literature.

As used in SLA, CALL has a strong presence in the literature. Egbert, Hanson-Smith, and Chao (2007) illustrate CALL’s relationship with SLA as that of a supporting rather than a central role. In today’s world of exciting, quickly-developing and improving technology, it can be tempting to incorporate some of these new devices, software, and games as a diversion, but the authors remind us to always stay grounded in SLA theory so that the ways in which we use technology can have more merit. Also found in SLA literature is Hubbard’s (2009) overview about CALL, where he illustrates how CALL has been used to facilitate language learning, paying particular attention to the application of synchronous and asynchronous computer mediated computing.

Another example is Kessler’s (2009) article in which he describes how CALL can be a useful tool to help teachers align with the foreign language teaching standards—many of such standards are also applicable to the ESL setting. He points out that of particular importance is CALL’s ability to help teachers provide “authentic instruction” and enable learner autonomy since “The ultimate goal of… language education is the successful autonomous use of language” (Kessler, 2009, p. 354). Kessler (2009) gives examples of “collaborative and authentic” (p. 356) activities that can meet the standards, and points out different uses of CALL: tutorials, critical thinking development, and communication.
Gonzalez and St. Louis (2008) list some of the ways in which they used CALL to promote learner autonomy through interaction and collaboration among their students through the use of Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, wikis, videos, webcasts and more. These are some of the more broad, underlying views of CALL in the field. It is worth reiterating that the incorporation of technology into the classroom must be done in a way that can enable the students to use it effectively. This begins with learner training.

As Hubbard (2004) explains, in order for learners to gain autonomy while using technology, teachers must ensure that students “are able to make informed decisions about how to use computer resources effectively to meet their learning objectives” (p. 51). To guide teachers in this, he explains the “five principals for learner training”: 1) teachers should experience CALL for themselves; 2) students should receive some teacher training so that they understand how the activities in which they are engaged can relate to learning the L2; 3) teachers should use a cyclic approach to teaching CALL activities rather than expecting students to understand from one explanation only; 4) activities should be followed by a collaborative review so that everyone better understands the activities and how to use the technologies employed for language acquisition; and 5) teachers should train students how to modify activities and resources for the students’ needs (“exploitation strategies,” Hubbard, 2004, p. 55). In the end, he suggests that teachers help students gain the skills needed to continue learning after the class has ended. He also discusses several media through which students can achieve this such as CMC, finding materials on the Internet, and so on.
It is important for teachers to play key roles in helping learners to use CALL effectively since many CALL materials (that the students use on their own) seem to be designed more for self-directed learning rather than to promote learner autonomy (Ruiz-Madrid, 2006). That said, Ruiz-Madrid (2006) created a pedagogical framework for the creation of effective CALL software that places fostering learner autonomy as one of the key components. Although Ruiz-Madrid (2006) focuses on CALL software that the students might use outside of class, she, like Hubbard (2004) noted the importance of guiding the learners in the use of learning strategies. Thus, one of the most important roles of the teacher must be to help the students learn to learn. Of course, in order for this to happen, the teacher must first be “comfortable and confident” with using technology, as Kessler (2013) points out (n.p.). This problem is not within the scope of the literature review, so for the remainder of the chapter, it must be assumed that the teacher is proficient. CALL needs to be implemented strategically if it is to enhance learner autonomy. In the field of ITA training, it has been used for decades.

**ITA Training Programs**

As explained in the previous chapter, ITAs across the United States must prove to be proficient English speakers. For those who are not, many universities have courses or entire programs dedicated to helping them achieve this end. Broadly speaking, they have typically included oral communication, culture, and pedagogy in their curricula (Gorsuch, 2012; Hoekje and Williams, 1992). These programs are currently housed in graduate studies departments, intensive English programs, languages and linguistics departments, and teaching and learning centers, often receiving at least some funding from the Provost...
or Deans’ offices (Tummons, L., ITA-IS listserv communication, May 14, 2014). These different departments likely have influenced the variety in content areas covered in ITA training programs, some with a heavier emphasis on teaching skills (Davies et al., 1989; Douglas & Myers, 1989; Fox & Gay, 1994; Graham, 1992; LeGros & Faez, 2012), and others on communicative and intercultural competence (Davies et al., 1989; Hoekje & Williams, 1992; Larocco, 2011; LeGros & Faez, 2012). The scope of the present study is limited to ITAs’ oral communication in terms of communicative competence and intelligibility.

Simply put, communicative competence refers to the ability to use language appropriately in different speaking contexts (Hoekje & Williams, 1992). For ITAs, this may involve what they would say and how they would speak in different teacher-student interactions such as during office hours, when managing the class, teaching, and more. Hoekje and Williams (1992) recommend that ITA Preparation courses should be designed within a framework of communicative competence so that the language learning and practice is contextualized for the ITAs and takes into account relationships between speakers, appropriate use of grammar, and more. One way to achieve this is to incorporate role plays as practice (Tyler, 1994), but as Hoekje and Williams (1992) caution, role plays among ITAs as students in a class will not be as effective as they could be due to the peer relationship that the ITAs share.

Not only is it important to know what to say to whom and in what context, but it is also important that the words and phrases the ITAs speak in extended discourse are understood (Ye, 2013). For this reason, numerous studies have been done on
comprehensibility of a foreign accent, mainly in terms of students’ attitudes towards teachers with foreign accents (these are predominately negative) (Chuang, 2010; Kavas & Kavas, 2008; Orth, 1982) and key features that impact the intelligibility of ITAs’ accents. Suprasegmentals, or the stress, rhythm, and intonation of speech, are especially important in communicating clearly. Hahn (2004) found that undergraduates were better able to remember content from an ITA’s lecture when prominence, or primary stress, was correctly placed in extended discourse. In terms of what was interpreted as more accented speech in ITAs’ sample lectures, undergraduates most frequently cited a slow speech rate (Kang, 2010). In fact, this lack of fluency, specifically in the form of “repetition or correction of lexical items, redrafting of entire phrases, and filled pauses” was also a source of confusion for listeners in Pickering’s (2001) study (p. 250). In *The Role of Tone Choice in Improving ITA Communication in the Classroom*, Pickering (2001) examines the use of intonation in actual recorded speech samples from six Chinese non-native English speaking TAs and six North American native English speaking (NS) male TAs. The author defines intonation as “variation in pitch movement...[that] bears a high communicative load in terms of information structuring and rapport building between discourse participants” (Pickering, 2001, p. 234). Problems can arise when tones unwittingly convey “rudeness or animosity,” as in the example Pickering (2001) gives of a non-native speaker (NNS) using a falling tone instead of a rising tone that could have “avoid[ed] the appearance of overt disagreement” (Pickering, p. 235). A more common problem, however, is using level or falling tones consistently throughout statements, as many NNS from China are known to do. This creates a
somewhat flat (monotone) intonation pattern that makes the ITA seem “boring... [and makes it] difficult [for students] to concentrate” in class (Pickering, 2001, p. 235). What Pickering (2001) found was that the native speaker TAs utilized the rising tones and falling tones with much greater frequency than the level tones. Falling tones were typically used for “telling, that is, presenting new... information... to frame and announce a new topic, and to present key facts or new procedures,” (Pickering, 2001, p. 241) whereas rising tones were used to “establish common ground, project solidarity, and avoid open disagreement with their students” (p. 244). Non-native English speaking ITAs primarily utilized level tones and not as many rising tones, thus revealing “different tonal structures” (Pickering, 2001, p. 245). Rising tones were only used “to mark common ground... at the moment of speaking” (Pickering, 2001, p. 248) rather than indicating common ground when referring back to material from a previous lesson, for example. The excessive use of level and falling tones created a monotonous feel to the lecture, thus creating distance between the teacher and students.

These tones that Pickering described are features of Discourse Intonation (DI). Gorsuch (2011) defines DI as “the study of how a speaker uses the intonation or prosodic system of a language (rhythm, stress, pitch, pauses, and loudness) for communicative purposes in extended speech” (p. 9), drawing in part from the above article from Pickering. These suprasegmentals are the most difficult aspects of spoken English both to teach and to learn, and the speaker who cannot use DI is at a disadvantage, as are his or her listeners, as evidenced by the studies discussed in the previous paragraph. Gorsuch (2011) underscores this, saying:
Essentially, not knowing and not using the intonation system of English in culturally expected ways strips non-native English speaking ITAs of an important, much-taken-for-granted linguistic tool to highlight and contrast key information in spoken messages, parse spoken information so U.S. undergraduates can comprehend it, and develop rapport with students. (p. 9)

She recognizes that learning to use these crucial features takes a long time, and that for many Chinese ITAs in particular, two semesters of English oral communication classes are insufficient; therefore, Gorsuch (2011) proposes that Chinese scientists who plan to study in the US begin their study of intensive English before they begin graduate school in the US because such a high proportion of ITAs in the US are from China.

To ease some of the difficulty in improving one’s spoken English, technology has been incorporated in these ITA programs. The use of video-recorded presentations dates back to the early 1980s, and perhaps earlier. Not only has video of other TAs been used as a model for teaching and pronunciation (Axelson and Madden 1990; Poirier, 1993; Sarkisian, 1984), but it also has been used as a means by which ITAs can watch and analyze their own performances (Sarkisian, 1984; Stenson, Downing, Smith, Smith, 1992), sometimes with the teacher present during play-back to assist in the analysis (Franck and DeSousa, 1982). By the same token, audiotapes were also used for self-analysis and comparison to a model (Kozuh, 1993; Stenson, Downing, Smith, Smith, 1992). With either video or audio recordings, the ITA can more easily hear their speech, thus allowing them to analyze it more completely than they would be able to while self-
monitoring for an extended period of time. These recordings can also serve for comparison to newer recordings.

In the late 1980s, the use of speech spectrographic displays, often with the Visi-Pitch, a machine that allows the speaker to see intonation, stress, and volume, became popular. This technology comes from the field of speech-language pathology, and as a speech-language pathologist, Ferrier (1991) found herself working with non-native English speaking ITAs because the English Language Center at her university had only “minimal training in phonetics” (p. 66). Through this collaboration with their ESL program, she used spectrographic displays to help ITAs correct their production of segmentals (consonants and vowels). This technology can also be used to examine duration, word stress, and phrasal stress; therefore, Molholt (1988) recommended its use in training Chinese English language learners (ELLs) to understand these difficult areas. Anderson-Hsieh (1992) explained in detail how this technology could be used to teach stress, linking, rhythm, and intonation. To her, “the major benefit of electronic visual feedback for teaching suprasegmentals is that it provides the student with an accurate visual representation of suprasegmentals in real time paired with the normal auditory feedback that occurs during speech” (Anderson-Hsieh, 1992, p. 61). While it was an innovative way to scientifically understand some of these speech sounds, Stenson, Downing, Smith, and Smith (1992) wanted to see whether it was effective; therefore, they undertook an experimental study to find out. They learned that although the ITAs found it to be helpful, there was no significant difference in the speaking exam scores between the ITAs that used this technology and the ITAs that did not (Stenson, Downing, Smith,
and Smith, 1992). Although the Visi-Pitch model described above was a stand-alone machine with a singular function, Visi-Pitch has been developed into a computer program that continues to be used today, but primarily in speech therapy clinics (“Visi-Pitch IV, Model 3950B”). Once technology had advanced sufficiently, tools that were more comprehensive in their abilities to work with ITAs’ pronunciation were tested. One of these was the TEAM software, to be specific.

Speech software is another way in which technology has been used in the teaching of pronunciation to ITAs. Schwartz (1996) reported on a 36-month project in which TEAM (Technology Enhanced Accent Modification), a “multimedia software designed to improve the oral proficiency of International Teaching Assistants” (p. 3), was developed, tested, and evaluated. According to their website, this software is still in use by Michigan State University in conjunction with their one-on-one pronunciation tutoring program (“TEAM: Home”). The TEAM project proved not only to increase ITAs’ oral proficiency scores, but it also made accent reduction for ITAs possible in a format that could be widely available and easily disseminated (Schwartz, 1996). Perhaps its success lies in its emphasis on prosodic (suprasegmental) features of pronunciation rather than segmentals. According to Schwartz (1996) in his report, other elements that set TEAM apart from such software were that it:

…provides multisensory instruction and feedback by using technology to enable ITAs to see as well as hear their speech; [it] contains a built-in curriculum that addresses 15 features, or topics, of speech that will make an accent more understandable; it is designed to be used by tutors…; [and it] employs tactics
designed to teach the ITA how to assume responsibility for maintaining the improvements he or she learns. (p. 8)

In the case of TEAM, there are many benefits to it being in an electronic format rather than just being a textbook, for example. The primary benefit according to Schwartz (1996) is that ITAs can both see and hear their spoken English production. The other main benefit is that it would be possible to hire tutors from a broader pool of applicants since pronunciation tutoring is done in conjunction with the use of TEAM. Therefore, instead of a tutor needing the entire term to acclimate to using a variety of textbooks and websites after a brief training period, tutors could be trained on the software and capable of using it proficiently with the students in about three weeks (Schwartz, 1996, p. 11). Not only that, but tutors can also work with the ITAs to develop effective practice techniques with the program. This combination of assets makes TEAM seem very attractive; it is a mystery why it is not used more prevalently, however.

In fact, in Crumley’s (2006) survey of the technology ITA programs were using, there was only one mention of TEAM software. Crumley (2006) conducted interviews with 14 directors, teachers, and related staff of ITA programs at 10 different universities, then used his findings to create and distribute surveys to 50 respondents from 40 universities across the US. Surprisingly, far less than one-third of those surveyed used accent-reduction software in their ITA programs (Crumley, 2010, p. 417). Of the 15 resources that were mentioned in the interviews to address “language, teaching, and culture,” (Crumley, 2010, p. 410), the most commonly used in universities across the US were video recordings of ITA presentations. One to two-thirds of those surveyed used
“pre-recorded materials for language development… [and] teaching skills / presentation development” (Crumley, 2010, p. 417). Other resources used were internet activities, audio recordings, Power Point, CMS (Course Management Systems), and iPods or other MP3 recorders (Crumley, 2010, p. 417). Crumley’s (2010) explanation for the successful use of those 15 resources included: “…awareness of resources, administrative advocacy, technology consultants, and funding” (pp. 418-419), all of which are present at the university in which this study takes place. That said, it is easy to imagine that with the increasing popularity and prevalence of technological devices for use at the university level such as tablets and other mobile devices, the numbers as well as the ways in which technology is used in ITA programs have likely increased.

One way in which the use of technology has expanded since Crumley’s study is in the use of these mobile devices since students can use them most anywhere. In Kessler’s (2010) *Fluency and Anxiety in Self-Access Speaking Tasks: The Influence of Environment*, he investigated whether there was any difference in the ITAs’ fluency between recording in a computer lab and recording anywhere with a mobile audio device. ITAs were given the choice of whether they would like to make their weekly audio recordings in the computer lab, or with an iPod (a mobile MP3 player). For all of the recordings except for one, they used only one recording device. Of the 40 participants, only two preferred to use the computer lab setting instead of the MP3 players, and their reasons for doing so were quite different; one wanted the support that a lab technician could provide, while the other preferred to limit his work to being on campus. What Kessler (2010) was researching in terms of the quality of the audio recording was
fluency, or with how much ease the ITA was speaking in terms of rate, pausing, utterance length, and volume. Each of these items was evaluated on all of the recordings, and the results confirmed the diminished quality of fluency when recording oneself in a computer lab. In the follow-up interviews, it was revealed that the reason for the higher level of fluency and lower levels of perceived anxiety when ITAs recorded themselves with the iPods was because the ITAs could choose both the time and the place where they would make the recordings. Based on his findings, Kessler (2010) recommended that ITAs be given the “opportunity to work in environmental contexts that may allow their true language abilities to emerge” (p.371). As mobile devices have become increasingly popular and affordable, increasingly, students have been able to step away from the computer labs.

What remains to be seen in the literature are the ITAs’ voices and opinions regarding themselves as ELLs (or learners in the process of modifying their accents for certain contexts). Little has been written about the ITAs’ experiences in this area. The most relevant research was Ye’s (2013) case study of two Chinese ITAs in which she examined the ITAs’ motivation and reasons to improve their oral English, but little was revealed of the participants’ experiences with learning the language other than their perceptions of the ITA preparatory class. The other studies that have been undertaken focus primarily on the ITAs’ experiences with teaching (Bates Holland, 2008; Bresnahan & Cai, 2000; Meesuwan, 1992; Ross, & Krider, 1992; Tavana, 2005; Trebing, 2007; Volkmann & Zgagacz, 2004; Williams, 2011; Zhao, 2014). Communicative competence (Bailey, 1982; Bengu, 2009) and intercultural competence (Larooco, 2011) have also
been examined. Coimbra (2002) investigated the “impact of the ITA Development Program [at her university] on ITAs’ effective teaching and learning” (p. 19). Although the study did not focus on ITAs as ELLs, Coimbra (2002) found that one way the ITA program impacted the international teaching assistants was that they increased confidence and speaking skills after going through the ITA training program. This sentiment was echoed by a few of the ITAs who shared their experiences in a recent TESOL intersection newsletter from the Applied Linguistics and the ITA interest groups (“International Teaching Assistant Voices,” 2014 http://newsmanager.commpartners.com/tesolswis/issues/2014-03-06/9.html).

**Summary**

International teaching assistants perform a number of demanding roles as graduate students, so it is important that ITA training programs find the most effective means possible to help ITAs improve their oral English communication. To overcome student reticence in these often-required ITA training programs, student-centered teaching with a focus on building learner autonomy is needed. A classroom where students are given the floor to express themselves, practice, and discuss the material will make the course more relevant and practical to the learners. The in-class instruction combined with the students’ efforts outside of class must serve to cultivate learner autonomy; this can be done with the assistance of technology. Technology has been used for decades in the teaching of oral communication. ITA training programs often focus on pedagogy, culture, and oral communication; technology has been a useful tool to achieve those ends, especially in terms of pronunciation and speaking. ITAs have found technology to be
helpful, but there is a lack of research on what exactly the ITAs themselves find to be useful as English language learners in an ITA training program. It is this gap in the literature that the present study intends to fill.

The purpose of this study is to learn more about ITAs’ experiences as ELLs so that the education offered in ITA Preparatory courses may be planned with the ITAs’ voices and experiences in mind. This includes understanding from the learners’ perspectives what has helped and stood in the way of their learning, how to more effectively implement CALL, and how to provide more opportunity for the ITAs to develop learner autonomy.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This phenomenological investigation was designed to examine the experiences of international teaching assistants (ITAs) from three sections of the ITA preparatory class at a Midwestern public university situated in a rural area about 75 miles away from the nearest major city. This English oral communication class was required by the university for ITAs who scored below 230 (ETS 46) out of 300 (ETS 60) on the SPEAK Test. Over the course of four months, during Fall term of the academic year 2011-2012 and through the subsequent winter break, I conducted this study from a phenomenological perspective so that I could better understand the ITAs’ experiences with speaking English. My final research questions were as follows:

RQ 1. What is the lived experience of learners with spoken English intelligibility in the ITA preparation / oral communication course?

RQ 2: In what ways do ITAs demonstrate learner autonomy?

RQ 3: What role does technology play in the ITAs’ lived experiences?

In the interest of transparency and being reflective of my own work, it should be clarified that these research questions were refined from the proposal stage as a function of emergent design. Emergent design, according to Patton (2002), is a design strategy in which “[o]penness to adapting inquiry as understanding deepens and/or situations change; the researcher avoids getting locked into rigid designs that eliminate responsiveness and pursues new paths of discovery as they emerge” (p. 40). The original wording of RQ1, “what is the lived experience of improving one’s spoken English as a learner in the ITA preparation / oral communication course,” assumed that learners were
working to improve their spoken English. So that the goals of the class would not be assumed as the participants’ experience, the word “improving” was removed. Similarly, RQ2 originally read “in what ways might learner autonomy be fostered in the classroom?” Because the focus of the study is the participants’ experiences, it was reworded to reflect this. Based on their experiences, the ways learner autonomy can be fostered will be addressed in the final chapter. RQ3 originally utilized the word “CALL” in place of “technology.” This was changed to communicate more clearly with a broader audience.

To answer the research questions, I conducted interviews with each of the thirteen participants based on their reflexive photography projects in which they visually documented what helped or hindered their oral English communication. Through the ITAs’ images and words, their experience speaking English, their use of technology, and their demonstration of learner autonomy were revealed. Questionnaires were utilized in order to gauge: 1) the group’s use of, 2) understanding of, and 3) comfort level with technology. The questionnaires, coupled with my observations that were conducted throughout the term, served to strengthen the analysis.

In this chapter, I first explain my theoretical framework before discussing the research participant selection. Next, I describe the methods followed by a timeline and description of the procedures. Then I explain the data preparation, including coding. The chapter ends with an explanation of data analysis.
**Theoretical Framework: Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is both "a philosophy of human beings in the lifeworld (Lebenswelt) and a qualitative methodology for describing, thematizing, and interpreting the meanings of this largely taken-for-granted world in a rigorous manner" (Nelson, 1989, p. 224). Aho (1998) defines phenomenology simply as “The systematic study of phenomena,” which refers to “everyday things” or “elements of the life—or lived—world (Lebenswelt)” (p. 3). There are many ways to explicate a phenomenon—through interviews, photographs, textual analysis, and more—and the quality of this examination is dependent on the attention and care of the researcher. I have taken a phenomenological perspective in understanding expressed life experiences as reported by the participants. Below, I will explain some of the basic concepts behind this theoretical stance.

Phenomena are “the ways in which things themselves appear to us” (Mortari and Tarozzi, 2010, p. 21), or how these “…‘things’…reveal themselves to us through our consciousness” (Ladkin, 2005, p. 111). Thus, their appearance is never complete. Despite the inability to acquire a full understanding, it is possible to define the phenomenon’s horizons of experience, or “limitations of truth” (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 185). Each story that is conveyed to the researcher about a lived experience, for example, helps to define the phenomenon of learning English as an ITA.

Phenomenological description illuminates lived experience. As Van Manen (1990) explains, “…a good phenomenological description is collected by lived experience and it validates lived experience” (p. 27). In other words, the description of the phenomenon should ring true to those who experience it. Thus, phenomenological
description is grounded in practice. This kind of thick description “requires methodologically, carefully, and thoroughly capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon—how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104).

There are a variety of ways to access people’s experiences: examining their written accounts in journals, e-mails, and other written communication, or talking with them, looking at photographs or watching videos they have created. In this study, thick description is obtained through the participants’ photography and interviews. All of these methods require that the participant has an awareness of having lived that experience.

Van Manen (1990) explains that:

[a] person cannot reflect on lived experience while living through experience. For example, if one tries to reflect on one’s anger while being angry, one finds that the anger has already changed or dissipated. Thus, phenomenological reflection is not introspective, but retrospective. Reflection on lived experience is always recollective; it is reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through.

(p. 10)

Because of the recollective nature of experience, I wanted to investigate the participants’ experiences as they were taking the class, both through my observations and their reflexive photography projects, discussion of photographs in focus groups, and interviews after the class was finished.

Interviewing allows for detailed stories from participants regarding their experiences. Storytelling not only requires participants to reflect on their experiences,
but it also allows them to tie together and assign meaning to disparate events and feelings (Babrow, Kline, & Rawlins, 2005; Van Manen, 1990). For this reason, during my interviews with the ITAs, I sought stories whenever possible.

Interviewing enables the researcher to probe for more detailed description and can determine the depth and detail of what is shared. Interviews “rest on the assumption that the researcher will ask meaningful questions” (Schulze, 2007, p. 537). In her investigation into reflexive photography, Schulze (2007) found that the participants were able to determine the scope of their experiences better than the researcher. I, too, found that the participants framed their experiences in ways that I never would have thought to ask about in an interview. For this reason, I conducted the interviews after viewing the reflexive photography projects. Based on the participants’ experiences documented in their photographs, and then discussed in focus groups, I was able to conduct in-depth interviews, asking the participants about their experiences as English language learners taking a required ITA preparatory oral communication course, and probing further when I knew there were stories based on what the participants shared or alluded to in the focus group discussions. What helped was starting with demographic questions in order to put the participants at ease. Once the participants seemed sufficiently comfortable, I inquired about their photographs, and then their stories. Asking questions such as “can you tell me about a time when…,” “describe a typical interaction between you and…,” and “how would you describe…” were often followed by detailed responses, especially when I gave enough wait time, or silent space, in which the participant could articulate their thoughts.
When analyzing the participants’ experiences, researchers must be able to identify their presuppositions and bracket them, or momentarily take away "one's various beliefs in the reality of the natural world in order to study the essential structures of the world" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 175). This process is called phenomenological reduction, and it can be seen as a conscious way of distilling one's observations into the most objective views possible by recognizing the pragmatic, cultural, and theoretical baggage that might ordinarily accompany the object within the natural, or everyday-uncritical, attitude. Van Manen (1990) lists several steps to making reductions:

First, reduction involves the awakening of a profound sense of wonder and amazement at the mysteriousness of the belief in the world. Next, in the reduction one needs to overcome one's subjective or private feelings, preferences, inclinations, or expectations that would prevent one from coming to terms with a phenomenon or experience as it is lived through. Third, in the reduction one needs to strip away the theories or scientific conceptions and thematizations which overlay the phenomenon one wishes to study, and which prevents one from seeing the phenomenon in a non-abstracting manner (p. 185).

For this study, the participants’ photographs and transcribed interviews served as description. After having listened to the interviews, read the transcripts, and looked through the photos multiple times, I reduced the data into broad topics. After coding the photos and the interview transcriptions, the data underwent further reduction. This will be described in the next chapter.
These reductions of the descriptions are also referred to as thematization. Thematizing is “a systematic way of developing and refining interpretations of the data” (Nelson, 1989, p. 234). This, perhaps, could be the most time-consuming part of the phenomenological method as it is important to go through the data in a variety of ways over time, or to “live with” it (Nelson, 1989, p. 222). Chapter 4 of this study details the themes. From those themes, the researcher can interpret the essence of the phenomenon, in this case, ITAs experiences as English language learners.

Interpretation of the data, of “the revelatory phrases obtained from the reduction phase” in particular (Nelson, 1989, p. 236), is the next step. While the meanings of the data are taken at face value during the description and reduction phases, interpretation seeks to “dis-cover meanings which are not immediately apparent” (Nelson, 1989, p. 237). In this study, the interpretation is discussed in Ch. 5.

The primary, overarching research question of this study entails learning about the lived experience with spoken English of ITAs enrolled in an English language preparatory course. Thus, by gaining an understanding of the essence of ITAs’ experiences primarily through a phenomenological perspective, it is hoped that teachers can better facilitate the class for the benefit of future ITAs.

**Research Participants**

In terms of determining research participants, Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) note that when “the goal is not to generalize to a population but to obtain insights into a phenomenon…the researcher purposefully selects individuals, groups, and settings that maximize understanding of the phenomenon” (p. 111). This is called “purposeful
sampling” (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007, p. 111). In critical case sampling, the researcher selects those participants who have had direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation. In this case, the participants were ITAs with lived experiences as English language learners.

Regarding the size of the sample, there are no rigid guidelines (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Still, enough descriptions must be at hand in order to approach the essence of a phenomenon. Morse (1994) recommends at least six participants for this type of research, and Creswell (1998) recommends up to ten people. Conducting an in-depth analysis with more than ten participants could be problematic in terms of time and resources, but with too few participants, redundancy (saturation) among the descriptions might not be achieved. I chose to observe and interview thirteen participants, the maximum number of volunteers for this study. Although there were a number of similarities among the participants in terms of L1 (native language) background, time spent in the US, and field of study, I found different experiences with each interview, reflexive photography projects, and observations. Nonetheless, saturation—“the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook” was achieved after the coding the first ten interview transcripts (Guest et al., 2006, p. 65). Complete saturation would have been extremely difficult in this study given the number of participants, and that the participants were asked about specific stories they shared about their photographs in the focus group interviews; as Guest et al. (2006) describe, semi-structured interviews make it difficult to achieve complete
saturation, as it “would be a moving target, as new responses are given to newly
introduced questions” (p. 76).

Exploring the “lifeworld” of ITAs, it is important to recognize the thirteen
participants who shared their experiences as people and need to be recognized as such.
Paredes’ (2010) explains that “[p]henomenology deals with persons as opposed to
subjects. A person is a whole being, complete with past experiences, attitudes, beliefs
and values. Persons live in a world of experience, replete with both cultural and social
influence” (p. 43). For this reason, the reader is introduced to each participant in Chapter
1. In this way, the reader may have a sense of the participants’ subject positions whose
experiences, when combined with the experiences of others, form larger patterns of what
it is like to be ITAs working to improve their spoken English.

The thirteen participants in this study were ITAs who took the ITA Preparation
oral communication course taught by the researcher during Fall term. There were eight
females and five males; the ITAs varied in age from 22 to 35 years old. Five ITAs were
from China, three were from Ghana, two were from India, two were from Nepal, and one
was from Iran. For most of the ITAs, it was their first term at a university in the United
States. Four had been in the U.S. for two to three years already, completing other degrees
or working on their current degree at the same institution. The ITAs came from a variety
of departments across campus, as shown in Table 3.1. Five of the participants passed the
SPEAK Test at the end of the term and twelve of the thirteen improved their SPEAK Test
scores (see Table 3.2 below). Individual learner profiles are found in Ch. 1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Department</th>
<th>On campus since:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arya</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Iranian</td>
<td>Chemical Engineering</td>
<td>Fall 2011 (first term)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ciela</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Nepalese</td>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>Fall 2011 (first term)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Media Arts</td>
<td>Fall 2011 (first term)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Ghanaian</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Fall 2011 (first term)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jolod</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Ghanaian</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Fall 2011 (first term, but previous degree in the U.S.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>Mechanical Engineering</td>
<td>Fall 2011 (first term)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lili</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Fine Arts (Painting)</td>
<td>Fall 2011 (first term)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liu</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Neurobiology</td>
<td>Fall 2011 (first term)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryam</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Ghanaian</td>
<td>Educational Administration</td>
<td>Fall 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mei</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
<td>Fall 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polly</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Neurobiology</td>
<td>Fall 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanu</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Nepalese</td>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>Fall 2011 (first term)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sting</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>Molecular Cellular Biology</td>
<td>Fall 2011 (first term)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.2 SPEAK Test Scores by Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Beginning of Term Score</th>
<th>End of Term Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arya</td>
<td>210 (ETS 42)</td>
<td>220 (ETS 44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ciela</td>
<td>220 (ETS 44)</td>
<td>220 (ETS 44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>190 (ETS 38)</td>
<td>210 (ETS 42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>200 (ETS 40)</td>
<td>210 (ETS 42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jolod</td>
<td>220 (ETS 44)</td>
<td>230 passed (ETS 46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>210 (ETS 42)</td>
<td>240 passed (ETS 48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lili</td>
<td>200 (ETS 40)</td>
<td>210 (ETS 42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liu</td>
<td>200 (ETS 40)</td>
<td>220 (ETS 44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryam</td>
<td>220 (ETS 44)</td>
<td>250 passed (ETS 50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mei</td>
<td>190 (ETS 38)</td>
<td>220 (ETS 44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polly</td>
<td>220 (ETS 44)</td>
<td>230 passed (ETS 46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanu</td>
<td>190 (ETS 38)</td>
<td>210 (ETS 42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sting</td>
<td>220 (ETS 44)</td>
<td>230 passed (ETS 46)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Methods

A qualitative phenomenological study such as this requires a variety of data collection procedures in order to obtain adequate breadth and depth of material for rigorous thematization and interpretation. The window into the ITAs’ experiences opened with reflexive photography. The ITAs elaborated on and clarified their
experiences through the focus groups and interviews. The methods are presented in that order.

**Reflexive photography.** Reflexive photography is an approach to storytelling in which participants visually represent an aspect of their lives through photography. The photographer and researcher collaborate on the analysis of the photograph through an interview (Jenkings, Woodward, & Winter, 2008). For this study, the participants were asked to take photos of what they saw as “key to [their] improvement” of their spoken English skills, in other words, what benefited them and what obstructed their efforts. Following this, in a three-person focus group of peers who seemed comfortable together, they discussed the various meanings they attached to the images, their choices of what to photograph, and the process of taking these photographs. These focus groups are discussed in more detail later on in this chapter. Subsequently, the participants discussed their photographs in the individual interviews in order to expand on stories behind the images. Through this three-step approach, participants reflected deeply on their experiences. Compared to informal interviews I conducted with other ITAs about their experiences without the aid of photographs, the interviews for this study yielded much richer data since the images not only were the starting point of the ITAs’ reflections on their experiences, but also were a point of reference and recall during the interviews.

Reflexive photography provides valuable insight into participants’ experiences. In her investigation of reflexive photography, Schulze (2007) loaned cameras and film to the participants for a period of seven days so that they could photograph “the most significant aspects of their work” (p. 541). The participants took pictures that symbolized
these aspects and made note of why they took the pictures. Because the participants visually documented what was important to them, they were able to establish the boundaries of the study and minimize the researcher’s influence. The photographs in this reflexive photography project, similarly, defined the boundaries of what the ITAs were willing to share of their experiences.

The participants’ interpretations of how the photographs captured something positive, negative, or neutral imbued meaning to the images. In the present study, all but one of the ITAs used their own cameras on their mobile phones, tablets, or on stand-alone digital cameras. They were asked to place each of the seven to ten photographs into a PowerPoint slide, write a caption for each photo, and indicate whether it was positive, negative, both, or neutral. The ITAs then shared the slides with the focus group in a video-recorded discussion, and submitted the PowerPoint to me as part of my data collection. In Schulze’s (2007) study, participants sorted their individually printed photos in this way during the interview. Having the participants discuss how something was helpful (positive) or obstructive (negative) minimized the risk of misinterpretation.

The photos and their classifications do not tell the entire story; therefore, talking in-depth with the participants provided more elaborated data. Schulze (2007) interviewed her participants in order to better understand the multiple meanings depicted in the photographs. After they sorted their photos into the three piles (positive, negative, neutral), they discussed what the photos meant to them. Like Schulze (2007), the photographs were the focus of my interviews, and the interviews allowed me to obtain
the thick description needed for phenomenological analysis since the photos “prompt[ed] much more talk” (Rose, 2007, p. 240).

The final way Schulze (2007) used the photos was in content analysis where she kept track of:

- whether the picture’s meaning was positive or negative (or both); what the main theme of the picture was; and whether the frequency of positive versus negative themes of the photographs was significant for the overall job satisfaction of each person. (pp. 542-543).

In this study, I also performed a content analysis. In it, I counted the number of positive photos, negative photos, and neutral photos. My calculations were for the group rather than the individual participants, however, since my focus was on the group’s experiences. The content analysis provided information about the ITAs’ overall experiences of what they found helpful and what they believed held them back as English language learners (ELLs). The results are found in Chapter 5 (Table 5.1).

Reflexive photography created an entry point to the ITAs’ stories because it helped me understand the ITAs’ experiences in a concise and visual way. I also chose this method because in this ocularcentric world where “the visual [is central] to contemporary Western life,” taking and sharing photographs is a familiar means of self-expression (Rose, 2007, p. 2). Photography is now commonplace, and as a result, there is little need to be concerned with a technological learning curve since the participants had prior experience with taking photographs. With digital cameras being a standard cell phone feature that all of the participants could easily access and operate, there was little
need to instruct the participants in how to take photographs. Using photographs as a means of expression is familiar to all of the participants since this is a common activity on social networking sites such as Facebook, and Instagram, where people can view their friends’ photos and make comments on them, often having a written exchange, sparked by the image. Communicating experiences through imagery is often more effective than speaking alone, especially for non-native speakers (Jenkings et al., 2008).

For those who may not have been able to clearly articulate their photos, I trained former ITA preparation students as facilitators for the focus group. These facilitators not only helped the groups to focus on the task at hand, but also asked probing questions of the participants. Because most of the facilitators had already taken the class, this provided them with a certain level of cultural capital, and the ability to better help the participants articulate their ideas.

**Interviews.** In addition to the reflexive photography project, the face-to-face individual interviews constitute another source for data in this study. Interviews allow the researcher to share stories and demonstrate empathy and flexibility about which questions to ask and when, as well as to listen deeply (Gluck & Patai, 1991). Apart from gaining a deeper understanding of the ITAs’ experiences, the interviews also gave voice to the ITAs, and allowed me to learn the stories behind their photographs. The interviews will be described in more detail under “Procedures.”

**Observations.** While the reflexive photography projects and interviews formed the primary sources of data in this study, my observations as the teacher-researcher served to triangulate the data collection process. Triangulation refers to the use of
“several different kinds of methods or data,” resulting in a stronger study (Patton, 2002, p. 247). I observed each class period and noted any interactions with the participants outside of class as well; this included office visits, phone calls, and emails. In the beginning, the observations were unstructured and broad since I did not know yet what would be important to know later or who would be participating in the study. As a result, the first two weeks provided lengthy descriptions of what was done in the class and any interactions that stood out. By week three, I had made it a point to record interactions, what I saw, my impressions or reactions, and anything else that seemed important. Towards the end of the term, I maintained notes on the four categories above, but focused more on the participants rather than their classmates. These observations, in tandem with the reflexive photography project, helped me design the interviews. Particularly helpful throughout the term was noting the class activities and participation, observations of the participants’ moods, and what was said during class discussions, such as Maryam’s goals on intelligibility which allowed me to cross-check my findings rather than relying only on the interview. The observations also allowed me to probe deeper in the interviews by giving context to certain questions and experiences. In addition to the daily class observations, I also watched the recordings of the focus group interviews. Although I was in the room when the focus groups were conducted, and thus able to take some notes, I was unable fully to listen to all the groups because they were speaking simultaneously. Playing the role of observer was beneficial because the participants likely may have shared more personal information with their peers than they might have with me since I was the teacher-researcher, such as Arya referring to the disappearance of his dissident
friends back home, or Evelyn explaining the cathartic side effect of recording herself speaking on her cell phone for fluency practice. In fact, observation of focus groups was one of the keys to Paredes’ (2010) success in her research as well. She had another person conduct the focus group interviews while she observed, taking notes all the while. Observations of the focus groups also informed the interview questions.

Triangulation of the data in a qualitative study falls within credibility techniques. It helps the researcher to establish “trustworthiness” (Patton, 2002, p. 51) and achieve a “neutral stance” with regard to the data (Patton, 2002, p. 51). In this study, the participants defined the scope of their experiences as language learners through their photographs. I was able to compare and contrast their photographs with what they recounted in the interviews. From here, I compared the participants’ images and words with what I had observed of their behavior in class and in electronic communication.

While most of the time there was convergence of the data, I occasionally found discrepancies. For example, from only looking at Ciela’s photographs, I would have thought she was putting forth much effort in her English language studies. What she said in her interview would support that in part, but she contradicted herself when talking about her efforts with the homework. After crosschecking with the observations, I found that she completed her homework satisfactorily and participated in class when she was not too tired. Examination of what she revealed in the focus group discussion revealed the importance of spending time with the Nepalese community here and maintaining contact with relatives at home. The final data source was her SPEAK Test scores from before and after the term—she was the only participant in the study whose score
remained the same. It seems to me that this lack of measurable improvement indicates that although she put forth enough effort as a student to pass the class, it was clearly insufficient for changing her accent, and this could be due in large part to the amount of time she spent conversing in her first language. Without the triangulation of multiple data sources, I may not have understood the complexity of the issue.

**Questionnaires.** I included questionnaires in my data-gathering process because they provided information, such as how comfortable the participants felt with technology overall, what software programs or apps they used to make recordings, and what apps they used to improve their English. I distributed three separate questionnaires inquiring about how the participants used technology in the classroom. Although the photographs and other forms of data provided me with the information necessary to understand their use of technology, the questionnaires provided background information regarding the group’s use of technology over the course of the term. (A copy of each of the questionnaires is found in Appendix A.)

**Procedures**

An overview of the timeline of the procedures is presented in Table 3.3 below. The study began at the beginning of the fall term (September 2011); data collection ended at the beginning of the winter term (January 2012).

Participants were recruited during the first week of the ITA preparatory classes after an explanation of the study during class time. I emphasized that their participation in the study would in no way affect their grade for the class. The students were asked to return the consent forms in the following class, either blank if they chose not to
participate, or signed with their consent. I explained that they could withdraw from the study at any time with no questions asked, no consequences to their grade in the course, or hurt feelings. No one withdrew, but one participant’s interview recordings did disappear. At the end of the term, I passed around a sign-up sheet in class to determine who was willing and able to participate in the follow-up interviews; all thirteen participants chose to be interviewed.

Table 3.3: Procedural Timeline of Data Collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>August 2011</th>
<th>September 2011</th>
<th>October 2011</th>
<th>November 2011</th>
<th>December 2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Pre-Fall SPEAK Test scores)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CALL Questionnaires 1 and 2</td>
<td>CALL Questionnaire 3</td>
<td>Reflexive Photography Project and Discussion</td>
<td>(Post-Fall SPEAK Test scores)</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Throughout the term, I recorded my observations and reflections in a log during or immediately after each class meeting. In these reflections, I detailed what material and activities were done, I made notes addressing each of the three research questions, and I
described interactions among classmates and with me. I also detailed anything else that I saw or heard that seemed important, including participation and the completion of in-class and homework assignments. At the end of the term, I sorted the notes from this log chronologically by person so that it would be easier to formulate interview questions, and to code for analysis.

As mentioned previously, the primary entry point into the ITAs’ experiences was through the reflexive photography project that the participants and the entire class completed. First, the participants took digital photographs that symbolized their experiences with improving their spoken English—specifically, what helped them, and what was holding them back. One participant checked out an iPad to complete the project while the rest of the participants used their own cameras. ITAs then chose 7 to 10 of their photos to put into a PowerPoint presentation that was worth 10% of their final grade. Each slide of the presentation contained a photo, a caption or textual description of what the photo represented to the ITAs’ experiences with improving their spoken English, and an indication of whether this was something positive (helpful), negative (unhelpful), both positive and negative, or neutral. The participants then shared their reflexive photography projects during class time in focus groups. (Directions for the assignment are in Appendix B.)

Each of the focus groups was comprised of two participants and one facilitator. During the session, each student shared and discussed why they took each photo, what the photos meant to them, and whether they considered each photo to represent a helpful or an unhelpful experience. This focus group was an in-class activity for the entire class
and was not graded. Those students who did not consent to participate in the study were put in separate groups, for the most part. Because of uneven numbers of participants and potentially abrasive personalities, three of the participants were paired with classmates who were not involved in the study. The participants’ discussions were video recorded by the facilitators in the computer labs in which two of the classes were held, and in a classroom for the final section. The main role of the focus group facilitators was to lead the discussion so that the participants could concentrate on sharing their experiences in an efficient manner. They also helped the ITAs with expressing themselves in English as needed.

Three to five focus group facilitators were needed for each class; they were recruited a few weeks prior to the discussion date via a Facebook request. While all of the facilitators were intended to be former ITA preparatory students, a few outsiders were also recruited due to scheduling conflicts: three facilitators were ITAs but never took the class, one was a pronunciation tutor, and one was the director of the department through which these ITA classes are offered. In the end, six of the eight focus groups were facilitated by ITAs. Before the discussion activity, I met with the facilitators for a brief training session so that they knew what to ask and how to facilitate the focus groups. They were given special instructions to elicit any stories behind the photos. I gave them the directions sheet as a guide (See Appendix C).

On the day of the focus groups, I circulated throughout the room and took note of stories to revisit during the interviews. In the weeks following the discussion, I viewed recordings of these discussions in order to be better informed about the photographs and
the stories behind them, and to compose interview questions for individual participants in order to elicit these stories. These focus group discussions were not transcribed since the microphones picked up the voices of neighboring groups in the room and because three of the participants were paired up with classmates who were not participating in the study.

After the conclusion of the term, the participants were interviewed. The interviews centered on the participants’ learning experiences as depicted in their reflexive photography projects, and my goal was to elicit stories about these experiences. I composed the questions to these semi-structured interviews based on a combination of the research informing this study, the reflexive photography project, the focus group discussions, and my observations in order to obtain as complete a picture possible of the ITAs’ experiences with improving their oral communication (see Appendix D). In order to gain more depth by having as much flexibility as needed in this conversation, I did not follow the same interview protocol each time. Rather, I shifted from one topic to the next as the flow of the conversation permitted, checking off which questions I had asked, and which topics I had yet to broach. The thirteen interviews were between 45 and 90 minutes in length. I interviewed each participant individually. During the interviews, I elicited the ITAs’ personal, related stories in order to gain more substance for phenomenological analysis so that I could find out not only what helped and obstructed their efforts at improving their spoken English intelligibility, but also what roles technology played for them and how they demonstrated learner autonomy. Some of these stories are shared in Ch. 4.
These interviews took place in my private office on campus during winter break after the ITAs’ grades were submitted. With the exception of one participant who I video-interviewed over Skype because she had returned home to Nepal, I was able to interview the remaining twelve participants in person. During each interview, I used three devices for recording in order to have multiple copies as back up: I used Audacity on my desktop computer to record audio (minimized, so it would be out of sight), I used a tiny, portable digital audio recorder that was placed nearby, and I also recorded a video using a small Flip video camera. I saved all of these files in Dropbox, on my external hard drive, and copied them to a flash drive for an extra measure of precaution. Most of the participants seemed comfortable despite the presence of the recording equipment. This, perhaps, was due to the rapport we had established over ten weeks, most having been to my office before, offering tea before the interviews, and beginning with easy demographic questions. By the time the participants were talking about their photos and experiences, they seemed to have settled into a state of relative comfort. At the end of the interviews, I presented each participant with a ten-dollar gift certificate from one of two local eateries of their choice, and sent each participant a hand-written thank you card near the end of the academic school year.

Data Preparation

This qualitative study is based on two main sources of analysis: the photographs from the reflexive photography project and transcriptions of the interviews I conducted with the ITAs. Before coding, I prepared these documents and images so that they would be accurate and compatible with the qualitative coding software, HyperRESEARCH.
HyperRESEARCH allows the researcher to code, file, filter, and retrieve both images and text, and it is compatible with both Mac and Windows. I chose it for these features as well as its intuitive, user-friendly design.

Because the reflexive photography projects were in PowerPoint format, the preparation of the photographs was time-consuming. First, I captured a screenshot of each slide in each project. I then saved these files as jpegs and named them with the title of each slide and each participant’s pseudonym in order to protect the identity of the participants. There were 134 images in total.

I listened to each interview multiple times from start to finish in order to make any needed corrections to the transcripts. I also added in gestures or emotional cues that seemed important for describing the mood of the participants (e.g., smiling, saying something very quietly, or slapping one’s knee). During this period, I was also able to listen for a general idea of the individual participant’s responses; this served to remind me of the broad topics that were covered in the interviews, and gave me a holistic context within which the ITAs reflected their experiences. After changing all names to pseudonyms in both the transcripts and observations, I converted these documents to Rich Text Format.

**Coding**

Coding was completed in several stages in order to maximize my familiarity with the material. In the first stage of coding, broad topics were determined from the material covered in the interviews (these were not *a priori*). In other words, I reduced the participants’ descriptions into the following topics: the ITAs’ overall pathway to
learning, their reactions and attitudes towards the requirement of the ITA preparation class, what helped them to improve their spoken English, what did not help (or obstructed) their improvement of spoken English, how the ITAs demonstrated learner autonomy, the ITAs’ use of technology, the ITAs’ experiences with the SPEAK Test, being a Teaching Assistant, juggling obligations (time management), how the ITAs use English in their everyday lives, how the ITAs use their L1 (native language) in everyday life, sense of community at the university, and background information (i.e., reasons for attending this university and accepting the teaching assistantship, previous work or study experience, and future career plans). In HyperRESEARCH, I set these as broad topics under which I could file specific codes for further reduction and analysis later. Some of these broad topics emerged during secondary noting.

During the long secondary noting, or reduction stage, I coded the content of the twelve interviews as well as the photos from the thirteen participants. This entailed reducing the descriptions further. For example, anything coded as “native speakers” was reduced more specifically, in this case, some of these reduced codes were “imitating them,” “speaking to [them],” “listening to their speech for pronunciation.” Furthermore, I did not have any a priori expectations as to what, specifically, would emerge during this stage. For a complete list of codes (and their frequency counts) under each broad topic, see Appendix E.

4 In HyperRESEARCH, the way that I did this was by making each broad topic what they call a specific “case.” Cases are typically thought of as individual participants, but for the purposes of my research, I found it advantageous to use HyperRESEARCH’s “case” distinction as a way for me to classify broad topics instead. The reason being was that each interview was saved as a separate document with the participants’ pseudonyms, as were the photos, and the program shows the file name as the source in the reports.
In the tertiary notation stage, I went back through the interviews and photos to code the existential themes of corporeality, relationality, spatiality, and temporality. I wanted to find and code these instances for later analysis, and coding these themes separately allowed me to more easily focus on these themes. Also, towards the end of the secondary noting stage, I realized I had missed a broad topic, Suggestions, so while coding for existential themes, I also coded the suggestions the participants had. Thematization was not a completely linear process.

In the final stage of coding, I coded my observations and went back through the reflexive photography projects to code the images as positive / negative / neutral, and coded for the presence or absence of the participant in the photo, whether the participant acted as an agent, and a few other items that were unique to the reflexive photography projects themselves such as titles to the projects and expressions of gratitude.

After completing the coding of the photographs, transcripts, and observations, I used HyperRESEARCH to build a report of all of the broad topics and the codes under each topic. Once this list was in alphabetical order with each code listed under its broad topic along with its frequency, it became clear that a final examination of these 620 codes for consistency and accuracy was necessary. Indeed, a few codes were misfiled under a different topic (i.e., some of the existential theme coding was done outside of that topic). Another major benefit to cleaning up the codes was that I was able to eliminate redundancy; for example, there were many places where I had the same code under two different topics. I also looked within each broad topic to make sure that two different codes did not express the same idea. A final advantage was that I could narrow the focus
of each broad topic. An instance of this is re-designation of all of the many codes about Native Accent from “Attitudes Towards the ITA Prep Class” to the broad topic of “The ITAs’ Use of Technology.” In this way, the topic regarding attitudes towards the class could be more general. In other words, I had a general code for anything having to do with Native Accent under that broad topic, but under the broad topic of the ITAs’ Use of Technology, the coding around Native Accent was more specific (activities that were helpful, problems with recording, and so on). This process was reflective in nature in that I was able to re-examine the codes to make sure that I had bracketed my assumptions and was looking at the data, not my interpretation of it; for example, I had coded a photograph of a coffee machine as “socializing,” but recognizing that this was my interpretation, I changed it to “coffee.” Once I cleaned up the codes, I printed reports that contained not only the code, but also the name of the participant and transcript excerpt or title of the photo on each topic. I cut the print out so that each code was separate. For broader codes, I cut them into separate excerpts. In each code print out, I then color-coded items to find the patterns. Separating these into piles, I drew up a web of how they interrelated and searched for patterns.

What was most useful to me during this stage was keeping a research journal, or an “audit trail.” Throughout the process of preparing the transcriptions and coding the data, I kept track of my thoughts, actions, and reflections. This enabled me to pick up from where I left off on a day-to-day basis, and it also helped me to keep track of loose ends that I needed to complete before moving on to the next stage, thus helping me to maintain a level of consistency and accuracy in my coding throughout the four-month
endeavor. This audit trail also proved useful throughout the time I performed the analysis.

**Data Analysis**

As mentioned previously, the primary sources for this phenomenological analysis were the interview transcriptions and the photographs from the reflexive photography project. I used my observations to support the findings from the analysis. For ease of filing and retrieval, I created broad topics during the first stage of coding based on my research questions and other general topics I noticed when reviewing the transcripts. The first step towards the analysis was to determine which broad topics from the initial notation stage needed to be analyzed in order to answer the three research questions. It should be noted that any particular excerpt at the time of coding could be (and often was) classified under one or more broad topics. To illustrate, the same excerpt from an interview could be coded under “What helped ITAs to improve their spoken English,” “How the ITAs demonstrated learner autonomy,” and “the ITAs’ use of technology.” In this way, I analyzed everything when considering the lived experience of ITAs, and could easily retrieve only the specific codes that related to learner autonomy to analyze data related to the second research question, and use of technology for the third. I have listed the broad topics examined for each research question in Table 3.4 below.
Table 3.4 The broad topics that were analyzed for each research question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Broad Topic Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the lived experience of learners with spoken English intelligibility in the ITA preparation / oral communication course?</td>
<td>• What helped ITAs to improve their spoken English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What did not help (or obstructed) their improvement of spoken English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The ITAs’ overall pathway to learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Their reactions and attitudes towards the requirement of the ITA preparatory class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The ITAs’ experiences with the SPEAK Test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In what ways do ITAs demonstrate learner autonomy?</td>
<td>• How the ITAs demonstrated learner autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What role does technology play in the ITAs’ lived experiences?</td>
<td>• The ITAs’ use of technology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once I filtered these broad topics by code under each research question, I thematized, or examined the data to “[discover] patterns, themes, and categories” (Paredes, 2010, p. 58). Because the first research question is an umbrella over the other two, inquiring about the lived experience of the ITAs—their demonstration of learner autonomy and use of technology fall under this—I thematized everything under research question 1. The ten thematic topics that emerged were the following: 1). attitudes towards taking the required ITA preparatory class, 2). sense of community, 3). study strategies, 4). English use in everyday life, 5). L1 use in everyday life, 6). time management, 7). future career plans, 8). TA duties and experiences, 9). experiences with the SPEAK Test, and 10). use of technology. It was not enough to recognize those emergent themes; it was also necessary to determine which of these were “incidental” and which are “essential” to the lived experience that the researcher is hoping to explicate (Van Manen, 1990, p. 106). Incidental themes such as “future career plans” were not
taken into consideration for the analysis. For the first research question about ITAs’ experiences as ELLs, these ten preliminary thematic topics were reduced to four themes: the ITA preparatory class; speaking opportunities; general English language skills improvement; and obstructions to spoken English improvement.

The emergent themes, the synergy between original words of the participants and my interpretation, came about after analyzing the codes present within each broad-topic under each research question. I searched for connections across emergent themes, via abstraction (where different experiences can be abstracted to a similar theme), numeration (where I noted the frequency of themes within one subject, and across several), and polarization (where I compared contrasting themes). These steps helped me to interpret the data in a rigorous fashion in order to shed light on the essential qualities of the ITA experience in improving their spoken English while taking the ITA preparation course.

Summary

In short, the multi-layered use of reflexive photography combined with interviews and class observations helped to engage the participants in sharing their lived experiences as ITAs working to improve their spoken English. Many of the findings, as described in the following chapters might be used to inform the practice of other teachers in this field. In the next chapter, I will introduce the individual participants and describe the thematic findings in detail. Following that will be the analysis, and later, the discussion.
Chapter 4: Topical Findings

The purpose of this study was to learn what ITAs at a small, Midwestern university’s lived experience was with spoken English intelligibility as a learner in the ITA Preparation course. Specifically, I sought to learn what helped them and what stood in their way of improving their spoken English, how they demonstrated learner autonomy, and in what ways they used technology. Through their reflexive photography projects, the participants gave the initial view into what was and was not beneficial for their oral English learning. The ITAs further elaborated on the ideas behind the photos in their focus group discussions. In the interviews, they shared these understandings with the researcher. The photos, indeed, “evok[ed]…information, affect and reflection” (Rose, 2007, p. 238), allowing the participants to not only share their views of “their world[s]” but also “to reflect on things they do not usually think about” (Rose, 2007, p. 242). I used the observations, class records, and the questionnaires both to inform and support what was said in the interviews. In this chapter, I report on the ITAs’ experiences with improving their spoken English.

Preliminary Thematic Topics

After looking through the photographs and reading through the transcripts several times, ten topics emerged that were common to most or all of the participants. These topics were 1). attitudes towards taking the required ITA preparatory class, 2). sense of community, 3). study strategies, 4). English use in everyday life, 5). L1 use in everyday life, 6). time management, 7). future career plans, 8). TA duties and experiences, 9). experiences with the SPEAK Test, and 10). use of technology.
For example, under the topic of “time management,” there were several statements in the transcriptions and photos (see Fig. 4.1 and Fig. 4.2).

- “I feel like I can’t manage the time, so that’s the main thing...in the Presentation, and Leading the Discussion, we have to study. So we have to spend most time, and it becomes like every week, we have assignments from our course also, and we have to concentrate on that also because that is our core course, and the minimum, we should get B+ at least, otherwise we can’t—I mean we can’t do the further research. So because of that, sometimes it becomes like time-- can’t manage the time” (Sanu)

- “The best thing is for me to plan my time very well. I know I have a lot to do, unlike when I just came in the beginning, now I’m trying to see, well, how is it going to be and every time just hitting at me like that but now I know when the bullets are coming, I know how to dodge them.” (Isaac)

- “I just can’t arrange time very well. I just ... to make sure that I can finish the homework and assignment before the class.” (Interviewer: Do you look and you see what's due for that day?) [quietly] “Not often.” [laughs] (Lili)

In the photographs, the work is separate from the person, and the participants frame it in the context of time. Polly directly states that the amount of work she has to do takes time away from her English studies (Fig. 4.1). Arya (Fig. 4.2) is making a statement of how demanding his TA work is to the time he has. In the quotations, the participants admit that they, personally, have difficulty managing time with all of the work they must do.
One thing annoys me is that there are a lot of work to do, a lot of papers to read, and I don’t have much time left for English. I think I should set priorities for these different obligations, try to balance them, and also work efficiently.

*Fig. 4.1 (Polly)*

4:30 pm at college.
Professor: Grade these homeworks and return them until tomorrow afternoon, please.
Me: ok, sure.
A sound in my mind: Really! Are you kidding me?! Tomorrow?
Professor: I know you can do this.
Me: (Smiling)
That sound again: I know I can, but...

*Fig. 4.2 (Arya)*
Reduced Thematic Topics

What follows are the four main thematic topics that emerged after reduction of the ten preliminary thematic topics via abstraction, numeration, and polarization: the ITA preparatory class, speaking opportunities, general English language skills improvement, and obstructions to spoken English improvement. In other words, some topics were excluded (such as “future career plans”), and others were absorbed. In the case of time management, for example, this theme was abstracted, and categorized under obstructions to spoken English improvement along with other topics during thematization. I will report on each of these thematic topics below, beginning with what the participants found helpful and ending with what the participants found to obstruct their spoken English improvement. Please note that the photographs were altered to hide faces in keeping with IRB requirements of anonymity.

**Topic 1: ITA preparatory class.** Overall, most participants showed through the reflexive photography projects that the ITA preparatory class was particularly instrumental in their efforts to improve their spoken English intelligibility. In the following sections, the subtopics that emerged will be discussed. I will begin with the participants’ description of how the class generally helped them to cultivate an awareness of the sounds of NAE (North American English) and an awareness of their own English pronunciation. This will be followed by a description of the assignments that the participants found to be helpful. This section will end with a description of the role that the participants’ classmates in the ITA preparatory class played in helping them to improve their spoken English.
Cultivating an awareness of what to improve. Several of the participants gave the class itself (Fig. 4.3) credit for laying the groundwork for the improvement of their spoken English skills. When I asked Ciela what she most attributed to her improvement, she replied unequivocally “It was the class. I mean, if I wouldn’t have taken the class, then I’m sure I wouldn’t have made it.” I asked about what, specifically, she found useful and she replied “Everything. I just walked the path… So I can't say exactly what I did but I'm sure that I just worked.” Observations and course records show that she not only did the coursework to satisfaction, but was also a very active participant in the class, volunteering to demonstrate activities, proactively picking partners for pair work, and so on. Maryam had a similar response when I asked her what was the most useful in improving her intelligibility: “I don’t actually know what to say because it’s a collection of everything, all the activities that we’re made to go through were… just helpful. I cannot pinpoint.”

Class(+): Of all the things that I believe are helping me improve my spoken English intelligibility, my [English] class comes first. Though interactions and discussions, I became aware of the gaps I need to fill in order to be understood by my students especially in the classroom.

Fig. 4.3 (Isaac)
Several of the participants attributed part of the success of the class to its instruction. Jolod explained “we just know that this is an experienced professor, and we felt really at home… I think it made things easier for us to be able to understand.” Jon particularly appreciated the instructor’s immediate feedback when he was talking and would be corrected saying when “then and there.” Ciela looked to the instruction of the class as an example for her to follow, as did Isaac and Maryam. On the last day of class (as noted in the researcher’s observations), Isaac said that the instruction of the class “served as a model” for how he could instruct his class. Because she taught Akan, a language, Maryam could use some of the assignments she had done in the class with her students. In the interview, she mentioned that she assigned audio recordings for her students to create. She explained “I never had that [assignment] in my plan. I just incorporated that into my lessons, and it worked, and they liked it.”

Some participants identified specific areas in which the instruction of the class helped them. Lili enjoyed the activities. For Mei and Jolod, the production of sounds and intonation was the most useful. Mei specifically noted that learning the types of phrases that required falling intonation at the end was useful. For Jolod, identifying her areas of difficulty and how to overcome them, as in the pronunciation of the word “think” was helpful. She said “at first, I wouldn’t say “think,” I would say, “think, think.” [Changes articulation of “th” and laughs] But now I know that that sound should come out.” Jon found the in-class SPEAK Test training useful, especially because he needed practice pausing between ideas rather than speaking non-stop and getting comfortable with the idea of speaking intelligibly as his top priority (rather than finishing his answer
in the allotted time). For Evelyn, the feel and the environment were helpful: “I think THIS is a very good class because every people in that class feel COMFORTABLE, and much more comfortable than any class else.” Finally, Sting “considered these classes [as a] medium to expand your mind… and make yourself more willing to talk… to native speakers.”

One of the primary benefits the participants cited of the ITA preparation class was that the activities helped build their awareness of the sounds of NAE and the participants’ awareness of their own speech production (Fig. 4.1). For Isaac, the activities done in class helped to increase his awareness of pronunciation. One such activity was, as he described, for “making us aware of the fact that British English and American English” are pronounced differently. He continued by saying that “even though I have that [idea] in my mind, I’ve never really taken the time to try to know about [the] clear distinction between them,” and he mentioned the different word stress patterns in particular. For example, in American English, the second syllable in de-BRIS is stressed; in other words, that syllable is longer in duration, higher in pitch, and may be perceived as louder. In British English and other dialects with similar stress patterns to British English such as Indian and Ghanaian English, the stress is on the first syllable: DE-bris. Isaac explained that when he had doubts about NAE word stress patterns, he would use the Merriam Webster online dictionary to see the transcription and listen to the audio recording of the word. Apart from when it was first introduced in class, he recalled referencing a word for an audio journal assignment to see whether he had pronounced the word with the NAE stress pattern. He explained that as listened to his recording, he thought to himself,
“Something might be wrong with this word. I don’t think this is how we should pronounce it,” so he said to himself, “Okay, I’m just gonna just cross check.’ So I went to the dictionary and I realized that what I was saying was, some of the words or if not most of them, I was pronouncing them in the British way,” he concluded with a chuckle. After discovering that he had pronounced several words with British stress patterns, he thought to himself, “Oooo, it means I really have to sit down and work on this just to get to how to pronounce that.”

Many participants noted this variation in how words are pronounced, so when they wanted to listen to how NAE sounded in the context of a presentation, many of them listened to TED Talks.¹ TED Talks were introduced in class for this purpose because they cover a wide variety of topics, viewers can search by topic or length—with the shortest talks being about three minutes in length—, and a transcript accompanies most talks. Liu, Sanu, Lili, and Mei mentioned the helpfulness of these videos. In Mei’s reflexive photography project, she noted that TED Talks served as a good model for her pronunciation targets (see Fig. 4.4 below). Unlike TV, Mei noted that TED is “helpful within the academic way, like, during a class, how to speak in front of a bunch of students. It’s a different style as the conversation.” She watched them at least twice a week because the topics were interesting and as she added with a laugh, “because I’m not interested in my major.” Liu viewed TED Talks as models for presentation organization, body language, and how to interact with an audience. Lili watched the videos for

¹ http://www.ted.com/talks
listening comprehension practice, and Sanu would play the videos in the background while she was cooking.

Interaction with native speakers was also useful for analyzing and imitating NAE pronunciation patterns. Isaac would look to one of his friends and colleagues for this reason. He explains “When I was listening to him, I tried to see where he prolonged this vowel, which vowel did he stress, and how does he go about it, in terms of raising the [key of the] whole sentence… So I listened carefully, especially to speech variation, the intonation.” For many of the ITAs, their friends and colleagues from their departments were an important point of contact, and provided an opportunity for raising their awareness of the sounds of NAE.
Another way that the ITA preparatory class helped the ITAs was with them gaining an awareness of their own pronunciation patterns. Much of this awareness began with external feedback on their pronunciation accuracy from Native Accent (see Fig. 4.5). Tutorials, practice exercises, and the Intelligent Tutor Suggested Learning Order were photographed, sometimes zoomed in to parts of the exercises, sometimes zoomed out to see the computer on which the software was displayed. This pronunciation software not only provided examples of NAE speech, but it also assessed the accuracy of one’s production and provided practice exercises. Jon, Mei, Maryam, Lili, Ciela, Liu, Isaac, and Evelyn noted its helpfulness in these regards. What was particularly helpful to Ciela was “the sound recognition. Even if I feel like I'm saying it correctly, it would not be so.” Evelyn also pointed out the link between assessment, practice, and differing analysis of one’s own pronunciation: “I found that I think I can [pronounce the /r/ and /l/] well, but after two weeks I didn’t practice and I couldn’t. It’s a good way to keep practicing.” Lili mentioned in her reflexive photography project that she kept to the assignment and “use[d] this software to practice English at least 1 hour per week.” Mei mentioned the Intelligent Tutor feature of Native Accent as useful since it identified her pronunciation weaknesses (see Fig. 4.6). Based on each recording the ITA made, the Intelligent Tutor kept track of what speech elements caused the student difficulty, and kept a record of which elements the speaker would likely perform well, and which would likely be inaccurate. From this analysis, it would create a curriculum for the student. In one of his photos, Isaac explained: “I find the Native Accent program extremely useful
because it helps me to directly and immediately assess and improve on different aspects of my speech. ” Liu also referenced the immediate feedback as useful in a photo.

Fig. 4.5 (Isaac)
Another class assignment that helped raise the participants’ awareness of their own pronunciation patterns was the Audio Journals, where ITAs would record themselves, then transcribe their speech verbatim, and finally analyze their fluency and pronunciation. Until she listened to her first recording of her own spontaneous speech, Polly said “I didn’t realize that I was… pausing awkwardly, but it’s only when I go back to listen to it, [laughs] I realize it’s a problem.” Similarly, Jon said he “had thought everything was great” in terms of his pronunciation, and said that the audio journals helped him to identify what problems he had.

I would speak then I would write that down what I spoke. So I instantly… realized what I was doing wrong. Some places were really difficult for ME to understand what I was saying. So I realized that I was too fast in certain places
and I had to slow down. It was okay to have gaps in between sentences—I didn't have that before… I would just go flat out. (Jon)

That simple act of listening to his own speech made him aware of what aspects of his speech made it hard for others to understand, and he said “So once I was aware of it, I could correct it… try to not to repeat that mistake.” Liu also found that not only listening to his recordings, but transcribing them were helpful “because I can catch every word and the error of the grammar… wrong pausing” and more. This assignment helped Ciela to learn what “you use without knowing, like the word ‘the’ and ‘hmm’.” This assignment helped the participants to both hear and see how they actually spoke, thus raising their own awareness of their pronunciation patterns.

Watching oneself speak can also be useful for finding where one can improve their intelligibility; consequently, some ITAs utilized recorded videos of themselves to analyze their speech. Mei told me about her experience with viewing herself:

[After] the first presentation, I remember I did horrible. I looked back to the recording. I keep talking really fast, and the intonation is kind of flat… And linking, sometimes I just keep eating the words during the sentence. But for the next time, I tried to slow down, and tried to make every word. (Mei)

Mei explained that she decided to do another take, so she recorded herself using Quicktime on her laptop, then watched: “Okay, it’s much better than the first one,” she concluded. Arya also found watching himself to be useful, as he described in his photograph: “That’s me presenting something. Although it didn’t goes well but I experienced something that I didn’t before. I found out about my weaknesses.”
Other assignments from the ITA preparatory class. In the previous section, the participants cited Native Accent, the audio journals, and the mock class presentations as important in increasing self-awareness of their pronunciation. They credited other assignments they were required to complete for class as being helpful to improving their spoken English as well. Evelyn commented that it “helped me a lot, just to finish those assignments.” Liu appreciated how practical the assignments were, saying that the mock class presentations helped with presentations he gave in his classes as a graduate student as well as with being a TA. He added “and leading a discussion, sometimes in my courses the teacher will divide the students into several groups, especially in the laboratory courses, into different groups, and they need cooperation between students.” Particularly useful, he says, was learning “how to summarize different opinions of other [discussion group] members” and to “control the pace of the discussion.” I will share more of the participants’ thoughts on that assignment later.

The Pronunciation Lab was one of the most often-photographed assignments, with seven of the thirteen participants featuring it as something helpful in their efforts to improve their spoken English. In this assignment, participants met individually with a pronunciation tutor for one thirty-minute session per week. The tutors were given a list of pronunciation targets for each participant at the beginning of the term, but continued to diagnose areas of improvement with pronunciation throughout the term. As Mei pointed out, “…if you go to the lab [and] tell them ‘I have this sound problem,’ they will help you to do that. And most of the time, they just pick up what is a general problem.” In other words, the focus of the sessions could be either student or tutor-directed. Jon felt that
their work with him on intonation variation was quite helpful, and he, Mei, and Ciela mentioned that practicing for the SPEAK Test with the tutors was also helpful. ITAs could also work with tutors on projects for their other classes. Evelyn found that having some coaching in preparation for her video production class was particularly useful. Of one tutor, she said: “She’s good. …she helped me with my script because the other day, I need to ACT in a short film in my project, and she helped me to work on that script.”

Polly found the Pronunciation Lab sessions to be both relaxing and enjoyable even though initially she did not want to attend the lab. She told me of an experience that she had with one of the tutors.

One thing I remember is that she told me how to practice the rhythm and there’s one practice that she let me to read a poem. She said, ‘A poem is a better way of demonstration of rhythm,’ and I read it and she told me it’s Emily Dickenson, [/laughter]. I heard of that name before but, after she mentioned that, I memorized that name, and then I did wiki and learned a little more about her. [It was fun] because it’s not purely those techniques and skills of practice and speech. It’s especially good for me to learn that poem. It’s so rhythmic. I know poems are rhythmic but I didn’t appreciate the rhythm before, and after she told me, then I did. … [I]t’s something that I start to appreciate.

Many participants found the tutors’ feedback to be helpful. Sometimes it was difficult for some participants to know whether they were pronouncing something correctly or using intonation patterns effectively, and the tutors could indicate whether or not it worked, and if it didn’t how to improve production. Jolod recalls:
We looked at linking and how to pronounce some words in the right way.

Someone actually asked me to read something, and she was, like, ‘No,’ [Laughs] ‘let’s do it again.’ And you think you're doing it, and just know that you messed it up, and say, ‘Okay, let’s try and do it all over again.’

It was for this reason that Jon preferred going to the lab as opposed to using Native Accent. He reasoned that “…sometimes [Native Accent] would say I was [pronouncing] it wrong, but in the lab they’d say ‘Yeah, it’s fine; there’s nothing wrong with the pronunciation of that word.’” Mei appreciated the feedback from “a real person.” Time spent with the tutors was one beneficial form of interaction with others.

Communication does not only involve the sound of one’s voice, but also the body language that accompany one’s words. Jon realized the role that gestures can play in breaking out of a monotone speech pattern. This is how he described it:

It was the second to last class in the Pronunciation Lab and just before the final class, where you told us to start using hands and everything [gesturing with his hands]. In the Pronunciation Lab, the tutor asked me to start [making gestures]. So like, once I did it without using my hands, and there was no variation at all.

And immediately [smiling] with the hands and then there was variation, so, that – I realized that I could just do this and there would be a MAJOR change. (Jon)

Indeed, this individual attention to the ITAs’ pronunciation and speaking skills from the Pronunciation Lab tutors was indispensable and well appreciated for many.

Leading a Discussion was another popular assignment and opportunity for interaction; four participants photographed the discussions. In this, one participant would
facilitate a discussion related to their concerns about being an ITA, allowing as many people as possible to participate. During these discussions, the instructor sat far outside of the roundtable and did not participate so that the participants could speak as much as possible. This nearly weekly twenty to thirty-minute discussion was an opportunity for the ITAs to speak their minds. For some participants, like Arya (see Fig. 4.7), this was one of the few opportunities they had to speak in English. These opportunities were valued, as Sting wrote in the caption of his photo, “Discussion in…class is a great chance to learn and enhance speaking skills.” More specifically, Liu stated “Discussing with spoken English is a good way to practice the organization of speaking, critical thinking pattern and pronunciation, as well as intonation.” These student-led discussions benefitted many.

Fig. 4.7 (Arya)
Classmates in the ITA preparatory class. Participants also found working with their classmates to be helpful. In his photo, Jon summarized the role of his classmates as “learning the concepts and practicing it in class.” He gave the example of when the class worked on moveable sentence stress in an activity. “We did some exercise where we would say the same sentence but in different ways, and the whole class would look at it and just say what is right and what is wrong, and make comments… so that’s very helpful.” Both Evelyn and Jolod pointed out that the camaraderie that the classmates experienced with each other was especially important. Jolod described how a typical interaction with her classmates went:

We related very well, because we were all kind of ‘okay, let’s try’. Ali would be making some comment [smiling], and say, ‘Okay, I didn’t say it right. I’ll say it. Let me say it this way.’ And then we laugh about it, and it’s okay. [His pronunciation] is better than what was previously said. And I think we were all good, relating with each other in the class, and I miss that.

It is clear that the participants supported one another and that they valued each other’s opinions.

Relating to others in the ITA preparation classroom was also beneficial in that it provided a kind of mirror, by both example and explicit feedback. Jon explained how “listening to everyone else speak” helped him:

…sometimes I wouldn't realize that I was making a mistake and when I saw someone do that, I realized that was a mistake. [T]here were some people who were from the same region as me… I realized it so amazing which he was
pronouncing was similar to how I would pronounce it. Because his topic was also slightly technical and mine was technical and I could understand that certain words, the way we said it, which you always point out in the comments. The way we pronounce some technical words was very different from how Americans use it.

Isaac was better able to understand what his listeners were experiencing with him based on his experience listening to his classmates. He explained

I also find it very difficult to understand, so that’s the same thing that happened when I also speak English to American friends. They might find it difficult to understand, they might not really try to get back to me and say, ‘What do you mean?’, just try to force their understanding or just within the context, ‘maybe this is what he means.’ Personally, because I like that when we have communication, it should be clear understanding of what we are talking about, so since he doesn’t know, I need to do something so that when I speak I will be able to convey exactly what I’m trying to. Yeah, the person I’m speaking with, especially if they are American friends, should understand what I’m saying and the only way I could do that is to improve my accent.

The participants’ classmates also provided constructive feedback both formally and informally. Formally, after each presentation / mock class, the ITAs filled out an anonymous survey based on the grading rubric in which they would rate the presenters on items such as volume, body language, spoken English intelligibility, and audience interaction, and they would write more detailed comments for each presenter at the end.
This was where Jon found out that it was not just the instructor telling him he spoke too quickly, but “all my classmates said that I was just too fast.” Participants sometimes received compliments as well. Sting recalled one of these compliments:

I was told by Maryam and other people; I could recall Maryam [particularly], only because she was the first one to come up to me and tell me how much she liked that presentation, the presentation about the cell. She said, ‘I never knew that such kind of things actually happened or exist.’ In my terms, I interpret it like I was understandable.

The participants cited their classmates, the assignments, the instruction, and the design of the ITA preparatory class as contributing factors to their pronunciation improvement. In the next section, I will discuss the role of speaking opportunities outside of the ITA preparatory class.

**Topic 2: How speaking opportunities helped the participants.** The second major topic that emerged was the benefits of speaking opportunities. I first divide these opportunities into campus-related speaking opportunities and daily life speaking opportunities. Then, I report on special events as speaking opportunities. Finally, I will share the participants’ experiences with solo speaking opportunities, or speaking by themselves.

**Campus-Related Speaking Opportunities.** First and foremost, the participants are graduate students. They are also ITAs. These two roles made the opportunity to speak with their classmates, colleagues, and students most accessible. The participants cited many benefits to speaking with colleagues from the same major. These are the
people with whom the ITAs can discuss their classes, their studies, and the teachers in the program. Several participants reported that their classmates and colleagues provided a suitable model of speech, and the opportunity to speak about common topics. Isaac saw sharing class, time, and space with his colleagues as a “privilege.” When I asked him why, he danced around with the wording a bit, then explained that his colleagues are “Let me say it that way, educated, because those on the street, the way they speak, I sometimes wonder… I don’t even hear a word of what they are saying. In this case, what my friends are saying… everything is clear. It’s exactly what I have to do [in my speech].” Lili also sees talking with her classmates as useful: “Because all my classmates, they are native, so I also can, in critiques, when… talking about our works. So, I think that’s… also way to improve my spoken English.”

Not only are these colleagues and friends good models for how to communicate in their field, but it is also easy to find opportunities to speak with them. Liu did not interact much with native speakers of English, but when thinking about finding more speaking opportunities, his mind immediately jumped to the lab: “I will increase my laboratory hours, because I will improve my research skills, my research abilities in laboratory, and also increase my English.” He concluded that “… maybe I can make friends with some native speakers …some of my classmates or colleagues.”

These class-related interactions were useful, even with non-native English-speaking classmates, as Sanu explained as seen in Fig. 4.8 and in the quotation below from the interview:
They’re from Iran. They are from Swaziland. So talking with them also improved my English… So even though I make some mistakes or I do something, they don’t know. It doesn’t feel embarrassing. … they are not Nepalese. Neither are they American… We often discuss problems like this, so we have to speak in English. So because of that, also, I got the confidence. I don’t get shy, just I speak whether it’s [grammatically] correct.

Fig. 4.8 (Sanu)

Working with classmates on homework assignments was also helpful as the photos from Jolod, Lili, and Evelyn illustrated (Fig. 4.9). Jolod seems to think of it as a
way to kill two birds with one stone. Evelyn worked with classmates on a group project that lasted the duration of the term. She explains that for the video production class, “We need to work in the team to finish a project, and to finish this project, we need to meet several times before it has been done. For the first meeting, we need to discuss how to develop that scripts, …and the second meeting, we need to revise it and we need to meet together to shoot and to edit.” I asked her about her interactions with them, and she said “I couldn’t 100 percent understood what they said … I couldn’t express myself fully, and they were not patient to wait for you to think the perfect word.” Despite these difficulties, she felt that the regular opportunities to speak with her group mates were helpful.

*Fig. 4.9 (Evelyn)*
As Evelyn found herself working with impatient classmates helpful, other ITAs benefitted by their classmates and friends acting as a sort of communication coach or even a mentor. Isaac befriended a NS with whom he would speak on a daily basis. He explains how his friend would give feedback:

I tried to speak, tried to imitate him sort of because I realize the way he says or pronounces a particular way, then I try to do that, and it sounds better. For example, in Ghana I would say, /wɔ-tə/[water]…. So with him, I guess he helped me a lot to begin to realize that, “Look, you need to do away with this way of speaking…” If I say, “Wa-tah,” or something, the first thing he’d keep saying, is, “Huh? You said what? Ah, yeah.” To avoid that …I listen to how he says it, I’d repeat, and do the same thing. (Isaac)

Isaac clearly valued knowing someone in his department with whom he could regularly interact in English.

Both Ciela and Sanu also befriended a colleague in their program, Andrea. Ciela told me about the first time they met. “I think we are 13 of us in our batch and only two of them are native people and luckily, one of them is a lady. And we got more chance to get interacting with each other and I directly say to her, “You need to teach us”…. Sanu asked her to teach them some proverbs, and Ciela reported that another NNS classmate said to Andrea “Okay, girl, you need to teach us. I want to speak like you guys speak”.

When I asked Ciela what Andrea’s reaction was, she explained that Andrea was happy to help. She explained when and how Andrea helped:
It was just when we would be talking with each other, be it in gathering or while waiting for professors and talking about other things, she would just scratch out some words, particularly phrases, and particularly the pronunciation of the words and this is about the phrase…. When she finds flaws in a particular word, then she would say, “Okay, this is said like this” and sometimes we ourselves would be saying, “Okay, am I pronouncing it correctly?” and most of the time she would agree because she's like that. She is like, “Yeah, you're doing good.” like that.

Ciela and Sanu felt fortunate to have such a friend in their program.

Jon had the unique situation that someone from his program was also from his hometown; this friend served as a kind of communication coach or mentor since he had been at the university for a year and had passed the SPEAK Test. Jon described how this friend, Pradeep (his name has been changed to protect his identity), would help. “I would see how he would speak with me and how he would speak with other Americans. He's been here for a year, so I couldn't immediately see the difference.” I asked Jon about the influence he thought Pradeep had, and he replied:

I think when I have an animated conversation or get excited about something, I would always go back to my Indian way of speaking. I won't try the American [way], so when you are doing that, if someone can say, "You're wrong put it back," then that helps because that's what he used to do. … [W]hen I'm working on the assignments in class, it's always calm and everything is under control. There's no spontaneous outburst or anything. When that happens, he was always like pointing out the mistakes and asking to switch back.
Jon said that when the two of them were speaking with people from the U.S., and they did not understand Jon, Pradeep would say what Jon said in an American accent, as a way of modeling for Jon. From that, Jon said “I would immediately get the difference.” Had it not been for Pradeep, he thinks he would have continued speaking the way he always has, but that over time and repetition, Pradeep helped him to both gain awareness and serve as a model of how to speak intelligibly.

Speaking with colleagues was helpful, but Sanu, Maryam, and Sting thought that speaking with their students was also a helpful opportunity. Sanu and Sting appreciated the opportunity to speak (see Fig. 4.10). For Sanu, the lab that she taught was one of the very few opportunities for her to speak in English, and she eventually gained some confidence because, as she explains, “they HAVE to listen to me, and I have to speak.”
Maryam and Sting went a step further- they sought their students’ feedback.

Maryam explains:

I made them aware that I’m taking this class… And for me I also like the American culture. Just be frank, earnest and tell them, “This is what is going on in my academic life. I need your help.” Because if you don’t tell them there’s a flaw somewhere, they will hold you accountable. But if you make them aware of what you’re going through, if something happens, and then they’re, “Oh, Maryam is going through a lot.”

She would frequently ask their help with pronunciation. Sting also sought help. Laughing, he told me that a few weeks into the term, he said to his students “I am taking some classes for the pronunciation, and I want you to point out which particular portion of my speech you find difficult to understand.” He said:

The only thing which everybody pointed at me, was the flow of speech, it was faster. That’s why I recall this thing, [laughs]. I said that you guys got to help me with that because I am more like a book-ish speaker because that’s how I learned it as. They said we really don’t use such kind of words.

Sting did not say whether his students helped him to learn how to speak conversationally.

Speaking opportunities in daily life. Many ITAs sought opportunities to speak with people as they went about their lives outside of their departments. Apart from speaking, as Liu noted in one of his photographs, “talking with native speakers… is a good way to learn the actual expression[s] in American English and to listen to the correct pronunciation and intonation.” Evelyn found it helpful to approach strangers, and
begin a conversation by asking them a question (see Fig. 4.11). She said that she thought that in theory, talking with strangers was “a good way to practice… and sometimes a good way to make friends.” Although it was difficult for her to do this when she first arrived, she said “I encouraged myself to talk with them.”

**Fig. 4.11 (Evelyn)**

Being conversant in one’s field is important as both a student and TA as Liu pointed out, but many participants also found it helpful to be able to speak outside of the context of school, in their social lives. One popular topic that was mentioned in the
interviews was movies. One of Jon’s photos was of “The Good, the Bad and the Ugly.” He describes the reason for taking the photo below.

Well, it's a famous movie and it helps you in having normal conversations with other Americans. Use certain sentences in certain occasions and certain phrases or something that would be humorous, or it can help you blend in with the American society or whatever. But that's how the movies and – I mean, when I was India, this was only window into how Americans spoke. …I watched a lot of them, so I feel that these are the few things that I have in common with the natives here. I can always start talking about movies and I don't have to worry about finding out what they like, what they don't like.

Several participants identified TV as having a similar function. Liu notes that one can stay informed of current events in this country by watching the news, and Jon said that the sitcoms “mirror the current styles and trends in American social life” (See Fig. 4.12). By having watched movies, TV, and the news, these participants felt that they were better able to connect, and therefore converse with people from the U.S..
By keeping up with current events, participants were more easily able to talk with both acquaintances and strangers. Nonetheless, Polly was uncomfortable starting a conversation with a stranger unless she was eliciting information. Instead, she found it helpful when strangers initiated small talk with her. She told me of one time that this happened.

The week of the Thanksgiving, I went to my friend’s place and we went to the Outlet and my friend was in the store buying something and I was waiting outside, sitting on the bench and there was a middle-aged man …wearing huge sunglasses. [He] just stood there. I was reading the Kindle on my cell phone. And he just stood there and started, “Hi, hello, did you buy something?” And he just pointed out his shoes, and “I bought a new shoes, [laughter] how do you like it?” I said, “Oh, it’s good, it’s good.”
Polly preferred to have small talk with people in other settings. She explained that it was more comfortable for her to “just talk to the cashier when you buy some things in the supermarket or talk to whoever you come across. Like in the library, you talk to the librarian, and it’s not that it’s socializing.” Mei also found the supermarket to be a good place to interact with others since she would often ask the help of clerks or other customers to find something.

Apart from the supermarket, shopping and dining in general was a common speaking opportunity that the participants cited. Evelyn had ample opportunity to speak when she was searching for her first major purchase—her laptop. During this process, she “contacted many people to compare the price and quality.” She “bargained on-line, consulted sellers in Apple store, and called the customer service toll free number.” Ciela found opportunities to speak and analyze the speech of others when she would visit stores, especially because she could hear how children spoke. When asked in what ways this was helpful, she cited “when they try to persuade their parents to get them something… [they] really pronounce the things they speak.” Mei and Liu found that dining out was another good opportunity. Mei’s told the story behind one of her photos.

I got there and I saw the menu, and … I said, ‘Okay, this one is good. It’s kind of steak.’ So I just ordered it. And [the server] asked me, ‘What kind of it you want?’ I thought, ‘Okay, you mean the medium, or medium rare, or something?’ And they said, ‘Yes.’ And I said, ‘Okay, medium rare,’ and they just go away. And finally, they [come back with a] kind of burger thing. I [thought], ‘Okay. What the hell is that?’ [Laughs] I was expecting a steak. They go through the
order, and they say, ‘No, this is yours.’ [shrugging] ‘Okay, whatever.’ [Laughs]

so every time when I go to the restaurant, I double-check what kind of things you will give me. Even if I go to a Chinese restaurant, I get lost.

Other places that were listed as helpful for the speaking opportunities that they provide are the library and church.

Most participants had ample opportunities to interact with other people from the same language (L1) background, and a few found speaking in English with these people to be practical. Liu spoke with his Chinese classmates in the ITA preparatory class in English, and from that decided he would try to speak English more often with his Chinese friends. Mei’s boyfriend was Chinese, and although they most often spoke in Chinese, sometimes they would speak in English, and he would help her create and analyze video recordings of her own English-language speech for self-analysis. She found it helpful and added that his English was “much better” than hers. Whether it was in the library, at the bank, shopping, or with friends who shared the same L1, many participants cited these daily life speaking opportunities as helpful.

**Special events.** Sports events, field trips, dinners, and excursions were featured in many of the participants’ photos. While all of these events provided some opportunity for interaction and cultural fluency, I will begin this section with sports. Jon’s experience at a football game as explained in the next topic (See Topic 3) was one such example. Mei went to the U.S. Open with her boyfriend and described her experience with “some crazy fans:”
‘Okay, you are Chinese people, you know what kind of things happen in this season, or something?’ They just keep talking. Half the time I’m lost, honestly. Because some words I never heard that, and they use it a lot. I just shy to ask, ‘Okay, what does this word mean?’ I just, ‘Oh! Yeah, yeah!’ [Laughs]

Despite not understanding much of the jargon, she found the interaction to be useful.

Food was a central theme for Lili as many of her speaking opportunities involved sharing food with classmates and a housemate’s professor (See Fig. 4.13). At a party with her classmates, they cooked and shared several Chinese dishes. Of her classmates from the U.S., she said “they never ate [these dishes] before, so they will ask me, ‘What this? What that?’ so I will describe the dishes, so we will find a best word for the dishes, like ‘fish tofu’”. She said that from this experience, she learned some words like “hotpot and drinking.” Another time, her housemate invited some friends and a professor over, yet Lili’s housemate did not know how to cook, “but I know, and I prepared that dinner for her professor, and we three eating together and chatting. Her professor asked me many questions about my major and art, so it was also a way to improve my spoken English.”
Special trips out of town with student groups provided for some fun speaking opportunities as well. Lili went on several of such trips to see art exhibitions with her classmates. She said “they like to go to Columbus to see the exhibitions and art shows, so they invite[d] me to come with them… [nearly] every weekend.” Sting went on a hiking trip (see Fig. 4.14) with a student wildlife club even though he did not know anyone. When I asked him to tell me about the opportunity, he explained:

There was this one time I was surfing [the campus website], and then I came across this Wildlife Club activity. This is actually is one of my prime interests, hiking and wildlife photography. I checked how to join. …They’ve got a
Facebook page… and then I wrote to the coordinator of this group, and then she emailed me back and she said that would be a very laid back group, and ‘We’ve got a lot of people in it, and would be fun if you’d just come. We have our meetings Tuesdays at 9:30pm.’ I said okay, I would come and join. It’s not only because of my interest to go climb rocks, of course, because then it would be a nice bunch of people who you can share ideas with.

This was a picture of approximately more than one month ago, two month ago. At that time, I was used to talk with people individually, but being in a group, it was a new idea to me. Although I was not very comfortable with it, I admit, yes, I thought that I might be [left] out or whatever. I thought, ‘Okay, at least there will be rocks, or the woods, which I’m more interested in, and my camera.’ I went to the meeting, and then she asked me, ‘May I have your introduction? You are the [new] member on the block.’ …I spoke for five minutes, like a speech. I didn't know that what I was doing. When I quit speaking, I thought, ‘Oh, my God, I spoke that much. I didn't know that I could speak that much.’

And I went on this trip. I talked to them…. They are mostly undergrads, and they asked me for my contribution, and their way of understanding things. I told them “you guys know more than me because the geography and wildlife here is different than what I have the knowledge of.” That was a good trip, although unfortunately, I could never go again with them [because of time conflicts].
Special events provided many of these participants with additional opportunities to speak English, often over a common interest. Some of the participants did not have such opportunities, so they found opportunities to practice in absence of company.

**Solo speaking opportunities.** Even without another interlocutor, the participants found solo speaking opportunities helpful. TV shows provided many participants with an enjoyable way to both listen and practice speech in conversation. Lili, Evelyn, Liu, and Mei reported using TV shows in this way as being useful to improving one’s pronunciation. When asked what was particularly useful to her, Evelyn said “because they have caption, I can read before the words are said or after; that’s a good way [to
practice].” For Mei, what helped her was hearing the intonation patterns in fluent English. The actors, she said, “vary their intonation very much.” After watching the show, she says “I will TRY to mirror them, like, doing it their way. I try to pretend I was the—” and she paused in a seemingly self-conscious way, adding “do that kind of weird stuff. It’s kind of a habit I can learn, and it’s kind of my style- going through. I do that. [It’s] really weird, but it’s different.” One show she watches is The Big Bang Theory because it is “really funny… [with] all the geeks there.” Mei had a process she went through when she watched the show. “Every time I watch [an episode], I will go through it, like, three or four times for one episode, because they work in Physics… and they use really academic words. And every time, if I just go through with the TV, I will say, ‘Okay, what’s that?’ [Laughs] I’m just completely lost. … [T]hen I need to go to the Chinese transcription one or two times, then go back to the English.” She also kept the subtitles on when watching the show in English since she said the actors spoke so quickly.

Imitating native speakers certainly seemed to be useful, and so was being able to listen to their own pronunciation after they spoke. To do this, some participants periodically recorded themselves with their cell phones. When asked in what ways he used his phone, Liu explained “because in the phone there is software that’s just like a recorder, so sometimes I use it to record. And also, as I said, I can just record myself, what I just like give a phone call to my friends, and I try to [talk].” Afterwards, he listened to the recording. Liu concluded with a chuckle, “When I listen to my own voice and my pronunciation, I think it’s not such bad as I imagine. And also, I will pay
attention to some point that I didn’t recognize when I just spoke.” These points usually included grammar; Liu explained that although he had difficulty catching grammar errors while he was speaking, he could more easily identify them when others were speaking or when listening to a recording of himself. In terms of pronunciation, he could identify fluency and thought groups, “wrong pause,” in particular. Evelyn also recorded herself on the cell phone, but she found an added benefit (Fig. 4.15). She first sought out the instructor of the ITA preparatory class during office hours concerned about the lack of time she had for practicing English, so the instructor suggested she pretend she was talking on the phone as she walked between classes to add in some speaking opportunities. Using the Tape-a-Talk app, she not only did this, but she also found an outlet for her emotions- an audio diary. She explained:

Sometimes I was alone and I was so emotional, I wanted to share my emotion with somebody like my good friend or my family, but they are not here—I really want to speak out. I talked through the cell phone one time as I was so heart-breaking because I quarreled with my boyfriend and I don’t want to let my family know that thing and I don’t want to bother other friends here. I just talked on the cell phone and to express my feeling—even burst out… crying. (Evelyn)
Native Accent also provided the participants with ample speaking opportunities, even though this practice was meant to exercise the speech muscles at the word or phrase level. Lili (see Fig. 4.16), Ciela, and Jon found regular practice with it to be useful.
Whether it was speaking with colleagues, friends, strangers, recording devices, or with themselves, the participants attributed speaking opportunities as one of the most helpful factors in improving their spoken English.

**Topic 3: How general English language skills improvement helped.** In this section, I report on the final emergent topic regarding what helped ITAs in their improvement of spoken English. Participants cited vocabulary acquisition of great importance especially in their academic lives, but also in everyday life. This will be discussed first. The importance of reading and writing are discussed at the end.

**Vocabulary acquisition.** Some of the participants cited a need to increase their overall understanding of English in order to improve their oral communication. This
included not just speaking, but also listening, reading, and writing. Lili, Liu, and Polly worked at this. Lili went about studying in this way:

I separate many different sections from my English study for my major, I think the articles that teacher give me that really can help me to improve my English and to improve my vocabulary, and also help me to talk with my classmates and the students, and talk to teachers… So… I also to remember vocabularies… like TOEFL vocabularies, and also I read the information from the art shows and exhibitions. When I read articles, I write- like a pencil. When I read the new words, I write down, and, when I finish reading that articles, I check out the meaning.

I asked her where she checked the meaning, and she said that she used online dictionaries like Youdao to translate the word into Chinese. She said that she did not use English to English dictionaries, and seemed to think that there was a word in Chinese for every word in English. She also mentioned several helpful apps on her phone, such as one that gave common phrases for travel. When I asked her to recall a time she used it, she replied that she had not used it—that it was “for fun and just to make sure that whether I have the new words.” With Lili, the idea of vocabulary acquisition was prominent. In her Reflexive Photography project, she documented her TOEFL vocabulary book since she tried to “remember” fifty words a day, as well as online shopping for clothing and art supplies. She cited the articles she read for class as “a good way for me to explain my artworks to audience,” and the books she read for class as a way to learn the terminology of her field. Presumably, she put these new words in practice by writing in her artwork
diary (see Fig. 4.17). Lili mentioned listening; she listened to some of the vocabulary words, and would listen to TED Talks and Voice of America.

While Lili was focused on vocabulary acquisition and seemed to listen holistically, Liu made it a point to focus. To do so, he recorded the lectures he attended as described below.

I use a Sony. And it is quite useful because I can record what lecturer said on a class. And sometimes if I didn’t catch some key words, or it was an important comment, I would just listen to the comment of the class and pick those key points again. And sometimes I will learn some, because native speakers, their
pronunciation is good, and I will pay attention just to the right pronunciation and intonation.

I asked Liu if he had incorporated some of the pronunciation that he heard into his speech, and he explained:

Actually, if I can recognize the word’s pronunciation by listening, I think sometimes I will automatically change my pronunciation for there is a specific type of word, the word like “mechanism.” It’s a very normal word in biology-related courses, because it’s different kind of mechanisms in the living body. I mean, but actually, I pronounced the word in the wrong way, like, “meCHANism” [Changes word stress pattern] for the first time, but I listen to the teacher. They pronounced the word as “MECHanism.” And firstly, I need to recognize this as a different way that I pronounce the word. And then I need to recognize actually which word that is. And I know the spelling of what I just pronounce it as “mechanism,” and the right pronunciation is MECHanism. So I will keep listening for maybe several times because it is quite common terminology. And then I will pronounce it right. So now, yeah, I will just pronounce it as “MECHanism.” (Liu)

“Professional English,” (Liu) or being able to speak in a formal register, using the terminology of one’s field, was important to Liu. When he read, he was not only looking at terminology, but also at the concepts and organization of ideas.

Several participants pointed to opportunities to interact with native English speakers as helpful for vocabulary acquisition. Evelyn explained that interacting with
native speakers was helpful because “I could listen to them and some vocabularies and some expressions, I’ve never known that before, but I can learn. I could use a word I never known how to use it, or to use it in this context and this time I learned, next time I can use it.” Jon found that going to a football game with a friend was helpful: “I think it helped me develop a new vocabulary for when I have to talk about sports. I just didn't have the vocabulary needed.” He concluded by saying “The more you can learn what's currently happening, then the more you can be involved. You can have a normal kind of conversation. These are things that, I think, help you to know everything, to be aware of other things happening.” Having the words to speak about current events certainly helps.

*The importance of reading and writing.* For Polly, reading was what most helped her to improve her English.

I spent hours each day on reading the websites and the news, English news, and actually I like to read fictions in English. I have a Kindle, so I read books on Kindle. Sometimes, when I read the fiction, there are some words describing something—it’s just a right word and I caught it … and I went, ‘Oh, that’s the word I should paid attention to that earlier.’ I would highlight it and sometimes, if necessary, I would take notes, or if some of the words are not familiar, I will look it up.

She could do all of this on her Kindle, and just by doing so, she said that she often remembered the word. Polly also worked on her writing skills. She reasoned that “if I couldn’t talk very well …at least I need to make my writing excellent so that makes me then before I talk, I can give me enough time… [to] think for a while. I can talk in a way,
reasonably good.” Overall, she felt it was important to think in English, so she free wrote without paying attention to grammar, and sometimes used Twitter: “sometimes I write tweets, in English. I think it’s better for me to just formulate my random thoughts in English.” Her multi-faceted approach to improving English seemed to arise from when she first became aware of her need to improve her English at a professor’s suggestion. Books, teachers, and her advisor all served as role models for Polly. She looked to other teachers and T.A.s for teaching skills, and to her advisor for how to articulate complex ideas. She said:

… if some people ask me what those concepts are, I can just borrow his [her advisor’s] words. That’s one thing, and another thing is that he advised me to pay attention when I read the articles or when I do the writings that I sometimes when I see a concept or when I see a definition I would think more about how the authors put those put their phrases, words, or how the authors use phrases, words to describe this definition and concept. [W]hen you realize the way they do, you can come up [with] easier ways when YOU do the explanation. I think it’s kind of helpful and I try to do the same thing…. Without this awareness, when you read through something you just read it through. You won’t pay attention to it, to word choice or something when you want to use it next time.

Polly made a connection between what she heard and what she read, and she would consciously try to do the same through writing and speaking.

For all but one of the Chinese participants, building their English skills base was necessary for them to improve their spoken English skills. These participants found that
building their vocabulary, listening to native speakers, reading, and writing helped them to do so.

**Topic 4: Obstructions to spoken English improvement.** In this last topic, I will illustrate what the participants found to obstruct their spoken English improvement. There was far less mention (14.7% as opposed to 85%) of what blocked the ITAs’ efforts to improve their spoken English. First, I discuss Native Accent, an ongoing assignment in the ITA preparatory class. Afterward, the participants’ time limitations will be discussed. Following will be an explanation of how participants were not incorporating their new pronunciation patterns into their speech. The section ends with a description of the lack of interaction opportunities for several participants.

**Native Accent assignment.** The primary source or targeted input of NAE pronunciation patterns was Native Accent, the pronunciation software that the students were required to work with for homework one hour weekly. Although there were some activities on rhythm and intonation, most of the program consists of individual speech sounds. For each consonant and vowel sound, there is a diagram and several audio samples of the sound and words in which the sound is found (see Fig. 4.18). Although a few participants mentioned the diagrams and examples in this software as useful in understanding how sounds and NAE speech patterns are produced, the input can cause confusion, as Sanu explained: “[There is] the picture. Another is the sound made by the person. Another is … text [a word list]…, [and] there is a person who speaks- model.” Frustrated, she explained “So they make the different sounds. I feel the contrast in the
three sounds, so I get confused whom to follow.” She concluded by saying “It was difficult.”

Fig. 4.18 (Jon)

Jolod’s conclusion about the utility of NA is emblematic of many of the participants’ experiences: “I kind of have… mixed feelings when it comes to Native Accent. I think I have learned more from class and from the Pronunciation Lab than with [the software].” Although there were many aspects of Native Accent (NA) that the participants found helpful, all but three participants mentioned features that somehow impeded their pronunciation progress. Several were loath to complete the assignment, and observations and class records showed that nearly half of the participants received notifications from the instructor at midterm that they were receiving below an 80% in the class mainly because of their lack of work with NA. One of these participants, Jon,
nearly failed the course because, as he admitted, his strong dislike of the software translated into avoiding work with it, consequently losing points on the assignment. His overall assessment of it was that “it didn’t really help.” The participants’ complaints about NA can be attributed to several of its limitations: its demand for perfection, technological shortcomings, and limited feedback. These are described below.

NA’s demand for perfect production of pronunciation targets was off-putting initially for many participants. Jon said “Because I think it expected us to be perfect, it was not positive [from] the beginning.” Sting also pointed out this feature. In his experience, “Sometimes, if you’re not perfect, or you’re not what you are supposed to sound like, then it’s gonna reject you.” This was a source of “annoyance” for him as well in the beginning. Isaac found the program ultimately to be helpful, but as he wrote in the caption of one of his photos, “At the same time, Native Accent represent a demotivating factor in my effort to attain a native-like accent (100% accuracy can be intimidating).” Its “strictness” often frustrated him.

The key word, in fact, for many of the participants about NA was that it was “frustrating.” For some participants, it was frustrating not only for its demand of perfect production, but also with their experiences with specific activities. Some problems with the activities could be attributed to the limited feedback (discussed in detail below), while others were due to the activities themselves. For example, an activity to build fluency frustrated Mei. She began by saying “the speed is crazy.” When I asked her to elaborate, she explained that NA was asking her to read a paragraph too quickly.
I just keep talking like a crazy way, even though I have no idea what kind of words I speak, and this speed rate is going to green [correct]; otherwise, you're stuck in red or orange [incorrect or almost correct]. There is no pausing. You just keep talking. And most of the time, I have no idea what this paragraph is talking about. I just go through random words. … [T]he system said they understand more than 90 percent. But I don’t understand 90 percent at all, so. [Laughs]

For other participants, slow progress with learning new pronunciation patterns was frustrating. Sanu was frustrated with certain words such as “apple” (see Fig. 4.19), and Maryam and Jon experienced much frustration with word stress. Jon thought it was “…impossible for anyone in the class to get [word stress activities] right. So [NA] didn't really help.” He described his experience with working with NA as such: “I would do one particular sentence 30 times and not get it. And then you’re really tired, and someone's watching a movie in the next room—just give in to distractions, and just close it, and leave.” Liu also had the experience of trying many times and never getting the green light, but this was not due to slow progress; it was because of a technological problem.
Technological limitations added to some participants’ frustration with NA. One of their primary complaints was with the microphone. In order for the program to assess one’s speech, the input must be absolutely clear, so the company that produced NA recommended that people use a headset rather than the built-in microphones on their computers. When Liu would find himself repeating a word several times without successful pronunciation, he explained how he resolved the problem by working with the Pronunciation Lab tutors.

I will note down that vowel and take it to the Pronunciation Lab… [L]ater I discovered something is wrong because the microphone and the setting of my computer. I made some change to the microphone and setting of my sound system, and the result turned good.
Some of the participants owned laptops, but did not own headsets, so they went to a computer lab on campus. For Evelyn, this was inconvenient and uncomfortable for her, and she was self-conscious about speaking in the seemingly quiet lab during the first half of the term.

The other technological problems that participants experienced with Native Accent were problems with connectivity. Mei, the Computer Science major, explained it in this way: “Most of the time, it’s because of the software going through the internet, and because of the internet we have trouble. … [I]t will continue analyzing, but it’s stopped there, freezing.” She said that if people could work offline with NA, this might not happen.

Instead of telling the speaker what he or she did incorrectly, NA gave the same feedback every time: an animation of the vocal tract when that sound is produced in isolation, sample words with the sound, and a text description of how it is produced. Sanu and Mei did not find this helpful. Sanu said that each of the examples made the target sound differently, and because of this, she would be confused which sound to make. With the word “apple,” the feedback was “just red, red, red [(incorrect)], and I couldn’t figure out where I was [going wrong].” Mei explained that “I …know this sound is made this way. But if I put it in a word, like at the end of a word, and at the beginning of the word, it’s kind of different.” She said that she would instead prefer personalized feedback, such as what she needs to do with her tongue, with vowel length, and so on. Jolod recalled the written instructions being difficult to understand. “Because sometimes you say ‘BALL, ball,’ and… [it says] ‘Open your mouth wide, close it,’ it’s
like… ‘Well, how do I do that?’ Open your mouth, open your tongue…” This is why she preferred working with the tutors in the Pronunciation Lab—“If somebody’s showing you and you are talking to the person… you’d be able to really just get it, what a person expects you to do.” NA’s limited feedback affected Isaac as well. He recounted his frustration, “especially when you are not able to get through, you think that you’ve done all the tricks, all the processing that you need to do to” in order to produce the sound correctly. He ended by saying without humor, “I don’t get it.”

The limited feedback drove some participants to continue trying the same question repeatedly, despite the frequent reminders given to them by the NA Liaison, the pronunciation tutors, and the instructor to stop after five attempts and take the word in question to the Pronunciation Lab. Setting aside the possibility that there were problems with the microphone, thus giving the participants the red or orange lights (they had not pronounced the target correctly), many recounted something similar to what Jon experienced: “I would try to get that red and orange thing to just go [away], and [I would repeat] maybe twenty to thirty times.” Mei said “sometimes I will keep doing one question for more than five, like fifty times.” She explained that the feedback was little more than a simple red light indication of being incorrect—“it didn’t tell you what kind of problem you have. You just try different ways, but most of the ways are wrong ways.” After twenty tries, Mei would say to herself “Okay, just give up.” Sting, on the other hand, did not want to give up. At first, he did not know that he could skip to the next question, and when he found out that he could, he did not want to because as he explained, “I thought that if I skipped the question, that is like accepting defeat in my
自己的话。“他笑了，然后补充说“我就是做不到。” 虽然这些参与者中的许多人认识到NA在某些方面是有帮助的，但许多人发现每周的作业是一个令人生厌的经历，它在许多方面阻碍了他们的口语英语学习。NA的要求完美生产，它的有限反馈，以及技术困难。

**Time limitations.** 另一个主要障碍是口语英语学习的另一个障碍，参与者报告的是时间限制。他们在完成ITA预备课程之外所要做的工作量，包括他们的专业和助教职责，要求他们付出大量努力。Evelyn总结了参与者在实践和时间之间的联系：“我认为我们总是知道练习会成功。一方面，我们没有那么多时间去练习，人们总是没有那么努力去练习。” 不论ITAs是否把完成ITA准备课程的作业作为优先考虑，还是做其他可以帮助他们提高口头沟通技巧的任务，他们无疑有很多责任。Jolod是一名全职学生和助教，同时在抚养她两岁的女儿，而孩子的父亲则在另一个大学完成他的博士学业。她描述了她如何在母亲和学生之间进行平衡：

[I worked] Late night, because I had to wait until she slept. Because when she’s around, she wants to take over the computer. She wants to get a headset and she wants to take the headset, and sometimes you get some noise during your recordings, and you have to—so I was doing it late at night. (see Fig. 4.20)
Family obligations both near and far were one of the time-consuming obligations for participants, and another obligation was to study. For many of the participants, the workload at this Midwestern university was experienced in a different way than they had experienced university workloads in their home countries. Of a typical assignment in his first term as a graduate student, Arya wrote in the caption of a photo he took of the fourth assignment that term--it turned out to be sixty-seven pages in length: “This is too much!!! In my whole bachelors, I didn’t submit this much homework overall. It took about four days [to complete], I have a limited time to prepare for other classes.” Instead of taking a high-stakes comprehensive exam at the end of the term as Isaac and several of the Chinese participants had commented, most graduate students at this university must
take several exams throughout the term, and complete assignments most every week. In this mix of obligations for classwork, many of the participants admitted that the work for the ITA Preparation class was not their top priority. In the interviews, some confirmed that the homework for their major areas of study were most important instead. Polly was one of these participants (see Fig. 4.1). To complicate matters, she said that she read slowly—“I can’t do it as fast as the native speakers…suppose what native speakers can do in twenty minutes, I probably need… one hour.”

Besides homework, some ITAs spent much time completing their TA duties. In one of his photos, Isaac explained that “Preparing to teach, grading and recording for me takes forever. This sometimes cut me off completely from my objectives for improving my spoken English.” Arya also had much to do, as he illustrated in the caption of his photo (Fig. 4.2). Balancing obligations to family and schoolwork took much time for the participants, and were often considered as more important than improving their spoken English.

**Not Consciously Incorporating New Pronunciation Patterns when Speaking English.** Although speaking opportunities were considered to be helpful, some participants recognized that without thoughtfully using their new pronunciation patterns, they were not benefitting as much as they could be. Sanu’s experience was an example of this. Although working with her classmates on homework in her field of study provided her with an opportunity to speak, these opportunities were not necessarily helpful for improving English. She said that since they “focus on the assignments
…there is no time to care about the intonation or the phrasal stress” (Fig. 4.8). In other words, she was not consciously trying to use her new pronunciation patterns.

Many participants documented interaction in their native language (L1) as one barrier to progress. Sanu and Ciela are Physics students from Nepal, and eight to ten Nepalese students that they knew on campus were in the Physics department with them. As Ciela pointed out, it is automatic for her to speak in her L1 when she meets another student from Nepal; if there had been fewer students from Nepal in her department, she said “I would have obviously spoken in English, and that would have helped me.” Sanu echoed this sentiment, predicting that “if there were no Nepalese…, then suddenly, I will improve the accent.” Both women mentioned that they would meet on campus in a common room with their Nepalese classmates where they would frequently converse in Nepalese. Speaking one’s L1 on campus was not the only place.

Many participants had roommates who shared their L1s, so the opportunities to speak in their L1s were present both on and off campus. Sanu mentioned that when she got home, she would speak to her Nepalese roommate in their L1. Jon also noted that this experience did not help (Fig. 4.21). Many participants mentioned socializing with others who shared their L1 as well. Ciela took a photo to document the frequent gatherings of Nepalese students and its caption wrote: “I can’t avoid using my mother tongue almost every single hour a day. It’s the major hindrance for me.” As technology has now enabled its users to communicate with audio and video, Ciela also found herself communicating with family members back in Nepal via Skype for several hours a day. Not only did the participants interact with family and friends online, but several
mentioned that they would watch movies, TV, communicate via email and social networking sites, and read the news online in their L1s. As Mei wrote in the caption of one of her photos (Fig. 4.22), “Surfing Chinese website keeps me in Chinese environment.” It is clear that the use of technology provides international students with a refuge from an immersive language environment. That is, despite being in the United States, the participants in the study easily engaged in their native languages on a daily basis in some form or other, and the participants recognized this as an obstacle.

Roommates from India (-): I talk to them in my native language

Fig. 4.21 (Jon)
Isaac, Jolod, and Maryam were from Ghana, a country where many languages and dialects of those languages are spoken; English is the primary language used to communicate. When spending time with others from their home country, Isaac and Maryam spoke English—the Ghanaian dialect of English. While discussing his photo with me (see Fig. 4.23), Isaac explained

…we always speak in English because one is an Asante, one is Ga, I’m an Ewe, the other is a Fante and… we all speak different languages. There’s no way we could, yeah, and so we all have to speak English. And we speak and ([he smiled]) nobody thinks of how we’re speaking it—we just speak it, yeah, understand each other.
In this photo, he shows his friends walking towards a store on a recent shopping trip that they made. On the way there, Isaac tried to practice the /r/ as it is pronounced in American English. He described what happened:

I think I was pronouncing “Parkersburg.” My Ghanaian friend said, “Isaac, when did you become an American?” He said, “You’ve just got here one week ago and I’ve been here for a whole year. No, probably two years, and there you are, just one week, and you are saying /r/, Parrkersburrg,” [laughing] and I said, “What?”

His friends laughed at him. When I asked what the reasons might have been, he speculated that

“[In] their minds, what is happening is they say, “Well, …you’re just starting to lose your identity,” or “you’re easily trying to— pretending— to behave like an American but I mean, you can never be an American, so you better speak the way WE speak.” That’s what they will tell you so you don’t need to speak that way. So they actually discourage you. That’s what happens. So when I am with them there’s no way I can [Americanize my accent]. Meanwhile, I spend a lot of time with them. Yeah, most of the time we are speaking English, too, but I don’t get a chance to practice.“

Isaac explained that maintaining the Ghanaian accent is a part of one’s identity; “they want to make themselves understood, but they still want to keep to their accent. They still want to be identified as Ghanaians. They want to speak, and say, [smiling] “Ah, are you from Ghana?” I asked him if he had discussed this with other Ghanaians, to which he replied:
…actually even in our meetings, when we have meetings, like African Union or organization, you have this conscious reminder that if you don’t try to behave, like- you need to speak and communicate very well for Americans to understand you but you consciously trying to, all of a sudden, Americanized everything you do, like, it’s something that they don’t really encourage, it doesn’t help. That’s what they say, so you need to find a balance, try to make sure your friends, your American friends, you speak well enough for them to understand you.

At the same time, you should be able to let people know that [smiling] you are Ghanaian, so you don’t necessarily have to lose all your accent to be able to sound or be understood, so when things like that happen, it puts you in a very tight corner, you know? You are convincing, you are communicating with them, so the only people I really try… to practice what I learned in class was with my American friends.
Spending much of their time in person and online using their L1s was seen as a barrier to many of the participants. After all, participants acknowledged that time spent using their L1 was not time spent improving their spoken English.

**Lack of interaction opportunities.** While the participants in the previous section had the problem of not practicing their new pronunciation patterns when speaking, the following participants indicated the lack of speaking opportunities as one of their major obstructions to improving their spoken English. As noted in a previous section, Arya said that the ITA Preparatory was one of the few opportunities he had to speak with others (see Fig. 4.7). In this first semester away from home, he was quite lonely, as can be seen in his photograph entitled “Thoughts” (Fig. 4.24). He explained during the focus group discussion that this loneliness prevented him from speaking with others. Furthermore, he
felt that even though he needed friends here, he could not simply go out and make friends. At the end of the interview with Arya, he remarked with a surprise that it was the longest he had sat down to talk with someone in English since he had arrived.

Fig. 4.24 (Arya)

Maryam and Evelyn explained that their lack of interaction came from the amount of time they spent studying in the library. This is why Maryam valued speaking with her students. She said that when she was not in class, “I’ll be in the library studying by myself. I think I also keep to myself a lot.” After thinking about it a little more, Maryam concluded: “I guess I’m the type that keeps to myself. [Whispers] It’s bad!” Evelyn also spent much time in the library. While she reported some positive speaking opportunities
there, she noted that much of the time was spent alone. This feeling of being alone emerged several other times in both her reflexive photography project and our interview. As she mentioned in her photo “Team Work in Video Production Class” (Fig. 4.9), when working with her American classmates, “Sometimes I feel being isolated.” She also explained how she would vent on the cell phone alone: “sometimes I was alone and I was so emotional, I wanted to share my emotion with somebody like my good friend or my family but they are not here, and I really want to speak out…” Being alone and being lonely made it difficult for some of the participants to improve their spoken English.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I shared the four main topics that emerged from the reflexive photography projects and the interviews. Three of them were deemed helpful to the participants in improving their spoken English (the ITA Preparatory Class, Speaking Opportunities, and General English Language Skills Improvement), and the final was what the participants found to obstruct improvement of their spoken English. All four topics spoke to the ITAs’ experiences with improving their oral English, and the photographs enabled many of the participants to express themselves and recall their experiences with greater ease. In the following chapter, I analyze the findings of this chapter and answer the remaining research questions of this study.
Chapter 5: Analysis and Discussion

“It doesn’t matter how expensive the car is if the tires are flat.” (Sting)

As seen in the previous chapter, the paths that the ITAs travelled between the SPEAK Test at the beginning of the term and at the end of the term varied, but were similar in many ways. What seemed to define these paths were: 1). the circumstances in which the ITAs found themselves and their agency within the circumstances, and 2). the idea of embodying dual linguistic identities through their native languages and their use of NAE (North American English). The participants were enrolled in full-time academic study, meaning that their English skills were sufficient to pursue graduate studies at the university, yet their speech was not sufficiently intelligible to teach undergraduates without some sort of remediation. For communication to take place, the speaker must not only send a clear message, but the listener must also understand that message. Apart from pronunciation, a number of other factors comprise clear communication, especially when teaching (Gorsuch, 2012): textual competence (predictable organization of the message), sociolinguistic competence (appropriate use of language for the situation), and grammatical / lexical competence (effective use of grammar and vocabulary). Successful oral communication therefore relies on the combination of these factors. If oral communication is a car and each one of these items is a tire, then all of them need to be in play for the car to roll. If any one of these areas is lacking, then it is akin to a flat tire, and effective communication will not take place, as the title of this dissertation from the quote above succinctly indicates.
Existential Themes Overview

Existential themes are what underlie all human experience. Van Manen (1990), a scholar well versed in phenomenological inquiry, recognizes four of these existential themes: temporality, spatiality, corporeality, and relationality. Temporality refers to “lived time” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 101), or how people experience time. He points to examples of how time might pass for people when doing something interesting or boring, as well as how time might be viewed at different life stages. As Van Manen (1990) points out, “The temporal dimensions of past, present, and future constitute the horizons of a person’s temporal landscape” (p. 104). For example, the saying “time flies when having fun” expresses that time seems to move more quickly during enjoyable experiences. For many of the participants, they had so many obligations that they had little free time to themselves, like Ciela, who said she “never had a weekend” since her weekends were spent grading. The weekend, in this case, were not so much calendar days, rather, the days of the week during which she did not have any scheduled obligations and therefore felt entitled to spend as she wished. Because of her workload, however, that time was not her own.

Spatiality refers to “lived space” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 101), or how space is experienced. A question that might be asked is “How do people feel in certain spaces?” Van Manen (1990) cites examples of the distinct feelings that can be evoked when in certain spaces such as a large city in another country, an open landscape, or at home. Inquiring about spatiality, as Van Manen (1990) stated, “… helps us uncover more fundamental meaning dimensions of lived life” (p. 103). An academic building with
benches in the study longue doubled as a place to both study and nap as Sting found out. The coffee pot in the lab or the office was the safe zone of contact that allowed many participants to engage in conversation with native speakers. Space is also divided into the private domestic sphere in which many participants felt safe and secure interacting with their friends and roommates in their L1 whereas on campus was a public sphere in which they spoke English and felt more guarded and aware of how they were representing themselves.

Corporeality refers to the “lived body,” or how people experience the world through their bodies (Van Manen, 1990, p. 101). Van Manen (1990) gives examples of how people might feel differently under “the critical gaze” than under the “admiring gaze” (p. 104). This can certainly add meaning and texture to lived experiences since many experience the world through the five senses. Isaac, for example, felt a sense of imminent danger during his first semester; he felt under fire with the amount of work he had and the short time frame in which to do it. After experiencing this, he said that by the end of the term he had figured out “when the bullets are coming” and he knew “how to dodge them.” This threat of danger—physical and psychological stress—was that he would be unable to do what was necessary in order to maintain his grades so that he could stay in his program.

Relationality refers to “lived human relation” or “communality” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 101). As Van Manen (1990) notes, when two humans meet each other, “we are able to develop a conversational relation which allows us to transcend our selves” (author’s italics; p. 105). Ciela described her relationship to other Nepali students as that
of family since they were the first point of contact before she came to the university, and they helped her to establish herself. Sanu’s relationship with her students was that of performer and audience. She felt she was behind a mask—her students did not know her personally, so even though they laughed at her, it did not matter. The relationship between Sting and his students was that they boosted his self-confidence about how well he was understood.

The participants’ primary goal of taking the ITA preparatory class was to pass the SPEAK Test by communicating more clearly. In this chapter, I will phenomenologically interpret their experiences in working toward this shared goal. Part of the interpretation relies on an understanding of the existential themes as they gave shape to the analysis; therefore, I will not always point them out explicitly. The interpretation will be followed by answers to each of the research questions.

**Interpretation of ITAs’ Experiences**

**Predetermined circumstances.** Some circumstances in which the participants found themselves were predetermined, such as whether they grew up using English in an institutional setting or learned it just as a subject in school, the space in which they underwent their graduate studies and consequently the people they would meet in these spaces, and the amount of work they were required to do both as TAs and graduate students. Although predetermined, there was opportunity for agency (power to act) within these circumstances, but the context in which they had previously learned English was a sizeable influence. In the following section, I will examine the patterns of influence these contexts had on the participants as well as how, if their SPEAK Test
scores pre-term and post-term can be some small indication of this, they exercised agency and learner autonomy.

**ELLs who learned English as an external L2.** The participants who learned English as an external L2 (second language), or only as a subject in school were linguistically at a disadvantage compared to the other participants who grew up using English as a means of communication (Gorsuch, 2008). They had to improve their all-around English skills—increase their vocabulary, use grammar in a more varied and sophisticated way, improve their listening comprehension, and speak much more than they were accustomed to. The participants who recognized this need and made it a priority used technology to facilitate their improvement of these skills. These participants were the ones who reported that they spent much time alone or had little free time. Not everyone made this extra English study a priority, however. Instead, most opted to spend their free time with friends of the same language background. This was perhaps due in part to them surrendering to the circumstances, thus resigning some of their agency—these participants fully expected to take the class. Only one of these participants improved their SPEAK Test score by more than ten points; those who studied English on their own, beyond what was needed for the ITA preparatory course, scored twenty to thirty points higher on the end-of-term SPEAK Test, and one participant in the group passed the SPEAK Test.

If success is measured by increased scores on the SPEAK Test, some keys to success for the Chinese and Nepalese participants who had only used English as a subject of study can be found through examination of the existential themes underlying the
participants’ experiences. Many of those who felt isolated from native speakers sought ways to interact in English in the absence of others. This combined with a lack of frequent socializing with friends may have led such participants to use technology as a stand in for face-to-face interaction or even personal relationships, giving the participants a way to improve their knowledge of English through reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The most successful of the group recognized that forming a habit of practice or using English regularly was the way to maintain and build English skills. Technology was the tool they used to facilitate their English language learning; since everything was at their fingertips, they could create their own English environment in their private lives.

Rather than limiting themselves to doing only what was assigned through the ITA preparatory class, these participants acted as agents exercising their abilities and power to learn. In other words, they chose to relate with others and with whom to relate—relating to people through technology in the absence of others--, how to spend their free time, and what kind of an environment they wanted in their personal space. Their use of technology was empowering in that it facilitated the participants’ agency and autonomous learning, giving them a level of control over their own environment within the pre-determined circumstances.

I used the words “free time” above when referring to when the participants did not have scheduled obligations in the form of class, teaching, or working in the lab. However, the way in which they spoke of this unscheduled time was not as free time; therefore, the participants’ decisions to make improving their English obligatory rather than tacking it on during what they considered to be their free time. To me, the
participants’ including their English studies into their time obligations illustrates their will to learn and their belief in exercising their agency as learners.

When examining their experience of time, relationships, and space, their decisions to increase their general English skills might have helped them to score 20 points higher on the SPEAK Test or to pass it in the end compared with the other participants who instead spent most of their free time in their home language speaking environment among speakers of their L1 who showed little to no improvement in their SPEAK Test scores. Thus, there were varying levels of success and distinct variations in behavior within this group of participants who learned English in an external L2 environment.

**ELLs who learned English as an institutional L2.** Similarly, there was variation among the participants whose background was in an institutional L2 context, where English was the medium of instruction. While they did not have as much work to do in terms of improving general English skills, but they did face their own set of challenges (Gorsuch, 2008). After speaking one dialect of English for much of their lives, they were asked to speak another dialect. Apart from slowing down their speech rate, they needed to acquire a new accent with distinct word stress patterns, different sounding-phonemes, and North American rhythm and intonation patterns that not only were different, but also expressed the meaning of a sentence in unanticipated ways. Complicating the physical aspects of a new accent were the psychological conflicts that many experienced since their identities were wrapped up in the English dialect they used at home and with others from their regions. All but one of these participants passed the SPEAK Test at the end of the semester. The major difference between them and the one participant who did not
pass was that he was averse to making recordings of himself. He was uncomfortable even leaving voice messages on his friends’ phones since he felt that technology-mediated communication was not only uncomfortable, but ultimately false. This inability to use technology as a tool for communication prevented him from benefitting from much from the technology-mediated practice throughout the term and likely impacted his performance on the SPEAK Test as well.

Analysis of the existential themes in play among the participants who learned English in an institutional context illuminates the differences between most of their experiences and most of the successful participants who learned English in a contextual L2 environment. While they spent much of their free time alone using technology to improve their overall English skills, the participants who used English in an institutional L2 context spent much of their free time with friends from the same country. For these participants from an institutional L2 context, they arguably did not need to dedicate as much of their free time to increasing their vocabulary and improving the grammar, reading, and writing skills. This was likely the reason behind the allocation of time when they were not in class: they seemed to value time with friends and family as the most important. Spending time with one’s support group was valuable, especially because of what was described as the violent nature of the workload experienced here in the US as compared to their home countries. Isaac likened each assignment to a bullet, and he had to dodge the barrage of fire aimed at him.

*Agency Vs surrendering to the circumstances.* Although many of the participants fully expected to take the ITA preparatory class, those who used their
unscheduled time to improve their spoken English improved their SPEAK Test scores by a greater margin than those who seemed to surrender to the circumstances, or in other words, exercise less agency. The participants who expected to pass the SPEAK Test—especially those who had been in the US for a few years—had a fire lit under them. They were the ones who chose to spend their unscheduled time studying English, whether it was by using technology in Polly and Mei’s cases, or in Maryam’s case, by hanging word lists to study and learn in her bedroom and office. Jon, Sting, and Jolod also had expected to pass the test, and once they knew the ways in which their accents differed, they were able to seek feedback on their accents in conversation and interact purposefully with native speakers. Liu and Evelyn, on the other hand, expected to take the class, but used technology in their unscheduled time to improve their English skills, creating listening and speaking opportunities that would not have existed otherwise. These participants were active agents for their own learning in spite of the pre-determined circumstances in which they found themselves. Through their actions, it was clear that they wanted to learn to speak differently. These active learners who showed agency demonstrated learner autonomy. The remainder of the participants, however, may have surrendered to the circumstances to some extent. Following, I will describe their unique situations.⁶ Although Sanu and Ciela expected to take the class, their focus was firmly fixed to their major area of study, doing little more than the required coursework in the ITA preparatory class to improve their spoken English communication. They viewed the

---

⁶ I will not describe Arya’s situation, however, since his interview recording disappeared. Observations, my brief interview notes, and his reflexive photography project did not contain sufficient information.
ITA preparatory class as “part of their journey” and were fairly confident in their speaking skills. Rather than feeling a need to communicate with her students in a way they could easily understand, Sanu saw her students as a captive audience whose job was to listen to her; as a student, she felt safe expressing herself as she was accustomed to when in company of international classmates. It is difficult to see why Sanu would be motivated to take a more active role in improving her English when she did not seem to experience much of a need for doing so. Nevertheless, she and Ciela occasionally sought the input of a native speaker classmate for help correcting their pronunciation. This, however, was not a frequent habit, and the classmate rarely corrected them on accuracy of production. Both spent much of their free time with the Nepalese community. It is unknown whether they truly believed they could score higher on the SPEAK Test simply by taking the required ITA preparatory course, but if their experiences are indicative of others in a similar situation, it is clear that the course alone is insufficient. While Ciela seemed interested in learning as demonstrated in her class participation and curiosity towards learning outside of class, I wonder if Sanu’s inaction and disinterest could be attributed to what Kohl (1994) calls “not-learning” (p.4). To reiterate, not-learning is explained as “closing off part of oneself and limiting one’s experience. It can require actively refusing to pay attention, acting dumb, scrambling one’s thoughts, and overriding curiosity” (Kohl, 1994, p. 4). Whatever the case may be, it seems that one must have the desire to learn and be an active learning agent, doing more than what is required through homework in order to be successful.
Lili’s case appears to be more complicated. On one hand, spending most of her free time with Chinese friends and her behavior in class (daydreaming, falling asleep, asking irrelevant questions, not doing the homework correctly) could indicate that she was resisting the material or not-learning; assuming that she had passed the TOEFL by through her own honest effort, she arguably should have been able to follow along in class better and understand what the homework was. It seems that she had the necessary skills to learn, but that for whatever reason, she chose not to use them, or to not-learn.

On the other hand, Lili claimed that she did study English beyond what was required of her; at the same time, her efforts were misdirected. Unfortunately, Lili’s learning strategies were not useful ones as they were arguably better-suited for taking the TOEFL rather than interacting spontaneously with native speakers since she was sticking to ways of learning that probably served her well in China, where the learning goals do not include speaking (Zhang, 2005). She sought to memorize vocabulary, mostly out of context and with an English-Chinese bilingual dictionary. Also, she did not seek help with her language acquisition and learning from the English teacher, perhaps to prevent loss of face or making herself and/or the instructor look badly. Likely for this reason, in part, she did not gain as much from the time she spent with her native speaker classmates at potlucks or on her many excursions with them to art exhibitions. If Lili was not resisting, but indeed was trying to learn, her situation indicates that not only must the learner take an active role in firming up areas of confusion, but the learner must also know how to do so effectively in order to be an autonomous learner. In her case, she would have benefitted from also increasing her listening comprehension skills, and
seeking what she learned in terms of listening, vocabulary, and speaking in these conversations as well as trying to implement them herself.

As for Isaac, his situation was perhaps the most surprising. As a learner of English from an institutional L2 context, a language scholar, and a foreign language teacher, he knew how to improve his language skills and would occasionally work to do so, yet he only increased his SPEAK Test score by ten points (and still was not close to passing). He truly expressed and demonstrated a desire to learn to speak differently. For him, rather, he had different obstacles. One of which was time; he simply felt unable to put in the required effort due to the amount of work he was to do. Apart from time, his coursework—unlike the other participants in this study—was in the Spanish language rather than English. Therefore, he was taking classes in the Spanish language, teaching in Spanish, and interacting with his classmates and colleagues in Spanish. Outside of class, he spent time with his Ghanian friends. As such, he received little input of American English and did not make the opportunity to practice it as much as necessary. Apart from lack of time and input, the other enemy was his displeasure of making recordings. He found it absolutely artificial to record himself as if he were talking with someone. Had he taken the time to overcome this feeling of unnatural communication and to use technology as a way to create opportunities to both listen and practice speaking in NAE, perhaps there would have been a different outcome.

**Relationality in predetermined circumstances.** Although the participants in this study were bound together as classmates in the requisite ITA preparatory class, the ways in which they chose to relate to one another were varied and telling, as can be seen when
examining the central theme of relationality with the ITAs’ experiences. This should not be entirely surprising given that learning is a social process that happens through interaction (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978), and it is the relationships that the ITAs had that seemed important in their experiences as ELLs in the ITA preparatory course. Dewey’s (1980) picture of the classroom is that of a social group in which students learn from one another through the experiences that they share. He also believed that learning does not end in the classroom; rather, it continues in daily life outside of the school (Dewey, 1980). In many ways, the participants’ experiences reflected these notions. In the ITA preparatory class, the participants found support and encouragement from their classmates. Many were proactive in giving support as well, encouraging the less active students to join in the conversations and group work, thus contributing to what several participants reported as a safe classroom environment in which they felt free to participate. McRobbie and Tobin (1997) point to relationality in their definition of a learning environment as being made up of “… learners' beliefs about their roles as learners, beliefs about the roles of others in facilitating and inhibiting learning, and beliefs about the extent to which the social and physical milieu constrain learning” (p. 194). One possible contributing factor regarding how such a learning environment was created is in the concept of a student-centered classroom. I use this term to imply the contrast between it and a top-down, lecture-based approach, wherein the emphasis is on creating an environment in which learner autonomy in a language classroom can thrive.

In this study, the ITA preparatory class was student-centered in that the teacher’s role was not that of the central source of knowledge, rather it was that of facilitator
Naizhao & Yanling, 2008), and the students had the opportunity to collaborate with one another on a wide variety of tasks rather than to sit listening passively. Such a method of instruction would be unhelpful for ELLs working to improve their oral communication since it would deny them the much-needed in-class practice. Through the decentralization of authority in the ITA preparatory classroom (such as by having the ITAs lead discussions and critique each other’s presentations), the participants enjoyed more opportunities to cultivate their autonomous learning skills, collaborate with each other, and learn by means of each other’s examples.

Collaborative learning contributed to the ITAs’ student-centered classroom and safe environment. In short, collaborative learning is when the students cooperate rather than compete with one another in order to create and learn. In the ITA preparatory class, learning objectives were often worked on in small groups rather than by lecture. During week 3, for example, the topic was “Using Body Language in Presentations.” The groups were given silhouettes showing a variety of gestures and stances that they were to mimic and video record while stating, “These are very convincing results.” The groups watched the video recordings they created and discussed how the different body positions changed the meaning of the statement or altered the believability of it. This departure from competition between students towards collaboration is said to build bonds and increase learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). Another activity that seemed to build these bonds was Leading a Discussion, in which the ITAs took turns leading separate discussions on a teaching topic. Perhaps this is one reason why so many participants documented the Leading a Discussion assignment as being helpful to their studies and practice of spoken
English. To conclude, the instructor stepping back to allow the students to learn from one another created the opportunity for the participants to relate with one another and create a favorable learning atmosphere (Cooper & Simonds, 2007; Lee & Ng, 2006).

Finally, speaking opportunities with each other and with others elsewhere on campus were absolutely essential to the participants in their efforts to improve their spoken English skills. These opportunities seemed to be determined in part by space and time. On campus, the spaces cited by the participants were the classroom, the lab, the library, the office, and the study lounges. Some of these spaces, such as the classrooms in which they taught and took classes and the lab, were a matter of circumstance, and the people with whom they could interact were set. Several ITAs pointed out that apart from speaking with their classmates in the ITA preparatory class, speaking with their classmates in their major area of study was another way that they could practice speaking, and many even asked some of them for help with their language studies and acquisition. Other participants were fortunate to have friends and advisors that they met in their classes who served as mentors who guided and motivated them. Several participants also took the opportunity interact with their own students, some went so far as to enlist their students’ help with feedback on their spoken English. These interactions with their students were valuable in that they could gauge their ability to communicate successfully with them. How and with whom the participants chose to relate within these predetermined settings was an important element to learning. The importance of interacting with others as expressed by the participants of this study and in Ye’s (2013) study supports the notion that learning is largely social.
**Bridging conscious competence to unconscious competence.** Speaking with others provided a useful learning opportunity, especially when participants were able to use these opportunities as a means of practicing new pronunciation patterns and obtaining feedback on their speech so that they could eventually reach the point where they did not have to think about their production when speaking. In line with constructivist theory (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969), the activities in the ITA preparatory class served as scaffolding, and the participants transferred this knowledge mindfully through repetition to similar real life circumstances. Another way to understand it is that these speaking opportunities helped the participants to move from conscious competence to unconscious competence. There are four developmental stages of learning when it comes to speaking skills (Heidish, 2013; Sprague & Stuart, 2000). The first stage is “unconscious incompetence” (Sprague & Stuart, 2000, p. 14), where the learners do not know their mistakes or what area they are lacking in. Many of the ITAs who expected to pass the SPEAK Test enter the ITA preparatory classroom at this stage, particularly the ELLs from an institutional English as an L2 context. In other words, they might not know, for example, that speaking in a low key with mostly falling tones leaves the impression that they are stern or authoritarian as Maryam discovered. The next stage is “conscious incompetence” where the ELLs realize that they lack certain skills, or in what particular skills they are lacking (Sprague & Stuart, 2000, p. 14). This is best illustrated with Polly realizing that she was not as fluent as she had thought, and with Jon and Sting realizing that they spoke much too quickly. The ITA preparatory class served in large part to help the ITAs understand in what ways their communication skills or accents were lacking,
then to give them the instruction, tools, and practice to help them reach the next stage.
The next stage is “conscious competence,” where the language learners are able to perform particular skills or in this case, pronunciation targets, in isolation or when thinking of them (Sprague & Stuart, 2000, p. 14). An instance of this is, for example, is purposefully using particular words in a sentence after practicing their pronunciation. Many ELLs who have the will to learn are able to reach this stage through the tools that the ITA preparatory class provides by participating actively in class and preparing adequately in advance, but the ITAs who did not demonstrate agency or learner autonomy stalled out here if or when they reached this stage. It seems that Sanu and Ciela may have been “not-learning” (Kohl, 1994), but this would be difficult to verify without more data. What can be said is that Ciela, Sanu, and Isaac did not seem to take the time needed to advance to the final stage, whereas Lili seemed to lack the learning skills and strategies to do so. The final stage is the assimilation of the skill into the ELLs’ speech, or “unconscious competence” (Sprague & Stuart, 2000, p. 14). In other words, the ITAs no longer need to think about the target before or while speaking. This could be automatically slowing down one’s speech or pronouncing a word correctly without having thought of it beforehand. Those who demonstrated learner autonomy and were active agents in their own learning succeeded in doing this with some of their targets. It is possible that the success of their efforts may be seen through their increased SPEAK Test scores. In conclusion, showing agency and demonstrating effective learner autonomy seemed to have led to an increased SPEAK Test score, whereas lack of agency in learning or not demonstrating learner autonomy was of little help in the tangible results.
of improved SPEAK Test scores. For the participants whose efforts went beyond the homework for the ITA preparatory class, technology played an integral role in their studies. For others, regularly seeking out opportunities to interact with native speakers was important so that they could both listen for and implement their new speaking targets. For another, making lists of troublesome words to learn, placing them in conspicuous places, and making a point to practice the pronunciation of those words thoughtfully was key. From a constructivist perspective, these were three ways that the participants actively constructed knowledge. Building their understanding through the use of technology (Jonassen, Peck & Wilson, 1999) and through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978) was of particular importance. A lack of agency dogged the efforts of other participants because they either chose simply to follow the path that was set for them, or when they did demonstrate the will to do more, they did not study what they should have studied or they did not study in ways that would be more effective. Another way to conceptualize this is that these participants were not actively working to build their knowledge. This lack of agency could, however, be indicative of not-learning (Kohl, 1994). I will discuss this further in the next section.

**Straddling two worlds through language.** The participants’ experiences in taking the required ITA preparatory course were colored in one part by the circumstances in which they found themselves and their agency within those circumstances, and in the other part, by the interplay between their L1 identities and their emerging identities as speakers of NAE. The desire and need to pass the SPEAK Test was the orienting force for many of the participants on their paths to becoming more intelligible speakers of
NAE. In the section below, I will discuss how their identities influenced their experiences with NAE as students in a required ITA preparatory course. **L1 identity.** L1 refers to one’s first language, or mother tongue. Languages and their many dialects are much more than the words used to articulate one’s thoughts. Rather, one’s dialect, especially one’s accent, can tell listeners much more (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010): level of education, age, and where a person grew up (Kulshreshtha & Mathur, 2012). This identity is something that people might not become aware of until they have left home and are confronted by others who not only speak differently, but also point out the differences in their speech. Dialects vary from region to region, and these differences become more pronounced the farther a person travels from home. Therefore, for many people living abroad, it is comforting to hear the familiar sounds from home since these people may intrinsically know more about each other and where they are from than those abroad. Speaking with others who recognize a person’s dialect abroad on one hand serves as a grounding force for the speaker in the foreign land since they may share identities, but on the other, it can complicate a person’s self-image when being asked to speak a different language or speak in a way that does not seem to accurately convey who the person is. A different accent can be a “powerful out-group cue” (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010, p. 215), and the association with a different accent can be negative, especially if there is stigma associated with the foreign environment or the speakers of that dialect. This is true both for people from external and institutional English as an L2 contexts. Sanu said that if she spoke with an American accent around her Nepalese friends, they would laugh at her since it would seem she was “pretending.” Isaac recounted an
instance of his Ghanaian friends making fun of him for pronouncing the /r/ sounds in “Parkersburg.” Maryam, on the other hand, warned her Ghanaian friends that she was taking the ITA preparatory class to improve her accent and would be speaking differently than they were accustomed. While she claimed that she did not care what they thought about it, she did wonder if they were thinking she was becoming “unrecognizable.”

For speakers like Maryam who come from an institutional L2 context using English as a form of communication in their studies, learning the pronunciation patterns to a new dialect is particularly complicated. Practically-speaking, they need to adopt a learner’s mind when they speak if they want to adjust to the new dialect; self-monitoring is only a part of the larger and more complex process of self-regulated learning (Ellis & Zimmerman, 2001). Emotionally, it can be unsettling moving from a place of privilege for English speakers to a place where the dialect of English they are speaking does not afford them the same privileges, including allowing them to communicate clearly. For instance, apart from the fact that their dialect and way of speaking is not how most other people speak, they may also have difficulty understanding and communicating with their teachers, and they need to reduce their accent in order to hold a teaching assistantship (Gallagher-Geurtsen, 2007). In fact, many of these speakers—as exemplified by Pai’s experience (n.d.), mistakenly figure that because they know the language, they should be able to communicate with others who speak the same language abroad, not taking differences in pronunciation, lexicon, and grammar into account. Part of this challenge is people overcoming negative reactions of being told that the way they speak is ineffective or inadequate, and deeper still, is the message that they no longer are part of the majority.
When Maryam and Isaac found out that they did not pass the SPEAK Test, Maryam took offense, and both participants were very upset. Their command of the English language was excellent, and in Maryam’s case, she had been in the US for several years already.

The concept that Gorsuch (2008) posits indicates that Maryam and Isaac’s reactions were not unusual for people raised in an institutional L2 context. In it, Gorsuch (2008) compared adults becoming bilinguals in a foreign language environment with adults in the ITA environment. She stated, “For many ITAs who rightly feel that they are already native English speakers, having to re-think and re-tool their English use is a kind of personal affront” (Gorsuch, 2008, p. 170). She pointed out that those ITAs with the desire to modify their accent “fear that their choices may result in alienation from L1 friends” (Gorsuch, 2008, p. 171). The ITAs in this study expressed many of the concerns that ITAs in Gorsuch’s (2008) study had regarding speaking in an American accent, namely the sense that others may think that the speaker is trying to show superiority or is being “artificial” (p. 171). Jolod echoed this sentiment when she explained that the only time she Americanized her accent in the presence of other Ghanaians was if someone from the U.S. were present:

It’s because we want a person to understand what we’re communicating, without having problems with it. But when we are just with our colleagues, it’s like, you're trying to show off because they know that’s not how you would have spoken back home.

The experience of being ridiculed or feeling inauthentic speaking English with an American accent is unsurprising since “accent is one of the most intimate and powerful
markers of group identity and solidarity” (Naficy, 2001, p. 23). Karen Garcia perfectly captured this along with the dissonant messages that resulted from her dual identity as both Latina and “American” in the US, addressing the expectations of each group and the accusations she felt. In the first two stanzas of her poem, Garcia (in Gallagher-Gertsen, 2007, p. 41) writes:

Spanish shouldn’t be spoken in America
To be American
You have to speak English
No accents
You are in America
Don’t you want to be American?
To be Latina
You have to speak like a Latina
Speak it proudly
Don’t speak like you’re not Hispanic!
Do you want to be a disgrace to the latin community?
Don’t you want to be Latina?

It is easy to imagine that the participants in this study, especially from institutional L2 backgrounds, felt similar pressure from both groups. Speaking with an accent different from the dominant group’s accent can serve both as an exclusionary device from the dominant group, but also as an inclusionary device with people from a shared
background. When so far away from home, this shared accent can be the key to inclusion due to the familiarity and easy recognition of it by those from a similar background.

Identity plays a role in what may be not-learning (Kohl, 1994), where people choose not to learn something they feel might be threatening their sense of self. In the context of this study, some participants may have been not-learning a new accent for fear of alienation from their L1 communities. Group membership is comforting, especially when a person is not from the dominant culture. When Kohl (1994) studied at Harvard, it was predominately Protestant, and as one of the few Jewish students, he described the allure of joining Hillel because it was an “environment where the illusion of being part of a majority could be reestablished” (p. 14). It would be understandable if the participants of this study felt similarly, especially those who spent much of their unscheduled time with other members of their L1 communities. Besides, most people prefer not to be the objects of curiosity or discrimination, opting instead to associate mainly with others from a similar background. This need for comfort within one’s own group while abroad could, in part, account for the length of time such students take in modifying their accents. For example, Sanu and Cieela reported very strong ties to the Nepalese community, and their SPEAK Test score improvement was only 10 points combined between the two. Their felt obligation to home and the L1 community on campus that represented home was, as they noted, distracting and fostered a feeling of guilt when they needed to take time to learn NAE rather than spend time with their community. Sanu’s frequent mention of feeling as though she was pretending when she spoke in an American accent seems to be further indication of her strong tie to her identity as part of the Nepalese community.
Evelyn, on the other hand, did not feel bound to her L1 community, choosing to spend what little time she had with friends from other places and watching English-language TV and videos. In fact, she only mentioned someone from her L1 background when asked about her living situation. Perhaps coincidentally, her SPEAK Test score went up by thirty points. Thus, not-learning seems to play a role in participants’ minimal (if any) improvement of SPEAK scores, showing again that the desire to learn makes a difference.

I believe that beyond Evelyn’s desire to learn combined with the increased linguistic input from native English speakers, a major key to Evelyn’s success in learning was that she valued spending time with people from backgrounds different from her own. Evelyn’s interest in strangers was evident through her reflexive photography project (see Figure 4.19) and the people with whom she spent her time. This openness to learning about and interacting with strangers can help people to better understand others. Hutchinson (2004) wrote about the importance of strangers in creating a strong democracy, and went so far as to outline a pedagogy that could guide educators in helping their students to understand the importance of and interconnectedness with strangers for easier relations. Hutchinson (2004) called for more opportunities to interact with strangers so that they could be better understood, and consequently people would be “less afraid, judgmental, or dismissive” of strangers (p. 82). This works both ways: as Evelyn and other participants in this study learned about strangers by interacting with them, strangers (probably) learned more about them. Hutchinson (2004) goes on to say that through this pedagogy, students would, among other points, “[u]nderstand that
strangers do not pose a threat to is individually or as a group. We can allow and should even welcome a variety of languages, customs, dress, and faiths in our society” (p. 87) and that students would “[r]ecognize that we do share similar human needs across the many cultures in our society, but we must be sure that we unlock our heads and not expect every culture to express or meet those needs in the same way as we do” (p. 88). In the grand scheme of things, it seems that Hutchinson (2004) is advocating for mutual respect among strangers. An understanding of strangers can illuminate and strengthen one’s own identity, as she points out.

Kohl (1994) recounts his experiences with people from different backgrounds helping him to shed light on himself as other; specifically, he discovered previously unquestioned assumptions he held about history and the language of racism and sexism. Had these strangers not appeared in his life, he might not have learned so much of himself, nor would he have been able to evolve as a person towards a more inclusive way of speaking and thinking. It is important to note that interacting with and arriving at a better understanding of strangers allows a person to maintain their own identity, and perhaps to even reinforce it. As people who study abroad often come to realize, one of the best ways to learn about one’s own culture and community is to leave it (Talburt & Stewart, 1999). The juxtaposition of new ways of thinking and doing in other communities against the ways that a person brings from their home community makes it possible to more clearly understand these differences. With a more clear vision of one’s own culture or community, it is possible to feel a stronger connection. This connection
should not be threatened if using a different accent is simply a tool to communicate with others.

**L2 as a tool.** Jolod, Maryam, and Jon seemed to think of their conscious altering of their accent as a tool, and in doing so, I argue that this demonstrated their respect for strangers. Because they wanted people from the U.S. to understand what they were saying, they would adjust their language and pronunciation for the benefit of the native speakers, even in presence of L1 friends. This desire to communicate combined with audience awareness can reduce that cognitive dissonance of speaking in a different accent. Rather than not-learning in order to maintain one’s identity or even feeling compelled to change one’s identity in the face of learning NAE, thinking of NAE simply as a tool for effective communication to be used only when necessary might be a healthier approach. It could open some students to learning. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Jolod, Maryam, and Jon passed the SPEAK Test in part because they spoke of their new dialect like a tool that they used. Thus, when ITAs are required to take the ITA preparatory class in order to become more intelligible speakers of English as proven by the SPEAK Test, many would be better served to think of this new accent they are learning as a tool rather than a statement of who they are and where their loyalties lie. They can interact with native speakers face to face, and they can peer into the lives of native speakers and listen to them through the use of technology either in addition to interaction with others or in absence of others. Doing so does not mean that the learners wish to conform to assimilate, nor do they have to. But when one very strongly wants to retain their identity apart from the dominant culture as expressed through NAE, there is a
potential for discomfort and cognitive dissonance of feeling inauthentic when speaking NAE, and added to that, learners may fear being made fun of or cast out by one’s peers; hence, active not-learning in many of the forms Kohl (1994) described, such as not taking assignments seriously, asking questions that are off-topic, and daydreaming, all of which I have observed in this study. What I hope these learners understand is that if they wish to maintain their unique identity, they should think of NAE as a tool to be used in the US when native speakers of English and / or people of other language backgrounds are present is only a tool- nothing more. The ability to switch to this accent says that the speaker is able to adapt to different situations and can communicate with a wider audience, and quite possibly is open to strangers. In the following section, I will answer the research questions directly.

**Answering the Research Questions**

The following answers to the research questions are based on the four emergent thematic topics: the ITA preparatory class, speaking opportunities, general English language skills improvement, and obstructions to spoken English improvement. Each research question will be answered below in accordance to these themes, using the existential themes to illuminate them.

**Research question 1: What is the lived experience of learners with spoken English intelligibility in the ITA preparatory / oral communication course?** The ITAs’ experiences are explained in detail in Chapter 4, following the emergent topics. To summarize, they found that cited the ITA preparatory course as the base from which they learned about the target accent, their own accents, and strategies for learning the target
That said, it is likely that the student-centered approach used in this class may have contributed to its usefulness. Apart from this circumscribed setting and the way their interactions with each other as classmates, interactions with native-speaker strangers in daily life, whether shopping or going out to eat, was also a learning experience for many of the participants. It was in these settings that they were able to learn how to express themselves in a non-academic register, and they could find out quickly how successful they were in their communication by whether or not they succeeded in communicating the task at hand, such as ordering the dish they wanted. The participants also cited their speaking opportunities through social events with friends and acquaintances as helpful since the atmosphere was typically more relaxed and fun. There were ample opportunities for this for those who sought them out: sporting events, excursions, potlucks and dinner parties were a few. These social events and daily life speaking opportunities also served as concrete ways in which participants not only spoke with others, but also learned new vocabulary and could practice other English language skills. The people with whom they interacted at school also helped them to improve their general language skills. Some of the participants cited their advisors and mentors as instrumental in pointing out how to learn and understand others, often encouraging the participants to read, write, and listen to gain a better grasp on the language. Classmates and the participants’ students also were able to help the ITAs to speak more colloquially and to learn the meanings of common expressions and idioms used in their groups. In absence of and sometimes in addition to interacting with others to improve their overall language skills, several participants turned to technology to provide them with examples
of authentic spoken and written English (Kessler, 2009), and to provide them with a place to write their thoughts, going beyond their pronunciation and use of oral English. Interacting with technology rather than a person allowed these participants to speak more freely since there was no concern of losing face because of speech errors (Wu, 2009; Zhou, Knocke, and Sakamoto, 2005). Improving these general English skills was particularly important to the learners from external L2 English backgrounds, as discussed previously.

The obstructions to the participants’ efforts in improving their spoken English were few, but powerful. The content analysis (see Table 5.1) of the photographs shows how few photographs depicted this, but the intensity of which could not have been discovered without the focus group discussions or interviews. Frequent interactions with speakers of their same L1 or people from their countries combined with immersing themselves in their L1 culture using technology was the main complaint. This, perhaps, is related to the second largest obstruction: time. Many participants felt that they simply did not have the time to work adequately on their spoken English, explaining the importance of doing well in their major area of study and their TA responsibilities. As discussed earlier in this chapter, how the participants spent their free time seemed to determine their degree of improvement on the SPEAK Test. Finally, several participants cited frustration at being able to express themselves clearly and frustration with using Native Accent. This feeling associated with inability to express themselves led many of the participants to try harder, whereas when associated with Native Accent, it seemed to diminish their motivation to use the software. Interestingly, not a single participant
expressed fear or worry about losing their funding if they were unable to pass the SPEAK Test at the end of the term. Perhaps this was not an obstacle for the participants since it was only their first term taking the ITA preparatory course; this concern seems to arise for some ITAs when they must take the course a second or third time.

Table 5.1: Content analysis of photographs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation of Photographs</th>
<th>Percentage of Photos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive (+)</td>
<td>73.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative (-)</td>
<td>10.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive and Negative (+ &amp; -)</td>
<td>14.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>1.77%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research question 2: In what ways did the ITAs demonstrate learner autonomy? The ITA preparatory class played a central role in the participants’ demonstration of learner autonomy. Most participants credited the instructor and the pronunciation lab tutors with providing direction, helping them to understand what they needed to work on in terms of accent modification and how to do so. The in-class activities were the seeds to many of the participants’ demonstrated autonomous learning behaviors, and technology played a large role in this since what could be accessed in the classroom could also be accessed from elsewhere, and at any time the participants found convenient. Most participants cited TED Talks, radio, and TV as being useful. In the classroom, the participants were taught targeted listening for particular aspects of native speech, and were introduced to some of these, TED Talks in particular. Other tools and
learning strategies introduced in class were how to use Merriam Webster dictionary to hear and see word stress patterns, and how to work with Native Accent. Apart from introducing these technological tools and strategies of their use, class activities often promoted the development of kinesthetic sensibility. When learning pronunciation of an L2 or a different accent, having a kinesthetic sensitivity to the target sounds is crucial. Understanding how the muscles coordinate to make those sounds, plus being able to hear the sounds and being attentive to what these sounds may look like helps learners to be better able to emulate these sounds. Thus, learning pronunciation is very much a process rooted in the body, and the strategies required for incorporating an L2’s pronunciation patterns into one’s own speech requires the learner to have some degree of kinesthetic sensibility. Unsurprisingly, several of the participants pointed to ways in which the body’s senses figured into their pronunciation learning.

Many participants applied their kinesthetic, visual, and auditory senses with their other learning strategies and awareness of their pronunciation targets to observing how these targets are realized in everyday speech by native speakers in real and relevant contexts. Participants documented the variety of opportunities they had with native speakers in which they would do just that. Most common were their interactions with other people in their major area of study: teachers, classmates, office mates, and the ITAs’ own students. Speaking with others in this discipline-specific context was highly relevant to the participants. Participants documented these interactions as opportunities not only to speak, but also to listen for their pronunciation targets. Many participants chose one particular classmate to whom they would listen for these targets, imitate their
way of speaking, and even get feedback on their own production. Real-time correction, regular exposure and practice were helpful in their spoken English improvement.

When they were not interacting with classmates in this way, many participants chose to supplement their native speech input with videos, TV shows, and movies; in a sense; they were relating with native speakers through technology. They looked to these videos both as models for spoken English as well as for a chance to imitate. Many participants also used this input to build their vocabulary, and give insight on how to organize presentations. Accessing this input was simple since all of the participants had access to the internet through smart phones, computers, and / or tablets. An added advantage was that they could play the videos on infinite repeat if they chose—much easier than continually asking a person to repeat what he or she is saying. What these participants and those who looked to native speaker classmates demonstrated was their desire or will to learn, something that both Littlewood (1996) McCombs and Marzano (1990) found to be an important part of learning. These authors maintained that learners need to have both the desire to learn along with the necessary cognitive skills. These participants demonstrated such a will to learn by seeking out opportunities to listen and practice.

The ability to analyze speech and prepare to participate ahead of time was also helpful for improving the ITAs’ speech. The key was regular practice and making it a habit. Learners must be agents in their own language acquisition—going above and beyond the coursework—who must also have the desire to learn if they are going to practice regularly and make learning into a habit (Littlewood, 1996; McCombs &
Marzano, 1990). This desire or “willingness,” Littlewood (1996) wrote in his examination of the concept of learner autonomy, “depends on having both the motivation and the confidence to take responsibility for the choices required” (p. 428). As Polly hinted, simply attending the Pronunciation Lab once a week will not guarantee learning; the learners must decide for themselves that they want to learn while there.

Many participants were unable to make this kind of learning a habit, or were going about it incorrectly. The largest obstacle to autonomous learning seemed to be a lack of time. Many participants understood what they needed to do and felt that they knew how to do so, but said that they did not have enough time to effect such a major change in their speech. Speaking for herself and her ITA preparatory classmates, one participant noted the lack of time to practice regularly, and pointed out that there may also have been a lack of will to expend such an effort. Several participants, in fact, stated that they did little more than the coursework required of them for the ITA preparatory class; the time they spent practicing was defined by due dates: Native Accent, audio journals, and so on. Although the instructor’s task is to guide students in developing learner autonomy (Littlewood, 1996), completing the activities and homework does not guarantee that one has learned the material; rather, one may have only begun to think about it. As discussed earlier in this chapter, this may have been demonstrated by the degree that the participants improved their SPEAK Test scores depending on what effort they put in beyond the mandatory coursework. It should be cautioned, however, that the participants’ efforts with the course work and with their English studies beyond the coursework must be effective in order for learning to take place. Lili’s attempts at
increasing her vocabulary were met with frustration since she found she was not able to easily interact in English. Similarly, repetition or imitation in absence of mindfulness can also lead to frustration and inability to produce a target.

When taking SPEAK Test scores into account, it should be noted that the results of this study indicate that learner autonomy does not guarantee language proficiency; just because students demonstrate some form of learner autonomy, there is no guarantee that they will learn enough to pass a test such as the SPEAK Test. In some cases, the learners who demonstrated autonomous learning behaviors did not do much more than was required by the ITA preparatory course work. Besides, what many of the participants did beyond the activities in class arguably added mainly to their receptive knowledge rather than the productive knowledge needed for speaking. Furthermore, learning English in an external L2 context takes time (Gorsuch, 2008; Gorsuch, 2014), and for many, this was only their first term. But this is also a case of what comes first; the conclusion of Dafei’s (2007) study on the relationship between learner autonomy and English proficiency was that “the more autonomous a learner becomes, the more likely he/she achieves high language proficiency” (p. 15). In other words, the participants who displayed greater proficiency through improved SPEAK Test scores may have been more autonomous learners than the others from the beginning.

Research question 3: What role does technology play in the ITAs’ lived experiences? I will summarize the ways in which technology was used across the four main themes in Table 5.2, and then I will explain the findings in more detail.
Table 5.2: Ways in which technology was used, divided into the four thematic topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ITA Preparatory Class</th>
<th>Speaking Opportunities</th>
<th>General English Skills Improvement</th>
<th>Obstructions to Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audio journals as a way to hear speech through audio recording and see speech through the transcription</td>
<td>US TV shows (including the news) as a conversation topic with native speakers</td>
<td>Listening: podcasts, TV and movies, TED Talks, recordings of class lectures from major area of study, English phrases in everyday life</td>
<td>Ease of creating an L1 environment through Skype, websites in L1, videos and music from the internet (takes time from English studies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video recordings of presentations to see and hear their own performance</td>
<td>US movies as an event and a conversation topic with native speakers</td>
<td>Vocabulary building: from reading blogs, articles for classes, and fiction on the Kindle; TV shows and movies; English phrase and word of the day apps; dictionaries like Merriam Webster and Youdao; Twitter to purposefully use new words</td>
<td>Native Accent pronunciation software: time consuming, frustrating since it demanded perfection, frustrating when it froze (frequent occurrence), the specific feedback was confusing since it was not tailored to the individual learners and their production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Accent pronunciation software gave feedback on pronunciation accuracy and provided pronunciation-focused speaking practice</td>
<td>Sports games and coverage as an event and conversation topic with native speakers</td>
<td>Reading: articles, blogs, fiction, social media</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apps introduced in class: TED Talks, Merriam Webster dictionary for pronunciation and definitions</td>
<td>Recording themselves in absence of speaking opportunities with native speakers</td>
<td>Writing: Twitter for practice paraphrasing; word processing programs for writing papers; Kindle for taking notes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Technology played a major supporting role in how the ITAs demonstrated learner autonomy as well as their experiences of improving their spoken English communication in terms of providing authentic input and reflecting the ITAs’ own pronunciation and ways of speaking. One of its defining roles is that it allowed the participants to take their learning just about anywhere; this is the mobile nature of technology, whether participants were using laptops, smart phones, or tablets. Regardless of what apps they used or where they used their devices, the reason why they were able to choose was because everything that they needed was accessible with their laptops or mobile devices. The participants used their smart phones to access e-mail, to record themselves (Voice Memos on iPhone and Tape a Talk Android app), to search for definitions and words with Merriam Webster and Youdao, to build vocabulary or hear English phrases for everyday life. Polly even had a Kindle app on her smart phone that synced with her Kindle. Through the app, she was able to read, highlight, and take notes. She would sometimes post words she had just learned from reading on Twitter or tweet a sentence in which she used the words. This was both fun and educational for her as she worked to improve her overall English skills. Other participants used mobile devices to build vocabulary and work on their listening skills by replaying class lectures or listening to podcasts. The mobility of the devices was an asset since it is unlikely that the participants would have done as much if had they been limited to working in the computer lab (Kessler, 2010).

Technology also helped support these learners in immersing themselves in an English language environment. Surrounding oneself with the language through radio,
music, TV, movies, and social media is indicative of the learners having a low affective filter which is one factor of second language acquisition (Krashen, 1983), and these participants, through their use of technology, showed that they were motivated enough to immerse themselves in the foreign atmosphere during some of their free time whether they were listening to podcasts, reading, or watching TV. Watching sitcoms, movies, and sporting events had a further benefit in that what they watched was then used as a topic of conversation with native English speakers. Many participants cited the difficulty of beginning and maintaining conversation with native speakers, but those who shared common interests were more able to interact with natives, thus increasing their exposure to and practice of English. Undoubtedly, the fact that they described their use of technology as fun, enjoyable, and relaxing must have played a part in their motivation to use technology.

Another important role that technology played was that of a mirror: it enabled the participants to hear and see themselves as another person might through recordings. Audio journals (recordings of the participants’ spontaneous speech and verbatim transcriptions of the recordings) helped the participants to hear and see what they were actually saying and how they were saying it, even for the participants who did not prepare to speak in advance. Regardless of their self-professed lack of effort in making the recording, they were nevertheless, able to identify the problems they had with speaking because the audio evidence through the recording combined with the visual evidence of the transcription clearly reflected to them the actual manner in which they spoke. Several
participants audio or video recorded themselves in their free time in order to have such an illumination of the way they spoke.

Apart from audio and video recordings of extended speech, many participants cited Native Accent software (by Carnegie Speech) as playing a role in showing them the accuracy of their focused speech at the word and phrase level. Several said that Native Accent helped them become aware of their problems through the red and orange lights—red light meaning that their production was incorrect, orange meaning it was close, and green meaning that their pronunciation was correct. This color-coded accuracy feedback helped some people to understand when their production was inaccurate, but for others, it had a negative effect. The most frequent complaint was that it demanded perfection; therefore, was frustrating. Another kind of feedback that Native Accent featured was a description of how to articulate the target sound along with a video of a side-view diagram of a mouth and a front-facing actual person modeling the sound (see Fig. 4.18). This feedback proved hard to understand for many participants because it seemed abstract, inconsistent, vague, and was not tailored to the actual production error. Because of this, some participants would repeat a word between ten to fifty times to try to get a green light. Some participants routinely procrastinated completing the one-hour per week of required Native Accent work until the end of the week. Another frequent complaint was that the program would freeze, (although the developers remedied this situation after this study, see Ch. 6). In other words, the hour that they were required to work with the software each week would end up taking much more time than necessary due to over-repetition of inaccurate words and connectivity problems. Although many participants
determined that using Native Accent was a waste of time, others found the challenges less burdensome and the software helpful because it provided 24/7 practice and modeling of English.

Technology also allowed the participants to feel closer to home. Although the participants were living in a small, Midwestern college town in which English was the language spoken and 91.5% of its residents were white as of 2013 (“United States Census”), their mobile devices and laptops enabled them to surround themselves with the sights and sounds of their home countries. As one participant noted, watching Chinese TV shows, surfing Chinese websites, and listening to Chinese music helped keep her in the “Chinese environment.” Another participant spent a few hours daily seeing and talking with friends and family back home via Skype. Although the participants noted that this was not helpful for their English language studies, I believe it served an important purpose: having a lifeline back home where the participants could maintain or strengthen their identity, speak with others and understand with little effort, were important in a place where they sometimes struggled to understand and be understood. Technology allowed the ITAs to bring some of home with them wherever they went.

**Conclusion**

The participants’ agency within their pre-determined circumstances ultimately seemed to influence how they spent what unscheduled time that they had. Those learners who expressed the will to learn did so in a number of ways—relating to others, whether classmates or strangers, was central—and used technology as a means to create and / or strengthen relations. They learned what they needed to do to improve their spoken
English and worked to do so. Ultimately, they seemed to consider adjusting their accents as a communication tool. Other participants did not allocate sufficient time to learning. Rather than simply attributing this to a lack of motivation, participants more likely were placing priority on other aspects of their lives that were more important to them at the time, or perhaps, in part, there may have been some fear of not fitting in with their L1 group on campus as a result of speaking differently. These participants demonstrated learner autonomy in very limited ways that were insufficient to achieving unconscious competence in their spoken English. With this in mind, it is clear that the teacher must play a role in cultivating learning relations in the classroom among the learners (Sidorkin, 2002) and should educate them in the use of technology to this end (Hubbard, 2004), all the while, stressing that this new way of speaking is a tool for communication (Modiano, 1999). The teacher should approach learners who are struggling in order to determine how they can increase their learning skills and strategies to become an autonomous learner, and to find out whether identity may be playing a role in anything that appears to be not-learning behavior. Perhaps this can help teachers to become more effective and to form a stronger relationship with their learners. In the next chapter, I will discuss the implication for practice and the directions for future research.
Chapter 6: Reflections, Implications, and Directions for Research

In the previous chapter, I analyzed the findings and answered the three research questions. In this final chapter, I will begin with a summary of the study, reflect on this experience, and then give implications for practice as well as suggest areas for further research. It is hoped that this contribution to the literature on the learning experiences of international teaching assistants might help other faculty and ITAs to better understand a broader set of issues with which ITAs may be struggling. This includes what they might find helpful in the process of acquiring more intelligible speech, learner autonomy, and the ways in which ITAs used technology to meet this end so that ultimately, the ITAs may communicate more effectively with their students.

Summary

Spoken English proficiency in the classroom is a necessity and ITAs are often required to take a course if their speech is not sufficiently intelligible. Yet, despite its importance to everyday life, many ITAs do not, and often feel they cannot, place a priority on improving their English when they have so many other responsibilities with which to contend. As a result of these challenges, along with the lengthy nature of language acquisition, many ITAs are unable to pass the SPEAK Test after just one term of taking a requisite oral communication class. Further complicating the learners’ progress is the reticence or even resistance they may feel to taking a class that may push them outside of their comfort zone. Thirteen ITAs taking a requisite oral communication course volunteered their language learning experiences (as depicted initially in their reflexive photography projects) that they shared in peer focus groups and further
expanded upon in individual interviews with the researcher. Their photographs as well as the content of the interviews were coded and analyzed, and four thematic topics emerged: the ITA preparatory class; speaking opportunities; general English language skills improvement; and obstructions to spoken English improvement. The participants found the ITA preparatory class to be particularly useful in helping them to cultivate an awareness of how their speech differed from that of native speakers of American English, and for modeling ways, including the use of technology, to learn this accent on their own. Through the activities completed in and for class, and by interacting with their classmates, participants reported they were also able to create a supportive atmosphere in which they felt learning could take place. They incorporated many of the classroom activities into their autonomous learning practices, especially those that used technology, whether it was accessing authentic speech (as opposed to a simulation designed and adapted for learning foreign languages) or recording their own speech for fluency and/or analysis. Many participants found that interacting with native speakers (NS) became the place where “the rubber met the road.” In fact, these out-of-class speaking opportunities became learning experiences in of themselves where participants could examine and imitate authentic speech and incorporate their new pronunciation patterns. Several participants recorded themselves when they lacked speaking opportunities with others. Many of the participants, particularly those from external English L2 contexts, documented the importance of improving not merely their speaking skills, but also their reading, writing, and listening skills, paying particular attention to vocabulary acquisition.
This study found that what stood in the way of the participants’ learning were: their lack of time and will to dedicate towards studying English, the limitations of the voice recognition pronunciation software, not being able to consciously incorporate new pronunciation patterns into their spontaneous speech, and the predominance of L1 interaction. Overall, it seems that the predetermined circumstances in which the ITAs found themselves as well as the agency they exercised within those circumstances, along with the dual linguistic identities they embodied, shaped their experiences. The participants who made their English language studies obligatory and sought interactions with native speakers and/or used technology to enhance their knowledge and practice scored higher on the SPEAK Test than the participants who did solely what was required. Using technology for this purpose was a hallmark of the learners who displayed learner autonomy, as was seeking interactions with native speakers for purposeful practice. Furthermore, the participants who viewed their use of an American accent as a tool more than an identity marker scored higher on the SPEAK Test than those who worried that they might be rejected by their own L1 group for being inauthentic. The participants’ use of technology was woven into most of their experiences, predominately to their benefit.

**Researcher Reflections**

Throughout the process of researching and writing this dissertation, what has impressed me the most are the individuals who graciously volunteered to allow me insight into their lives and experiences in a way that is not often afforded in student-teacher relationships. While elements of the student-teacher relationship were at times present during interviews, particularly with some participants who praised the class and
my teaching in general terms, distinguishing between compliments and data was fairly easy due to the ITAs’ photographs and reading through my class observations. Beyond what they shared with me as a researcher through their photography and our interviews, each and every participant also entrusted me with insight into their private lives and unique situations. From this knowledge, the importance of understanding these ITAs as individuals is clear in addition to the patterns I discovered among their experiences.

Maintaining separate roles as instructor and researcher required vigilance when writing. While I naturally approach the role of teacher as that of a researcher as well, always examining what works for the students and what does not, and looking for new and improved ways to educate, I found it to be an exercise in perspective to write primarily from the standpoint of researcher. Nonetheless, taking this stance helped me to examine the situation in a way that I might not have been able to do as a teacher.

Creating the time and space for serious data analysis has allowed me to suggest new ways of approaching material to my department, and this has granted me the ability to implement them as a higher education instructor.

With the opportunity to teach the ITA preparatory class nearly every term since I collected the data for this study, I have been able to provide more opportunities for what the ITAs deemed helpful, and to address the concerns about impediments they felt stood in their way. For example, one change I implemented was the introduction of a goal-focused conversation hour. Speaking opportunities proved to be critical to so many participants, yet many struggled with finding sufficient time or the opportunity to converse with native speakers. Furthermore, those who did have someone to speak with
were often unable to sufficiently self-monitor for accuracy as they were talking because their focus was on completing an assignment or a transaction. For the goal-focused conversation hour, ITAs are required to attend a 30-minute one-on-one conversation with a native speaker twice weekly in which they have a goal to implement. For example, they might be required to work on lengthening stressed words, or incorporating the accurate pronunciation of certain targets—“thanks,” “something,” “think”—for “th” sound. The conversation partners meanwhile, make it a point to let the ITAs know when they have not understood something and to correct their speech in the event the ITAs need assistance with monitoring their speech. ITAs reflect afterward on what they have learned and take any pronunciation issues that arise to the Pronunciation Lab.

Because the participants demonstrated a strong need to have as many speaking opportunities as possible, I also flipped my classroom. That is, the students watched the instructional component in preparation for the class so that they could spend the entire class period practicing and applying what they had learned. For each class, I made a short video (about 6 minutes in length) on the topic of study. These videos took about five hours to plan, record, and edit. To be as efficient as possible, I created a Power Point for each topic that was animated so that each line would appear when needed. I filmed my voice-over of the presentations using Camtasia. With that same program, I was able to easily insert sound and video clips that I asked native speakers to record, such as an opera singer’s demonstration of a vocal warm up to illustrate intonation range, and a friend’s explanation of how to make a snowball to illustrate key choice in organization. I also edited the video using Camtasia; its features were intuitive, so it was simple to cut
extraneous sounds (like clearing my throat) and to fade in and out for transitions.

Another useful feature enabled me to circle text, draw arrows, and insert a text bubble. This was particularly important since it made up for the inability to gesture as one might when speaking in front of an audience. Along with watching the videos in preparation for class, I asked the ITAs to take a survey afterwards that gauged both their understanding of the topic and their opinions regarding the videos. The videos were very popular, and many ITAs mentioned that they watched them several times. Although it was an extremely time-consuming endeavor, flipping the classroom was worth it in the end because I was able to allocate much more class time to learning strategies and practicing the material.

Another change I helped to implement into the classes (by working with my colleagues in the department) was how the Native Accent software program was used. Chief among the improvements has been the support that we have been able to provide the ITAs beyond the limited support the ITA liaison was able to offer in terms of technology and practice. At the suggestion of the director, the Pronunciation Lab tutors were trained to work with students on Native Accent so that they could provide the detailed feedback that Native Accent lacked and to help ITAs use the program more effectively, similar to how tutors were made an integral part of the use of TEAM software (Schwartz, 1996). The ITAs attended at least three additional Pronunciation Lab sessions towards the beginning of the term in order to would work on Native Accent. Under the attentive eyes and ears of the tutors, ITAs were shown how to practice with the software in a more effective way. We also changed the wording of the Native Accent homework
requirement so that students would be able to practice regularly; instead of being required to work for an hour each week, ITAs needed to work five times weekly. Although these changes helped some, we faced some logistical problems this year in that we were unable to provide the extra hours in the Pronunciation Lab that were needed for Native Accent support, and most of the Pronunciation Lab tutors were new. To compensate, we reserved a computer lab for three hours each week where ITAs could come to work on Native Accent and get feedback on their production and use of the software from a tutor. Time will tell if the ITAs find this to be an effective approach.

Recently, the program in which I teach was fortunate to experience growth in the number of classes we offered and faculty we hired. As a result of this and other factors, the department moved towards standardized syllabi where the assignments, text, and topics were predetermined. While this has allowed a more consistent approach to class and an easier way for new faculty to jump right in to their classes, it has removed an element of spontaneity and student-centeredness from the ITA preparatory course. This top-down approach makes me question whether the ITAs feel they do not have agency, and I am left wondering whether they are taking the initiative to put forth as much effort as the ITAs in this study did. However, despite the pre-determined types of assignments and topics, it is still possible to work within the system to uphold a degree of student-centeredness. The ITAs continue to have influence regarding many topics of discussion and their individual presentation topics. Additionally, textbook assignments—the choice of which was informed by this study—is then modeled after and applied to the current students’ experiences themselves.
Also still possible within the system of standardized syllabi is the emphasis on relationships. These are not solely student-teacher relationships and student-student relationships among the ITAs. Rather, there is encouragement of mentor relationships (by the ITAs observing and interviewing other TAs in their departments), tutor-ITA relationships (with the Pronunciation Lab tutors also coming to class to lend a hand), and conversation partner-ITA relationships (in conversation hour, and instruction and practice around small talk to encourage ITAs to build relationships, however brief, with strangers). It is clear that learning happens in relation to others (Dewey, 1998; Sidorkin, 2002); therefore, it is important to create the space so that all students taking the ITA preparatory class have these important opportunities. Since many relationships also take place virtually through social media, I also created a Facebook group for the ITAs so that they have an additional space to relate with one another, their conversations partners, and the pronunciation lab tutors, but it has yet to be used as such. Instead, the conversation hour coordinator and I post relevant oral communication tips and optional topics for discussion during conversation hour. Perhaps if it were required, students would use it in the intended way.

Not only have individual relationships been made a priority in the course, but relationships with other groups across disciplines have been educative as well. Last year, a phonetics teacher in the Communication Sciences and Disorders (CSD) department had his students record the ITA preparatory students reading a base passage that his students then transcribed phonetically and analyzed. In exchange for the recording, several of the CSD students attended the last month of the ITA preparatory class in order to help
identify pronunciation problems and to promote fluency through small group work in class. This allowed the ITAs increased individualized attention. Several of the CSD students went on to become conversation partners and Pronunciation Lab tutors. I also collaborated with a voice teacher in the Theater Department; our students worked in pairs to learn each other’s accents. Therefore, the ITAs in this study inspired many of the new directions I have taken the class. Perhaps other teachers will also find inspiration in implications of this study’s findings. Below, I will detail what others might consider in their practice.

**Implications for Practice**

Keeping in mind that what is useful to some learners may not be useful for others, these implications for practice should be understood in the spirit of options and guidelines for consideration in transferable situations. Through it all, learner agency continues to be the driving force in spoken English improvement. In other words, the learners must play an active role in their learning. Teachers can support this by modeling different learning habits, and ensuring that they provide opportunities for the learners to both explore and implement these practices. When the teacher can stay abreast of technological developments to facilitate learning and guide the ITAs in its use to strengthen learner autonomy and language acquisition, the learners will benefit (Hubbard, 2004). This is especially true since mobile devices are much more common and affordable than they were three years ago, according based on the information provided in the report by Harris Interactive for Pearson (2013). By utilizing technology and framing the target accent as simply a tool to facilitate communication, perhaps ITAs may
require less time to acquire the skills necessary for a more intelligible accent and higher SPEAK Test score. The following are some of the more important implications for practice:

1. Dedicate some of the class meeting time towards completing assignments. For example, recording audio journals in class and having students’ speech transcribed simultaneously through online Google automated speech recognition\(^7\) will save some time, and it will show students where their speech is unrecognizable, thus helping them to analyze their speech. In this way, the instructor can model how to do this and students can readily find help completing the task; this may help to increase the likelihood that students will complete the assignment as well.

2. Provide frequent speaking opportunities (Davies et al., 1989). Goal-focused conversation hour with undergraduates has been popular; in fact, most students stay beyond the required time limit. Students have reported that it helps them to feel more comfortable conversing in English and many students feel that they can speak more fluently. It also helps students build their self-monitoring skills (Ellis & Zimmerman, 2001). Observing and then interviewing other TAs from their department is another opportunity. The interviews can address whatever the ITA finds important, whether it be how to

---

\(^7\) These voice recognition technologies are rapidly becoming more sophisticated and are worth looking into. For Google automated transcriptions: [https://www.google.com/intl/en/chrome/demos/speech.html](https://www.google.com/intl/en/chrome/demos/speech.html)
teach a topic, classroom management, or a discussion about intercultural differences.

3. Use L2 learning context as a basis to inform not only L2 transfer errors in speech (for example, saying “wary” instead of “very” because the L1 lacks the /v/ sound) but also possible attitudes about the L2. As a cautionary note, however, this can only be used to identify potentialities since teachers must remain sensitive to the unique situations of individual students. Recognize that many of those who learned English in an institutional context (such as students from India and Ghana) already are fluent and capable English speakers who might now feel confused or even offended that they need to speak English differently from the way they spoke at home (Gorsuch, 2008). These learners tend to have strong lexical knowledge of English but need to focus on different pronunciation patterns (Gorsuch, 2008). The functional use of English that ITAs who learned English in an external L2 context (such as in China and Nepal) may be limited since there is little emphasis or opportunity to practice spoken English. These students often need to build not only their vocabulary, but also organization of discourse, syntax, and even reading, writing, and listening skills. They might also find difficulty with speaking fluently for lack of practice and the over-emphasis on learning the rules of “correct” grammar in their English language studies (Wu, 2009).

4. Consider general English language skills support. Many learners, especially for the English language learners from an external L2 context, are still
struggling to build vocabulary and improve their reading, writing, and listening skills. Meeting individually with these students will allow for better planning and implementation of study strategies. Teachers can direct these students towards relevant resources, whether tutoring services or links to websites which could be kept on their course management system, and show learners how to implement them if the learners do not already know how to do so. It may also be valuable to explore the use of textbooks such as *American Accent Training: Grammar* as a way to review grammar with the goal of increased grammatical sophistication in use, or at least emphasize the importance of spoken English grammar while working towards increased intelligibility through pronunciation.

5. Promote learner autonomy with in-class guidance (Hubbard, 2004). For example, help learners to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice or share vocabulary acquisition strategies. Once learners identify words whose pronunciation they struggle with, have them compare a recording of their pronunciation with a recording on Merriam Webster. Once they feel they are able to pronounce the word, have them purposefully use it in focused free speech. To do so, Web 2.0 tools such as Voice Thread can help in this effort and increase communication. (Voice Thread is an app that allows users to post verbal or written comments around a photo or video to create an asynchronous discussion.) Learners can incorporate the word into their comments, and others can give feedback on their use of it while continuing the
discussion. Having a discussion around an image where certain vocabulary is used should be more effective than memorizing word lists and their translations.

6. Partner with undergraduate students (Tyler, 1994). I have already discussed the role of partners in goal-focused conversation. Undergraduates can also assist in role-plays with ITAs on situations such as answering questions and meeting during office hours. These can simulate real-life situations and facilitate learning. Not only do ITAs benefit from the interaction, but the undergraduates might also benefit by meeting someone from another culture. Perhaps this exposure could lead to greater cross-cultural understanding to foster mutual respect for strangers.

7. Utilize a student-centered pedagogy. Include the students’ voices and experiences in the planning, preparation, and delivery of classes. Find out what the students’ concerns and questions are. Allow plenty of time for students to work in small groups. In my experience as an instructor, I have seen that not only can this increase overall student participation at the individual level, but it also empowers students to take leadership roles in small group work; experience with this in class can improve the students’ confidence when they are in the classroom as a TA as well. Negotiating content, recognizing the students’ experience and how it relates, and providing opportunities for small group work and collaboration make a student-centered
pedagogy an appropriate approach to meet the needs of students from diverse cultures.

8. Provide pre-term SPEAK Test preparation. Since second language acquisition takes a significant amount of time and can be “a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition” (Guiora, 1984, p. 8), it could benefit ITAs to take an online workshop before fall semester begins and their responsibilities multiply. Not only might they feel more prepared for the SPEAK Test, but some of the ITAs who learned English in an institutional context might even be able to pass the test with a bit of guidance. Having an introduction to the topics before the onset of the semester would likely decrease the burden of learning completely new skills while juggling all of the other ITA responsibilities.

Directions for Future Research

While the results of this study can add to the literature on ITAs’ experiences as language learners, this research also opens the door to others areas that could be investigated, particularly how SPEAK Test scores might correlate to certain variables. Since the purpose of the ETS-based SPEAK Test is to measure one’s spoken English intelligibility and one of the primary purposes of the ITA preparatory class is to help students improve their spoken English intelligibility, it is reasonable to look to these test scores as a possible indicator of learners’ success in having applied new pronunciation patterns and communication strategies to their spontaneous speech. (The SPEAK Test requires participants to speak spontaneously on a number of topics.) In this small sample
of thirteen participants, clear patterns of SPEAK Test score improvement can be seen (see Figure 6.1). In future research, I would like to discover whether these patterns (hypotheses) hold true and if they are significantly significant at the population level.

Table 6.1: SPEAK Test score patterns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations of Patterns / Hypotheses</th>
<th>SPEAK Test scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants from institutional L2 English backgrounds</td>
<td>Passing score for all but one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants who expected to pass the pre-term test but did not</td>
<td>10-30 point improvement of all eight; five passed, 3 did not but improved by 20-30 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants from external L2 English backgrounds who said they had little free time or spent much time alone made it a priority to study English (high agency)</td>
<td>20+ point improvement; one passed the test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants from external L2 English backgrounds who spent much time with other speakers from same L1 background did not prioritize English studies</td>
<td>10- point improvement; no one passed the test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants who did little more than what was required of them through class</td>
<td>0-10 point improvement; no one passed the test</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regarding Native Accent, many improvements to the software have been made since version 2.5, partially in response to the feedback from this study. The software does not freeze and crash as it used to, students cannot attempt more than ten responses to the same question at a time, the enrollment process is much easier, and more activities on suprasegmentals are being discussed for 2015 (personal communication with David Oberlin, Nov. 14, 2014). Studies should be done both on user experiences with the software, and to what extent use of the software might influence performance in speaking assessments.
Finally, I would like to see a nationwide survey on what mobile apps ITAs are using to improve their spoken English and how they use these apps, including whether they are used independently or with the intervention of a teacher or tutor. Mobile Assisted Language Learning has become increasingly important as tablets and smartphones become more sophisticated and easily available.

**Conclusion**

In order to assist ITAs in becoming more intelligible in the most efficient and effective ways possible, teachers need to cultivate an atmosphere conducive to learning that will maximize student motivation while giving sufficient feedback on their progress. This study provided me with the opportunity to learn from the ITAs what they found to be helpful in this process of language acquisition. In doing so, I learned how they used technology and how they demonstrated learner autonomy. This investigation made me appreciate just how much effort it can take a language learner to measurably improve their spoken English. As a teacher, I would like to be able to tell learners that all they need to do is follow the syllabus and do their course work in order to improve, but it is clear that there is much more work that must be done. By incorporating the findings of this study into a student-centered classroom, ITAs should be better equipped to improve their spoken English more quickly than they might have otherwise so that they can communicate more easily with their students and focus more on their teaching and major area of study.
References


doi:10.1080/15210960701334094.


277-293. Retrieved from

http://web.atilf.fr/IMG/pdf/melanges/6_RUIZ.pdf


http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED274190


6&ERICEstSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED414836giv


doi:10.1080/09500790903487512.


Appendix A: Questionnaires

CALL Questionnaire: 1 of 3
In order to learn more about using technology to improve our spoken English skills, you are being asked to give your feedback. Some of your comments and questions will be entered into the CALL Q & A Blog where the instructor will address them so that everyone can learn. You can find this blog on Blackboard under “Resources.” Feel free to add your own comments to the questions and responses. This blog can be an excellent resource for you as you become accustomed to the many ways in which we use computers in our learning.

1. How comfortable are you with using computers?
very comfortable comfortable slightly uncomfortable uncomfortable

2. Which type of computer are you more comfortable with using:
Mac P.C. (IBM) Both Neither

3. How would you rate your skill level with using Microsoft Office's WORD?
basic level (I can type and save- that's it) good level (I can type, save, and format my document) high level (I can do most everything WORD has to offer)

4. Have you used Native Accent on your own yet?
Yes No What is Native Accent?

5. Choose one of the following options that describes your experience with using Blackboard so far.

6. With what frequency do you use Blackboard?
I have not used Blackboard for [class] I have only used Blackboard in class for [the ITA preparatory class] I have used Blackboard outside of class for [the ITA preparatory class]

7. Complete this sentence, then describe further, if needed: What I like about CALL (using computers for language learning) is: ______

8. Complete the sentence, then describe further, if needed: What I do not like about CALL (using computers in language learning) is: ______

9. What questions do you have about CALL (using computers in language learning)? List them below.

10. What would you like to see improved about CALL? Please list your thoughts below.

11. Share anything else that you have on your mind about CALL below.
CALL Questionnaire 2 of 3

In order to learn more about using technology to improve our spoken English skills, you are being asked to give your feedback. Some of your comments and questions will be entered into the CALL Q & A Blog where the instructor will address them so that everyone can learn. You can find this blog on Blackboard under “Resources.” Feel free to add your own comments to the questions and responses. This blog can be an excellent resource for you as you become accustomed to the many ways in which we use computers in our learning.

1. How comfortable are you with using computers?
   - very comfortable
   - comfortable
   - slightly uncomfortable
   - uncomfortable

2. Which type of computer are you more comfortable with using:
   - Mac
   - P.C. (IBM)
   - Both
   - Neither

3. Are you comfortable with using Macs? (choose all that apply)
   - yes
   - no
   - I am more comfortable than at the beginning of the quarter

4. How would you rate your skill level with using Microsoft Office's POWER POINT?
   - basic level (I can type and save- that's it)
   - good level (I can type, save, and format my presentation)
   - high level (I can do most everything POWER POINT has to offer)

5. Have you used Native Accent on your own yet?
   - Yes
   - No
   - What is Native Accent?

6. Have you met with Jeff Kuhn yet to learn about how best to use Native Accent?
Yes
No
Not yet
No, and I will not

7. If you HAVE met with Jeff about Native Accent, what did you find useful?

8. If you have NOT met with Jeff yet about Native Accent, why not (remember, your answer is confidential)?

9. Choose one of the following options that describes your experience with using Blackboard so far.
   - Blackboard is too difficult- I do not know how to use it yet
   - Blackboard is difficult to navigate, but I can do so with help
   - Blackboard is easy to navigate by myself

10. Choose an answer below to describe your experience with making audio or video recordings:
   - I have no problems with making recordings
   - I have some problems with making recordings
   - Making recordings is too difficult
   If you have problems, what are they?

11. Which programs have you used for making recordings, and how well can you use them?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>I haven’t used it</th>
<th>I have no problems using it</th>
<th>I can use it well enough</th>
<th>I do not know how to use it well</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audacity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quicktime audio</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quicktime video</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12. How often do you use Merriam Webster dictionary to hear the pronunciation of words in an American accent?
   - Never
   - Sometimes
   - Often
13. Complete this sentence, then describe further, if needed:
What I like about CALL (using computers for language learning) is: ______

14. Complete the sentence, then describe further, if needed:
What I do not like about CALL (using computers in language learning) is: ______

15. What questions do you have about CALL (using computers in language learning)?
List them below in the form of a question, and be SPECIFIC. Also, understand that
Native Accent is one part of CALL. CALL is Computer Assisted Language Learning.

16. What would you like to see improved about CALL? Please list your thoughts below.

17. Share anything else that you have on your mind about CALL below.

CALL Questionnaire 3 of 3

In order to learn more about using technology to improve our spoken English skills, you
have been asked to give your feedback. This is the last survey regarding CALL (using
computers in language learning).

1. How many times have you read questions and answers on the CALL Q & A Blog (on
Blackboard)?
   - What is the CALL Q & A Blog?
   - 0 times
   - 1 time
   - 2 times
   - 3 or more times

2. How useful was the CALL Q & A Blog to you?
   - very useful
   - useful
   - not useful
   Why?

3. Are you more comfortable using computers now than you were at the beginning of the
quarter?
   - yes, I am more comfortable now than I was before
   - I am just as comfortable now as I was before
   - I am less comfortable now than I was before

4. How comfortable are you with using computers?
5. Are you comfortable with using Macs? (Choose all that apply.)

- yes
- no
- I am more comfortable than at the beginning of the quarter

6. How comfortable are you with making audio recordings now?

- very comfortable
- comfortable
- neutral
- uncomfortable

Please share any comments.

7. How useful has Native Accent been for your self-study?

- very useful
- somewhat useful
- not useful

8. Please comment on what you liked about meeting with Jeff regarding Native Accent.

9. Please comment on what you did NOT like about meeting with Jeff regarding Native Accent.

10. Choose one of the following options that describes your experience with using Blackboard.

- Blackboard is still too difficult
- Blackboard is difficult to navigate, and I can only do so with help
- Blackboard is easy to navigate by myself

11. How comfortable are you with making audio or video recordings, and in what ways?

- very comfortable
- comfortable
- uncomfortable

In what ways?
12. Which programs have you used for making recordings, and how well can you use them?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>I haven’t used it</th>
<th>I have no problems using it</th>
<th>I can use it well enough</th>
<th>I do not know how to use it well</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audacity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quicktime audio</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quicktime video</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13. How often have you used Merriam Webster dictionary to hear the pronunciation of words in an American accent?

- [ ] Never
- [ ] Sometimes
- [ ] Often

14. Complete this sentence, then describe further, if needed:
What I like about CALL (using computers for language learning) is: ____

15. Complete the sentence, then describe further, if needed:
What I do not like about CALL (using computers in language learning) is: ______

16. What questions do you have about CALL (using computers in language learning)?
List them below in the form of a question, and be SPECIFIC. Also, understand that Native Accent is one part of CALL. CALL is Computer Assisted Language Learning.

17. What would you like to see improved about CALL? Please list your thoughts below.

18. Share anything else that you have on your mind about CALL below.
Appendix B: Directions for the Reflexive Photography Project

(as written in the syllabus)

Reflexive Photography
Over the next week, you will take a deeper look into the efforts you are making to improve your spoken English intelligibility by taking photographs of what you see as key to your improvement, both in class and outside of it. You do not need permission to take photos in class this week; just make sure that doing so does not distract you from your participation in class. If you do not have a digital camera, let me know and I will loan one to you for the purposes of this project. You may take as many digital photographs as you like, and as you take them, make a note to yourself what the photograph symbolizes since the visual representation might not be obvious. For example, with her permission, I might take a picture of a conversation partner since she helps me practice what I learn by speaking about whatever we like; conversely, I might take a picture of a stack of essays I need to grade since they take time away from my spoken language practice. This level of description will suffice. We will share our photos in class, and you can elaborate on the description at that time. If you do take pictures of people, including your classmates, be sure to ask them if you can do so.

Of all of the photos you have taken, you will choose your best 7 to 10 images. Because they are digital, you will not print them out. Instead, put them in a PowerPoint presentation format where you can insert a photo and insert text on the same slide. The reason for having text on the slide is that you will write a brief description of what each photo represents. Make sure that the description is clear enough for me to understand it since I will not participate in your group discussion, thus missing your explanation.

Specific elements to your presentation include the following:

• Complete and well-organized content:
  o One photo per slide
  o A brief explanation of what each photo means on that same slide
  o A title for each slide and as a part of it, a “(+)” indicating that the photo represents something positive, a “(-)” indicating that it represents something negative, a “(N)” if it represents something neither positive or negative, or a “(+/-)” indicating that it represents something both positive and negative.
  o Make sure that there is some organization to your PowerPoint

• Proofread content:
  o Make sure that it is free of spelling and grammatical errors
  o Make sure that each photo represents something that you see as key to the improvement of your spoken English

• Properly saved and submitted content:
- Save the presentation with your name and class (for example, “LaraW MW.pptx”), and submit it to Blackboard. Go to Assignments ➔ photo project ➔ submit photo ppt here.
- Have a backup of the presentation saved on your USB, in your e-mail, and / or in Dropbox so that you can access it in class (we will be in the computer lab).

This project will be graded based on the careful completion of the power point. See the following page for the grading rubric.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>PowerPoint format is used and the file is accessible to you in class</td>
<td>Save it on your USB and email it to yourself. Also save it in your Dropbox account just in case.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(we will be in the computer lab).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Number of photos</td>
<td>You should have a minimum of 7 for full credit, and a maximum of 10.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>A description for each photo</td>
<td>Make sure you clearly describe how the photo represents something key to your spoken English improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>The subject directly relates to your efforts in improving your spoken</td>
<td>Make sure your photos represent something key to your spoken English improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English intelligibility.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>PowerPoint appearance</td>
<td>You should have titles for each photo. In each title, place a “(+)” if the photo describes a positive situation, and a “(−)” if it describes a negative situation. Put “(+/−)” if it is both or “(n)” if it’s neither. Make sure all words are spelled correctly and that you have used correct grammar (proofread!).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: Directions for Focus Groups

(as seen on the in-class handout of directions)

Small Group Discussion Directions
In order to practice our speaking skills, we will share our photos and experiences with improving our spoken English intelligibility in groups of 3. Each person will have 20 minutes to share his or her photos, tell a story, and lead a brief discussion. In other words, this sharing will be part presentation and part discussion. This is the format you should follow.

- Present the PowerPoint you made of your photos: 1 minute per photo-say why you took the photo and how it relates to your work on improving your spoken English intelligibility.
- Story telling: Based off of a photo, tell your group about a time when you experienced what one of your images represents. Your true story will bring the image alive for your group.
- Leading a discussion: Prepare a discussion question for your group based off of the photos for the group.

During the last 15-20 minutes of class, your group will discuss the following. Each person should participate.8
  - Is there any information that you wanted to include but could not photograph in any way (about the work you have been doing on your spoken English intelligibility)?
  - Overall, how satisfied or unsatisfied are you regarding your efforts at improving your spoken English intelligibility?
  - What would help you to improve this?

---

8 The former ITA students of [the ITA preparatory class] will lead this discussion in their groups.
Appendix D: Interview Questions

The researcher conducted these semi-structured interviews based on the reflexive photography projects and focus group discussions. She focused on eliciting experiences in the form of a personal story. As such, questions regarding specific photographs and experiences along with any probing questions are not listed here.

Interview Protocol: Conclusion of Fall Quarter

Introduction: Hi, ____. Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. This conversation should take about an hour. Is that all right with you? I will need to record this conversation so that it can be transcribed for my research. For the transcription, I will use a pseudonym for your name. Is this all right with you? Ok, let’s have a look at your photos now.

(RE: PHOTOS)

• Who or what is in this photo?
• What were you thinking about as you took this photo?
• Is there a story behind this photo?
• (+) In what ways has this (what the photo represents) helped you to improve your spoken English?
• (-) In what ways has this (what the photo represents) stood in the way of your improvement of your spoken English?
• Tell me about a time when… (what this photo represents).
• How do these photos capture your feelings about your efforts to improve your spoken English?

(Setting the photos aside, the following questions will be asked:)

(RE: CALL)

• In what ways did using the computer help you to improve your spoken English?
  o Are there any programs, activities, or websites that were particularly useful?
• In what ways did using the computer hinder you in the improvement of your spoken English?

(RE: LEARNER AUTONOMY and [the ITA preparatory class])

• What is the most effective activity you have done as a part of this class to improve your spoken English?
• If you were teaching [the ITA preparatory class], what would you do differently that could help ITAs improve their spoken English?
• What could I have done as an instructor to better help you to improve your spoken English?
• Describe how you worked to improve your English skills apart from what we did in class and apart from the assignments we had for class.
  o Probe: Describe the personal learning context that you created.
• What are some of your personal learning strategies?

(AS AN ITA / LEARNER AUTONOMY)
• How easily do you feel you express yourself to your class as an ITA?
• When you are unsure how to state something when teaching, what do you do?
• Have you applied communication strategies that you learned in this class to your teaching? If so, please describe which and how (example: how to lead and take part in discussions, answer and ask questions, give opinions).
• What do you feel that your students know about you, personally (or do you distance yourself from them)?

(OTHER)
• Is there anything else you would like to mention that you think I should have asked?
• What questions do you have for me?

Closing: Thank you again for your time. Talking with you has been very helpful for me to understand your experience as an ITA improving your English. Please accept this gift card as a token of my appreciation.
Appendix E: Frequency Counts of Codes Under Each Broad Topic

Table E.1. Frequency Count of Supporting Codes for Topic 1 (How the ITA preparatory class helped)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Number of codes and participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AJ- Audio Journals (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJ- helps you hear how you speak (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…Assignments (7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…Class (21)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…class environment (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…classmates (11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…feedback from classmates (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…instructor as role model (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…instructor (7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…LAD leading a discussion (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…personalized instruction (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…presentations (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…self-reported effort (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…understanding concepts (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENG- ITA knows what problems s/he has with speaking (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gestures- incorporating them into speech (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habit (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help received from classmate (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help received from instructor (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped classmate with pronunciation (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive vowel chart- Paul Meier (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinesthetic learning (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA- native accent (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA affected emotions (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA- amount of time spent (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA- assessment (8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA- helps improve pronunciation (8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA- practice (7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA- video and diagram (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL tutors (20)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL- feedback (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL- frequency of attendance (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL- pronunciation lab (6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL- pronunciation practice (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL- worked on SPEAK Test (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person- a real person (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice SPEAK Test in class (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TED Talks (10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weakness- awareness of (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word stress (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOTAL codes: 165
13 / 13 participants
Table E.2. Frequency Count of Supporting Codes for Topic 2 (How Speaking Opportunities Helped Participants)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Number of codes and participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advisor (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell phone- talking to self on phone (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffee (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curiosity (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialects- distinction between NAE and other (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENG- easy topics of convo (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENG- happy with own spoken English (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENG- successfully bought something (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENG- used ENG instead of L1 when speaking with someone of same L1 (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends help with pronunciation (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun (9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movies (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museums (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native speaker colleagues helping with English (10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native speakers- imitating them (8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native speakers- listening to their speech for pronunciation targets (8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native speakers- speaking to native speakers (15)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office space (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation- consciously using new patterns (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-analyze or analysis (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking opportunities (31)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking practice (6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking with classmates (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking with other international students (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking with strangers (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sporting event (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students- interaction with (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students- told them to help with English (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology- make recordings (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV (10)</td>
<td>TOTAL number of codes: 168 12/13 participants (all but Arya)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table E.3. Frequency Count of Supporting Codes for Topic 3 (How General English Language Skills Improvement Helped the Participants)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Number of codes and participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dictionary for pronunciation (2)</td>
<td>TOTAL number of codes: 64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENG- vocab acquisition (1)</td>
<td>Total number of participants: 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal-setting (1)</td>
<td>(Lili, Liu, Polly, Evelyn, Jon)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcasts (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparedness (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation organization (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading in ITAs’ field of study (6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading- ENG language how to books (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slang (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sporting event (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Styles and-or trends (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time- buy time or make time (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOEFL- studying for (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translator or bilingual dictionary (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV (10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual cue (7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary (16)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table E.4. Frequency Count of Supporting Codes for Topic 4 (Obstructions to Spoken English Improvement)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Number of codes and participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>alone or isolated (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>already knew material (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>course work- first quarter at OU (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>distractions or distracted (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ITA Prep class] feedback from classmates (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frustrating or frustrated (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghanaian English dialect (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grading (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1 community (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1 interaction with others in L1 community (7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1- amount of time speaking L1 (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1- housemate or roommate shares same L1 (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1- movies and-or TV (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1- websites (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>major area of study (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>misses friends from home (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA- activities not liked (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA- affected emotions (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA- amount of time spent (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA- demanded perfection (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA- feedback unhelpful (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA- Native Accent (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL tutors (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reading- time it takes (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self- thoughts (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>silence (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slang- too informal for speaking with professors (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>speaking opportunities (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>speaking with other international students (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>speaking without trying to incorporate pronunciation targets (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teaching duties (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thinking (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>time- little time for anything but coursework (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>workload (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL number of codes: 71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of participants: 12 of 13 (everyone but Lili)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>