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Facing with Non-nativeness while Teaching: Enacting Voices of International Teaching Assistants of Basic Communication Courses

Arata Miyazaki
Kaori Yamada

INTRODUCTION

Maintaining the quality of basic courses offered at universities in the United States is critical for both undergraduate students to develop fundamental skills and knowledge of the subject matter and for course directors and administrators to manage the workload of full-time faculty members in the department. The use of so-called graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), or simply, teaching assistants (TAs), is a commonly shared strategy to balance such an administrative management issue in higher education. Meanwhile, graduate programs in America attract students from all over the world. Gomez and Pearson (1990) once noted, more than two decades ago, that the United States had become “the graduate school for the world” (p. 58). Eventually, a growing number of international students attending graduate programs in the U.S. have led to the increasing presence of international teaching assistants (ITAs) who engage in teaching duties as non-native English speakers (Twale, Shannon, & Moore, 1997). This trend is observed across disciplines, and basic courses in speech communication and communication studies are no exception (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Gray, 1990).
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Though teaching as GTAs while pursuing their degree is such a challenging experience for all graduate students, the situation becomes more intense for ITAs. English is the medium for teaching and communication with students in and outside the classroom. Despite the level of their intellectual knowledge on the subject matter, however, language performance of ITAs often hinders them from effectively conducting their teaching duties. Undergraduate students with limited exposure to the varieties of English (or of Englishes) also struggle with learning due primarily to language barriers, resulting in their complaints about the ITAs' lack of English competency and fluency. This is well illustrated in Bailey's (1983; 1984) discussions about the “foreign TA problem,” which is still well applied to the current situation even three decades after her initial writing.

This paper presents the authors’ “voices” as ITAs concerning this issue in the context of basic communication education. We have engaged in a sufficient amount of teaching experience in public speaking courses as ITAs at American universities. It is our contention that our co-constructed narrative demonstrates how an ITA’s non-native identity, or what we call “non-nativeness” in relation to languages employed becomes highly nuanced while teaching American, native, English speaking students how to better their communicative performance. Different from the cases of the math, engineering, or science classes as in Bailey’s (1983; 1984) discussion about the foreign TA problem, our co-constructed narrative contributes to a better understanding of the connection between language and identity of ITAs in the basic communication education context. Not only is it important to address the efficacy of the use of ITAs for basic
communication courses, this language and identity issue deserves further investigation considering the power of English around the world (Crystal, 2003).

To elucidate the key notion of non-nativeness that affects the performance of ITAs, this paper first presents literature concerning native/non-native issues in the ESL (English as a Second Language) context. Although our focus is not on ESL, this provides a framework for the discussion between language and identity within an education context and helps us situate our discussion within the net of related inquiry. Discussions about undergraduate students’ perceptions about non-native English speaking instructors will also be examined in order to explicate the dynamics of such classroom situations. Based on the literature review, we propose our research question for the issue at hand. Then, we detail the co-constructed narrative method for enacting our voices as ITAs. The analysis of our narratives, namely, our narrative co-construction follows in the subsequent section by taking a dialogical approach to present our shared reality, or narrative truth of ITAs’ non-nativeness of public speaking. We argue that non-nativeness is displayed, developed, and negotiated through interactions with both native and other non-native speakers. Thus, non-nativeness is not monolithic but is highly relational and multilayered. Based on our narrative co-construction of ITAs of public speaking, we suggest two practical proposals to better the situation for all groups of people involved in basic communication education.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity is constructed and negotiated through social interactions and any form of communicative conducts with other individuals in society (Blumer, 1969). Park (2007) claims that non-nativeness, or non-native speaker identity appears in a form of “doing being [a non-native speaker] in the course of interaction[s]” (p. 340) with other native speakers. Especially, non-nativeness is critical in cultures where English accounts for a significant portion of education. Thus, the American higher education environments can be seen as the crucible of relationships and interactions between native and non-native English speakers, which provides an effective lens to examine the connection between language and identity.

The special issue of TESOL Quarterly in 1997 is devoted particularly to the discussions by TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) scholars about Language and Identity. Here, the “language” refers specifically to “English” spoken and employed by various so-called non-native speakers. In an opening note for this special issue, Norton (1997) raises a question about the “relationship among language, identity, and the ownership of English” and asks “whether English belongs to native speakers of English, to speakers of standard English, to White people, or to all of those who speak it, irrespective of their linguistic and sociocultural histories” (p. 422). Responding to the theme, discussions presented in this special issue critically examine the problematic assumptions associated with the inscribed labels of “native” and “non-native.”
Being “non-native” means to be always inferior to native speakers, to be incomplete, and to be insufficient (Amin, 1997). As the suffix *non* indicates, non-native speakers of English often struggle to achieve goals that can hardly, if not impossibly, be achieved. This has intensified a dichotomy between these labels and resulted in an extremely idealized idea of *nativeness* (Leung, Harris, & Rampton, 1997). Considering the diversity of English spoken by different races or ethnic groups, as well as the complexity of the issue of language and identity, Nero (1997) claims that some speakers of English should be labeled as neither native nor non-native. However, even when individuals are fluent enough in a language to conduct themselves, it often depends on how individuals are labeled by their language(s) that socially define(s) their social identity in relation to language affiliation; namely, *nativeness* or *non-nativeness*.

Such a non-nativeness issue particularly stands out when non-native speakers play a role of an instructor who is assumed to hold an authoritative status, seasoned knowledge of the subject matter, and more importantly, highly skilled command of both linguistic and technical languages they employ for teaching. Attempting to address the foreign TA problem (Bailey, 1983; 1984), a number of research has examined the ways to better the situation through testing and evaluating ITAs’ language performance (Halleck & Moder, 1995; Yule & Hoffman, 1990), providing institutional support to enhance their English (Gorsuch, 2011), addressing language barriers between ITAs and native speaking students (Plakans, 1997; Rubin, 1992; Tyler, 1992), and acknowledging the advantages of ITAs as a
role model of a successful “learner” (Medgyes, 1992; Tang, 1997).

Along with the discussions about the strategies to help ITAs improve their English, it is critical to acknowledge how students’ perceptions affect the dynamics of the classroom significantly, regardless of the level of confidence and competence the ITAs believe themselves to hold about the subject. For instance, Butler’s (2007) study reveals that the actual nativeness of the teacher is not necessarily the primary factor that affects students’ learning outcomes, while students’ perceived nativeness, or a lack thereof, indeed influences their evaluation of the credibility of an instructor. Likewise, Gomez and Pearson (1990) examined the perceptions of American undergraduate students enrolled in public speaking courses about credibility and homophily of TAs with different nationalities. They found that the participants regard American TAs as being more “homophilous” and approachable than ITAs to them. When gender comes into play, male ITAs tend to be regarded as the least homophilous to American students. This, however, again, is not necessarily correlated with their actual learning performance in class. Such stigmatic perceptions on ITAs deserve further investigation, considering the results of Buerkel-Rothfuss and Fink’s (1993) study that suggest students in speech classes even rate GTAs higher than tenured-track faculty members for some attributes such as friendliness, closeness, and accessibility.

Butler’s (2007) and Gomez and Pearson’s (1990) studies are highly instructive in addressing the issue of language and identity of ITAs in the context of basic communication education. Different from science-ori-
mented fields, basic communication courses deal with students’ everyday life subjects such as, to name a very few, self and identity, interpersonal and intercultural communication, and public speaking. Especially, public speaking has become one of the most demanded basic communication courses in order to help students prepare for their future employment (Verderber, 1991). Winsor, Curtis, and Stephens (1997) conclude, the same as their previous research about the aspects of students expected for their successful job search (Curtis, Winsor, & Stephens, 1989), that “the skills most valued in the contemporary job-entry market are communication skills” (p. 177; see also Peterson, 1997). Considering the nature of public speaking classes that emphasizes the development of students’ communicative performance, the context of public speaking courses provides a very unique scope to examine how non-nativeness of ITAs is always challenged and negotiated in and outside the classroom environment.

For our discussion about the non-nativeness of ITAs of public speaking courses, we propose the following research question: “How do ITAs of public speaking courses manage to survive in the English speaking institution, while negotiating their non-nativeness in relation to others?” To address this research question, we will employ the co-constructed narrative approach to examine our ITA experiences of public speaking. The next section details this method as well as the narrators of the study.
METHOD

Unmediated Co-constructed Narrative Method

Narrating oneself is a powerful form of meaning- and sense-making in which we, as human beings, engage (Polkinghorne, 1988). Narratives are developed for various reasons and purposes (Plummer, 2008). Some narratives are recounted reflexively, rendering meanings to our life experiences (Hinchman & Hinchman, 2001) and, eventually, to a sense of self and our identity construction (Ochs & Capps, 1996). Regardless of the form they take, narratives are reflections of subjective interpretations of the past and ongoing events and feelings we experience in the course of our everyday life. Thus, the exploration of narratives provides us with narrative truth, which is different from the scientific, positivistic notions of Truth or reality. Narrative truth is highly contextual and personal, and different narratives yield multiple narrative truths that still have significant impacts on one’s self and construction of identity (Chase, 2008; Plummer, 2008).

Narratives can be constructed collectively with someone who shares a similar life experience. For the current project, we employ the method of unmediated co-constructed narrative proposed by Ellis and Berger (2001). This is one of the narrative co-construction methods whereby two researchers who share a particular experience develop personal narratives individually and then integrate them into one story with a shared reality. This particular method is unmediated in that two researchers work together as researcher-participants without having someone else guide them for narrative co-construction (Ellis, 2004). Thus, the research-
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ers’ own experience, as well as their relationship becomes a subject of study, and the researchers themselves are researchers of their own life. Ellis and Berger (2001) emphasize that the use of the unmediated co-constructed narrative approach is to share the complex emotions individuals go through in critical life events “so that readers might experience our experience—actually feel it—and consider how they might feel or have felt in similar situations” (p. 863). Unmediated narrative co-construction is such a self-reflexive approach so that, in narrating personal experiences collectively, Ellis and Berger claim that narrators of a story guide readers to connect “emotions to the cultures in which they arise” (p. 863).

The unmediated co-constructed narrative method was originally employed for exploring the issues between romantic partners who share some critical incidents for their relationship, such as their unexpected pregnancy and the decision about abortion (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Berger, 2001). As demonstrated in Toyosaki and Pensoneau’s (2005) study about the interpersonal cultural analysis of their friendship, however, the co-constructed narrative method is also “useful for partners in any sort of meaningful, interpersonal, intercultural relationship” (p. 59). With the applied approach and by localizing their research “by valuing [their] own friendship as a subject of study” (p. 54), Toyosaki and Pensoneau examine how friendship between two individuals from different cultures have been nurtured beyond the traditional understands of the intercultural encounter.

We consider the unmediated co-constructed narrative appropriate for the current project since we have long been engaging in co-construction of our narratives.
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as ITAs of public speaking courses in the American graduate programs. Also, following Toyosaki and Pensoneau’s (2005) extended approach to this method, we consider that critical events, or epiphanies can be experienced and shared as long as we agree that we go through similar experiences on the same issue. In sharing and co-constructing narratives, our relationship becomes more meaningful and jointly-authored (Ellis, Adam, & Bochner, 2011, para. 23), and we eventually “participate in each other’s existence” (Bochner & Ellis, 1995, p. 205). We argue that our relationship, or companionship sharing unique ITA experiences of public speaking at different graduate programs works as a subject of study and provides rich descriptions of and a new perspective toward identity construction of non-native speakers.

Narrative Co-construction

Following the unmediated co-constructed narrative approach, we first revisited our interactions prior to the initiation of the current project. In so doing, we referred back to our own personal narratives that we had developed during the course of our ITA experience, such as diaries, personal notes, and emails to close friends and the ones exchanged between us. We find Toyosaki and Pensoneau’s (2005) brief summary of the step-by-step narrative co-construction procedures (Bochner & Ellis, 1995; Ellis & Berger, 2001) useful and appropriate for our project (p. 59). In narrative co-construction, we 1) first identified an epiphany in which we were so involved that we had “no way to make sense of the experience at first” (Toyosaki & Pensoneau, 2005, p. 59), 2) “independently constructed a detailed chronology of the
emotions, events, decisions, and coping strategies that had taken place” (Ellis & Berger, 2001, p. 863), 3) constructed a narrative individually based on the chronology, 4) exchanged and read each other’s versions of the epiphany, and 5) wrote our jointly co-constructed narrative. A final story is our co-constructed narrative about non-nativeness of ITAs of public speaking, which illustrates the process we went through “to access our feelings and resolve [the] epiphany for ourselves” (Ellis, 2004, p. 77).

Our discussion is based on our subjective interpretations and explorations of our own experiences, and it involves distress and emotionally evoking stories. However, it is not our intention to elicit sympathy from readers. As Ellis, Adam, and Bochner (2011) clarified, the key is to “use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders” (para. 9). It is our contention that our entire ITA experience is more like survival, and that obtaining a social role as an instructor of the introductory public speaking course was a critical turning point, that is, an epiphany that made us rethink our non-nativeness.

“Participants”: Narrators of the Study

One of virtues of narrative co-construction is to invite readers to the world within narratives so that they may realize that such a story “could be about anybody” (Ellis, 2004, p. 77) who comes across similar emotionally provoking life incidents and experience. In order them to focus on our narrative truth of the experience, not on ourselves (Ellis, 2004), we employ pseudonyms for our names: Masaharu for a male’s voice and Sayaka for a
female’s voice. We are both Japanese who were born and raised in Japan, speaking Japanese as a mother tongue and English as a second, learned language.

After finishing the undergraduate program with an English major in Japan, we came to the United States, at different years, to further pursue our mutual academic interest, communication studies. Masaharu enrolled in a master’s program in 2004 and continued to work on his doctoral degree at the same school since 2006. Sayaka started her master’s degree at her university in 2008 and then enrolled in a different school for her doctoral degree in 2010. In our master’s programs, we solely studied as graduate students without engaging in any teaching duties. Like many other international students, we occasionally had small talks over the phone or online about school in order to cope with the difficulties and various kinds of stress we experienced in the course of our scholarly pursuits.

After we proceeded to a doctoral program, we received a teaching assignment as GTAs (in the real situation, we are also considered as and called GTAs, not ITAs) for introductory public speaking courses. Although we were assigned as GTAs, Masaharu started teaching as a stand-alone instructor who took the full responsibility for the courses he taught, such as conducting lectures, grading assignments, and holding office hours like faculty members do. Sayaka worked for the instructor as a TA for the first two semesters, and then started teaching as a stand-alone instructor. Though at different years, we both started teaching around in the middle of our 20s. While feeling so excited about obtaining a valuable teaching opportunity, we were so frightened to teach American undergraduate
students *public speaking* in English as non-native speakers, anticipating an enormous number of complaints from students about our language performance and credibility.

Once Sayaka received her assignment in 2010, she and Masaharu came to spend more time sharing the difficulties of being an instructor for a speech class as non-native English speakers. With his three-year teaching experience on the same subject by that time, Masaharu often provided Sayaka with some advice, while recalling his own first-year teaching experiences where he also suffered from tremendous emotional burdens to face his students as an instructor. Even though we were not in close vicinity to each other, we talked relatively frequently thanks to information communication technologies. Such regular interactions often worked therapeutically and helped us survive in a program by sharing experiences and supporting each other to release tensions from study and teaching, and more importantly, from being non-native. Since then, we started to exchange ideas about and feelings toward how we would engage and face non-nativeness for our survival as ITAs. The next section, Analysis, presents our co-constructed narrative by taking a dialogical approach to show our analysis of the individual narratives, which addresses our research question: “*How do ITAs of public speaking courses manage to survive in the English speaking institution, while negotiating their non-nativeness in relation to others?*” The Discussion will follow our co-constructed narrative, and we suggest two practical proposals for the issue at hand.
**Analysis**

*Masaharu:* Writing own chronology and narrative of our ITA experience was really therapeutic. And reading each other’s versions really helped us identify that the teaching assignment for public speaking courses was actually a turning point for our understandings of non-nativeness.

*Sayaka:* Yes indeed. Developing narratives about our ITA experience gave us a way to see our non-nativeness from different angles, which would never have been done independently at the beginning of the assignments. I found that our non-nativeness is highly relational. Working as an ITA provided me with more chances to interact with other TAs, both American and international graduate students. Solely focusing on my own study, I had more international friends than American friends in my master’s program. I considered myself an *international* student at that time, simply because of the social cohort with which I associated myself. Now that I have more American friends and colleagues than international friends thanks to the teaching assignment, I have become comfortable with labeling myself as a *graduate* student. This creates a sense of belonging, diluting the sense of inferiority of non-nativeness associated with being an international student. Such a labeling act is quite powerful no matter if it is done by your own will or being imposed by someone else.

*Masaharu:* The same is true for me. Making *American*, native, English speaking friends was a serious issue for me at the beginning of my scholarly pursuit in the U.S., assuming that having many native speaking friends would help me succeed in the program as well as
develop my English. Before my teaching assignment, however, there was not as much of a chance for me to socialize with other American students as I would have liked. Interactions with other international—most often, Asian—friends were fun and important. With a feeling of guilt, and to be honest, however, I never felt satisfied with my entire graduate program experience at that time, nor did I see any improvements in my language performance. Having only other non-native English speaking friends reinforced my idea about own non-nativeness in a negative way. Then, the assignment first brought some peripheral changes to my school life. I felt that I had received a “place” for myself in a program, both physically and relationally. Having been assigned a desk in the office, I could officially stay in a place where other graduate students always engaged in everyday interactions. This expanded my relational boundaries, allowing me to stay in a relational network of other GTAs, namely, native speakers. This is what I initially felt lacking from my graduate program experiences, as well as in my American life. The teaching assignment changed this situation significantly, and I felt like I was beginning to obtain membership in the community. As Myers (1998) points out, peer socialization was a critical means for assuring comfort in a GTA community and helped me establish a sense of belonging.

Sayaka: I can see how vital it was to feel a sense of belonging, or to obtain membership for our survival in a graduate program. Emphasizing the importance of membership from the other members of a new community to establish one’s positionality, Stone (1962) claims “identity is intrinsically associated with all the joining
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and departures of social life. To have an identity is to join with some and depart from others, to enter and leave social relations at once” (p. 94). The mentoring program provided by my department was a huge help in this regard, which assigned me a third year American doctoral student as a mentor who had had two years of teaching experience on the same course. As Buerkel-Rothfuss, Fink, and Amaro (1994) suggest, mentorship is an effective means for helping new TAs cope with teaching responsibilities. Having a mentor who was always willing to listen to me meant a lot to me. I really appreciated that I had someone I could talk to, whenever I needed to, especially in my first year of teaching in conjunction with the start of a new doctoral program. Also, the mentor treated all of her mentees equally, which made me feel assured that I was at the same level as other American GTAs who also struggled with their survival of the first year in the doctoral program. I came to share the difficulties and coping strategies for teaching with my office mates, and it became reciprocal. Through such conversations with other GTAs, I gradually realized that my language performance, or non-nativeness was not detrimental to my teaching ability.

Masaharu: Our program did not have a mentoring program, so I did not get as much of a chance to ask for help as I would have liked. However, I do remember how I felt when we first started sharing our struggles of teaching after you received an assignment. And I believe that this is when our companionship started to grow significantly. By that time, I had had three years teaching experience and developed a bit more confidence than at the beginning of my assignment. I did not have much opportunity to share the hardships of being an
ITA of a public speaking course with someone who was also in the same situation as me. So, conversations with you were cathartic for me. It was a big surprise for me to know that you had also been going through a lot of emotional difficulties from teaching at that time. Of course, I never assumed that you would be a perfect person, but knowing you as a very intelligent and successful student prior to the graduate program, it was somewhat reassuring to know even you would think that teaching was that challenging. And I appreciated the fact that you disclosed such personal, emotional burdens to me. Having a quasi-mentoring experience as a mentor for you, in a way, allowed me to think back my own first-year teaching experience in a reflexive way.

Sayaka: I appreciate you saying I was a successful student, but I myself did not feel that way. I went through a huge anxiety about being a teacher of public speaking as a non-native speaker of English. It was nice to have a mentor like you who had experienced similar struggles. I was the only ITA who was teaching public speaking in my program, and all the other TAs were Americans. The department had three ITAs other than me, but all of them were teaching another course, business communication. Although the mentorship program, support from the course director, and conversations with other TAs helped me a lot, I had no one in my department who could understand the difficulties of being non-native while teaching public speaking. Through listening to the hardships you had experienced in your first year of teaching, I could feel I was not the only one who struggled. Knowing you as a “good teacher” who had been awarded by your department, I could believe that
non-nativeness would not necessarily hinder my teaching performance as much as I had thought.

**Masaharu:** What we commonly share about our teaching experience is our fear of being vulnerable in front of students because of our non-nativeness. Obviously, teaching public speaking as ITAs was not easy at all, not only because of the subject matter but also because the amount of our previous teaching experience was somewhat limited. Especially, in my case, this assignment was the very start of my entire teaching career. So, my first teaching experience was to teach American students public speaking as a stand-alone instructor in, of course, English. I felt depressed and frustrated almost every time I finished teaching. Sometimes, it was because of my students who were irresponsible or did not submit assignments in a timely manner. Most often, however, it was because of my performance as an instructor and my English skills. It was also challenging to not show any weakness or vulnerability in front of students as an instructor, which, I believe, intensified the psychological pressure I felt. All things combined, I could barely enjoy teaching at the beginning of my teaching career.

**Sayaka:** I am glad to hear you say that because I experienced similar hardships for becoming and performing a credible instructor in front of students. Though I had had one year TA experience for a professor of the same course, teaching American students as a stand-alone instructor sounded, and in fact was very challenging to me. My anxiety about speaking English in front of American students was very high on the first day of teaching. I felt pressured to fulfill my role as a teacher, knowing that if my students could not under-
stand what I said, it would provoke confusion and interrupt their learning. I was also concerned that poor control over English would lower my credibility as a teacher. Especially because I was teaching public speaking, I understood that my speaking skill would become an essential criterion in this regard.

Masaharu: Exactly. We know that we cannot hide our non-nativeness once we open our mouth, nor can we avoid being judged by our appearance. International students, especially those from Asia, tend to look much younger than we actually are in America. Both of us have the same experience where people, including students, got surprised to know our age. This can be a compliment in other situations, but not in the ITA teaching context. Looking young means to look less credible, experienced, and “teacher-like.”

Sayaka: Admittedly, though sadly, gender was also an obstacle for coping with non-nativeness as an instructor. Did you come across any instance where your gender prevented you from establishing your credibility and closeness to students as Gomez and Pearson’s (1990) research indicated, in which male ITAs of public speaking were rated as being the least close to American students?

Masaharu: Fortunately, I do not recall any situation where my gender as being a male ITA really kept me from building a rapport with student. Though I can only tell from limited knowledge, at least any of the comments on student evaluations did not mention my gender as a criterion of their judgment.

Sayaka: In my case, that scenario was a bit different. In a meeting with a course director and other TAs, the director’s story caught my attention because he said
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that students would tend to challenge female TAs, including international, Asian TAs, which made me really concerned. Actually, I have had two American female students who took an aggressive attitude toward me, upset about the grades they had earned. I know all novice TAs could have such an experience, but I felt the story would have been different if I was a man, an American, or much older. Since then, I became more aware of how I would present myself in the classroom. As I could not change my biological sex, nationality, or age, the thing I could do was to dress professionally. I tried hard to face an imposed stereotypical image of an Asian young woman as being powerless and vulnerable.

Masaharu: Like your story shows, what makes teaching difficult for ITAs is the fact that we have to stay in a physical spot of being constantly watched and evaluated by others. And I think our non-nativeness was really challenged in such a teaching situation. It is somewhat ironic because we teach students how to manage communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1977) for their speeches in our class, and it is always the same for ITAs coping with fears of being evaluated by students. As Cooley (1902) puts it, we think about ourselves based on how we believe or imagine other people would think of us. Some of those evaluations from others, or reflected appraisals (Cooley, 1902) will be internalized, reinforcing how we think about ourselves. The opportunities to receive feedback from students were somewhat limited. Though the comments provided in student evaluations were helpful in understanding where we were at as instructors, not many students in fact wrote detailed comments on our performance, nor did they take that opportunity as a place of communica-
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Sayaka: True. Fortunately, I felt relieved when I received the first student evaluations because most of them were positive and supportive. I did find some students point out the language barriers in their learning. There was only one in 60 by the second semester who mentioned my language performance. The course director encouraged me and other TAs that there would always be some students who would like an instructor and some who would dislike an instructor in every class, no matter what. I did not receive any complaints on my performance in the next semester, but I had a hard time to let the one negative feedback go because English was a skill to which I had devoted a huge amount of time.

Masaharu: There is no way we can be completely freed from our non-nativeness. It is displayed through our language performance, appearance, and negotiated through our interactions. However, I feel like our struggles, to some extent, have paid off when we realized that becoming instructors of public speaking was indeed the moment when our attitudes toward English and non-nativeness changed. I found that our non-nativeness is not monolithic but is multilayered, as well as relational like you said. The more time I spent in front of students as an instructor in class, the more comfortable it became for me to hold conversations with other TAs, and professors as a non-native English speaker. The degrees of our non-nativeness vary depending on the situations and individuals we engage in language performance. When in class as an instructor, I felt pressured to not make small, silly mistakes in English and to maintain my “in-
structor face,” even though I was aware that it would never be possible for me to speak perfect or native-like English. Because of the fears of making myself more vulnerable in front of students, I tended to wear only an instructor face and refrain from telling students about my background as a Japanese and an international graduate student. One day, one of my students mentioned in the evaluation that they would be interested in knowing more about my personal background. I did not necessarily feel reluctant to disclose my personal side. I would have rather wanted to. But, it was because of my fears of disclosing my non-nativeness that kept me from sharing personal aspects of myself with students in class. The outside classroom communication with friends and faculty members then became a place where I could be freed from an authoritative, instructor face and explored English with little hesitation.

Sayaka: My ITA experience also had the same effects on me. I also became less concerned about English when talking with professors or other TAs because I had much more pressure to speak clearly and accurately in the classroom as an instructor. In conversations with peers and professors, speaking in English was no longer for the sake of improving English but for communication. English eventually became the secondary priority, nearly always, in such interactions. Not only did our additional role as an instructor give us a chance to develop more relational ties, but it also helped us change our mindset as an English speaker. This has also affected the way I think about my scholarly life. Doing research is my favorite part of being in the graduate program. I love to go to the university library and dig into a ton of resources. When conducting research and writing
scholarly papers, the focus is placed on my arguments, not on my English per se. I know I can spend enough time later to polish my English to make my arguments more compelling and scholarly. When I attend a conference, I usually do not feel inferior to other native English speaking students and scholars. My paper was competitively accepted, and that fact makes me feel confident that I have an idea from which scholars in the field would benefit. Knowing that the quality of my discussion receives more attention than the accuracy of my English, I felt competitive and sufficient as a scholar. English, or non-nativeness was no longer at the top of the “to-worry list” in my scholarly life.

Masaharu: And we both have experienced this from the other side, by listening to English spoken by other non-native speakers. We often came across the situations where other non-native students or scholars made overly self-deprecating excuses regarding their English and then made a solid, compelling discussion. We were paying more attention to their arguments, not primarily to their English, and found such excuses completely unnecessary, or even inappropriate. And we found this was also true for other native speakers who paid more attention to the content, not to English fluency. This made us decide not to use a common phrase that non-native speakers often introduce at the beginning of their presentation or in a casual conversation: “I’m sorry. English is not my first language so please bear with my English and any grammatical errors.”

Sayaka: Having realized such critical moments happened in our lives respectively but now shared in our companionship, we can feel sure that the issue of language and identity and of non-nativeness of ITAs should
be understood beyond the boundaries of the classroom situation. The most reassuring aspect our companionship reveals is that we can say with confidence that there are occasions and relationships where we can be less concerned about our non-nativeness and English can be a secondary priority. Our ITA experience was critical in that it has made us realize non-nativeness is not monolithic, but is relational and multilayered. In order to survive such an emotionally burdensome graduate program in the U.S., along with teaching duties of public speaking, we have come to accept non-nativeness in our own definitions, not based on its stigmatic labeling.

**DISCUSSION**

*Intersection across Two Narratives*

As Park (2007) states, our social non-native identity is developed and negotiated by *doing* non-nativeness through interactions with other native speakers, and we claim, with other non-native speakers also. English is a vital means for every aspect of survival during our degree pursuit, and the way we understand our engagement with non-nativeness has changed since we received a teaching assignment for public speaking courses. Through co-constructing narratives of our experience as ITAs, we could identify an epiphany that had happened within our relationship at different times and locations, but is now shared in our companionship. Had we not obtained a teaching role, we would in fact never have realized how multilayered and highly relational non-nativeness was in conjunction with other social roles, such as a graduate student and a novice scholar.
Thus, non-nativeness is displayed and negotiated differently through interactions with other native as well as non-native speakers in our personal, scholarly, and teaching situations. This is how we understand the shared reality or narrative truth of non-nativeness of ITAs of the public speaking courses at the American universities.

Our discussion about non-nativeness explicated an epiphany where both of us had realized that non-nativeness was not monolithic, but relational and multi-layered. Such realization does not necessarily “solve” the difficulties and hardships ITAs encounter in their teaching. Rather, it helps ITAs see their positionality in the English speaking environment in a new way, changing their perceptions about and attitude toward language performance and non-nativeness. Importantly, such self-reflection is quite hard to achieve when ITAs are so preoccupied and overwhelmed with their teaching as well as scholarly responsibilities. Acknowledging so in fact provided us with room for reassurance that non-nativeness displayed and performed in every sphere of our life is intertwined with our overall non-nativeness as an English speaker.

For instance, we used to believe that the quality of English would determine our overall evaluations from others, such as professors and other scholars. This, to some extent, is still true as long as we challenge ourselves in the English-oriented academic world. Yet, there are occasions where English can be a secondary priority. As a graduate student and a novice scholar, fluency of English does not necessarily interfere with us constructing critical arguments and discussions. Effective communicative performance (i.e., delivery and or-
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ganization of the idea) often compensates for a lack of linguistic performance (i.e., English per se). We came to realize that our non-nativeness did not stand out in those occasions as much as it did in performing our roles as ITAs.

The hardships of doing ITAs derive from the fact that such an authoritative social role intensifies the expectations for being perfect and authentic, or in other words, “being less non-native.” Moreover, experiencing emotional burdens of non-nativeness from teaching affects our performance significantly as a graduate student which is supposed to take precedence over teaching. A dilemma for prioritization grows bigger, however, when we as ITAs are told “Research first, teaching second.” In reality, we suffer from teaching the most, and consequently, from not being able to conduct our scholarly performance well because of teaching. Thus, unless non-nativeness is embraced with the idea that it is multilayered and relational, ITAs suffer from the “lose-lose” situation because of their teaching duties. This is not the best situation for the department which the ITAs belong to either, because the teaching assistant opportunity is meant to support graduate students’ scholarly achievements for their degree pursuit, rather than discouraging them from growing as a scholar and a human being.

What our co-constructed narrative suggests in this regard is that there still remains room for improving the basic communication ITA situation for all groups involved in this issue. Struggles of ITAs with their non-nativeness do not only occur inside the classroom, in front of students, but non-nativeness is also negotiated through ITAs’ personal socialization with other indi-
individuals in a graduate program who may or may not be a native speaker of English. Coping with non-nativeness in ITAs’ personal lives will, in turn, help them rethink about their non-nativeness displayed in the teaching, classroom situation. Their “graduate student life” where ITAs originally believed to be the place of agony and hardships can turn out to become an emancipation for them to feel less pressured to test out and train their language performance through casual conversations with peers. Interactions with faculty members also work as ventilation since ITAs need not to worry about maintaining an authoritative persona.

As illustrated here, non-nativeness is displayed in different degrees and forms depending on the situations ITAs interact with others. Knowing there are physical and relational spaces in which ITAs can return to confirm a sense of belonging outside their “teaching” world would significantly help them feel reassured about their positionalinity. The interplay of varied degrees of non-nativeness in turn shapes a new contour of their identity as ITAs, as well as non-native English speakers.

Since narrative truth is not meant for generalization, our discussion is not something universally applied to all ITA situations or their survival in a graduate program. However, we believe that our discussion has revealed the aspects of ITAs that might have not yet been thoroughly recognized by the following three groups of people involved in basic communication education: other ITAs of public speaking or any relevant courses, native English speaking GTAs, and course directors. Our co-constructed narrative showed how every one of individuals in those groups can actually get involved in ITA’s survival as well as identity construction through...
small everyday interactions. The influences of those interactions may or may not be significant. Knowing the power of such communication and acknowledging that non-nativeness is highly relational and multilayered, however, their involvement in ITA’s teaching experience should better the entire situation for basic communication education.

**Practical Implications**

There are two practical implications for the basic communication education as a whole in relation to the issue of ITAs. First, on the TA side, holding orientations and training sessions and providing manuals (Lowman & Mathie, 1993) for newly assigned TAs are common strategies to prepare them for their teaching endeavor. Along with a mentoring program, introducing more voices of ITAs during such a preparation process will benefit not only new ITAs but also native speaking GTAs in that it will make their teaching environment more communal. Also, we believe that it is important to hold such sharing opportunities, or what can be called the “enacting voice sessions” periodically. ITAs tend to associate any emotionally challenged teaching moments with their non-nativeness, while native speaking GTAs also usually share very similar, if not the same, experience with their students. Sharing stories and enacting voices can help both GTAs and ITAs get involved in each other’s teaching experience and avoid unnecessary ill will towards students. Such sessions will also provide a course director with opportunities to grasp the TA situation for the program as a whole.

Second, on the student side, addressing this non-nativeness issue as a lived learning opportunity in public
speaking classes, or in any relevant introductory courses will help undergraduate students grow as a responsible member of a new collegiate culture. One of the major and critical components of public speaking education is to encourage and educate students to embrace cultural diversity and develop respect and tolerance for differences. The discussion about non-nativeness and the ITA issue are perfect examples of what students can relate to in the context of their college life. Along with the basic courses of communication, they are enrolled in the introductory level courses of different subjects taught by TAs with different backgrounds. It is understandable that students, especially those fresh out of high school struggle with English spoken by anyone from outside of their comfort zone and make complaints about ITAs. As LaWare (2004) argues, we need to consider the public speaking classroom as a public space where both students and an instructor engage themselves fully to understand the world and to make the marginalized voices heard and embraced. It is also important to acknowledge that public speaking education is still deeply rooted in the Western tradition, says Powell (1996), where “our courses often teach students that there is but one correct way to communicate” (p. 197). The incorporation of the discussions about non-nativeness and ITAs into public speaking invites students to think critically about cultural diversity they come across in their everyday context.

**LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

Our co-constructed narrative detailed the epiphany of our companionship as ITAs and its effects on our en-
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gagement with our own non-nativeness. We also suggested two practical proposals to better the learning community for all the people involved. We believe that our experience is highly unique in discussing the issue about non-nativeness of ITAs in the basic communication education context, specifically in that of public speaking. However, we see two limitations that need to be carefully considered in order to further develop good understandings of the issue at hand: One is the diversity of ITAs, and the other is the teaching context of ITAs or narrators themselves.

First, we acknowledge the fact that backgrounds of ITAs vary highly from student to student. As Bailey (1984) noted in her discussion about the foreign TA problem, the definitions of “foreign” or “international” students in the American graduate programs are complicated and even unclear. For instance, some international students, such as those from Canada attending an American university may not necessarily consider themselves non-native speakers of English. It is very likely that the language barriers may not be as much of an issue for such international students as it is for Asian-born ITAs. Thus, the degree of confusion among undergraduate students may depend on how “foreign” English sounds to the students, regardless of the actual background of the speaker. Also, since international graduate students are pursuing their degree abroad, their living condition varies greatly. It is widely observed that some of them live with their family where one of, or both of spouses engage in their degree pursuit. Such students may face additional hardships of balancing their personal and scholarly lives. Even among Asian students, those of particular nationalities such as
Chinese and Indian tend to have large communities inside and outside of their school life, in which they can receive various kinds of support for their life. We also acknowledge that there are groups of ITAs, especially in science-fields, whose title is not necessarily “student” but “researcher.” Thus, the discussion presented here needs to be understood that it is a story of two ITAs pursuing a doctoral degree in communication, who were born and raised in Japan and spoke English as a completely second, learned language.

Second, our experiences as ITAs of public speaking can be considered very similar because of its rarity in the American graduate program context and we succeeded in developing and maintaining our companionship despite the geographic separation. Yet, the future research will benefit more if two ITAs attending the same graduate program who teach public speaking courses work on narrative co-construction about non-nativeness. This will provide more detailed, even quite subtle aspects of ITAs, other than age or gender as discussed in our co-constructed narrative that may significantly affect their survival process and identity construction. Also, our programs did share differences such as a mentoring program and the number of semesters by which we were assigned as a stand-alone instructor. As illustrated in our co-constructed narrative, Sayaka benefitted from having a mentor program at her department and a quasi-mentorship with Masaharu whose nationality indeed affected how she handled her situation afterwards. Listening to voices of ITAs from the same department working on the same course may provide more insights into their companionship and ideas about non-nativeness.
This study examined the critical connection between language and identity and addressed the issue of non-nativeness of ITAs. The primary goal of our discussion is to enact our voices as ITAs of public speaking so that all groups of people involved in basic communication education would benefit. For this, we proposed two ideas. One is to hold “enacting voice sessions” for TAs and a course director to have a place to share their voices. The other one is to introduce the discussion about non-nativeness of ITAs into the public speaking classroom context. The issue of non-nativeness needs to be embraced by all the people involved, rather than trying to “solve” it as a problem. It is our hope that our voices help the effective learning community grow further where students and instructors embrace diversity of individuals and move toward the same goal, communication education.

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