

THE IMPACT OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE MESSAGES ON CHANGE IN ATTITUDE TOWARD INTERNATIONAL TEACHING ASSISTANTS

MARY I. BRESNAHAN & MIN SUN KIM

1. GOAL OF THE STUDY

Many undergraduates entering colleges and universities in the United States have little or no experience in communicating with people from other countries. Even if they are open to such an experience, often the message they will be most likely to hear from other students is a warning to avoid classes that are taught by international teaching assistants. Positive messages about international teaching assistants are also present in the informal student network, but often they are available only to those who have already manifested a desire to communicate with and learn from international students. The purpose of this study is to assess and document U.S. undergraduates' level of receptivity toward international teaching assistants (ITAs), and then to measure the impact that positive and negative messages have on these attitudes. This study discusses ways in which positive messages about cultural exchange and contact can be brought into greater prominence by all members of the university community.

Numerous studies confirm that language attitudes are acquired early and tend to be enduring and particularly resistant to change. Even as early as 3.6 years of age, Day (1982) reported that many children are able to accurately discriminate between high prestige and low prestige dialects of English. Children use this information to make competence and power judgments about others. Thus, it is no surprise that U.S. undergraduates are likely to equate non-native, accented varieties of English with communicative incompetence. It is clear from the decision to hire international, non-native English-speaking teaching assistants, that U.S. universities have not capitulated to pressure to exclude international students from teaching assistant positions. On the other