

**Enhancing Teacher Education Programs through the Strength of Many Peoples:  
An Analysis of the Experiences of an International Teaching Assistant**

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## Introduction

In most institutions of higher education graduate students serve an integral role by assisting with research, contributing to publications and teaching classes at the undergraduate level. Through these contributions graduate students gain valuable experience that serves as a scaffold in their induction into the world of academia. Opportunities to work as a teaching or research assistant enhance students' curriculum vitae and contribute to developing the skills needed to gain future employment. However, these opportunities are not universally granted to graduate students in a program. One population that is often ignored when distributing teaching assistantships is international students. The literature on international graduate students predominantly focuses on linguistic and cultural issues that inhibit integration and the completion of program requirements. However, little attention has been directed towards international students' experiences in attempting to gain teaching opportunities and actually teaching courses. This paper will address this deficiency by reporting on the experiences of an international doctoral student at a Canadian university.

### The Internationalization of Higher Education

Higher education institutes have always included an international focus. Since the beginning of the modern university, institutions have stocked their shelves with the works of international academics and invited traveling scholars to share their ideas. Developing a community of international scholars has been an attractive proposition for universities in order to be at the forefront of cutting-edge developments and provide their students with diverse learning experiences. More recently, the internationalization of universities has been further cultivated by an influx of international students. Western universities

have promoted increased international enrollment as a business solution to their financial difficulties (Ryan & Zuber-Skerritt, 1999). In many western economies public support for higher education institutes has been diminished, thus leaving administrators to seek alternative forms of revenue. Full fee-paying international students have provided one attractive source of revenue. The importance of international graduate students to the financial viability of western institutions is evidenced by the continual increase in the number of students admitted into such programs (Katz, 2006).

#### Issues Encountered by International Graduate Students

In order to maintain the revenue provided by international graduate students, successful experiences must be promoted by universities. The failure of international graduate students to achieve success would hurt universities' reputations and hinder future recruitment efforts. As a result, considerable attention has been directed towards the issues encountered by international graduate students and potential solutions. The literature on the experiences of international graduate students has highlighted three primary areas of difficulty: linguistic problems, difficulties adapting to a new learning environment, and problems associated with living in a new culture. One of the most significant issues identified involved adapting to the use of a second language in an academic setting (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; Scheyvens, Wild, & Overton, 2003). Huang and Klinger (2006), for example, analyzed the perceived issues encountered by Chinese graduate students at two North American universities. The authors identified speaking and writing skills as one of the most influential factors adversely affecting students' academic experiences. This issue was also identified by Liu and Kuo (1996) in their study of international graduate students at an American university. The authors noted a

correlation between students' linguistic proficiency and participation in classes.

Students attempted to 'save face' by adopting a more passive role in their graduate classes, thus inhibiting the learning opportunities available to them. Other linguistic issues identified in the literature include knowledge of the academic register and the disciplinary discourse of specific fields of study (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Gee, 2004), access to language support that is subject-specific (Balcom & Kozar, 1994), and cultural norms of language usage (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006).

While language has an important influence on academic experiences, other factors were also found to influence international graduate students' experiences in North American universities. Support from academic faculty has been identified as a significant factor. Dedrick and Watson (2002) noted that supervisor support for international students may be inadequate because faculty members have not been trained to deal with the unique needs of the student population. Their contention was based on an analysis of published materials designed to assist university supervisors with their duties. The study found a dearth of resources that recognized the unique needs of international students. Goode (2007) further supported this claim by contending that international doctoral students often do not receive adequate support from their supervisors based on a discourse of 'independent learning' that permeates higher education institutes. Other authors have noted that a culture of independent learning has created difficulties for international students who have not been exposed to such a climate during their undergraduate studies (Huang & Klinger, 2006; Scheyvens, Wild, & Overton, 2003). Students reported experiencing difficulties adapting to new expectations about the role of the teacher and learner.

Finally, acculturation has been identified as a significant obstacle for international graduate students. Lack of familiarity with the local cultural environment means that common activities such as taking the bus or paying bills become strenuous, stressful activities. Scheyvens, Wild, and Overton (2003) noted that the process of adjusting to a new culture was particularly difficult for females, who were expected to organize their household in addition to scholarly responsibilities. Moreover, cultural differences were reported to interfere with the establishment of meaningful social relations with local colleagues (Huang & Klinger, 2006). This is significant because contact with local peers has been identified as a significant indicator of international graduate students' satisfaction with their program (Perucci & Hu, 1995).

While considerable literature exists about the general experiences of international graduate students, far less has been dedicated to their experiences in acquiring and successfully completing teaching assignments. Ruwe and Al-Wazedi (2003) explored issues associated with international graduate students' first teaching experiences. They concluded that a strong mentoring relationship between students and their advisors is critical to promoting successful teaching experiences. The article focused on the mentoring process, thus limiting analysis of other potential issues. In contrast, Olaniran (1999) investigated the effectiveness of a workshop designed to prepare newly appointed international graduate students for teaching positions. The author concluded that a 'one size fits all' approach was inadequate in addressing the unique needs of international students and that cultural adaptation needed to be included as a focal point. Wanta (2003) also investigated issues associated with international graduate teaching assistants; however, he investigated issues at a more holistic level than the previously mentioned

authors. Wanta (2003) identified two prominent issues that need to be addressed: increasing students' confidence in speaking using their second language and the creation of incentives for faculty members to foster mentorships with graduate teaching assistants. The article is written from the perspective of a faculty member though and does not provide insights into the experiences of international graduate students.

#### Potential Contributions of International Teaching Assistants

The limited number of articles analyzing the experiences of international teaching assistants is surprising considering the increased internationalization of North American campuses. With a growing population of international students it would be expected that the prevalence of international teaching assistants would increase. Increased participation in teaching activities would also be expected based on the valuable contributions international teaching assistants can make to developing globally competent graduates, a current emphasis of higher education institutions. Deardorff and Hunter (2006) wrote:

It is in every nation's best interest to invest as heavily in global competence preparedness as it does in military defense. Greater educational, social, and cultural awareness – of both friends and foes – is surely more powerful than the next greatest weapon system. Losing the battle of cross-cultural understanding will ultimately be the most costly of all. (p.82-83)

More than providing utility for national defense, the development of skills as an intercultural communicator is also essential for contributing to an increasingly diverse North American society. Sercu (2007) wrote: “An intercultural speaker is determined to understand, to gain an inside view of the other person's culture, and at the same time to contribute to the other person's understanding of his/her own culture from an insider's

point of view” (p.66). Therefore, the development of intercultural competence would serve to not only benefit individual understanding but also general social cohesion.

The importance of developing intercultural competence in educational institutions is evidenced by the number of publications relating to the topic (see for example Ward & Ward, 2003; Clark, 2002; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). A number of innovative approaches to addressing issues of diversity have been developed by academics, including holding campus-wide symposia (Cooney & Akintunde, 1999), establishing intergroup dialogue sessions (Clark, 2005), and promoting community-based service learning (Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 2000). However, what has been absent from the literature is the potential value of international teaching assistants in supporting the development of intercultural competence. Rather than limiting the concept to a theoretical discussion, international instructors provide students with unique opportunities for the practical application of intercultural competence. Moreover, international scholars contribute to North American programs by providing alternative perspectives that challenge taken-for-granted norms of education. International instructors bring with them lived experiences and cultural perspectives that challenge the stability of content as presented from a western perspective, thus, creating space for alternatives to be considered. Furthermore, the knowledge derived from the personal experiences of individuals who have negotiated multiple cultural perspectives is invaluable to prospective teachers who will be expected to act as cultural mediators (Sercu, 1995) in diverse classrooms.

### The Study

The current study was motivated by a dialogue between the two authors. The first author, Wenying, is an international doctoral student, completing her studies in second language pedagogy. Prior to her third year in the doctoral program she was offered a teaching assistantship as the principal instructor of a third-year curriculum course for ESL teachers. In her attempt to gain information about the course, she contacted the second author, Greg, who had taught the class the previous year. Greg is a Canadian, Caucasian male who is also completing a Ph.D. in second language pedagogy. During the conversation about the curriculum course, the subject was raised about collaborating on a research project. Finding a common topic of interest proved difficult until Wenying began to talk about her personal and professional experiences in Canada. The power of her experiences resonated with Greg, who had developed an interest in social issues associated with language learning and usage during his graduate studies. Moreover, it seemed like a story that needed to be shared.

Data was collected for the case study using two methods. The two authors engaged in numerous conversations about the topic, with several of the discussions recorded and transcribed. These conversations were supplemented by a professional journal that Wenying had contributed to throughout her experiences in the doctoral program. The case that is provided outlines Wenying's experiences since arriving in Canada with a brief description of her professional background. Greg's voice is prominent in the work in providing the narration of the case study and the analysis of the events. Nonetheless, it is Wenying's voice that is most prominent, as it is her spirit that is encapsulated in the study.

## The Case

### An Accomplished Background

Wenying was born to a family with very modest means. Her father died when she was young and her mother was an illiterate factory worker. In contrast to traditional practices in Chinese society, Wenying sought to change her social status by pursuing a university education. After completing a Bachelor and Masters degree in education, Wenying became an associate professor at the university and an independent entrepreneur with several education related initiatives. Wenying wrote: *“I became a popular public figure in education in my home town. For five years I had hosted radio programs and for twelve years I initiated big mass social activities on English education; conferences, seminars, and teacher/principal training programs on international citizenship education. At the same time, my school business expanded to two directly owned schools and ten affiliated sister schools. The number of staff reached 70, and students 700. In the meantime, I had four academic publications.”* Wenying was a highly respected educator with impressive accomplishments as a mentor, teacher educator, scholar and entrepreneur. After achieving considerable success in her homeland, Wenying decided to pursue a new challenge by enrolling in the doctoral program at a large Canadian university.

### Loss of Identity

The adjustment to life in a new country posed a significant challenge to Wenying. Unfamiliar with cultural norms and the mechanisms of western society, she found it difficult to acclimatize to her new setting. She wrote: *“Life was full of shock, puzzlement, disturbance, loss, resentment, loneliness, and depression. This was something that was*

*beyond my imagination. I even had no language to define and describe these feelings. I did not know what had gone wrong and how I had become so negative.”* The situation was further complicated by her new role as a student. Whereas in China she was revered as an educational expert, in Canada she was treated as just another graduate student. Moreover, conducting her studies in a second language posed a challenge to her personal efficacy. *“Rather than flowers and applause as I used to receive in China, there was an overwhelming chaos. I suddenly found I couldn’t understand the professors’ and the classmates’ talks. All the concepts were new and subtle. I couldn’t relate them to my past experience or future. When I finally found a topic I could contribute with my opinion, I was always too slow to miss the chance. My classmates talked like a machine gun without pause. I felt like I was being suddenly thrown into darkness, being blind, deaf, ignorant, bewildered, and discouraged.”* The inability to express herself as she desired had a crippling effect on her sense of identity.

Despite her initial struggles adapting to life in Canada, Wenying gradually became more comfortable in her new context. At the end of her first year in Canada she was offered a job at a local college as a teacher educator. The college was developing an international English teacher education program and Wenying was invited to be the inaugural instructor. The opportunity to work in a college after just one year in Canada was viewed as a tremendous success. Wenying stated: *“I heard lots of stories about new immigrants which were not pleasant. The immigrants I met all said life was too hard. Even if we came as foreign trained professionals, we couldn’t find a professional job. We had to have Canadian education and work experience. But for me this was my first year of immigration and I got this teaching job in a college with very good pay. So that*

*was a surprise for me. I was so happy and excited.*” The job entailed working with twenty Chinese teachers to improve their English proficiency and develop familiarity with western culture and teaching theories and methodologies. Due to her extensive experience in China, Wenying felt very comfortable with the assignment and expected to thrive in this position.

Originally, Wenying was the only instructor in the program. However, two weeks after receiving the job assignment she was informed that a Canadian woman had been hired as a co-instructor. Wenying’s colleague had no formal training as a teacher and her professional experience was limited to teaching kindergarten and daycare children. Nonetheless, the administrators of the program felt that it was necessary to hire a Canadian teacher in order to meet the expectations of the program participants. Although Wenying felt she was more than capable to teach the course alone, she welcomed the addition of a Canadian colleague. She stated: *“I was surprised because I did believe that I could do the job myself, but I also knew that I was not Canadian and I couldn’t speak as well as a Canadian native speaker. From the perspective of culture, Canadian teachers could offer better [insight] because they themselves were part of the culture. So I thought it was good for the students.”*

The program was in its inaugural year, therefore, the curriculum had not been clearly established. This contributed to difficulties in administering the course; however, Wenying and her colleague were able to make adaptations to ensure that meaningful learning experiences were promoted. Everything seemed to be progressing relatively smoothly when after four months of a six-month course, Wenying was summarily dismissed from her position without a clear rationale or opportunity to make changes.

The dismissal from her teaching position was a devastating blow to her professional identity. She stated: *“That affected me too much and for too long. That was a total deprivation of my identity, my confidence, my expertise. This job gave me hope. I hadn’t expected to get a professional job so soon and so fast. I got it fast and lost it fast.”*

Earlier struggles acclimatizing to Canada had resulted in tension surrounding the loss of identity. Her experiences at the college compounded the tension, by bringing her professional identity into question.

### Charting a New Course

Rather than adopting a defeatist attitude, Wenying set out to bring clarity to her experiences and to carve a future direction. Exposure to critical pedagogy in one of her classes had a particularly catalytic effect on her interpretation of recent events. In her professional diary she elegantly explicated her first encounter with the writings of critical theorists: *“Words are too weak to express my shock at our first encounter. Like a drowning person struggling for life amid a vast, unknown sea, critical pedagogy and the concept of conscientization saved me. Conscientization ruthlessly disclosed the hypocrisy and emancipated the oppressed. It enabled me to face the ‘ghost’ bravely, constantly recall and recount it, reflect on it, analyze it, inquire it with a critical mind.”*

Wenying used her newly acquired knowledge of critical pedagogy as a healing tool. She began to reflect upon her experiences in course papers and conference presentations. This helped her to alleviate the doubt that resonated from her earlier experiences and provided her with a community of support. She explained: *“I began talking about this experience in workshops and conferences. Some audience [members] came to me saying that they had experienced similar things and they said they appreciated my courage in speaking*

*about it and letting them feel they were not alone in suffering. It gave me courage to overcome this depression.*” The first step in healing came through self-expression, the second step came when she was given the opportunity to co-teach an undergraduate curriculum course for second language teachers in the Faculty of Education.

After her earlier experience teaching at the college, Wenying was both surprised and excited about the opportunity to teach Canadian undergraduate students. She stated: *“I was assigned a co-teaching job to undergraduate students. I was very surprised. At that time, I thought I was not qualified. Teaching Canadian students - this job in my standard was even more challenging and required higher expertise [than the earlier job].”* In order to recover from her earlier experience, Wenying needed to have a successful experience. For her, success was avoiding conflict and completing the teaching assignment. *“In order to make this teaching successful, I was very cautious with all relationships. Actually I hid my ideas. I didn’t say anything. I just worked hard to do my share of the work and I didn’t try to influence anybody. . . For me, I don’t need anybody to like me, all I need is a smooth process and no complaints.”* In adopting the goal to survive rather than thrive, Wenying withheld herself from her teaching. She attempted to meld into her surroundings by assuming a subordinate role to her co-instructor and adopting instructional strategies that were conservative and would not challenge students unnecessarily.

Wenying’s survivalist approach to teaching the course was successful in enabling her to re-establish her confidence. She successfully instructed Canadian pre-service teachers, thus cementing her transition from a student in Canada to a teacher. She wrote: *“The first step I made was still clumsy with a little uncertainty and over-cautiousness.*

*But I had crossed the boundary from a student to a teacher. It was not a returning, to a teaching field where I'd been actively involved for the past 19 years. It was something brand new, in a foreign environment, for foreign students, transmitting foreign concepts, using foreign techniques, with foreign colleagues, towards foreign goals. But they were not totally 'foreign' this time because I was included which meant we were not foreign to each other any more."* The sense of belonging that was established through this experience was a powerful force in Wenying's life. Rather than continually being perceived as an outsider, she had established a position as a social member of a larger mainstream community. She noted: *"This sense of belonging worked as a forceful push from a temporary co-teaching [position] to a dream for something bigger and longer."* Acceptance enabled her to re-establish her ambitions of asserting herself as a contributor in the realm of teacher education.

### Regaining Professional Autonomy

Inspired by her success, Wenying sought the opportunity to teach a course independently. She found information about the application process and wrote a letter to the department arguing why she should be given the opportunity. The initial response was disparaging. She wrote: *"During the application process I heard a comment that I was not culturally ready. I was not convinced because I believed my Chinese culture was a part of Canadian culture; I had lived as a Canadian resident, studied and practiced in its educational field for three years."* Although these comments were discouraging, Wenying didn't perceive their legitimacy and persisted in the application process. She lamented: *"What is the criterion for cultural readiness? Whose criterion is it? When would I be regarded as culturally ready? Would I ever be regarded as culturally ready?"*

*If one authority thought that I was not ready, should I just wait until given permission?  
Being unconvinced of this judgement, I continued the application process.”*

Wenyong’s persistence resulted in being offered a position as the principle instructor for an ESL curriculum course. Exuberant about the opportunity, she spent the next three months preparing for the course. First, she contacted a former instructor, Greg, and looked through the materials he had used in instructing the class. Second, she audited a second language curriculum course being delivered during the summer. This course had special significance for her because the instructor was also Chinese: *“He was the only professor of Chinese origin in the Faculty of Education. I always took him as a role model and a source of inspiration.”* Finally, she participated in an intensive two-week training program that aimed at improving non-native speaking instructors’ presentation skills. In addition to the preparation undertaken during the summer, Wenyong was also able to draw inspiration from her supervisor. As one of her program requirements, Wenyong observed her supervisor teaching a fourth-year curriculum course for second language majors and engaged in extensive reflection about the instruction. Each of these experiences provided Wenyong with ideas that she adapted and personalized, resulting in the creation of a syllabus that she was proud of. She noted: *“When I submitted the course syllabus, I was presenting something I was so proud to own and to show. It was just beautiful. Later upon request, I shared it with two other colleagues who were to teach a similar course and their response was, ‘wow!’”*

For Wenyong, being given the opportunity to teach the course was very exciting; her experiences in the class would not disappoint. She reflected in her journal: *“Since teaching the course, I haven’t experienced very emotional moments. Therefore, I haven’t*

*felt there is a strong and urgent need that I have to write to release the tension.”*

Although she had concerns about students’ knowledge base and their diligence in completing assignments, she felt confident in her abilities and perceived that the class was progressing very smoothly. As assignment deadlines neared, she sensed increased tension among students. She received e-mails from students expressing concerns about assignments and how they would be assessed. She patiently responded to students’ concerns and set out to provide assistance to students who were struggling. She recalled: *“I spent many extra hours in coaching those who could not understand or accomplish the assignments until every one of them was happy with a satisfactory project paper.”* Her efforts were rewarded as students performed well above expectation on their final assignments. This instilled in her a great sense of pride that she was able to assist students in achieving considerable growth as professionals.

#### Discussion

Wenying’s experiences were filled with frustration and struggle; however, her story is best characterized as one of hope. When she came to Canada she sought to develop her skills as a teacher educator but she also wanted to contribute to Canadian teacher education programs. A difficult experience early in her program brought her efficacy as an educator into question and almost destroyed Wenying’s aspirations. It was only as a result of her personal strength and resilience that she was able to fulfill her goals and contribute as a teaching assistant.

Wenying’s experiences are informant of a number of issues that face international graduate students in becoming teaching assistants. One issue that poses a significant obstacle is a deficit view of the contributions non-western graduate students can make to

higher education programs. As an Asian female, Wenying's professional expertise was repeatedly brought into question based on a perceived lack of 'cultural' knowledge. Historically, the discourse of western superiority has been established through the process of 'othering'. Drawing from the tradition of Greek mythology the 'other' was invariably labeled in terms of barbaric behaviour, which in comparison defined western society as civilized (Sardar, Nandy, & Davies, 1993). When the ascribed barbaric nature of the 'other' was associated with the undeveloped child in the life cycle, the rational legitimization for imperialist agendas was created (Nandy, 1983). The result was centuries of colonial domination and the indoctrination of colonized peoples with western ideas. The physical colonization of nations has ceased; however, supported by the proliferation of the English language and its associated culture (Crystal, 2003), a more subtle form of colonization has taken place that promotes structures of unequal material and power distribution that supports the perception of western superiority (Phillipson, 1992).

This process of 'othering' was apparent in Wenying's experiences in Canada. Based on the perception that Chinese students would want to see a Caucasian, Canadian teacher, Wenying was assigned a co-teacher during her initial teaching assignment. Subsequently, she was criticized for using Chinese in the class to explain difficult concepts. Although this is a pedagogically sound decision, it was not the behaviour that would be associated with a monolingual, western educator and, therefore, it was deemed inappropriate. The process of 'othering' was not restricted to her early experiences at the college. When she applied for an independent teaching position, questions about her

cultural preparedness were raised, a clear manifestation of western chauvinism and an indication of the desire to preserve local norms.

While it is important to address western chauvinism by acknowledging the strengths of international graduate students, it is also important to recognize the unique needs of students who are not familiar with the societal and academic culture in which they are functioning. Wenying's story highlighted the difficulties experienced when acclimatizing to a new culture and language. On a personal level the transition to living in a new culture was very challenging. Activities that once seemed trivial now demanded greater attention. As Scheyvens, Wild, and Overton (2003) noted, practical difficulties in adjusting to a new environment have a significant impact on the ability of international students to delve into their work.

Moreover, the transition from professional life in one's homeland to a new beginning as a graduate student in a new country can be very difficult. Even though an individual such as Wenying may have a very accomplished professional background, the transition to a new work environment may be very challenging, in particular as it affects the confidence and personal efficacy of the individual. Verity (2000) wrote: "professional identity is a zone of historically situated activity vulnerable to external conditions and influence which may require strategic maintenance, rather than a fixed state of being whose continuity is assured" (p. 180). Wenying's experience demonstrated the vulnerability of her professional identity and the need for support and mentoring to ensure successful experiences. The support provided cannot be the same as that given to a Canadian graduate student, but must cater to her specific professional needs (Jacob &

Greggo, 2001; Ryan & Zuber-Skerritt, 1999). Such support systems were absent for Wenying.

Despite the absence of programmatic support, Wenying took the initiative to locate resources that would help in working as a teaching assistant. Subsequent to her initial teaching experience, Wenying participated in an independent study class by observing a course taught by her supervisor. The course provided her with an opportunity to become acquainted with Canadian students and commonly utilized teaching strategies. After a period of observation, Wenying was able to ease back into teaching by co-teaching with a colleague. Subsequently, she audited another curriculum course, discussed teaching options with a previous instructor and participated in a presentation skills workshop. Each of these experiences acted as a scaffold that prepared her for independently teaching the course. Although it may not have been a conscious undertaking at the time, the steps that she took were well devised to ease the transition to a more prominent role. Wenying's determination to seek out support is a positive model for other international graduate students to follow. Moreover, it provides a template of how faculties could ease the transition of international graduate students into teaching positions.

### Conclusion

The increased internationalization of North American universities and the need to develop globally competent individuals necessitates providing more opportunities for international graduate students to work as teaching assistants. In order for this to happen though, faculties must dedicate resources to supporting the development of international teaching assistants. This would require a reversal of the current trend to let teaching

assistants 'sink or swim' in the classroom (Wanta, 2003). It would also require training on the part of supervisors to address the unique needs of international students.

Nonetheless, by establishing a mentoring program and a network of support, faculties could not only assist graduate students in acquiring the skills needed for future employment but also promote valuable learning experiences for undergraduate students.

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