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**Second Language Identities of International Teaching Assistants  
in the U.S. Classroom**

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Abstract:

Sociolinguistic research has yet to comprehensively address changes in the second language mediated identity, or second language identity (L2I), of English as a second language (ESL) students that take place as a result of traveling abroad and experiencing English in authentic circumstances. First, this study provides an outline of L2I and proposes a framework for evaluating L2I in authentic contexts (i.e. in a country where the target language is the primary means of communication). Second, personal narratives, formal reports, and observed classroom comments of international graduate teaching assistants (ITAs), who were placed in a required English Speaking course as a university requirement, are examined using the proposed L2I framework to determine how their experiences and interactions as graduate students and ITAs affected their L2Is. It was determined that the proposed L2I framework is an effective tool for identifying factors that may impact the L2I of ESL students in American university settings. Student reports revealed that there were potentially significant changes in L2I that resulted from specific interactions with members of their new community. It is concluded that this research has pedagogical implications for instructors and prospective ITAs in this specific educational institution as well as for any other institutions where there are stakeholders invested in the success of ITAs, foreign language study, and travel, work, or study abroad programs. It is suggested that follow-up research focus on identifying reoccurring shared experiences by ITAs that may trigger or facilitate the renegotiation of student L2I in comparable contexts.

Travel to foreign countries is often portrayed as a transformative experience because of its power to broaden an individual's worldview as a result of being immersed in a foreign environment and a foreign language. By taking a closer look at language learners who find themselves in foreign contexts from a sociolinguistic standpoint, the intricacies and complexity of the situation are brought to light, and the misrepresentation of this oversimplified conception becomes apparent. As a result, this observation has given rise to the exploration of the complex relationship between the individual language learner, the target language (TL), and the foreign context.

This study attempts to shed light on how the second language identity (L2I) of English as a second language (ESL) speakers is affected by being exposed to English in authentic contexts. In this paper, L2I will be viewed as Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, and Brown's (2013) provisional definition of the term, which describes it as "any aspect of a person's identity that is connected to their knowledge or use of a second language" (pp. 174). In order to gain perspective into this situation, overlapping existing theory and research relating to language learning, identity, and foreign contexts is used as the foundation for the creation and proposal of a holistic framework to be used by researchers and practitioners to evaluate the L2I of language students in foreign contexts. The foundational theory used is drawn from Bonny Norton's work with identity and language learning (Norton Pierce, 1995; Norton, 2000; Norton, 2012), David Block's (2007) concept of language-mediated identity, and Benson et al.'s (2013) notion of second language identity. Furthermore, the proposed framework is applied to interpret qualitative data obtained from graduate international teaching assistants (ITA) at a flagship state university in order to ascertain (a) the functionality of the proposed L2I model and (b) how the L2I of the students were renegotiated as a result of their new surroundings.

## **Background**

Due to globalization, international education programs and universities are attracting large numbers of students who want to study abroad. This has attracted significant attention from the applied linguistics community since the eighties and has sparked the continual development of formal research dedicated to exploring language-related outcomes and phenomenon in this field, particularly amongst study abroad students (see Freed, 1995 and Kinginger, 2009 & 2013 for reviews). While international experience has been an integral component and long established practice across many educational institutions, there still remains relatively little focus on how students who travel abroad for non-language-focused educational ventures are affected socially and linguistically by being immersed in various international contexts, which is why it is helpful to draw upon study abroad research for deeper insight into which factors play upon the language learner in a new context. While the students in this study have specialized reasons for traveling abroad (to attend graduate school) and are fundamentally different than study abroad students, they do share some important comparable characteristics. Namely, each group is generally comprised of adults, they are full-time students, they experience immersion in a foreign culture, and, most importantly within the scope of this paper, they are each second language speakers at their respective educational institutions and will be exposed to, or interact in, English as a lingua franca or with native speakers in a foreign context. These similarities comprise the rationale for utilizing research from the study abroad context within this study.

As research vis-à-vis second language acquisition in international study programs came into its own as an established area of interest, concurrently, other applied linguists were working to develop a sociolinguistic theory that explains how an individual's identity and language learning process are connected by incorporating theory from the social sciences of psychology,

sociology, and economics (Norton Pierce, 1995; Norton, 2000; Norton, 2012; Pavlenko, 2002). Although language learning in the study abroad context and identity theory were not significantly connected during their development, as it turned out, identity issues had already been a reoccurring theme and area of study within study abroad and SLA-related research, but primarily only in relation to how different identity markers (namely race, gender, and nationality) may affect second language-gains within the study abroad context (see Kinginger, 2009 for an overview). While this research is important in its role to help ensure more linguistically successful trips abroad, it is clear that there is more to the picture than the binary relationships between an identity marker and the acquisition of specific speech acts and general language proficiency, which is why these two areas of study eventually merged.

An interesting product of the language learning and identity body of research, predominantly established by Norton (1995), has been the rise in popularity of the convoluted yet intriguing concept of “second language identity” (L2I). L2I has been a reoccurring term within the literature, although to date it still lacks clear constructs or unequivocal meaning. Once the fields of study abroad/SLA research and language identity theory intersected, and gave rise to a new sub-field of applied linguistics, the term *L2I* started to gain some traction within this body of literature (Block, 2007; Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2013; Sato, 2014; Agostinelli, 2018). Consequently, some have called for the development of a structured framework for analyzing the relationship between the study abroad context and L2I (Benson et al. 2013; Block, 2007). Moreover, in Benson et al.’s (2013) exploratory study of Chinese students studying abroad in English speaking countries, their main aim concerned the search for insight into potentially appropriate constructs for L2I in the study abroad setting. Besides proposing three tentative constructs for L2I, they concluded that, “the construct of second language identity

can be a useful lens through which we might examine, and draw together, study abroad outcomes” (pp. 190). This conclusion can be viewed as motivation to analyze the experiences of language learners in foreign contexts through this L2I “lens”. Additionally, while the term “L2I” overlaps with, and may be seemingly synonymous with, Bonny Norton’s notion of “language mediated identities,” (1995) it is possible that the choice to utilize this term instead is due to its potential to provide a new direction in this research that may ultimately provide a more holistic explanation of the relationship between learner identity, target language (TL), and context.

Within the L2I field, a poststructuralist approach must be utilized because of the complex, ambiguous and ever-changing nature of both the individual language learner and their context. Ideally, a researcher applying a poststructuralist perspective can account for the individualistic nature of each trip abroad by utilizing a well planned and thorough mixed-methods approach with a heavy focus on qualitative data collection methods in the forms of various types of learner narratives and observations. This perspective is valuable, especially for the research at hand, because it emphasizes “L2 users as agents whose multiple identities are dynamic and fluid” (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, pp. 283) and provides a “more context-sensitive way of theorising social impact on L2 learning and use.” (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, pp. 295). However, despite these positive aspects, there are noteworthy problems with narrative analysis within the poststructuralist framework (Block, 2010). Namely, data collected from written and spoken learner accounts is simply vast, complex, and unorganized, making the task of analyzing the data very unclear and difficult. Furthermore, Pavlenko (2007) compounds the difficulties that researchers face by identifying several other problematic areas. Specifically, these areas include “the lack of theoretical premise, which makes it unclear where conceptual categories come from and how they relate to each other [and] the lack of established procedure for matching instances

to categories.” (Pavlenko, 2007, pp. 166). These inadequacies of the data collection methods used within identity research also apply to the related developing field of L2I research, which is where one of the foci of this research becomes relevant.

A main objective of this paper is to propose a framework of L2I in foreign contexts as a reference to those interested in researching this topic in authentic settings. Within the literature, the thorough theoretical accounts of language learning and identity, while comprehensive, are dense and neither clearly come to any consensus of what exactly constitutes L2I nor provide a practical model or explanation for narrative data analysis within this field. Presently, in order for a L2I researcher to evaluate the narrative accounts of language learners, they must undertake extensive research in an ambiguous and developing field of study. Hopefully, the proposed framework will help researchers, teacher-trainers, ITAs and instructors on the ground level to explore the relationship between language, culture, identity, and context without being deterred from the field because of its current state of complexity. As the body of research continues to grow, it is hoped that this framework will serve as a step towards a more comprehensive intuitive tool for practitioners to utilize when trying to identify and evaluate potential sources of L2I influence on their students, while also being able to more easily reference and understand the existing underlying theory. It is also hoped that the results from this study will contribute to the advancement of this body of research and the creation of a database or compendium of relevant findings.

Lastly, and importantly, this study aims to build upon its predecessor (Agostinelli, 2018). The fundamental distinction between the two studies is the participant group (Korean college students vs. ITAs in the U.S.), and how the same L2I model will function in a very different context. As a by-product, this study will also have a potential impact on research concerning

ITAs in the U.S. The experiences, particularly the challenges, of ITAs in the classroom and speaking programs for ITAs have given rise to a modest number of scholarly articles concerning classroom practices, teacher training, and language education (Ashavskaya, 20215; Jia, 2008; Kuo, 2011; Park 2014). However, this will be the first study where ITA experiences will be viewed through the lens of L2I, which may prove to be a valuable perspective for instructors to better understand and facilitate successful experiences for ITAs in the classroom.

### **The Theoretical Framework**

In response to the call for conclusive constructs for L2I (Benson et al., 2013), the exploration of L2I related occurrences of language students in foreign contexts (Benson et al., 2013, Block, 2014, Norton, 2012), and to determine a comprehensive theoretical description of the relationship between the language learner and identity (Norton Pierce, 1995), the following framework has been created, and is being suggested, as a holistic viewpoint on the relationship between L2I, identity, language, culture, and the foreign context:

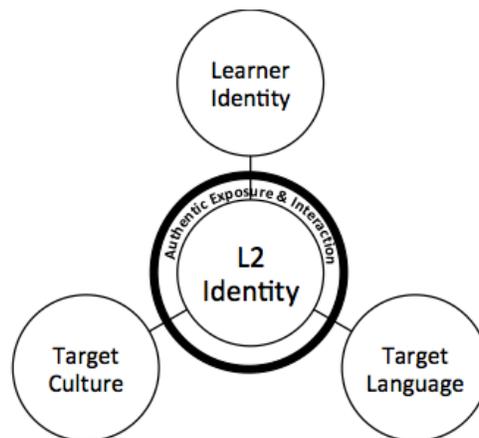


FIGURE 1. Second Language Identity in the Foreign Context

As improvements in data analysis within the field of L2I research in foreign contexts is one of the aims of this study, the framework used in this study could potentially comprise its own

paper. However, this section will be used to provide an overview of the framework and the basic components of its constructs and where they were derived from.

***Second Language Identity.*** L2I, within the scope of this paper, can be broadly viewed as Benson, et al.'s (2013) provisional definition, which maintains that L2I consists of “any aspect of a person’s identity that is connected to their knowledge or use of a second language.” (pp. 174). It should be noted that identity and L2I can also be viewed as inherently intertwined, but within this paper they are presented as separate interconnected entities in order to better visualize their components and isolate the manners in which they can relate to one another. Furthermore, since there is not yet any consensus as to what exactly constitutes L2I in the literature, the constructs of L2I employed in this model are meant to be viewed as a tentative definition based primarily in the theory of principal researchers in the areas of language learning and identity and L2I in the study abroad setting (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Second Language Identity  
*L2 Ability as suggested by Benson et al. (2013)*  
*Investment derived from Norton Pierce (1995)*

The components that comprise L2I within this framework consist of *Investment*<sup>1</sup> and *L2 ability*. Norton Pierce’s (1995) notion of *Investment* entails the “socially and historically

<sup>1</sup> Constructs of the L2I framework are hitherto written in *italics*.

constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their...desire to learn and practice it” (pp.10). Although this term has not gained much attention in the field, this concept has been chosen as a component of the model over similar ones (namely that of Dörnyei & Ushioda’s [2009] concept of L2 motivation) because of its explicit relationship to identity. The idea of *Investment* is also a suitable foundation on which to build the concept of L2I because of its faculty to incorporate the diverse interconnected aspects of L2-related phenomena within the learner. That is to say that *Investment* is multi-dimensional, in that it encompasses learner *perceptions* of the TL and their *power relationship* with the TL (“relationship of learners to the target language”), as well as TL-related *motivation* (“desire to learn and practice [the target language]”) of the language learner, all of which are fundamental to understanding L2I (Pierce, 1995, pp. 17). These aspects of *Investment*, referred hitherto as *perceptions*, *power relationship*<sup>2</sup>, and *motivation*, are at the core of L2I and should be viewed as interconnected components that are constantly being influenced by the other constructs and in turn renegotiated.

In addition to *Investment*, the remaining component of L2I consists simply of *L2 Ability*. Since L2I is being defined in this paper as any aspect of one’s identity that is connected to the knowledge of a second language, then inherently, overall L2 ability falls into this category. A comparable variation of this component of L2I has also been employed by Benson et al. (2013)

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<sup>2</sup> David Block’s (2007) description of “Power and Recognition” notes that “identity is neither contained solely inside the individual nor does it depend exclusively on how others define the individual. Rather, one needs to consider both self-generated subject positionings as well as subject positionings that are imposed on individuals by others” (Block, pp.31). This notion is key when conceptualizing the relationship between the individual and speakers of the TL within this framework.

who used the term “Identity-related L2 proficiency”, within their model entitled *Dimensions of second language identity* (Benson et al., 2013, pp. 7).

**Learner Identity.** The identity construct in the model is meant to denote and encompass the SA participant’s identity, exclusive of their L2I. The components of this construct are synonymous with those found in Block’s (2007) book section entitled “Identity in a Nutshell” (pp. 31-51), which is comprised of an overview of what he deems to be the most commonly studied perspectives of identity in the social sciences and specifically the applied linguistics field. The *Identity Types* described include *Ethnic identity*, *Racial identity*, *National identity*, *Migrant identity*, *Gender identity*, *Social Class identity*, and *Language identity*, and are meant to be viewed as socially constructed aspects of an individual’s identity as ascribed by others and embodied by the individual. For a quick reference, here is a neat overview of these constructs:

Ethnic identity	shared history, descent, belief systems, practices, language and religion, all associated with a cultural group
Racial identity	biological/genetic make-up, i.e. racial phenotype.
National identity	shared history, descent, belief systems, practices, language and religion associated with a nation state
Migrant identity	Ways of living in a new country, on a scale ranging from classic immigrant to transmigrant
Gender identity	nature of conformity to socially constructed notions of femininities and masculinities, as well as orientations to sexuality and sexual activity
Social Class identity	income level, occupation, education and symbolic behaviour
Language identity	relationship between one’s sense of self and different means of communication, understood in terms of language, a dialect or sociolect, as well as multimodality.

Figure 3. Individual/Collective Identity Types (Block, 2009, p. 49, Table 2.2)

Within the scope of this paper, this list is especially useful because of its incorporation of what is

termed *Migrant identity*. Exclusive of *Migrant identity*, each of the identity types presented can be representative of any individual within any context. As this study is concerned with the L2I of a specific type of migrant group (graduate students), this part of the identity construct is suitable for distinguishing these individuals from other migrant groups (i.e. economic migrants, refugees, full time international students, etc.) and evaluating representative data specific to these language learners.

***Authentic Exposure & Interaction.*** The component of the model that is meant to encompass the “foreign context” is labelled *Authentic Exposure & Interaction*. This facet can be viewed as the various settings within the larger foreign context that serve as the platforms that facilitate the TL-mediated encounters and experiences that potentially effect the L2I. As Kinginger (2009) mentions, “language learning in study abroad (foreign contexts, for the study at hand) is extremely complex, requiring researchers to choose between a large array of potential foci” (pp.207). So, with this in mind, *Authentic Exposure & Interaction* is meant to encompass all of the different environments and situations language students are exposed to while abroad.

***Target Culture & Target Language.*** Naturally, each of these plays a central role in how L2I is negotiated and altered, regardless of setting. While these two constructs are separated within the framework in order to identify sources of L2I influence more easily, it should be noted that they are fundamentally related and constantly affect one another. The definition of the term *culture* in this paper is meant to be synonymous with Kramsch’s (1998, pp. 127) notion that culture is “the membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting” (as cited in Nunan, & Choi, 2010, pp.3). The broad categories which comprise the *Target Culture* (TC) (See Figure 4) component of the framework are derived from this definition and consist of

the sub-constructs: *perceptions*, *beliefs*, and *practices*. It should be noted that these sub-constructs are not to be viewed as definitive characteristics representative of every member of the TC, but rather from a critical standpoint, always considering the individualistic nature of human beings and that “as individuals we belong simultaneously to multiple cultures and sub-cultures” (Nunan, & Choi, 2010, pp.3).

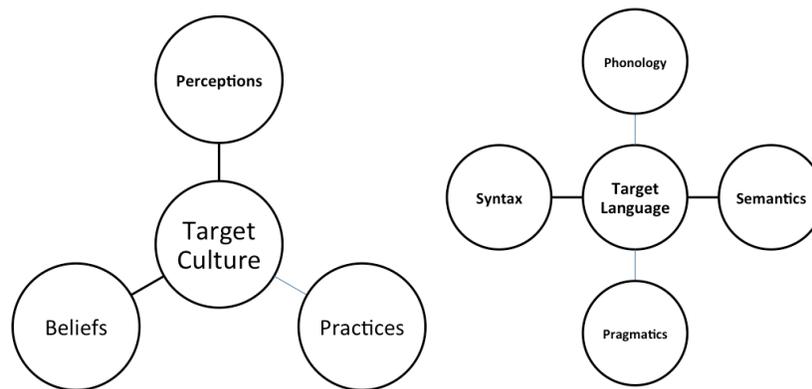


Figure 4. Target Culture and Target Language  
Adapted from Kramsch (1998)

The pieces that comprise *Target Language* (see Figure 4) consist of all the characteristics of the TL being studied, which include the *phonology*, *syntax*, *semantics*, and *pragmatics* of the language. These broad categories are meant to serve as a reference for practitioners to identify any language-related sources of influence on L2I.

### Context

Louisiana State University (LSU) is the flagship university of the state. Over 50% of graduate students, and 80% of undergraduates are in-state students. 11% of the graduate student population is comprised of international students, around 500 in total. As Louisiana has a very unique culture with its own share of unique or southern-influenced linguistic features, it makes for an interesting sociocultural and linguistic context to study new international students;

however, this dynamic will not be specifically addressed in the results of the study at hand. As in many state universities that admit large numbers of international graduate students, LSU is required to run an English Speaking for International Graduate Teaching Assistants course to help the ITAs supplement their speaking ability for their TA duties.

The ITAs' experiences as a student and TA provide valuable and unique research opportunities for those interested in sociolinguistics. Not only do they maintain an identity marker of "international student" in their university context, but they also hold a position of power where they are required to instruct or advise mainly native English speaking undergraduate students in their second, or third, language. For many of the students, it is their first time using their English abilities pragmatically, in real-life situations, outside of an EFL classroom.

## **Method**

### **Research Objectives**

The all-encompassing aim of this study is to evaluate the effect, if any, that attending a U.S. university has on the L2I of ITAs. It is hoped that the findings can be used to build the body of research concerned with the relationship between L2I and different contexts. It is also anticipated that the insight gathered from the data collected will have beneficial pedagogical implications for future international students who seek higher education in the U.S. Accordingly, the objectives for this case study are the following:

1. To propose and apply a framework for evaluating and identifying potential sources of L2I influence among international students in a U.S. university.
2. To utilize this framework to investigate how the L2Is of ITAs are affected by being exposed to English in authentic contexts during their assistantships.

3. To determine the applicability and functionality of this framework across different participant groups and contexts by comparing this study's results with those of its predecessor (Agostinelli 2018).

### **Participants**

The participants were 23 international graduate students who had secured teaching assistantships from the university. Each of these students were deemed to require supplemental language skills to perform the duties of a teacher assistant, based on the results of an *Oral Proficiency Interview* diagnostic placement assessment that was conducted before the start of the semester, and were placed in an *English Speaking for International Graduate Teaching Assistants* course. 14 of the students were from China, 3 from Nigeria, 2 from Nepal, and 1 from Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and India. It was the first semester in an American university for 16 of them, and the other 7 had previous U.S. graduate school experience at this institution or another one.

### **Data Collection**

A poststructuralist approach was utilized in the methodology of this research. The rationale for applying this perspective was for its potential to account for the ambiguous individualistic nature of student's personal experience and the complexity of the university context.

Qualitative data was collected using interviews, in-class observations, in-class discussions, and a questionnaire (see Appendix A for the complete questionnaire). The questionnaire was administered the final week of the semester and included 6 questions that were designed to identify phenomena related to English language usage and effects on L2I while at the university.

## Data Analysis

The *L2I in Foreign Contexts* theoretical framework functions as an analytical framework as each of its constructs and sub-constructs can be used to identify and categorize the L2I-related qualitative data gleaned from narratives. In this study, the narrative data from the questionnaire and interview responses was categorized into each of the outer constructs (identity, target culture, target language). Then the most salient accounts where L2I may have been effectively renegotiated were analyzed further by evaluating their relationship, if any, to the other outer constructs and then to the sub-constructs of L2I.

## Findings

### General results (*Linguistic & Sociocultural trends*)

In Benson et al.'s L2I study of Chinese students studying English in various English speaking countries, it was found that some of the students may have experienced, "a shift from second language 'learner' to 'user' identities...because they were at a stage where they had been studying English for many years without ever having used it to any great extent for spoken communication" (pp. 190). While this study was conducted with a slightly different participant group (the ITAs motivation for attending the university was not primarily for English language education), it seems that some of the ITAs experienced a comparable renegotiation of L2I from being exposed to English in a variety of academic settings in an authentic foreign context. That said, some of these shifts in L2I are more evident than others due to their reoccurring nature amongst international students, and can thus be more easily identified by instructors and researchers. In this study, these trends can be explained by, or categorized into, linguistic and sociocultural characteristics of the target culture (TC- people at the university) that led to the renegotiation of the L2I of the ITAs.

Some of the *linguistic* characteristics of the TC, and the English ability of the ITAs, created barriers for the participants. For example, all but two of the students cited either pronunciation, speed of speech, or idiom usage as the causes for not being able to communicate well with members of the TC. Some of these comments can be easily chalked up to the overall L2 ability of the ITAs; however, there were certain cases where students were fluent in other varieties of English (i.e. Indian and Nigerian) and had difficulty adjusting to the pronunciation, intonation, and vocabulary choices of American English speakers. Each group of ITAs renegotiated their L2I to encompass the linguistic challenges (or general characteristics) they experience on a daily basis when interacting with member of the TC. These changes in L2I could manifest themselves differently from case to case in the form of changes in the ITAs investment (perception, motivation, and power relationships) in English and the TC, and in various aspects of L2 ability (pronunciation, intonation, and vocabulary). (Please refer to the *Discussion* section for more in-depth L2I analyses of specific cases)

The more noticeable *sociocultural* characteristics of the TC that accounted for renegotiations of the ITAs' L2Is can be identified by evaluating the ITAs' perceptions of American university students and instructors, perceptions of the U.S. higher education system, and issues faced in their TA positions, which were all elicited in the questionnaire. As is common for many international students across the U.S., many of the ITAs noted that, in class, their American counterparts wore informal clothing, ate and drank, participated more, and were more confident and relaxed than those in their home country. They also noted that their instructors were "closer to students," "more positive," "more engaging," and "not as feared." as the instructors in their home countries. Furthermore, many of the ITAs commented that class discussions and presentations were new for them, and that courses were generally more rigorous

and exams were tougher than those they took in their previous institutions. Lastly, some ITAs had difficulties with their students during their assistanceship duties. Namely, they had issues with feeling disrespected by their students and the surprisingly “low” level of basic foundational skills in their fields, which is noted in other ITA studies as well (see Ashavskaya, 2015). Once again, each of these phenomena likely contributed to a renegotiation of the ITAs’ L2I in the form of investment (perception, motivation, and power relationships) with English, the TC, or both. (Please refer to the *Discussion* section for more in-depth L2I analyses of specific cases)

### **L2I-related results**

“Every time we speak, we are negotiating and renegotiating our sense of self in relation to the larger social world, and reorganizing that relationship across time and space.”

(Norton, 2009, pp. 1-2)

With this notion of identity-shift as a result of specific speech acts in mind, instances where interactions with native (and nonnative) speakers of English in their university context may have influenced L2I were elicited through the questionnaire, or noted by the researcher when they occurred naturally during their English Speaking course. The following are four noteworthy cases where L2I may have been effectively renegotiated as the result of English-mediated interaction within the university context. (See the *Discussion* section for the theoretical L2I evaluation and explanation for each case)

**1. “The Professor’s Accent”-** This account was from a discussion in the English Speaking for ITAs course, and comes from an ITA who recounting an experience she had while auditing her advisor’s course. They are both from the same country.

“... so I was sitting in the back with the students... Anyway, the Professor was from (my country) and he said the word “hy-PO-thi-sis” a few times. Americans say, “hy-paw-

*thuh-sus". So, a group of students next to me were mocking him and kept saying the word in the Professor's pronunciation for the rest of class. I was so angry. They didn't know I was right there. I also think I say the word like that... Is this common for undergraduate students?"*

**2. "Direct Feedback"**- This comment occurred during a teaching demonstration for undergraduate students and faculty members, which was a requirement for the English Speaking for ITAs course. The comment was made by an ITA in the audience about the demonstration of their classmate, who is also an ITA. The comment occurred immediately after the finish of the presentation, during the Q&A period.

*"I must tell you that the explanation you have given is truly a terrible one... Maybe it is okay for these naive people here (motions to visiting undergraduate students), but I know it is incorrect."*

**3. "Gender Equality"**- This comment was made during a discussion about an assignment during the English Speaking for ITAs course. The assignment was to interview an American undergraduate student about their academic and social lives, and to report their findings during class.

*"I interviewed an undergraduate student in my department. We talked about many things. But we didn't talk about politics. I think because women don't like politics."*

**4. "Disrespectful Students"**- This comment was taken from the questionnaire that was administered to the ITAs at the end of the semester. The question was, "What have been your most negative experiences with American students as a TA/Student? (if any)"

*"Some students don't treat me seriously... I can't bear someone to treat me like a kid and play around with me." (referring to students who argue about having the ITA change a*

grade or feed answers during class and office hours)

## Discussion

### ITAs Through the Lens of the L2I Model

The results of this study provided insight into how the L2I of some of the ITAs may have been influenced by their surroundings. While some of the results were more convincing than others, it must be noted that when evaluating something as theoretical as L2I, it is difficult to make conclusive statements about how exactly it is affected. As this is the case, the following insights into L2I, as derived from the evaluation of specific accounts, are not meant to be presented as conclusive findings, but to be viewed as a new perspective from which to evaluate how the identity of language learners can be transformed by entering a new context. The following deductions are extrapolations on the findings from the four salient interactions found in the *L2I-related results* section of the *Findings* (the previous section) as interpreted by the researcher. They explore the potential L2I-related consequences of English-mediated interactions in a new context through the lens of the L2I model, and end with instructional suggestions to address these types of situations in the classroom.

**1. “The Professor’s Accent”- *Relationship between language/national identity and target culture.*** This interaction exemplifies how L2I can potentially be renegotiated, in terms of *power relationships* with the *TC* and *TL* and *perceptions* of the *TC* and *TL*, due to the relationship between the ITAs *language/national identity* and the *TC*.

When the ITA overheard this upsetting conversation, her L2I was likely influenced by being exposed to the perceptions of certain members of the TC about her L2 ability, specifically in terms of pronunciation. For further insight into the situation it becomes pertinent to refer to Norton Pierce’s (1995) *investment* framework, which includes the “socially and historically

constructed relationship of learners to the target language [i.e. perceptions and power relationships]” (pp. 17). In this case, this ITA’s socially constructed relationship with English did not include how her variation of English (Indian) would be perceived by speakers of a different variety of English (American). Conversely, the students who made these upsetting comments likely had a historically/socially constructed perception of the Indian English pronunciation as being comical. The awareness of this perception of her accent likely triggered the renegotiation of the ITA’s *perception* of certain members of the *TC*. It is also likely that L2I was influenced in terms of the ITA’s self-perceived *power relationship* with the *TL* and the *TC* within this context. This account demonstrates how an individual’s L2I may be renegotiated to encompass a more broad view of what it means to be an English speaker due to exposure to a perception of a different variety of “world English”.

**Pedagogical suggestions:** Many ITAs are fluent speakers of a different variety of English, and are surprised at the different pacing, intonation, and pronunciation of speakers of American English, and the miscommunications they can cause. So, as an instructor, of course, it is important to highlight significant differences; however, it is more imperative to introduce the students to the idea of “World Englishes,” and to empower, and not diminish, their perception of the variety of English they speak. In this specific case, and similar ones, it would also be helpful for the instructor to dedicate time to making sure that the ITAs understand the backgrounds of the undergraduate students at their university. Many of these students are from areas that have very little cultural and linguistic diversity; so, when they arrive at college, they are not always prepared to act appropriately when they meet or hear new people. This doesn’t make it right, but it may save the ITAs from taking similar comments too hard.

**2. “Direct Feedback”- Relationship between *language/ethnic identity* and *target culture*.** This

interaction exemplifies how L2I can potentially be renegotiated, in terms of *perceptions* of the *TC* and *TL*, *motivation* to continue studying the *TL*, and *L2 ability*, due to the relationship between the ITAs *language/ethnic identity* and the *TC*.

This comment during a peer's final presentation may be the result of the ITAs *language* and *ethnic identity* markers being perceived differently by members of the *TC* when mediated by a second language in a different context. When confronted about the comment afterwards by the instructor, the ITA seemed genuinely surprised that his comments were interpreted negatively by anyone in the classroom. When told that the undergraduates were shocked about being called, "naïve" and the presenter was not happy to hear his final teaching demonstration called, "terrible" in front of faculty, his advisor, students, and peers, the ITA was genuinely concerned, but more notably curious about what he had done to upset everyone. After some clarification by the instructor about the nuances of the adjectives chosen and the level of directness used, the way that ITA's L2I was in that moment was immediately apparent because he articulated the whole process. He noted that this type of direct feedback was the kind of feedback he had received, and appreciated receiving, in all of his previous educational institutions (i.e. *ethnic identity*). He also admitted that he did not realize the impact that his word choices had on those they were directed towards. It is probable that this interaction prompted changes in L2I in the forms of *perceptions* of members of the *TC's* norms about levels of directness, and *motivation* to incorporate more context-appropriate *vocabulary* and *speech acts* into their *L2* inventory.

**Pedagogical suggestions:** Levels of directness vary from culture to culture, and are often the root of conflicts between ITAs and their students. It is worth continuously addressing and incorporating this phenomenon into various teaching activities and demonstrations in order to avoid such conflicts in their teaching.

**3. “Gender Equality”- Relationship between *ethnic identity* and *target culture*.** This interaction exemplifies how L2I can potentially be renegotiated, in terms of *perceptions* of the TC, due to the relationship between the ITAs *ethnic identity* and the TC within this specific context.

The idea that language and attitudes are inseparable, and the notion that “on-going social...changes affect these constellations, modifying identity options offered to individuals...” (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004, pp. 1) offers valuable insight into the relationship between identity and language, and is especially relevant when evaluating the case of the ITA who made an inappropriate comment about gender in front of his classmates. In this case, the ITA’s comment may have been agreeable in certain contexts, and among certain ethnic groups, in his home country or elsewhere; however, when this type of comment was made in a U.S. classroom, the comment was immediately met with negative feedback. For example, a classmate of the ITA, who was from the same home country, commented, “You cannot say that here,” while the instructor, who was American, immediately made comments about the inappropriateness of this type of comment. Upon receiving this type of response, the ITA seemed genuinely surprised and immediately regretted, and felt sorry about, their comment. This moment marked the start of a probable renegotiation of L2I, in terms of *perceptions* of the TC, took place. After this interaction, it is assumed that this individual, based on this experience, will avoid expressing these types of comments in their new context because they have incorporated a new *perception* of members of the TC and context into their L2I.

**Pedagogical suggestions:** Besides addressing these types of sexist comments on-the-spot, it would also be helpful for instructors to make sure to incorporate a political correctness lesson into their curriculum. Many international students are not familiar with the gender equality

awareness in today's America, and could greatly benefit socially from explicit instruction about this topic in their English classes.

**4. “Disrespectful Students”- Relationship between *social/national/language identity* and *target culture*.** This interaction exemplifies how L2I can potentially be renegotiated, in terms of *perceptions* of the TC and *motivation* to interact with certain members of the TC, due to the relationship between the ITA's *social/national/language identity* and the TC within this specific context.

For the ITA who felt disrespected by his students, his previously formed *social identity* (or *subject position* in Block's [2007] terminology) did not align with the *perceptions* of this identity marker by members of the TC. Their *national* and *language identity* could have also played a role in the perceived disrespect they received. In other words, their *social and national identity* of a TA and an international student, coupled with their *language identity* of an English language learner, may have been the grounds for the mistreatment. Many TAs experience “grade grubbing” from demanding students, and disputes between TAs, specifically international ones, and American undergraduate students are not uncommon (see Ashavskaya, 2015). It is also possible not being a proficient English speaker lead to his being treated like a “kid.”

Consequently, it is applicable to reference the *power relationships* construct of L2I at this point, which emphasizes that “one needs to consider both self-generated subject positionings as well as subject positionings that are imposed on individuals by others” (Block, 2007, pp.31). In this case, the ITA must have been experiencing a renegotiation of his L2I in terms of the *power relationship* he has with members of the TC (his students) when he is communicating in an authentic context (in class or during office hours). This could also affect his *motivation* to interact with members of the TC in the future.

**Pedagogical suggestions:** It would be helpful to ITAs if their instructor introduces them to some of literature about the challenges that ITAs face in U.S. classrooms (i.e. Ashavskaya, 20215; Jia, 2008; Kuo, 2011; Park 2014) in order to prepare them for these types of interactions. It is also beneficial for them to be honestly, and explicitly, told about the nuances of the TA position, and how it is generally not regarded nearly as highly as other positions of power in the university (i.e. instructors and professors).

### **Concerning the Framework**

The findings of this study suggest that the methodology implemented, the proposed framework, proved to be effective in collecting, identifying, and analyzing prospective L2I-related data. The comments, answers, and narratives provided by the participants were also helpful in understanding the complexity and challenges of researching L2I in foreign contexts. It quickly became apparent that even though this framework was helpful for identifying and categorizing relationships between its different components, that the magnitude of the potential relationships that come into play during each account can still makes for an overwhelming amount of information to navigate through. The utopian idea of creating a holistic design for this field of research may be realized someday, but today is not yet that day. Although this framework may serve to holistically comprise the basic aspects of L2I (as provisionally defined), it still falls short in its ability to identify other aspects that certainly come into play within this context (i.e. personality traits, such as confidence). Currently, the idea that “language learning in study abroad [and foreign contexts in general] is extremely complex, requiring researchers to choose from a broad array of potential foci” (Kinginger, 2009 pp. 207) rings true, but hopefully the framework used in this study is a step towards a clearer, more organized, approach to analyzing this scenario.

**Limitation.** A key limitation to this portion of the study was that many of the accounts selected for evaluation were not as comprehensive as they ideally could be. Although they all provided thought-provoking examples of instances that may impact L2I, they could not be evaluated thoroughly because of insufficient resources and data collection methods. These accounts were also collected either during their English Speaking course or through class assignments, which may yield inauthentic accounts.

### **Implications**

**Research Implications.** As displayed in the findings, it can be seen how the *L2I in the Foreign Context* framework can be utilized to analyze qualitative data collected from student narratives and classroom observations. While only a select few aspects of the constructs were employed within the results, it can be inferred as to how the various other aspects can be utilized by researchers to identify and explain L2I-related phenomena in foreign contexts.

Another key implication of this study is that it adds to the developing body of research concerning the relationship between language learner, identity, and foreign contexts. This research plays a role in the following call for the further investigation of this relationship:

“...there needs to be a broadening of what identity means and the range of subject positions explored in research...more could be done on these all-important perspectives on identity and how they play out in study abroad contexts. But most crucially, there simply needs to be more studies, and more involving different nationality combinations as regards to sending and receiving countries.” (Block, 2007, pp. 222)

While the students at this institution are not study abroad students, this study and any follow-up studies in this institution may offer a wide range of valuable insights into phenomena related to different subject positions and “different nationality combinations.” Furthermore, in Sato’s (2014)

review of L2I literature, she notes the lack of substantial attention to students' perceptions of using language as a foreigner while abroad. It is believed that this study effectively takes the stance of valuing and investigating learner perceptions while abroad and enhances the scope of this body of research.

**General Pedagogical Implications.** While the main aim of this paper was to evaluate the effects that this particular context had on the L2I of these students, the findings also have useful pedagogical implications, particularly, in this case, for ITA English speaking classes. English instructors and administrators at this institution (or similar ones) can tailor course content to focus on the relevant speech acts necessary for navigating the situations faced by former students. Future students will benefit from this instruction because they can be assured that the course content has pragmatic value. More broadly, the L2I model can be referenced to guide any language instructor towards finding the potential source of L2I-related challenges their students face. In turn, once these sources are identified, they can be addressed instructionally through their incorporation into the course curriculum.

### **Conclusion**

Considering the resources invested by both students and educational institutions to participate in international travel, research that might help improve these experiences in academic or social capacities could prove valuable. The value of L2I research is not only instrumental to the success of these international sojourns, but also invaluable pedagogically. Educators and administrators can use results from L2I studies to gain perspective and insight about the language education of their students. Additionally, it is hoped that further qualitative research concerning L2I in foreign settings will allow future researchers to incorporate more sound research methodology and continue to advance this developing field.

One aim of this paper was to propose a framework of L2I in foreign contexts as a reference to those interested in researching this topic. Besides providing an overview and visualization of the various aspects of this environment, it also attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practitioners on the ground level in this field. For those invested in this research, it can serve as a more intuitive tool to connect the various data gathered from student narratives to the existing literature. Furthermore, upon evaluating the constructs of this framework, one can conceive how a potential future research direction could entail its alteration as a means to evaluate other groups of migrants (i.e. international students, economic immigrants, refugees, etc.) in any foreign context.

This study also aimed to build upon its predecessor (Agostinelli, 2018) by testing the L2I model in a different context (various countries vs. one U.S. university) with a different participant group (Korean college students vs. ITAs). While the model was once again helpful in identifying underlying L2I-related phenomena in marked situations, the results of this study were decidedly more complex. This can be easily attributed to the participant group and the background of the researcher. In the previous study, the participants were nationally, linguistically, and ethnically homogeneous, and the researcher had extensive cultural and linguistic experience with Korean students. This made identifying the underlying causes and effects of renegotiation of L2I relatively easier than employing the same strategy with a more diverse group of participants. Due to the range of backgrounds of the participants in the study at hand, the home culture and L1-related sources of possible L2I renegotiation were more difficult to pinpoint, and often necessitated further research in the forms of further participant inquiry or seeking outside individuals with experience with the culture and native language of the participants. Thus, in the future, it would be beneficial for all researchers and practitioners in this

field to share their specific L2I-related findings with their peers. Ideally, this would be done by depositing and organizing this information in some form of repository/database that can eventually be used as a resource for those that are interested in this subject matter, but lack the appropriate cultural and linguistic background to easily apply the L2I model to their students (i.e. ESL teachers with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds).

This study has also yielded qualitative data relating to the challenges ITAs, and their instructors, face in American university classrooms. These specific ITA experiences can be used by various stakeholders in international education (i.e. researchers, teacher trainers, and language educators) to expand upon, and identify trends within, the existing body of ITA research. By comparing the experiences of the students in this study with comparable ITAs who were evaluated in other U.S. universities, some trends can be easily identified. For example, navigating the nuances of the informal U.S. student-teacher relationship and dealing with the perceived low academic ability level of U.S. undergraduates are cited by ITAs as challenges in this study, as well as in others (Ashavskaya, 2015; Jia & Bergerson, 2008). That being said, these types of examples are just the tip of the iceberg; there are countless others waiting to be identified for those who have an interest in improving the lives of ITAs in the U.S.

Finally, the ultimate goal for this study is to contribute to the creation of an accepted model for evaluating and explaining L2I in different contexts that can be intuitively applied to any learner in any context by practitioners in the field. It is hoped that eventually this framework can function within the field of sociolinguistics just as *Maslow's hierarchy of needs* does within the field of psychology or as Krashen's (1981) *Theory of Second Language Acquisition* is utilized in the field of applied linguistics.

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## Appendix A

### Reflection Assignment: 1051- English Speaking for Graduate Teaching Assistants

Name:

Class/Section: 1051-

Date:

Department:

*\*Please use as much space as necessary to answer the following questions*

#### ***General Information:***

##### Teaching background:

1. Do you have previous teaching experience? (Before you started this course) If so, please describe in detail (institution, position, course, age of students, duties, etc.)
2. Have you had any teacher training? (Before this semester or presently) If so, please describe in detail.
3. Do you have any experience as a Teacher's Assistant? (Including this semester: Fall 2018) If so, please describe in detail (department, course, year of students, duties, etc.)

##### Future plans:

1. In which course(s) do you expect to be a TA during your time at LSU?
2. Besides your TA position(s) here, do you plan or have aspirations to be an educator in the future? (As an instructor, professor, trainer, etc.) If so, please describe in detail.
3. After you graduate from LSU, do you plan to return to your home country? Or stay in the United States? (if other, please describe)
4. After you graduate from LSU, what do you hope to do? (i.e. job, postdoc, etc.) Please give a general description.

***Reflection: American Higher Education***

1. Is this your first semester as a student in the United States?  
If no, please describe your previous educational experience in detail (institution, amount of time, degrees/certificates received, and reason for attending a U.S. university)
2. Has going to an American university met your expectations? How is it the same/different?
3. So far, what have been the most surprising differences between students in the U.S. and in your home country? Academically, culturally, or socially. (This answer can be based on your personal observations or on what we have talked about in class)
4. So far, what have been the most surprising differences between instructors in the U.S. and in your home country? (This answer can be based on your personal observations or on what we have talked about in class)
5. What have been your most negative experiences with American students as a TA/Student? (if any)
6. What have been your most positive experiences with American students as a TA/Student? (if any)