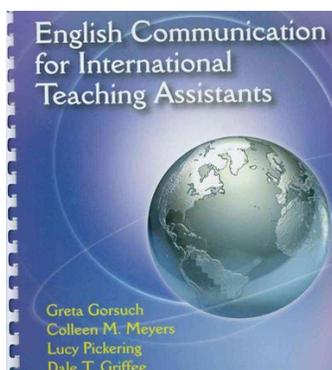


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## English Communication for International Teaching Assistants

Gorsuch, Greta, Griffiee, Dale T., Pickering, Lucy, and Meyers, Colleen M. (2012). *English Communication for International Teaching Assistants*. Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press. ISBN-10: 157766776X

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*English Communication for International Teaching Assistants* is a textbook written specifically for international teaching assistants (ITAs) working in a typical U.S. undergraduate classroom. An ITA might speak fluently in English with a clear pronunciation, yet the undergraduate students in an US classroom may still have difficulty understanding him or her. High English oral proficiency does not necessarily lead to an ITA's communicative competence, which, according to Canale and Swain (1980), includes grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and also strategic competence. Canale and Swain's (1980) theory of communicative competence essentially emphasizes language learners' ability to "respond to genuine communicative needs in realistic second language situations" (p. 27). Many ITA training programs are aimed to improve ITAs' communicative competence in the U.S. undergraduate classroom, as "the task of teaching content and managing undergraduate classrooms places extraordinary demands on ITAs'L2 communicative competence" (Gorsuch, 2011, P. 2). This textbook is valuable to ITAs and their instructors because it helps ITAs improve communicative competence by training them in a unique area--discourse intonation. According to the authors, discourse intonation plays a key role in how an instructor structures presentational information and builds rapport with students. However, it is not commonly taught to ITAs.

Discourse intonation "prioritizes intonation as the way in which we organize speech" (P. 6). Proper discourse intonation (DI) helps an ITA deliver the information effectively in a friendly and engaging manner that will be well-received by undergraduate American students. The whole textbook, which is highly practical, is based on this foundational concept. The authors also maintain that classroom communication has three "major components": "language, pedagogy, and culture" (P.5), and DI is interconnected with all of those major components. In fact, "DI takes into account using a specific language (English) in the context of a situation (teaching) to a specific audience (U.S. undergraduate students)". (P. 162). Therefore, it can be inferred that DI is essential to classroom communication, which justifies the textbook's focus on DI as the key concept and starting point for improving an ITA's classroom communication with students.

The textbook is divided into three parts. Part I presents the foundational knowledge of DI for spoken communication. It introduces the key elements of DI: thought groups, prominence, pitch movement, and ton choice. For each element, this section provides a definition and rules for helping the reader "decide how and when to use the concept in English." (p. 7). This excellent

feature explains very well the use of each element's real classroom effects on student comprehension and rapport building. The authors use numerous classroom examples to illustrate how the proper/improper ways of using those elements can make a significant difference in the classroom. Also, Part I is embedded with a lot of tips and advice exceptionally valuable for ITAs who want to use DI as an important tool for improving their communicative competence. The authors obviously believe in "learning by practicing/doing". Each chapter of Part I includes well-designed practice materials, which help the reader identify, use and evaluate each DI element. Those materials are thoughtfully organized from "listening practice", to "controlled practice", to "rehearsed practice" and "free practice". In addition, ITAs are also asked to transcribe their own recorded mini-teaching presentations and then use that to practice.

Part II of the book aims to train ITAs to use DI to function realistically in authentic teaching situations. Divided into several chapters corresponding to typical, well-chosen teaching tasks, this section includes: introducing the course, leading labs and classes, giving instructions and advice, and asking and answering questions. Each chapter explains how to use DI (tone, thought groups, prominence, and key) to excel at a particular task. The same as in Part I, each chapter has numerous creative exercises for helping ITAs comprehend and practice the DI principles for effective communication in the classroom. Those exercises also follow the same order from listening and analysis for communication, to controlled and rehearsed practice, and to free practice which is a mock teaching presentation. The exercise sections of Part II end with the ITA performance test and the self-reflection exercise.

Part III of the book provides further resources for ITAs and their instructors. Chapter I covers solving communication breakdowns. As the authors have mentioned, it focuses on strategies that ITAs can use right away rather than on practicing DI principles outlined in the previous chapters. Communication breakdown is one of the biggest challenges that ITAs face. This chapter discusses the key reasons for breakdowns, which include issues related to pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and answering unexpected questions. It provides practical and insightful strategies for overcoming them. It also presents a key concept that most ITAs might not know: fluency is not about speed, but about "speaking at a rate that is appropriate for the audience (and also) for the material one is trying to teach" (p. 162). Chapter II explains techniques for improving DI, teaching ITAs how to continue to improve their DI even after a formal training course is over. This chapter focuses on two key techniques: mirroring and transcribing. Those two techniques should help ITAs form useful habits of reflective learning and teaching as they progress in their journey towards becoming a qualified ITA. Chapter III explains the development and validation of the ITA performance test as an important instructors' tool for ITA assessment.

Written by experienced university professors and scholars, the second edition of this outstanding textbook has several unique features. First, in contrast with some textbooks that have relatively underdeveloped exercise sections, this textbook presents well-designed exercise items to help ITAs comprehend and thoroughly practice the DI principles that they have just learned. This "semi-workbook" style facilitates ITAs' learning by giving them many opportunities to put the principles of DI into practice. Some exercises help ITAs gain feedback on their mock teaching performances. Secondly, as indicated in the Introduction, the book emphasizes metacognition as a reflective tool for learning and teaching. In this context, metacognition includes thinking about, planning, and managing one's own teaching process. The authors are obviously keen on developing ITAs' skills of using metacognition to become reflective and self-managing teaching professionals. Many of the exercises teach useful techniques for self-improvement, self-evaluation, peer-evaluation, and using feedback from instructors. They also reinforce good techniques of reflective teaching, such as using outlines and transcripts, micro-teaching and recording, and

mirroring. Each chapter also includes the self-reflection exercise, which directs ITAs to reflect on the biggest challenges that they face regarding a particular element of DI and the strategies that they can implement to overcome those challenges. It is worthy of mentioning that the guiding lists provided for facilitating the reflection are insightfully well-written and informative for new teachers.

The textbook includes a wonderful DVD, which has numerous audio/video examples of real classroom teaching. Those examples are essential parts of the book, often used to illustrate key points of each chapter and for facilitating the exercises. While watching the DVD, ITAs can observe authentic classroom examples of both proper and improper use of each DI element. This method considerably facilitates understanding of the DI principles and their application.

The book is written by scholar-professors who are obviously familiar with ITAs and their work. An ITA might be surprised to find valuable pieces of classroom teaching advice throughout the book. Also, the book is informed by authentic reports from real ITAs. Insights from the “insiders” focus on the real needs of ITAs, such as how to pronounce American names correctly, how to understand undergraduate students’ pronunciation, and how to answer unexpected questions. These personalized approaches will make ITAs feel that they are understood and that their concerns are addressed. For future editions, my suggestion would be to include more materials as resources for ITA instructors, in addition to the ITA assessment tool. Also, currently the book focuses on developing spoken communicative competence as its main goal; adding some discussions on written communicative competence should be beneficial since ITAs need to communicate with students in writing as well.

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