Understanding the World of Teaching: English Teaching Assistants' Journey to Role Realization

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Abstract

This study explored the role realization journey of 11 English Teaching Assistants (ETAs) in Hong Kong. Their journey is framed through the lenses of Shulman's (1987) teaching elements of content pedagogical knowledge, knowledge of learners and their characteristics, and knowledge of educational contexts. Data from four different inquiry methods were analyzed and triangulated to map out the journey of the ETAs. During this journey, the ETAs were faced with demands for content knowledge and teaching whilst encountering educational and cultural differences in terms of students' learning styles and working environment. The ETAs perceived these experiences as shaping their role as supportive teachers, but hoped for structured professional development to enhance their preparedness and credibility – an implication for teaching assistant training. Fundamentally, the ETAs' readiness to embrace their role as teaching assistants through the many faces of culture, experiences and challenges surmounts their journey to understand the world of teaching.

An increasing number of teaching assistants (TAs) have been placed in the learning environment of schools and tertiary institutions as part of the changes for constructive teaching and learning. This movement has dominated many learning environment in developed countries like the U.K. and the U.S. Wilson and Bedford (2008) pointed out that the main aim of recruiting teaching assistants in the U.K., for example, was to share the workload of the main teachers' classroom teaching and administrative work. Previously, Minondo, Meyer and Xin (2001) also identified contribution to student learning as one of the reasons for integrating teaching assistant into classroom learning environment.

Whatever the reasons were for integrating TAs into the learning environment, studies have suggested that TAs perform a variety of educational support roles (Blatchford, Russell, Bassett, Brown, & Martin, 2007). These roles ranged from a strictly classroom-based instructional assistance to school level administrative and liaison support.

In primary and secondary school classrooms, TAs had generally been found to be effective with student level instructions and support. The TAs' help in language instructions were found to be effective (O'Neal, Wright, Cook, Perorazio, & Purkiss, 2007), whilst not significantly affecting the overall student attainment and outcomes (Blatchford et al., 2007). On the other hand, the latter research found that TAs' interactions with students were positively related to their behavior management, particularly in connection with those students with special needs, lower ability or difficult behavior. TAs' have also been found to be instrumental in retaining students' interest in science (O'Neal et al., 2007).

The main class-teachers in schools commonly reported that they found TAs were effective in their supportive role. This effect was seen in their supportive role because the effect usually was indirect where the assistance given by TAs in the classroom helped maximize students' and teachers' attention to work. Therefore, students had more opportunities to interact with

the main teacher (Blatchford et al., 2007). It was also found that main teachers preferred TAs who were sensitive to their needs and those who were more proactive in planning and managing students' behavior (Bedford, Jackson, & Wilson, 2008; Wilson & Bedford, 2008). All these research demonstrate that TAs role is multifaceted, and is in line with the perspectives and demands of both students and teachers of the learning environment.

Teaching Assistants and Their Functions

Hence, TAs have to realize the specific functions that they must equip with in order to be effective in their position as teaching assistants. Specifically, Minondo et al. (2001) identified five role components for TAs, namely: (a) instructional; (b) school support; (c) liaison; (d) personal support; and (e) one-to-one in-class support. Within these kinds of functions, the TAs have to encounter many forms of interactions and challenges on route their understanding their role as a teacher. Chae, Lim and Fisher (2009) found such interactions or challenges existed in the transition period of international teaching assistants (ITAs) in a U.S. college. The ITAs lamented a strain caused by students' demand for ITAs' expert knowledge in certain disciplines and their lack of experience and understanding of those students. The ITAs also cited a lack of confidence in their own authority in classrooms in relation to the professors in attendance. However, the ITAs demonstrated a lack of belief in the need for professional development other than their classroom teaching experience. These findings show an obvious tension in TAs' own expectations and the demands of their working surroundings.

In an earlier study, Jenkins (2000) reported that ITAs generally failed to comply with the expectations of the faculty due to difficulty they experience in module content, comprehending students' assignments and lack of topical knowledge. Most of the ITAs had lesser than desired English proficiency to assist in an English learning environment, and this caused further complexities in their role as teaching assistants in an American tertiary setting.

Another study highlighted the impact that teaching content and context have on ITAs willingness to communicate in the classroom. Compton (2007) found that the ITAs in her study were more likely to communicate actively when the teaching content was close to their specialization or familiarity. The ITAs' communication in the classroom was also affected by the American tertiary context, which was different from their home country situation. The impact seemed to have originated from the way the ITAs carried out their teaching role based on their own upbringing and culture. Asian ITAs, in particular Chinese, had a tendency to be formal in the classroom causing an obvious constraint on an informal classroom that was dominant in the U.S. tertiary context. Parrish and Linder-VanBerschot's (2010) cultural dimension of learning, which incorporates individualism-collectivism dimension and conceptualized its application on learning environments, could be used to explain the different tendencies of the ITAs.

Table 1 illustrates the different approaches of teaching and learning that happens in contexts that consist of participants from multicultural backgrounds. The individualistic and uncertainty acceptance approaches shown in Table 1 are suggested to typically belong to persons from Western countries like the U.S. (Heine, 2001; Ma & Schoeneman, 1997). The collectivistic and stability approaches, on the other hand, are said to represent Asian persons such as the Chinese (Dahlin & Watkins, 2000; 1987; Wheeler, Reis, & Bond, 1989). When teaching assistants of different nationalities teach in foreign countries, they have to adapt to the 'new ways' of teaching and learning, and this fact impacts upon their function as a

teacher.

Teaching Assistants and The World of Teaching

The studies that have been reviewed predominantly came from the U.S. or other Western countries. In recent years, a generation of teaching assistants known as the English Teaching Assistants (ETAs) has worked in Asian countries. This development brings forth the question whether the ETAs face identical interactions and challenges as other Western-based ITAs or TAs in their role as teaching assistants. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the journey, which the ETAs working in an Asian tertiary setting, faced in their effort to realize their role as teaching assistants and to understand the world of teaching.

We look at their experience as a journey since the ETAs are foreigners who work within this Asian setting where the culture and context are different to that of their own background. Challenges as delineated in cross-cultural dimensions of teaching and learning practice (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010) is anticipated in the ETAs' pathway to being a teacher. It is also a journey because the ETAs, like the students and teachers (professors) whom they support, have to go through a passage filled with interactions and challenges that a world of teaching would offer them.

In the world of teaching, as conceptualized by Shulman (1987), there are at least three main areas that relate to the ETAs' role realization. These are: a) content pedagogical knowledge; b) knowledge of learners and their characteristics; c) knowledge of educational contexts. Content pedagogical knowledge is central to the ETAs' role as instructors and their ability to adapt their existing content and pedagogical knowledge to the learning environment. Their effort to know students (learners) and their characteristics will help them with their instructional and support role. Assimilating and accommodating to the local educational context is imperative for the ETAs to blend in with the instructional methods and strategies employed by the main teachers and students. In order to investigate whether the ETAs in our study understand this world of teaching, we explore their journey to their role realization as teaching assistants in a Hong Kong tertiary institution.

Method

Research Context

The present study was conducted in a Hong Kong teacher-training institution, which comprises of over 400 academic staff members and approximately 7,000 students. With a strong emphasis on teacher education, vast majority of the programs lie within the education discipline, with a few on arts and social sciences. Students are predominantly Hong Kong Chinese with a sound number of Mainland Chinese students and some international students.

The English Teaching Assistants (ETAs) were recruited by the institute under a U.S.-based program. The institute employed 16 American graduates yearly, aiming to enhance language and cross-cultural opportunities for the local students. Unlike other international teaching assistants in the aforementioned literature, the ETAs were treated as staff members of the institute and not enrolled in any post-graduate programs. In general, they were tasked to provide study and language support for students in the institute, and also for affiliated institutes in Mainland China during teaching practice period of the local students. Prior to commencement of the academic year, all ETAs were supposed to have undergone a series of

orientation activities including campus tour, departmental orientation, language teaching course, basic starter Cantonese classes and cultural exchange activities.

Participants

The participants in this study were 11 ETAs (out of 16) during the academic year of 2008-2009 (Table 2). All participants were raised and educated in the U.S. and held bachelor degrees and a few with master's degrees; their academic disciplines were notably diverse, ranging from languages to sciences. Five of them were of Chinese descent and the other six were of Caucasian descent. Regardless of their heritage, they were all native speakers of American English.

Along with the ETAs, the program officer in charge of their on-going teaching and curricula assignments also contributed to this study. The program officer was a staff member in the institute who assisted the program director in implementing the program policies, briefing the ETAs, carrying out logistic and administration work. The program officer had a continuous contact and communication with the ETAs, and hence, was considered knowledgeable regarding the ETAs and their work.

A total of 294 students and five professors from the teacher education programs who experienced teaching and learning with the ETAs participated in this study as evaluators of the ETAs' function in course teaching. Although the ETAs worked with more than five professors, the others did not participate in this study mainly due to their own time constraints. All participants voluntarily took part after being fully informed of the nature of their involvement in this research.

Inquiry Methods

Four different inquiry methods were employed to obtain the data in conjunction with the aim of this study. The methods were focus group interview, individual interview, open-ended paper surveys and document analysis (Table 3). Since the ETAs were the central subject of this study, the focus group interview was considered as the main method of inquiry. The other methods provided multiple perspectives of the ETAs' role as teachers or teaching assistants, and therefore, presented opportunities for cross-validation between data. This approach ensured that the data obtained were of meaning and aligned with the aim of this study. All the interviews and open-ended survey were completed in English language.

Focus group interview. The ETAs were interviewed collectively through a focus group interview in order to solicit their views and feelings regarding their role realization as teachers in Hong Kong context. A semi-structured approach was taken during the interview to guide the discussion. The guiding questions in the semi-structured approach were related to the aspects of the ETAs' expectations, knowledge and experience of teaching and learning in Hong Kong. The focus group interview was done towards the end of the ETAs' teaching assignment at the tertiary institution.

A focus group approach was chosen primarily because it allowed the ETAs to express their thoughts and feelings through an interactive environment where "construction and reconstruction" of their role realization happened during the interview (Barbour, 2007, p. 42). The focus group interview also was convenient due to limited time and difficulty in arranging individual interviews with the ETAs. This interview session that lasted for nearly two hours

was video recorded from three angles in a large recording studio. This setting was intended to provide the ETAs a sense of neutrality from their work place pressures. The setting was also void of any extraneous sounds or interferences. Three cameramen and a sound engineer worked synchronously to ensure all contributions and responses during the focus group were captured on video. This resulted in a clear visual and audio recording of all of the ETAs' interactions and expressions.

Individual interview. A separate individual interview with the program officer was necessary to procure the relevant background and information regarding the participating ETAs' teaching and learning role. The interview was conducted after the completion of the focus group interview, in a quiet meeting room of the tertiary institution and took a total of 30 minutes to complete. A digital voice recorder was used to record the whole interview. This interview was structured according to the sets of information needed to supplement the data collected through the focus group interview. Basically, the questions in the interview asked for further details and clarification on the ETAs' preparation, orientation and the process of integration into their roles as teaching assistants. The program officer's knowledge and perception was important in further illuminating this research inquiry.

Open-ended questionnaires. Open-ended questionnaires were administered to students and professors who were involved with the ETAs. The questionnaires consisted of 4 items that explored students' and professors' respective views and opinions about ETAs' function in teaching and learning. These included their perspectives of ETAs' strengths, weaknesses and possible suggestions for improvement in their teaching and learning role. Students' and professors' views provided an evaluation of the ETAs' function of their teaching and learning capacity and performance.

Documents. A search was completed to find documents that contained personal and academic background information of the ETAs, and other factual information that linked to their role as teaching assistants. The documents were grouped according to the information they revealed about the ETAs' job description, pre-conceptions, expectations and motivations of their role as teaching assistants in Hong Kong. These documents were carefully read and analyzed for relevant data to further elucidate and supplement the other data obtained in this study. These documents gave a more lucid overview of the ETAs' role realization process.

Researchers' Roles

Both the researchers in this study had our distinctive but complementary roles in the research inquiry. The lead researcher was in charge of the open-ended surveys and individual interview, whereas the second researcher conducted the focus group interview. Both of us prepared the open-ended surveys in relation to the research question and read the related documents. During the whole process we constantly discussed and reflected on our own role whilst we checked and balanced each other's inquiry and analysis process. In the following paragraphs, each of us relates our roles in exploring the ETAs' journey.

As the lead researcher, I conducted the individual interview with the program officer. Unlike my fellow researcher, my non-involvement in teaching activities enabled me to approach the interview as an 'outsider' with limited internal knowledge of the ETAs' working lives. However, I was familiar with this study's setting due to my role as research staff in the institute. My take with the interview was to elucidate the knowledge I had gained from my discussions with my fellow researcher and also from the readings of the ETA documents. The

program officer, hence, made effort to explain many of the issues that would have been otherwise implied if she thought I had ample 'inside' knowledge.

As the second researcher of this study, I moderated and facilitated the ensuing discussions that happened in the focus group interview. As a moderator, it was imperative for me to initially reflect on my position in this study and the possible impacts that I may have on the ETAs' feelings and thoughts, and their contribution during the focus group interview. One critical fact to note; with some first hand experience of having ETAs assist with my own teaching and learning, I was able to discern a number of important issues related to ETAs' experience. Since I also had a working relationship with two of the ETAs, I took care to minimize any unnecessary pressure or influence over the dynamics of the focus group interview. Before the start of the focus group interview, I explicitly stated the role that I played in this research, i.e., as a moderator who had 'inside' knowledge and was interested in the journey that the ETAs experienced in their role realization. I iterated that my interest was in their honest and frank opinions and views regarding their working experience in their capacity as ETAs. This especially included the issue of any weaknesses in my role as a professor or any other professors (with no names mentioned) who worked with the ETAs. Yet, having some inside knowledge of the ETAs working dynamics seemed to contribute to the ETAs' ease in discussing issues that I simply understood not only from my perspective but also from their perspective. This made the focus group discussion interactive and productive.

Data Analysis

The focus group interview video recordings were viewed and transcribed to ensure all dialogues and discussions were taken into account for further analysis. The individual interview was transcribed. The transcriptions were carefully checked for their accuracy by both the lead and second researcher. The authenticity of the transcriptions was then double-checked by two other independent researchers (one academic staff and a research staff) by randomly selecting and verifying parts of the transcriptions.

The open-ended surveys data were inputted into an excel spreadsheet. These data was also carefully checked for their accuracy. Text on the documents chosen in this research was studied and only relevant portions of the text linked to the overall research aim were saved as text files.

All these data were imported into NVivo 8, a computer-assisted qualitative analysis software, which helped with the sorting and coding of data. To meet the purpose of this study, which is to articulate the role realization of the ETAs as teachers, we targeted the focus group interview as the main informing data. The other data: the individual interview, the students' and professors' perceptions and the documents relating to the ETAs' background provided support and corroboration to the focus group data. As such, the focus group interview data were sorted and coded by adapting the Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009, pp. 205-207) procedure of 'meaning condensation'. The method involved the following steps:

     1.   Reading of each source to obtain an overall sense of data. The first author read the focus group transcription to initially identify possible emerging patterns. This was done on purpose to eliminate potential bias of the second author in the analysis.

     2.   The "natural meaning units" within the data were ascertained in line with the

researchers' understanding. This procedure involved breaking the verbatim of transcription into smaller units based on the understanding of each researcher.

3. The sets of "natural meaning units" were taken as brief descriptions of arising themes. To achieve an overall understanding of the data, each "meaning unit" was condensed and rephrased into brief statements and were imported into a separate document for further examination.

4. Initial themes were then identified through linking of the brief descriptions to the specific purpose of the current research where ETAs' role realization as teachers took place within the context of Hong Kong. A 'peer review' (Johnson, 1997, p. 283) process was undertaken. To ensure the interpretation of the data was reliable and consistent, the two researchers of this study reviewed the initial themes and the corresponding data. The data were repeatedly reviewed and discussed until we reached a saturation point where both researchers were agreeable with the interpretation of the data. When there was doubt as to the consistency of the interpretation, the earlier independent researchers were invited to corroborate the data interpretation accuracy. The data sorted according to the emerging themes were further clarified and supported by the three other data sets to ensure consistency and reliability in the categorization of data.

5. The data were then sorted and categorized according to these initial themes to discern the process and experiences that the ETAs underwent to embrace their role as teachers in relation to the three elements of the world of teaching (Shulman, 1987). In linking the themes to the research question, we created broad categories based on the processes the ETAs had during their encounter with students, professors and the larger context of the institute.

6. The open-ended surveys were content-analyzed to identify emerging patterns from the written responses of students. Upon further perusal and agreement of both researchers, categories were created and the responses were linked to them based on the meaning of each response to provide an overall meaning to this dataset. Since we only had five professors responding to the open-ended survey, their responses were studied and coded in connection with the relevant comments of the ETAs.

Findings

The aim of this study was to map out the journey that the ETAs experienced in order to discover and understand their role as teaching assistants in Hong Kong. From the data we found three major recurrent themes to illustrate this particular journey that the ETAs went through in understanding their world of teaching. To aid us with our discussion of our findings within these themes, we refer to a concept map of the recurrent themes and the subthemes that show the journey in a visual form (Figure 1).

Preconceptions of Teacher Role and Expectations

Prior to their arrival in Hong Kong, the ETAs had a basic understanding of their role as an aide to professors and as English tutors to students. For example, Shawn stated that "we didn't have much information coming to Hong Kong, about what we're supposed to [do] besides that we were teaching assistants which has some kind of implication for what TAs are supposed to be like". When probed for further explanation of their understanding, a few of

them recalled their reliance on an information package provided to them concerning their teaching role in the institute. However, these ETAs found the information too vague for them to form more specific understanding of their role expectations.

The lack of perceptions of their expected role as teachers was evidenced by the documents and the interview with the program officer, which revealed their initial motivation to be ETAs. These data described the excitement of cultural and language experience as their main motivation for their embarkation on a journey to Hong Kong. Fewer of the ETAs referred to the aspects of teaching as part of this experience. Additionally, the Chinese American ETAs expressed a strong desire to reconnect with their heritage, whereas the Caucasian ETAs viewed the journey as a cultural immersion. The program officer supported this observation by stating the types of activities the ETAs were expected to be involved in:

> I think mainly is the language exchange, they need to enhance our students' English in our campus, also it's like a …culture exchange. Other than teaching, they also need to do a lot of activities in the campus, like in the dormitory … and [the Club], that brings a lot of American culture to our campus, so which is very meaningful

Experience as an ETA in Hong Kong

Preparation. All ETAs were supposed to have undergone a series of orientation activities including campus tour, departmental orientation, English as a Second Language instructional course, basic starter Cantonese classes and cultural exchange activities prior to commencement of the academic year. The participants were sent to various centers and departments in the institute to receive trainings concerning the culture and education system of Hong Kong and development of the institute. One important aspect to note during these activities was that the ETAs were given a broad description of what was expected of them as teaching assistants at the institute level. This description included their working hours and their teaching responsibilities such as working with students in class activities and providing English language support to professors' teaching and students' course work.

The ETAs were then allocated to different departments of the institute to assist in undergraduate and postgraduate classes. This allocation meant that the ETAs did not have a set of specific job description tailored for each department that they were assigned to. Athena who was allocated to the language center felt that the lack of specific job description was due to this exercise of department allocation. She stressed that

> …maybe it was done on purpose because this year we ended up getting split amongst different departments, so we were told…which very late in June or July when we're told which department you're in, but the job responsibilities weren't laid out.

The different departments had different working style and therefore, exposed the ETAs to different demands and experiences. As a result, only a few ETAs felt that they had clear directions in terms of their responsibilities as prescribed by their host departments whilst others felt that they had to make their own way in understanding their role as ETAs in their departments.

Content vs. language teaching. The ETAs found their duties in their new work environment to be fairly diverse. Their tasks included assisting students with module learning, facilitating group discussions, and in some instances, preparation of course materials. They were required to perform some administrative or technical work like preparing the physical setting of classrooms for lessons. Sometimes, the ETAs were asked to perform teaching duties that the professors felt was close to the ETAs' expertise. For example, Lilian lamented that she was overwhelmed with the task of organizing and carrying out a workshop on plagiarism, which was not well received by the students.

Depending on the department they were assigned to, some ETAs seldom had the opportunity to assist students in English language learning. Even though their title suggests they were English language teaching assistant, teaching content modules was inevitable especially to those who were assigned to professional-domain departments. Five ETAs had no strong concerns about content teaching, while the other six seemed to be overwhelmed with their content teaching load. Somewhat frustrated, Sophie expressed, "I'm attached to classes that aren't concerned with English at all, there's really no space for me to be working with English or with improving students' language". Conversely, according to an orientation program document, ETAs were expected to conduct module teaching. It was likely that they were aware of this task, yet they had a varying degree of acceptance towards the workload of content teaching.

Confrontation of students' learning style. Being exposed to classroom setting of the institute, the ETAs eventually discovered distinct learning behaviors of students that were different from theirs. Adaptation to the new teaching atmosphere contradicted some of their prior expectations in terms of learning styles, such as this comment of Angel, "we don't know if it's just [this institute's] students that are more... susceptible to wanting to spoon-feeding, or if it's a Hong Kong phenomenon in general". When Andrew experienced difficulty in eliciting response from students in a class, he asserted, "a very long wait time because... and they're just all be like... they're just look at each other, they're nervous, no seriously, do you have questions? And they don't expect that". These classroom phenomena left them an impression that Hong Kong students were generally passive learners.

Apart from classroom teaching, assignments and essay writing conventions of the local students made many ETAs feel apprehensive. Shawn recounted, "you know sometimes I think the focus was more on just you know going over the theories and stuff…" Recalling his experience in the U.S., he explained that, "for example in the States, I am also never... wasn't given an assignment agreeing with someone a statement or idea or whatever it was, an option was always like disagree, argue why this... things like that". This evoked a response from Athena, "when I was given a paper topic and go, I got to do my own research, I'm writing my paper and develop it in such and such a way, and I got good grade or bad grade on it", in which she emphasized her inclination towards independent research and learning when doing assignments.

These ETAs seemed to have compared their educational experiences in the U.S. with the local students. This comparison highlighted the differences in background and learning styles, and therefore caused some difficulties to the ETAs in adapting to the teaching of these students. The ETAs, thus, had to find their own equilibrium in response to the local students' passive way of learning. Some of the ETAs tried to incite the students to be more active in their learning especially through study groups' participation. In the open-ended surveys, it was obvious that the students welcomed study groups conducted by ETAs since they found

the ETAs support in the discussions as encouraging their learning process. However, there were a number of the ETAs who decided not to interfere with the students' learning styles, and instead provided as much feedback as they possible could.

Interpersonal relationships with professors. Faced with the difficulties in teaching the local students, the ETAs also had to juggle the teaching and working styles of the professors that they supported. The ETAs highlighted that this juggling process lied on how well the professors and the ETAs communicated with each other and attempted to synchronize their teaching styles.

Most ETAs acknowledged the lack of explicit communication between them and the professors. Hence, this led Cathy to suggest the following, "it's possible to have the professor from my department say what classes they want us for and what roles they have in mind for us before we're given to departments might help." On the other hand, Angel recognized the importance of having routine meetings with professors. She recalled her experience with an expatriate professor whom she worked with in the institute.

> And one thing that helps in the [CL] department was... just like meetings, you know when I was working with [Lara] … like she was very open to like meeting once a week you know for our human development class and that was good at least just have a human contact and to make sure you were on the same page, so then it looked like, it was more of a united front to the students as oppose to just like the professor saying okay, do this lecture now.

The foundation to the communication between the ETAs and the professors were to a certain extent affected by the lack of explicit set of guidelines in the respective departments. Keith saw himself adrift in his function within his allocated department that he "was just kind of floating there". Congruent to Keith's remark, Rosanna shared that, "well I think this is one of the biggest problems that happened this year is that there wasn't a clear set of guidelines given to the departments on how they're supposed to use us". The ETAs appeared to doubt whether the departments had any clear understanding of their role. Andrew, Sophie and Dora postulated that the institute held tenuous aims and noticed many inconsistencies among the departments regarding their positions. They attributed the problem to the conflicting interests of professors, faculties and authorities involved, hence pleaded for clearer guidelines among departments. This led to Sophie's comments:

> I think something that would be really helpful, this is just kind of a tangential claim, kind of an institute wide policy of like how much ETAs should help. I think one thing we started with is like how much we should be rewriting their papers. And how, and like, how and what do we do when we hit a plagiarized paper, like what is the policy. And I think something that telling all of us that at the beginning and giving us like a common guideline to use would be helpful.

Furthermore, the ETAs had mixed feelings towards the teaching styles of some of the professors. And these feelings paralleled with the difficulties the ETAs encountered in terms of the local students' learning styles. It seemed that the students' passive learning style impacted upon the professors' way of teaching as well. As a result, the ETAs observed that some of the professors were less inclined to challenge or question their students in order to match with the students' learning style. Andrew described his observation of a professor

inadvertently prohibiting interactive discussions in class, he mentioned, "it's interesting to see in the [IC] department that they ask question and they try to elicit responses but they do things like "do you have any questions?" "okay" darabarara... "is that clear? "okay" bararbara." Dora also narrated her experience about a professor struggling to provide a creative learning environment, "the professor that I worked with... because her students really wanted that kind of structure, her struggle was that she's trying to allow room for creativity". She added that this professor was susceptible to students' demands and had to succumb to some of their requests on the structure of assignment they preferred. In general, these practices were foreign to the ETAs. Consequently, they hoped for more explicit communication with the professors that they believed to be helpful in preparing them for this teaching environment.

Through the open-ended survey, it was found that the professors participating in this study acknowledged the importance of ETAs' supporting role in their teaching in, for example, leading class discussions and following up with students' writing. Yet, one professor realized she needed "much more input on how to best use them according to their strength". There were also concerns about the ETAs' capacity as a teacher. One professor felt that she had to "spend time with the ETA to go over lesson plan" and another was worried about an ETA's ability to manage a class.

Lifestyle in dormitory. ETAs had contact with students not only in classroom settings but also in their dormitories. Since they lived in the dormitories with the local students, they also provided language assistance to these students and organized various activities with them.

They all had different experience in dormitory owing to the differing mix of student groups, but generally praised the welcoming attitude of the residents and their unique experience in it. Their only major concern seemed to be their arbitrary working hours. Rosanna shared the following:

> But the thing we're available 24/7 that's also kinda tiring, 'cause I would like go from the bathroom to my door and some girl would be like "I have a paper due in two hours, can you read it?" And it's like ten o'clock at night, you know so that's a bit tiring, and it was hard to be like off duty 'cause they really was no such thing as off duty if you're living in the halls.

Despite there being prescribed help desk hours of ETAs in each dormitory, some ETAs found it difficult to reject students who sought help from them at night. This practice, of course, intervened into the ETAs' personal time, an issue that they had to get used to in relation to the tertiary context of Hong Kong.

Realization of Teacher Role

Tension between expert and novice. Complexities of ETA role were fraught with tension of being an expert of content subjects. Even though their native command in English lent them confidence to teach English subjects, most felt that they were considered as experts of the content and language courses they taught. Thomas' comment seemed to reflect this, "I think as well... the focal point should be our native speaking ability that's what our strength is and when we start to move away from that, that's when these problems occur." Sophie's case was similar with Thomas:

> You could say maybe we're engaged in the language, but I was teaching psychology and that was frustrating, because sometimes they felt like I didn't learn the psychology and that was being taught, and this wasn't my background, and I was being put in the position of being an expert when I actually wasn't.

Their experience as ETA brought Angel to an awareness to differentiate between teaching English as a second language and teaching English to native speakers, "…coming out of the TESOL class... okay like I'm qualified to teach English but English to native English speakers but when I got here I realized teaching English to speakers of other languages is completely different...". Here, Angel believed that ESL teaching was out of her expertise even though she was a qualified English language teacher in the U.S. Athena described another example of being seen as a content expert:

> Maybe I can develop a general outline, a structure of what I think a good speaking course should include, or like… Spanish or French curriculum, something that is very general, but in terms of specific lessons and day-to-day and developing pathways, I felt it was out of my expertise, the level of detail that was expected of me.

Andrew, who has academic background in education, empathized with Athena that he saw "the point of writing lesson plans for someone else is very difficult". The ETAs appeared to stress the extent of their expertise, which was resonated by Dora's exclamation, "We're qualified, but not that qualified".

Patterns emerging from the students' survey showed that the students strongly preferred ETAs to provide them with course support and accessibility, as illustrated in Figure 2. Students appeared to be satisfied with their ability to support and teach them the relevant concepts and knowledge in a content module. There were also instances where students appeared to be dissatisfied with their course teaching and this is exemplified in Figure 3 and 4 (The themes are defined in Table 4). Most of these comments referred to their accessibility of the ETAs outside class. Overall, these findings indicated the students' emphasis on ETAs' ability on course teaching and their support out of class.

Need for practical strategies. The ETAs felt that in order to meet students' and professors' demands, they needed a number of practical strategies that would help them become effective teaching assistants. In most cases, the ETAs found the orientation sessions did not fully prepare them for the work environment in the institute. Dora proposed to include more student-relevant information in the orientation. Thomas wished to have more weekly professional development sessions to receive feedbacks, and the others, mostly, recommended protocols in handling different teaching and learning situations across the board. Hence, many ETAs purported a number of ideas to remedy this perceived miscommunication by conducting more meetings, assigning a 'go-between' in the departments, and reminding the professors of their background.

The ETAs agreed that they generally had positive experiences as teaching assistants, though only a few attributed their language teaching and interaction with students to this favorable experience. More importantly, this positive experience seemed to have impact on some ETAs' pedagogical style. Dora shared the following:

> I was constantly comparing what a teacher would do in America or what... because... at least in English program, they're becoming future English teachers so that suggest ways in ((how we might)) do things differently and my students were really open to that, I think that was probably the biggest benefit of exchanges here for them to consider new ways of doing things, for me to consider new ways of learning and teaching.

The experience was eye-opening to Dora that she would rethink her teaching strategies. While the acculturation process in the workplace haunted many of them, two ETAs somehow realized that it was a blessing in disguise. Thomas recalled his experience with Shawn in preparing a debate for a lecture:

> One example was [Shawn] and I had to do a speech about Obama or debate, about Obama versus McCain, the day after Halloween, so we really wanted to go downtown to sort of... and we had to do it the next day, and it was in front of a hundred and twenty Hong Kong students, but we weren't given the questions, and we're not experts on their own views and they changed the format the last moment to what the democratic party would do and what the republican party would to. And that's one example of the things we do here. It's been a fantastic experience.

This led Shawn to conclude that he gained confidence with his capabilities as a teacher because they were expected to perform such tasks on a regular basis, with no expertise on the subject and little preparation time.

It was found that students' responses in terms of their learning experiences with the ETAs aligned that of the ETAs' own experiences (Figure 5). Responses like "very good", "I like her" and "friendly" were not uncommon. On the other hand, these responses were counter-indicated by other 'negative' comments on ETAs, which included "he should participate more in class" and "aid us more out of class".

Discussion

We discuss the findings that we have presented based on Shulman's (1987) dimension of teaching, which were used as a framework of analysis. The ETAs' journey could be seen through the three lenses of the world of teaching: their knowledge of teaching content and struggles with pedagogical methods; their implicit and explicit efforts to gain understanding of their students and their learning characteristics; and their adaptation to the educational context of the institute in Hong Kong.

Pedagogical Content Knowledge

The ETAs generally had managed to cope with the content subjects assigned to them and demonstrated a supportive role to the professors. The ETAs who were allocated to teach content subjects gained insights in the respective disciplines they taught, but not all welcomed the arrangements of the institute. Some coped well to an extent that they were able to support their students in those subjects, especially within the environment of study groups, and a few were able to employ new teaching strategies that were favored by the students. These findings somewhat reflect studies that have found ITAs supporting professors in their classrooms, having to balance between the demand of content teaching and teaching

strategies (Chae et al., 2009; Compton, 2007). Parallel to Compton (2007) in particular, the ETAs with relevant qualification and expertise were far more comfortable in teaching in the courses that were assigned to them. There were ETAs whom students rated as lacking confidence in teaching, and these ETAs fell within the caveat of those who had less relevant expertise in content or experience in teaching.

ETAs who were assigned to language-related departments expressed no major concern on their teaching abilities. They tended to be more confident than those who taught professional-domain subjects, perhaps due to their native-speaking ability of English. Then, does such ability make them an expert English teacher? This notion was questioned when an ETA made a distinction between teaching native and second language speakers of English. Some of them had academic background in English, but their knowledge seemed to misfit the pedagogical skills required in this particular context. It became questionable whether the ETAs had received sufficient training to teach Hong Kong students to accommodate to their learning needs in English language. This situation was in contrast to the findings in Jenkins (2000) where the professors in the study complained of ITAs who were non-native English speakers having less than desired proficiency to teach in the American tertiary classrooms.

These findings though highlight the importance of proper training of the teaching assistants in relation to the medium of instructions and the content pedagogical knowledge. Unlike the ITAs found in Chae et al. (2009) study, the current ETAs hoped for better orientation of the local students' needs and provision of relevant professional development to prepare them for their supportive role. This point is crucial for the ETAs in their journey to be teachers, where content and pedagogical knowledge are inevitably linked with the ability to effectively communicate and instruct in the language of delivery.

Knowledge of Learners and Their Characteristics

Possessing adequate knowledge about students' characteristics was essentially fundamental to the ETAs' role realization in the Hong Kong context. Many ETAs were initially quite oblivious about the local students' characteristics. As found in Chae et al. (2009), the lack of understanding of students' characteristics could be detrimental to the teaching assistants' efforts in meeting their teaching obligations. The ETAs were faced with this challenge but were able to overcome it by having constant contact with the students in and outside of classrooms. However, there were some behaviors like students' less autonomous attitude to learning and lack of critical thinking that went against the ETAs' own educational background. The ETAs efforts to counteract this situation could be seen in their engagement of the local students' study group discussions where active participation was encouraged. Such engagement was seen by other studies that researched teaching assistants' effectiveness as being instrumental in managing behaviors or retaining interest in subjects like science (O'Neal et al., 2007).

In this journey, the ETAs' role realization was mainly impacted, not by the learning habits of the students per se, but by their lack of prior knowledge of the students. This might be as well an indicator that the ETAs were not well prepared for this instructional environment, which appeared to be a barrier to their assimilation process. Hence, it explains the reasons for the ETAs' request for more specific and realistic information of students. They also welcomed related practical strategies in their effort to become effective teachers. Accordingly, teaching assistants who had sufficient knowledge of students and their learning characteristics were found to be effective in their supportive role (Bedford et al., 2008; Blatchford et al., 2007;

Wilson & Bedford, 2008). Nevertheless, those challenges that the ETAs faced regarding their students were not insurmountable and the overall outcome of their experience was perceived to be fruitful in shaping their role as teachers.

Knowledge of Educational Contexts

Although the documents showed that the ETAs underwent a series of orientation sessions, which supposedly had prepared them for their work environment and culture, intricacies occurred when the ETAs were allocated to different departments. While some departments had accommodated their ETAs well, a few ETAs had to work more independently in understanding their department's surrounding and working culture including the professors. The ETAs' own educational training and cultural preferences clashed with some professors' ways of teaching. The ETAs also felt that there was a prevalence of professors' superior role in the workplace. As a result, the ETAs experienced tension in relation to the conflicting pedagogical and communication style. On the contrary, ETAs who had regular communication with the professors had no great difficulty in coping with the new environment. In other words, they found such mode of collaboration to be effective. This finding echoed Compton's (2007) experience with ITAs in his American classroom where pedagogical styles and communication issues were constrained by the ITAs' cultural background.

It is apparent that there were many complexities in the ETAs' role realization process. Nevertheless, the cultural differences and the ability to recognize these differences determined their role realization. The cultural differences could be explained using Parrish and Linder-VanBerschot's (2010) cultural dimensions of learning framework. Many characteristics of the American ETAs seemed to be consistent with the characteristics described in the individualistic and uncertainty acceptance dimensions (e.g., expectation that students speak up) (Heine, 2001; Ma & Schoeneman, 1997), whereas their perception of Hong Kong students were seen to reflect the characteristics in the collectivistic and stability dimensions (e.g., structured learning activities) (Dahlin & Watkins, 2000; Wheeler et al., 1989). Accordingly, Parrish and Linder-VanBerschot (2010) suggested that educators should not overlook their cultural predispositions and be aware of the culture of their learners in different stages of their teaching in both planning and execution. This perhaps could serve as an implication for the ETAs, professors and the institute in (re)considering the ETA role in the institute.

Conclusion

This study explored the ETAs' journey in their role realization as teaching assistants. We however, recognize that more in-depth reflections from the ETAs regarding their journey would have made this exploration more interesting and insightful in terms of the individual ETAs' intrinsic feelings and skills. Furthermore, a bigger sample of professors would have been desirable for a representative perspective of the ETAs' supportive role to them. The evidence that we have presented in this study, nonetheless, provided a multi-faceted view of the ETAs' experience.

The ETAs' experiences raise some key questions: To what extent then should the ETAs teach? What level of expertise is expected out of them? How much should the ETAs support professors? Answers to these questions will shape an ETAs' function as a teaching assistant within the framework of Shulman's world of teaching and hence, are important to be

answered. A precise prescription the ETAs' role will help them understand their functions in content pedagogical knowledge, knowledge of learners and knowledge of educational contexts. In contrast, a vague understanding of the ETAs' functions may be detrimental to the ETAs' role realization and acculturation process. It is also important for the professors to understand and integrate the diverse and supportive role of an ETA within their own world of teaching. Clearly, the success of the ETAs' role realization lies not only on the provision of the institute, but also their preparedness, awareness and willingness to actively participate and adapt to their teaching and learning functions. Fundamentally, the ETAs' readiness to embrace their role as teaching assistants through the many faces of culture, experiences and challenges surmounts their journey to understand the world of teaching.

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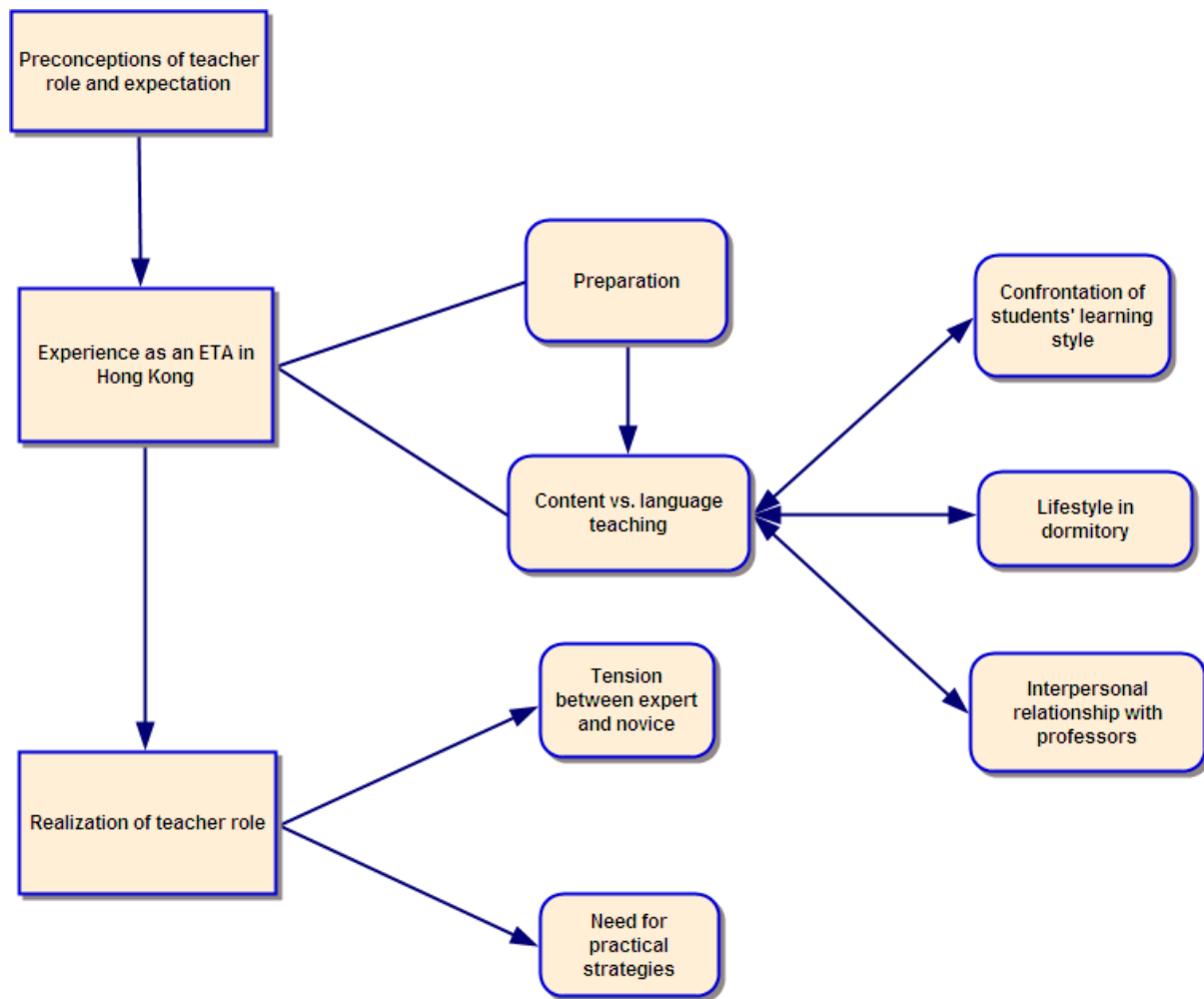
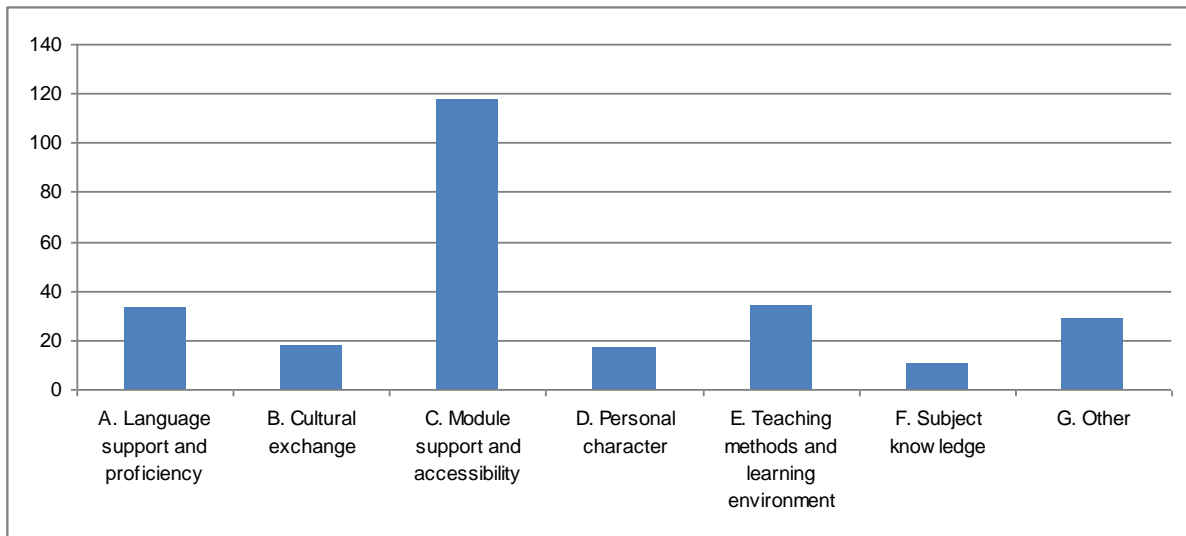*Figure 1.* Concept map of the ETAs' journey of teaching in Hong Kong.

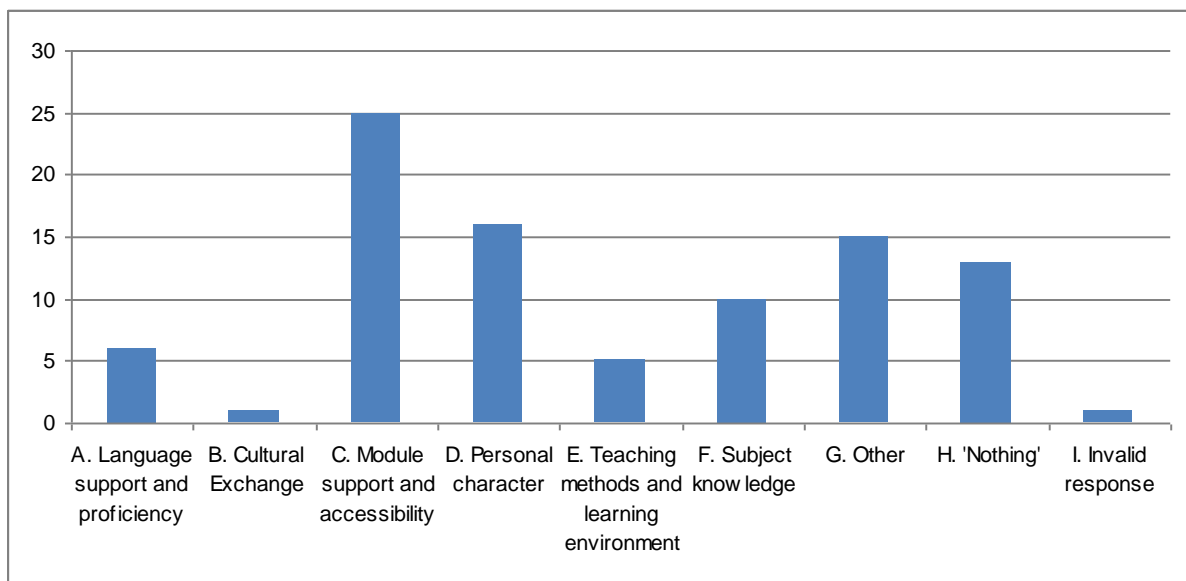*Figure 2. Students' preferred functions and qualities of the ETAs.*

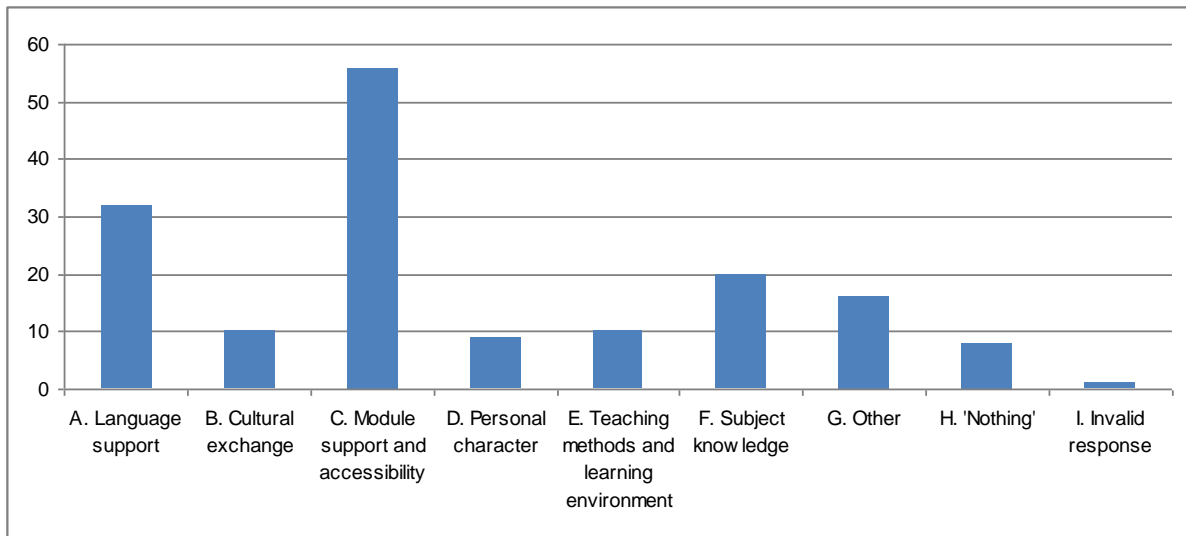*Figure 3. Students' perceptions of ETAs' weaknesses.*

Figure 4. Aspects needed for further improvement of the ETAs – students' views
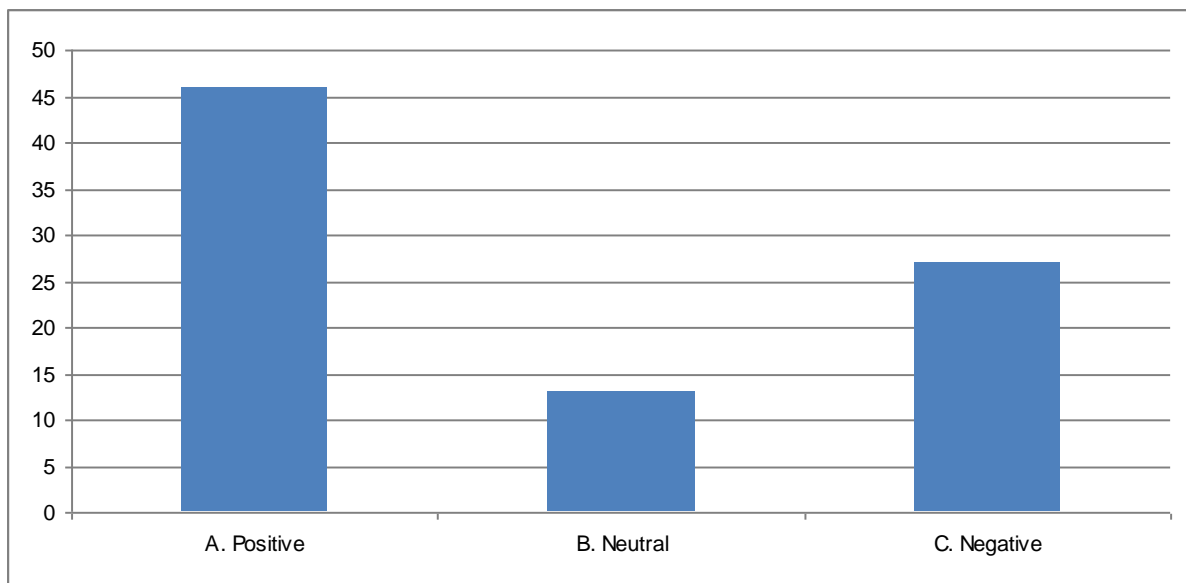

Figure 5. Students' overall learning experience with the ETAs.

Table 1

The Cultural Dimensions of Learning Framework (Individualism-Collectivism and Stability Seeking and Uncertainty Acceptance Dimensions) (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010, pp. 7-8)

More individualistic	**More collectivist**
Expectation that students speak up	Students speak up in limited situations
Learning how to learn (cognitive skill) is primary (individual growth)	Learning how to do (content knowledge) is primary (social growth)
Expression of students' point of view is valuable component of learning	Student expected to accommodate teacher's point of view
Expression of student's point of view is valuable component of learning	Student expected to accommodate teacher's point of view
Hard work is motivated by individual gain	Hard work is motivated by the greater good

More stability seeking	**More uncertainty acceptance**
Structured learning activities	Learning activities more open-ended
Focus on getting right answers	Focus process and justified opinions
Ambiguity tend to be avoided	Ambiguity is a natural condition
Teachers expected to have the answers	Teachers can say "I don't know"
Single textbooks or teacher authority	Many resources used
Luck is a factor in student success	Demonstrated ability to think is the key to academic success, not right answers
More stressed	Less stressed

Table 2

Focus Group Participants Characteristics

Gender	Highest degree attained	Discipline	Race
F	Bachelor's	• Spanish • Psychology • Chemistry	Chinese
M	Bachelor's	• International Studies • Political Science	Caucasian
F	Master's	• Curriculum and Teaching • English ,French ; Culture & Politics	Caucasian
F	Bachelor's	• English • Philosophy	Caucasian
M	Master's	• Cinema and Media Studies • English, Communication/Culture Music	Caucasian
F	Master's	• TESOL • East Asian Studies	Chinese
F	Bachelor's	• Neuroscience	Chinese
F	Bachelor's	• English, Music	Chinese
M	Master's	• Higher Education Leadership • History and Classical Studies	Caucasian
F	Bachelor's	• Secondary Education • Magazine Journalism	Chinese
M	Bachelor's	• Chemistry • Classics	Caucasian

Table 3

Summary of Empirical Material

Data type	Materials
Focus group interview	• Approximately 100 minutes of video recording of 11 ETAs
Individual interview	• Approximately 30 minutes of audio recording of 1 program officer
ETA evaluation survey	• 4 open-ended items from 294 students • 4 open-ended items from 5 lecturers
Document archive	• ETAs' short biography from their website • ETA handbook 2008 • ETA orientation program 2008 (PowerPoint slides)

Table 4

Student Survey Theme Definitions

Themes	Definition	Example(s) of responses
Language support and proficiency	The assistance and ability of ETA in terms of the writing, proofreading, etc.	'have a chance to talk listen with native speaker', 'Correcting my English'
Cultural exchange	Interactions and conversations that entail information about the ETAs' cultural experience.	'sharing culture difference in their learning', 'about her background and culture'
Module support and accessibility	The assistance of ETA in terms of students' learning in the content modules.	'they could help us to making clear the points that sometimes we may confuse in the lecture', 'hard to reach not always around'
Personal character	Behavioral aspects of ETAs	'he is helpful and funny nice to talk with, willing to answer our questions', 'not active enough during class'
Teaching methods and learning environment	Students' description of their classroom learning experience with the ETAs.	'they make the classroom atmosphere more relaxed and their sharing of their experiences', 'they don't correct our mistakes that often'
Subject knowledge	The depth of ETAs' knowledge on a module.	'she is good in explaining the definition of term', 'they do not have enough subject knowledge'
Other	Miscellaneous categories	'helping the professor do the teaching and make the class go smoothly', 'the eta and the tutor share different ideas'
'Nothing'	Some students intentionally wrote 'nothing' in the questionnaire	/
Invalid response	Responses that were inappropriately answered (e.g. a response belong to question 1 had been written on question 2)	/
Positive	Praises and positive comments about ETAs	'very good', 'I like her'
Neutral	Comments that have no strong view	'I think it important to have the role of ETAs, 'nil'
Negative	Criticisms and negative comments about ETAs	'participate more actively by engage his culture in', 'may be can clarify ETA roles at the very beginning of the module'