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The Foreign Teaching Assistant's Manual by Patricia Byrd, Janet C. Constantinides, and Martha C. Pennington and Teaching Matters: Skills and Strategies for International Teaching Assistants by Teresa Pica, Gregory A Barnes, and Alexis G. Finger

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***The Foreign Teaching Assistant's Manual*** by Patricia Byrd, Janet C. Constantinides, and Martha C. Pennington. New York: Collier Macmillan, 1989. 193 pp.

***Teaching Matters: Skills and Strategies for International Teaching Assistants*** by Teresa Pica, Gregory A. Barnes, and Alexis G. Finger. New York: Newbury House, 1990. 192 pp.

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With the remarkable growth in the number of international teaching assistants (ITAs) on U.S. campuses in recent years, most major research universities--indeed most universities with teaching assistants--have had to deal with the often difficult process of effectively incorporating international graduate students into the teaching assistant ranks, what Bailey (1984) has characterized as "the foreign TA problem." The fields of engineering and mathematics, as well as the biological and physical sciences, have been especially affected by the substantial increase in the number of ITAs hired to assist with undergraduate courses.

In response to this situation, most institutions have created special training programs for ITAs, which resemble ESP courses for teachers, the results of which have been shared in national conferences and published articles. More recently, two books have appeared which address the training of ITAs: *The Foreign Teaching Assistant's Manual*, by Patrice Byrd, Janet C. Constantinides, and Martha C. Pennington, and *Teaching Matters: Skills and Strategies for International Teaching Assistants*, by Teresa Pica, Gregory A. Barnes, and Alexis G. Finger.

Teaching assistants at American universities perform a variety of roles. While most TAs grade exams, prepare materials, and hold office hours, many of them also run labs and lead discussion sections. Their status as graduate students helps them to bridge the gap between professor and student. Since clearly all of this is true for international TAs as well, what are the special hurdles ITAs face as new participants in the university instructional process?

The primary concerns of the ITA involve three broad areas: language, culture, and pedagogy. Although there is obviously a

good deal of overlap among these areas, we shall discuss each separately by referring to pertinent literature and then reviewing each book in that particular light.

Shaw & Garate (1984) define an ITA's ***language*** skills as the ability to express meaning based on his or her knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, but they also point out that communicative skills depend on discourse competence which involves the ability to perform such functions as initiating a lesson, defining a concept, or giving instructions. A study by Romstedt & Moon (1985) revealed that ITAs often have difficulty executing certain communicative functions, e.g., responding to complaints, clarifying misunderstandings, and eliciting feedback. In their study of the role of lab assistants, Plakans & Myers (1989) recommended that linguistic instruction in ITA programs should center on interactional skills, in particular on the comprehension of informal speech and the ability to pose effective questions.

The orientation to language skills in *The Foreign Teaching Assistant's Manual* (henceforth, the *FTA Manual*) "presupposes an advanced level of English" (p. ix). As a result, the book deals neither with grammar nor vocabulary, but focuses almost exclusively on pronunciation instruction, including a review of vowels and consonants, stress and intonation patterns, and rules for pausing and blending between words. Such a focus belies an assumption that a fuller knowledge of English pronunciation will aid in the comprehension of informal speech, one of the skills recommended by Plakans & Myers (1989). Although a brief discussion of delivery (e.g., eye contact and gestures) begins the section on pronunciation, the authors clearly expect that ITAs will receive most of their instruction and feedback on discourse competence and interactional skills when performing the teaching tasks later on in the book. And indeed, the broader communication skills contextualized in the "Practice for Teaching" section of the *FTA Manual* reflect the overlap between language and pedagogy.

Language skills are not directly addressed in *Teaching Matters: Skills and Strategies for International Teaching Assistants* (henceforth, *Matters*). The authors either assume adequate English proficiency or expect it to be treated in a separate course. The book thus deals with communicative ability primarily as it relates to actual teaching. In the introductory section, "Notes to the Teachers," the authors clearly state: "We take for granted that you will engage in considerable videotaping and replay" (p. viii). In line with Shaw & Garate (1984), who point out that ITA communicative competence

involves being able to perform typical teaching functions, this book closely intertwines improvement in language and communication skills with pedagogical training. As an additional language resource, a list of current pronunciation instructional texts is included in an appendix.

The second aspect in ITA training concerns knowledge of ***culture***--in this case, familiarity with the culture of the American classroom in general, as well as, more specifically, of the ITA's own university and department. A lack of such cultural information could lead to a considerable mismatch between ITA and student expectations (Pialorsi, 1984) and result in various misunderstandings, such as what is considered appropriate student behavior in class, what level of preparation students bring to the subject matter, and how formal or informal the relationship between TAs and undergraduates should be.

The *FTA Manual* devotes its first four chapters to culture, beginning with a cross-cultural comparison of education, university life, faculty, and students. Chapter 2 offers hands-on activities and worksheets to help ITAs familiarize themselves with their specific department, whereas the final two chapters in Section I provide descriptions of American students and faculty. The *FTA Manual* thus covers all aspects of American classroom culture, focusing both on what specific departments and undergraduates might expect of ITAs as instructors and on what ITAs can expect of their American students.

In *Matters*, cultural background information is provided in a single chapter highlighting the American university system. Useful chapter appendices include a list of common American first names with their corresponding nicknames and a list of the abbreviated names for most academic disciplines. Compared to the *FTA Manual*, *Matters* provides a basic general knowledge of academic culture but does not include as extensive a treatment of American faculty and student expectations, nor does it place as much emphasis on getting to know one's own department.

It should be noted that the linguistic and cultural hurdles facing ITAs are not unlike those experienced by second language international students in general. However, in their roles as university instructors to mainly native-speaker students, ITAs appear to require contextualized linguistic and cultural input going well beyond that needed by the average foreign student completing a degree. The books under review have certainly attempted to

respond to this requirement, especially with regard to cultural knowledge.

Thirdly, the need for skillful ***pedagogy***, while not unique to ITAs, is especially crucial given the possibility that ITAs may have linguistic and cultural difficulties. The sorts of necessary skills ITAs need include classroom management, lesson planning, using the blackboard, and checking for comprehension. In some respects this area might be viewed as a cultural variable and not merely a pedagogical one. Furthermore, just as teaching styles may vary from country to country, methodological preferences may vary across disciplines or even departments. Plakans & Myers (1989) thus strongly recommend that ITAs familiarize themselves with their particular American teaching context, especially through contacts with experienced ITAs in their department.

Pedagogy is approached by the *FTA Manual* from several perspectives. In addition to providing extensive general cultural background on the typical teaching context of ITAs, the book devotes three sections to practical pedagogical matters: "Background to Teaching" (e.g., planning a course, using audiovisual aids, and preparing tests), "Practice for Teaching" (actual mini-teaching assignments), and "Observation of Teaching Behaviors" (worksheets with guidelines for observing classes). The result is that ITAs have ample opportunity to prepare for, observe, and practice in the target teaching context, especially if instructors and students take advantage of the cross-referencing of relevant materials suggested by the authors (in a somewhat confusing appendix) to make the most of the book's modular organization.

*Matters*, which describes itself as a "process-oriented textbook" (p. vii), devotes nine of its ten chapters to teaching, covering a wide spectrum not only of pedagogical settings, such as the classroom and the office hour, but of instructional skills as well, such as presenting information, employing effective questioning strategies, testing and grading. In line with the sequence of a typical teacher training course, the authors have placed classroom teaching skills, such as presenting information, using effective questioning strategies, and office hour interaction, in early chapters, while more global preparatory topics, such as planning a course and meeting a class, are postponed until later. *Matters* also includes a glossary of classroom-related terms and a list of research and pedagogical references. Cited throughout the book, the research references are a major strength of this text, providing sound theoretical support to the practical pedagogical functions and strategies that are addressed.

Some of these pedagogical skills are treated more extensively in one text than the other. The *FTA Manual*, for example, dedicates 5 chapters (Chapter 21-25) to different types of classroom observation activities, such as observing the setting, the instructor and the students, whereas *Matters* only mentions observations briefly in Chapter 10. On the other hand, *Matters* covers three topics more in depth than the *FTA Manual*: dealing with classroom questions and answers--both the TA's and the students'--(Chapter 3); working one-on-one and giving individualized instruction during the office hour (Chapter 4); and preparing the course syllabus, supported by a set of guidelines and a model outline (Chapter 5).

The two books may also be compared with relation to format. Specifically, each book structures its chapters in quite different ways, reflecting different overall styles. Whereas the *FTA Manual* consists primarily of worksheets to be used within the framework of a well-guided course of instruction, *Matters* could, because of the amount of background information it provides, be used not only as a classroom text but also as a reference for the individual student.

In the *FTA Manual,* each chapter, after a brief overview outlining its content, is divided into a number of subsections all of which are listed in the book's table of contents. The first two chapters, "Background to U.S. Education" and "Departmental Relations," begin each of their subsections with a **background assignment**, a type of pre-activity which either elicits the ITA's own background knowledge or encourages the ITA to investigate the department he or she will be teaching in. This is followed by a **discussion assignment** which provides opportunity for ITAs to share their results in a group. Beginning with Chapter 3, each subsection begins with a written passage (as short as one paragraph or as long as three pages) containing general information on the new topic. Following the passage, some **assignment** (i.e., a specific practical exercise) is set so that the ITA can digest and immediately apply the new information before moving on. Sample assignments include finding resources on one's campus, consulting with experienced ITAs about one's TA assignment, analyzing discourse from one's field, and performing mini-teaching lessons.

In contrast, *Matters* structures its chapters in a more traditional way. Each chapter begins with a list of bold-faced key terms which are also explained in a glossary at the back of the book. Chapter introductions are brief, giving an overview of the chapter content as well as listing specific objectives. As in the *FTA Manual*,

each chapter is divided into clear subsections all of which are listed in the book's table of contents. However, even more than the *FTA Manual*, *Matters* provides many examples of authentic materials, such as a syllabus, a lesson plan, and a standardized course evaluation form. In addition, rather than embedding the activities throughout the chapters, as the *FTA Manual* does, *Matters* ends each chapter with **Comprehension Questions** (to check basic understanding of the text), **Discussion Questions** (to extend basic understanding), for example, "Are there ways to check your students' comprehension without asking a question?" (p. 47), and **Activities** (to apply the skills and strategies presented in the chapter) such as role-plays or classroom observations. It should be noted, however, that relevant exercises are suggested at the end of each subsection, and thus instructors or students can deal with the information more actively during the reading of the text itself.

In sum, these two books offer the instructor and/or planner of an ITA training program a variety of resources. The design and, to a certain extent, the purpose of the two texts are different. The *FTA Manual* offers brief but focused coverage, in a modular format, of many of the specific topics for which ITAs need guidance to prepare themselves as thoroughly as possible for their own setting and teaching assignment. *Matters*, on the other hand, provides greater in-depth treatment of fewer topics in a sequentially chronological manner. Whereas both books deal extensively with pedagogical issues, the *FTA Manual* not only more strongly emphasizes the possible cultural adaptation an ITA may need to make in the classroom, it also includes a section on pronunciation matters.

Both textbooks could be used in ITA training courses to great advantage, although the *FTA Manual*, because of its hands-on nature, would probably require stronger guidance from a course and instructor than *Matters,* which could also serve as a reference or self-study text at institutions where ITA training programs are brief. Either text could be used over a quarter or semester; the *FTA Manual*, in fact, contains enough activities and assignments for a year's worth of teaching preparation. But even universities restricted to intensive summer programs or shorter ITA orientations could greatly benefit from the thoughtful information and useful activities in these two texts.

It should be noted that both books assume that trainees will have access to videotaping of their practice teaching, although lack of this resource would not preclude the use of either text. That

videotaped mini-lessons form the core of most current ITA training programs greatly influences the approach each of these books takes. However, one core feature of many ITA programs, which cannot be addressed in book format alone (and which is not addressed by either text), is the analysis and discussion of videotapes of experienced TAs in the various disciplines. This resource provides ITAs with an extremely helpful intermediate step between reading about teaching skills and doing it oneself.

As a final note, we wish to emphasize that a great deal of information in both books focuses on pedagogical skills which, as we stated earlier, are as essential (and often as lacking) in native-speaking TAs as in international TAs. It is hoped, therefore, that the useful applicability of these two texts will extend into the native-speaking TA arena as well.

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