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Teaching in the Contact Zone: The Lived Experience of an International Graduate Instructor

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Introduction

Writing classrooms are often understood as what Mary Louise Pratt (1991) terms "contact zones," social spaces where individuals from different linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds meet, negotiate difference, and produce meaning within asymmetrical relations of power. Within writing studies, this framework has been widely used to examine how multilingual students navigate academic discourse, develop literacy practices, and encounter institutional expectations. In much of this scholarship, however, the contact zone has been applied in predominantly student-centered ways, where instructors are positioned as facilitators responsible for guiding students through linguistic and cultural negotiation while maintaining relative stability in their own authority. As Horton (2021) suggests, instructors are often understood as conscious mediators who help students engage difference productively.

This article challenges that application. It argues that multilingual international graduate instructors do not merely facilitate the contact zone; they are also constituted within it. For these instructors, linguistic identity, accent perception, and institutional positioning render authority contingent rather than assumed. Their voices, bodies, and speech patterns become sites where legitimacy is evaluated, negotiated, and at times contested in real time. As a result, the classroom emerges not only as a space where students encounter difference, but also as a space where instructors experience vulnerability, scrutiny, and ideological positioning, conditions that complicate the assumption of the instructor as a stable facilitator.

This vulnerability is not unique to this study; it echoes a growing conversation about how graduate instructors' identities shape classroom authority. Alam (2024) describes his hesitation to address race in his first-year writing classroom as an international graduate teaching assistant, noting that although "our fears could be illogical," they remain "genuine" because of his precarity on an F-1 visa (p. 2). Louie and Purna (2025) similarly describe "persuasion-work," the ongoing labor graduate instructors of color perform to establish their legitimacy with students who may associate writing instruction with whiteness (pp. 4-5). Klinowski et al. (2025) examine a related tension, showing how graduate instructors negotiate their emerging identities as researchers alongside their established identities as teachers.

Building on these conversations, this study asks how linguistic identity, alongside race and other forms of difference, shapes instructor authority within the contact zone. While Alam (2024) and Louie and Purna (2025) examine racialized challenges to instructor legitimacy, and Horton (2021) applies Pratt's (1991) contact zone framework to students'

negotiation of identity and difference, this study shifts attention to the instructor. It asks what happens when a multilingual international graduate instructor is not simply the facilitator of the contact zone but a participant whose own linguistic legitimacy is subject to negotiation.

Drawing on critical autoethnography, this study examines how linguistic legitimacy is constructed and interpreted in the writing classroom through the lived experiences of multilingual international graduate instructors. Focusing on moments of miscomprehension, repetition, ambiguity, and evaluation, the analysis demonstrates that authority is not a fixed attribute tied to institutional role, but a relational condition shaped by perception, expectation, and power. These moments reflect what Pratt (1991) identifies as the risks of the contact zone, including “miscomprehension” and uneven interpretation (p. 37), while also revealing how such instability operates on instructors themselves, an area that remains underexamined in writing studies. Beyond the specific application of contact zone theory, this gap reflects a broader pattern in writing studies scholarship: international and multilingual graduate instructors remain a comparatively underexamined population in the field’s research, even as international students have received sustained scholarly attention. Although writing programs increasingly rely on international graduate instructors to teach First-Year Writing, most scholarship on writing pedagogy and teacher preparation still assumes instructors are linguistically dominant. As a result, instructors who teach from positions of linguistic difference have received far less attention in writing studies.

This article addresses that gap not only within contact zone scholarship but also within writing studies more broadly, where international graduate instructors have received relatively little attention as a subject of inquiry in their own right. Rather than extending Pratt’s concept, this study draws out its relational scope by interrogating how contact zone theory has been taken up within the field. While Pratt’s formulation emphasizes “people” engaged in relations of power, writing studies scholarship has often narrowed this focus to student experience, positioning instructors as linguistically secure guides. By foregrounding instructor experience, this article demonstrates that the instability, negotiation, and vulnerability associated with contact zones are not limited to students encountering academic discourse, but also shape the experiences of instructors whose linguistic identities diverge from dominant norms. In doing so, it exposes a critical blind spot in writing studies and calls for a reconsideration of how authority, language, and legitimacy are conceptualized in increasingly multilingual classrooms.

Situating this argument within ongoing student-centered scholarship further highlights its contribution. While prior work has been instrumental in showing how students negotiate language and power, this study demonstrates that multilingual instructors also experience linguistic vulnerability and contested authority, thereby challenging the assumption of stable instructor authority within the contact zone. This reframing has implications beyond theory. Recognizing multilingual international graduate instructors as both facilitators and participants highlights the need for writing programs to more critically examine how instructors are prepared, evaluated, supported, and trained. It also invites a broader rethinking of linguistic normativity in academic spaces, where

authority is often implicitly tied to standardized expectations of speech. By situating instructor experience within the dynamics of the contact zone, this article contributes to ongoing conversations about language, power, and identity in writing classrooms and offers a more inclusive understanding of how meaning and authority are negotiated in practice.

This article makes a theoretical contribution by reframing contact zone theory to account for the experiences of multilingual international graduate instructors. In doing so, it also suggests new directions for research and for how writing programs prepare, support, and evaluate multilingual instructors.

Understanding the Contact Zone

Mary Louise Pratt (1991) introduced the concept of the contact zone to explain how people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds interact, negotiate meaning, and navigate unequal power relations. In these spaces, interaction is shaped by differences in language, culture, and social position. Pratt also notes that writing in the contact zone involves significant risks, including "miscomprehension, incomprehension, dead letters, unread masterpieces, [and] absolute heterogeneity of meaning" (p. 37). These perils highlight the instability of communication in contact zones. Miscomprehension and incomprehension refer to moments when individuals misunderstand or fail to understand one another. Dead letters and unread masterpieces describe ideas or contributions that go unrecognized or unacknowledged by others. Finally, what Pratt (1991) calls "absolute heterogeneity of meaning" reflects how individuals may interpret the same language or message in fundamentally different ways (p. 37). Together, these conditions illustrate how communication in contact zones is shaped by unequal power relations and differing linguistic and cultural frameworks, making meaning contingent, negotiated, and often unstable.

Other scholars have described contact zones as multifaceted spaces shaped by interaction, power, and negotiation across both material and symbolic dimensions. Mullen (2005) conceptualizes contact zones as "a cluster of symbolic and material spaces," drawing attention to the fact that they exist not only in physical locations such as classrooms but also within symbolic domains like language, identity, and discourse (p. 22). Similarly, Singh and Doherty (2004) define contact zones as "spatial, temporal locations," emphasizing that these spaces are situated within specific contexts and moments rather than existing as abstract or static constructs (p. 12). Expanding on this, Negash (2009) characterizes contact zones as "intensely contested political and cultural space[s]" and as "physical and imagined terrains of concurrent colonial appropriation and negation," highlighting how power and resistance operate simultaneously within these environments (pp. 76, 79). Other scholars further underscore the instability and unevenness of contact zones, describing them as "uneven terrain" (Yeoh & Willis, 2005, p. 282) that can be "transformative, generative, and disruptive" (West, 1996, p. 147), as well as "challenging" and "destabilizing" (Chidester, 2008, p. 64).

These descriptions collectively point to the inherently dynamic and unpredictable nature of contact zones, where interactions do not follow fixed or stable patterns. Pratt's (1991) observation that the contact zone is a space where “no one [is] excluded, and no one [is] safe” (pp. 38–39) suggests that negotiation and contestation extend to everyone within it, including instructors whose authority is shaped by linguistic difference. Taken together, these perspectives position the contact zone as a complex and evolving environment in which meaning, authority, and identity are not predetermined but are continuously produced and reshaped through interaction.

Within educational contexts, Cynthia Fields (2015), explains that the concept of the contact zone has been widely applied across various academic spaces and practices. Fields notes that scholars have used the contact zone to examine “the academy itself” (Canagarajah, 1997), research relationships (Manathunga, 2009), English studies as a discipline (Bizzell 1994), and English as a second language contexts (Singh & Doherty 2004), as well as the experiences of international students in the “global university” (Fields, 2015, p. 38). She further observes that contact zones have been used to understand academic conferences, writing centers, and peer response groups, highlighting the classroom and related academic spaces as sites of interaction shaped by linguistic and cultural difference (Fields, 2015, p. 38). According to Fields, invoking the English classroom as a contact zone has also served as “a way of organizing literary study” (Bizzell 1994) and as “a rationale for integrating English studies multiculturally”, particularly through the inclusion of diverse literatures and perspectives (p. 39). Fields also draws on Miller’s argument that the “central activity” of the classroom as contact zone is “investigating the range of literate practices available to those within asymmetrical power relationships” (Miller 1994, p. 399 as cited in Fields, 2015), emphasizing how classrooms function as spaces where language, literacy, and authority are negotiated (p. 38). Through this synthesis, Fields (2015) highlights how contact zone theory has shaped how scholars understand educational spaces as sites of linguistic, cultural, and ideological interaction.

Pratt (1991) conceptualizes the contact zone classroom as a space organized around interaction among participants navigating cultural, linguistic, and hierarchical differences. She suggests that pedagogy in such settings may involve practices such as “exercises in storytelling” and opportunities for participants to engage with “the ideas, interests, histories, and attitudes of others,” alongside “experiments in transculturation and collaborative work” and the use of critique, parody, and comparison (p. 33). These approaches foreground engagement across differences and invite participants to encounter perspectives beyond their own. 1also emphasizes “the redemption of the oral” and encourages “ways for people to engage with suppressed aspects of history,” highlighting the value of diverse modes of expression and historically marginalized voices (p. 33). Collectively, these practices frame the classroom as a space where meaning emerges through interaction among individuals shaped by different linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts.

Importantly, Pratt (1991) repeatedly refers to “people” rather than limiting her description to students alone. For example, she describes contact zone pedagogy as involving

"ways for people to engage with suppressed aspects of history" and "ground rules for communication across lines of difference and hierarchy that go beyond politeness but maintain mutual respect" (p. 33). Her use of the broader term "people" emphasizes that the contact zone includes all participants within the classroom and that communication occurs across differences in power, identity, and authority. By framing the contact zone as a space where "people" engage in storytelling, critique, collaboration, and cultural mediation, Pratt (1991) highlights the relational nature of the classroom, where meaning, authority, and legitimacy are shaped through interaction rather than fixed roles. This emphasis on interaction across difference reinforces that the contact zone is defined by ongoing negotiation among participants within asymmetrical relations of power.

However, the writing studies scholarship often assumes that instructors occupy stable positions of linguistic authority within the classroom. As Matsuda and Silva (2011) argue, "even though various iterations of writing classrooms like 'mainstream,' 'ESL,' or 'cross-cultural' exist, a reality of increased globalization is that students of all kinds of cultural and linguistic backgrounds enter all types of writing classrooms" (p. 253). They further emphasize that writing teachers must adopt pedagogical strategies that support students at different stages of linguistic development. (Matsuda & Silva, 2011, as cited in Horton, 2021, p. 2). This framing positions the instructor as a linguistically secure authority whose role is to guide students through linguistic and cultural differences.

Scholarship on multilingual writing classrooms places significant responsibility on instructors to accommodate linguistic diversity, arguing that it is critical for teachers to integrate pedagogical strategies that support students and meet them where they are (McCook, 2016; Bizzell, 1997, as cited in Horton, 2021, p. 2). This expectation is reinforced through contact zone pedagogy, which positions instructors as active agents responsible for shaping and managing these spaces. As Horton notes through McCook, writing classrooms are sites where instructors take a "proactive approach" to implementing contact zone-informed practices, helping students engage with "linguistic and rhetorical dynamics" and providing opportunities for experimentation (McCook, 2016 as cited in Horton, 2021, p. 2). Within this framework, instructors are expected to carefully construct "contact zones that are enabling ones, in which all voices are heard" (Gottschalk 2002, as cited in Horton, 2021, p. 3), while also facilitating "safe" and "authentic" spaces that promote "restorative, liberatory literacies" (Pritchard, 2017, Hooks, 1994, as cited in Horton, 2021, p. 3).

Taken together, these perspectives construct the instructor as linguistically competent, stable, and capable of managing difference within the classroom. In other words, they assume that the instructor possesses the linguistic authority necessary to lead the contact zone, mediate misunderstanding, and ensure that all voices are recognized and respected. Horton's (2021) framing of instructors as facilitators of the contact zone further reinforces this assumption, positioning them as figures who can confidently navigate linguistic and cultural difference on behalf of their students.

Additionally, Cynthia Fields (2015) explains that the contact zone has often been associated with developing students' reflection and critical awareness (p. 39). Through this framework, Fields demonstrates how contact zone theory has been used to understand writing classrooms as spaces where students critically engage with language, authority, and meaning, (p. 39). As Fields demonstrates, contact zone theory has been widely used in composition studies to examine how students develop critical consciousness by reflecting on their linguistic practices and confronting the unequal power relations that shape academic discourse. Within this framework, the classroom is understood as a space where students encounter "colliding voices" and learn to recognize how their reading, writing, and interpretive choices are shaped by broader discursive structures (p. 39).

However, this student-centered application of contact zone theory also raises an important question: what happens when the instructor's linguistic identity becomes a site of negotiation within the same space? Pratt (1991) defines contact zones as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (p. 34). This definition suggests that contact zones are relational spaces shaped by interaction among all participants, rather than spaces experienced by students alone.

Beyond contact zone theory, a distinct body of scholarship has examined the experiences of non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) and international teaching assistants (ITAs) directly. Moussu and Llurda (2008) synthesize decades of research on NNESTs, documenting how accent, native-speaker status, and perceived linguistic authority shape students' evaluations of teacher competence, often independent of actual instructional skill (pp. 326–329). Much of this research, however, has approached NNESTs as an undifferentiated category; as Moussu and Llurda themselves observe, "research so far has typically approached NNSs as a single group" (p. 337), a limitation this study's grounded, single-instructor account helps particularize rather than resolve.

Together, this body of work shows that challenges to the authority of multilingual instructors are not isolated experiences but well-documented across different disciplines and institutional settings. Research on non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) and international teaching assistants (ITAs) has examined issues such as accent bias, oral proficiency testing, instructor evaluations, and institutional support. However, this scholarship has generally focused on student outcomes, evaluation practices, or institutional policies. This study builds on that work by bringing it into conversation with contact zone theory. Rather than viewing these issues as only administrative or pedagogical concerns, it argues that they are also examples of how authority is negotiated through language, identity, and power within the contact zone.

Recent scholarship on international teaching assistants extends this connection between accent and racialization directly. Ramjattan (2022) borrows the concept of "accent work" from the labor undergone by actors to adopt an accent for a role, applying it to ITAs whose accents are treated as "liabilities" in English-medium university

classrooms (p. 1256). Ramjattan (2020) further demonstrates that ITAs are commonly "criticized for having 'unintelligible' accents for professional communication" (p. 1119), a criticism that "takes a racist form" by disproportionately targeting racially minoritized ITAs regardless of actual intelligibility. This scholarship places my experiences within a broader pattern of challenges faced by multilingual instructors, showing that they are not isolated incidents but part of a larger body of documented research.

While contact zone pedagogy expects instructors to guide students through linguistic difference, it rarely considers what happens when the instructor's own linguistic identity becomes a source of scrutiny or misunderstanding. In these moments, authority cannot be assumed simply because of the instructor's role. Instead, multilingual instructors may find themselves negotiating their own legitimacy within the same classroom they are expected to lead. This reveals an important limitation of contact zone pedagogy: it often assumes instructors occupy stable positions of linguistic authority, overlooking how that authority can be challenged for those whose speech falls outside dominant linguistic norms. My experience as a multilingual international graduate instructor illustrates how instructor authority is continually negotiated rather than automatically granted.

Recognizing the instructor as a participant in the contact zone is important because it challenges the assumption that classroom authority is stable and automatically comes with the instructor's role. By focusing on multilingual international graduate instructors, this study shows how linguistic identity shapes perceptions of legitimacy, competence, and authority in ways that writing studies has often overlooked. While much of the scholarship has focused on how students negotiate power in the classroom, far less attention has been given to instructors' own experiences of vulnerability and contested authority. Viewing the contact zone in this way also raises an important methodological question: how can these experiences be studied from the instructor's perspective? Because these moments of negotiation are deeply personal and often difficult to capture through observation or surveys alone, this study uses critical autoethnography to examine how authority, linguistic legitimacy, and belonging are experienced and negotiated in the classroom.

Methodology

This study adopts critical autoethnography as its methodological framework, drawing on scholarship that positions personal experience as a site for examining power, identity, and institutional structures. Jones (2016) argues that the “critical” in critical autoethnography lies in understanding theory not as a fixed body of knowledge, but as an ongoing, dynamic process that “links the concrete and abstract, thinking and acting.” Within this framework, theory and story exist in a “reciprocal, inter-animating relationship,” where theory helps explain the nuances of lived experience, and narrative serves to illustrate and embody those insights (p. 228). In this sense, theory is not something applied after the fact but functions as a “language for thinking with and through” experience itself (Jones 2016). Extending this perspective, Reed-Danahay (2017) conceptualizes critical autoethnography as a form of “anthropology as cultural critique” that contributes to understanding power and social inequality (p. 144). This

approach emphasizes that personal narratives must be situated within broader cultural and political contexts and critically examined in relation to questions of power, including "whose interests are being served" (p. 145).

Together, these perspectives position critical autoethnography as a method that moves beyond individual storytelling to interrogate how lived experiences are shaped by systems of power and inequality. This framework is particularly appropriate for this study, as it enables an analysis of how linguistic identity, accent, and authority are negotiated within the contact zone. By examining my experience as multilingual international graduate instructors, this study demonstrates how personal narrative and theoretical inquiry work together to reveal how linguistic ideologies and institutional power shape perceptions of legitimacy in writing classrooms.

Autoethnography

"She needs to go back and learn English." - Anonymous

This comment appeared on my student evaluation after my first semester teaching first-year composition. English is my first language. Yet in that moment, my legitimacy as an English instructor was not evaluated based on my pedagogical training, lesson design, or engagement with students, but on how my accent was perceived. Standing at the front of the classroom, I was positioned not only as an instructor but also as an object of linguistic scrutiny. My authority, competence, and belonging were implicitly questioned. This moment revealed the classroom as more than a site of student learning; it was a site where linguistic identity, institutional authority, and cultural legitimacy intersected and were actively negotiated.

Before I arrived in the United States, I did not realize how much my accent would shape my teaching. Prior to finalizing my graduate teaching position at the University of Wyoming, I was required to take the Oral Proficiency Interview–computer (OPIc) exam, an assessment designed to measure spoken language proficiency in academic and professional contexts. The OPIc evaluates a speaker's ability to describe experiences, explain ideas, give opinions, narrate events, and communicate clearly in real-life situations. Unlike other standardized tests, the OPIc focuses exclusively on speaking ability; it does not separately assess grammar, reading, or writing. My performance on this exam resulted in a rating of Advanced High on the ACTFL proficiency scale, the second highest level below Superior. According to ACTFL standards, speakers at this level are able to communicate fluently and effectively, explain complex ideas, and participate in academic and professional discussions with clarity and competence. Receiving this rating affirmed my confidence in my linguistic ability. I understood myself to be a proficient English speaker, fully prepared to teach First-Year Writing. However, my experience in the classroom quickly complicated this assumption. Despite institutional certification of my speaking proficiency, communication with my students was often marked by moments of hesitation and misunderstanding. When I asked questions, students frequently responded with "huh?" or "can you repeat yourself?"

On more difficult days, I noticed eye rolls or visible frustration. The most striking moment came in my course evaluations, where one student wrote, “She needs to go back and learn English.” Reading this comment, I paused. The institution had formally recognized my proficiency, yet my linguistic authority was being questioned within the classroom itself. This moment revealed a disjunction between institutional validation and classroom perception, where linguistic legitimacy was not determined solely by proficiency, but by how my speech was received. It is worth acknowledging that these moments of miscomprehension were not always solely products of linguistic ideology; in some cases, students may have genuinely struggled to process an unfamiliar phonological pattern in real time, particularly in a classroom setting that demands sustained listening and rapid comprehension of spoken instruction. Distinguishing, in the moment, between a student's ideologically inflected dismissal and a student's genuine difficulty in comprehension is not always possible, and both likely operated simultaneously across different interactions. Acknowledging this reality does not weaken the claim that linguistic legitimacy is socially negotiated; rather, it clarifies that this negotiation unfolds at the intersection of real communicative friction and the ideological frameworks through which listeners interpret and evaluate that friction.

The perils Pratt (1991) associates with the contact zone, the possibility of being misunderstood, misheard, or fundamentally unintelligible to one's listener (p. 37), are illustrated directly in my experience, as my accent became a site where meaning, authority, and legitimacy were negotiated. Despite my ability to communicate effectively, differences in accent and linguistic expectation created moments where my authority as an instructor was destabilized. These interactions positioned me not outside the contact zone as its facilitator, but within it as a participant whose linguistic identity was subject to interpretation and contestation.

Now, after five years of teaching First-Year Writing and living in the United States, I have gained experience, confidence, and familiarity with the academic environment. Some professors and students engage with me without difficulty, and I have often assumed that my accent has become more familiar or more easily understood. Yet these moments of negotiation persist. Only weeks before writing this article, a student laughed when I pronounced the word “purpose,” shaped by my Nigerian accent. I felt immediate embarrassment. This moment raises an important question: why is the contact zone primarily understood as a space where students develop critical awareness, while instructors are assumed to possess stable linguistic authority? This student-centered framing overlooks how multilingual international graduate instructors may also experience vulnerability within the contact zone, where their linguistic identity becomes a site of scrutiny and negotiation. My experience demonstrates that the contact zone is not only a space where students grapple with institutional discourse, but also one where instructors navigate contested perceptions of linguistic legitimacy and authority.

These moments reveal a critical gap in how contact zone theory has been applied in composition studies. While scholars such as Fields (2015) emphasize how students develop critical awareness within the contact zone by reflecting on language, power,

and authority, less attention has been given to how instructors, particularly multilingual international graduate instructors, experience linguistic vulnerability and contested legitimacy within these same spaces. Horton (2021), positions writing instructors as facilitators of the contact zone, responsible for guiding students through encounters with linguistic and cultural difference. This framing assumes that instructors occupy stable positions from which they can confidently mediate these interactions.

However, my experience complicates this assumption: if the contact zone is inherently unstable, as established above, how do instructors confidently facilitate this space when they themselves are grappling with questions of linguistic legitimacy and authority? These moments suggest that multilingual instructors are not merely facilitators of the contact zone but are also subjects within it, navigating the same tensions, misunderstandings, and negotiations that contact zone theory has traditionally attributed to students. Recognizing the instructor as both facilitator and participant expands the contact zone framework and reveals how authority within writing classrooms is not fixed, but continuously shaped through interaction, perception, and power.

My experience as a multilingual international graduate instructor further demonstrates that the instructor's linguistic identity can become a site where these negotiations unfold differently depending on context. In one of the most linguistically diverse sections I taught, which included students from Argentina, Brazil, Bangladesh, and other multilingual backgrounds, my accent did not become a site of disruption or ridicule. Students engaged with the material without questioning my linguistic legitimacy. In contrast, in another section composed primarily of monolingual U.S. students, my accent became hypervisible. Students laughed, asked me to repeat myself, or signaled difficulty understanding me in ways that implicitly challenged my authority. Importantly, my accent, teaching preparation, and pedagogical approach remained constant across both classrooms.

What differed was not the instructor, but the linguistic expectations students brought into the space. These contrasting experiences reveal the classroom as a contact zone not only for students but also for instructors whose linguistic identities diverge from dominant norms. Linguistic authority, in this context, emerges not as an inherent attribute of the instructor but as a socially constructed and relational perception shaped by student ideology and experience. In multilingual classrooms, where linguistic diversity is normalized, authority is less tightly bound to dominant accent expectations. In predominantly monolingual classrooms, however, linguistic difference becomes more visible and potentially destabilizing to instructor legitimacy. These moments reflect the asymmetrical power relations Pratt (1991) describes, where legitimacy is negotiated through perception and ideology rather than institutional role alone. Recognizing the multilingual international graduate instructor as a subject within the contact zone expands the theoretical framework beyond its traditional student-centered application and reveals how linguistic identity, power, and authority are continuously negotiated within writing classrooms.

To reemphasize, this study centers on accent and its effect on instructor authority in the classroom, but accent is never perceived in isolation, how it is heard is shaped by race as well. As a Nigerian instructor, my accent is not evaluated on its own terms; it is filtered through existing assumptions about race and linguistic legitimacy. This pattern is well documented: accent-based bias tends to fall disproportionately on speakers who are already racially marked, regardless of the actual clarity or correctness of their speech (Rosa & Flores, 2017, p. 632). A full treatment of how race and language intersect is beyond the scope of this article, but that intersection should not go unnamed simply because the analysis here focuses on language. Future work, including my own, should take up this relationship more directly.

What This Means for the Contact Zone

Contact zone pedagogy, as articulated in the literature, consistently positions instructors as central, stable figures responsible for structuring, guiding, and sustaining the classroom as a productive site of negotiation. Pratt (1991) urges educators to "look for the pedagogical arts of the contact zone" (p. 40), a call that has been taken up by scholars who emphasize the need for deliberate, instructor-led intervention in shaping these spaces. In response, Horton's (2021) literature advocates for a "revolution via new pedagogical approaches" that prioritize creating "safe spaces for learners to unpack linguistic and cultural conceptions" and engage in "meaningful interactions with new ideas" (p. 3). Within this framework, instructors are not passive participants but active designers of the contact zone, tasked with making it accessible and navigable for students. This role is further reinforced through the metaphor of the instructor as a "travel agent or tour guide," one who "makes the contact zone tangible for students and help[s] them navigate the different learning experiences they encounter within it" (p. 7). Such a framing assumes that all instructors possess the linguistic competence necessary to guide students through unfamiliar rhetorical and linguistic terrain.

Horton (2021) further underscores that instructors must actively cultivate environments that enable students to engage productively with difference. Students are expected to "socialize within their translingual environment" and develop reflexive awareness through "turning back to discover, examine and critique one's claims and assumptions" (p. 3)

However, this process is contingent upon the instructor's ability to construct a classroom environment that supports such exploration. As emphasized, "instructors must create an environment that is conducive to discovery through error-making," ensuring that students feel comfortable engaging with uncertainty and difference (p. 3). This responsibility extends to instructors' own communicative practices, as they must remain "aware of how they talk about writing" and model the kind of reflective, equitable engagement they expect from students (p. 4). Without such intentional facilitation, the contact zone risks becoming "oppressive," as students may misinterpret or disengage from the complex dynamics of identity and power at play. Thus, instructors are

positioned as essential to ensuring that the contact zone functions as a productive, rather than harmful space (p. 7).

At the same time, Horton (2021), places significant emphasis on the instructor's ethical and ideological role within the contact zone. Teachers are expected to "exemplify equitable, decolonizing practices" (p. 7) and foster "an amicable relationship-based environment" that supports students' identity negotiation and literacy development. They must also engage in reflexive inquiry, continually examining their own positionality while co-constructing knowledge with students in ways that "equitably distribute power across stakeholders" (p. 7). Even the caution against exotifying the cultures explored within the contact zone reinforces the expectation that instructors possess the critical awareness necessary to navigate complex cultural dynamics responsibly. Taken together, these expectations construct a particular image of the instructor within contact zone theory: one who is linguistically proficient, culturally competent, reflexive, and capable of managing the complexities of difference, able to "closely attend to what our students say and write" and respond to the "strange, sometimes threatening, multivocal texts" produced within the contact zone (Horton, 2021).

However, attending to the multilingual international graduate instructor within this framework reveals a critical limitation in these assumptions. While the literature positions instructors as those who guide students through linguistic and cultural difference, it does not fully account for situations in which the instructor's own linguistic identity becomes a source of instability within the classroom. For multilingual instructors whose accents or speech patterns fall outside dominant norms, the ability to function as a "tour guide" or facilitator cannot be taken for granted. Instead of occupying a position of uncontested authority, these instructors may find themselves simultaneously guiding and being evaluated, teaching and being misunderstood, facilitating and being positioned as a problem within the very space they are expected to manage.
The autoethnographic experience presented in this study illustrates this tension clearly. Despite receiving an Advanced High rating on the OPIc exam and being institutionally recognized as proficient, my authority was undermined when students complained, revealing that linguistic legitimacy was determined not by institutional validation but by student perception.

Similarly, moments in which students responded with "huh?" or requested repetition reflect what Pratt describes as "miscomprehension" and "incomprehension," not as isolated breakdowns in communication but as conditions shaped by linguistic expectation and power. These interactions positioned me not as a stable facilitator of the contact zone, but as a participant within it, whose authority was subject to ongoing negotiation.

My experience further extends this dynamic, demonstrating how authority can be destabilized through subtle, ambiguous interactions, students smiling, wearing earbuds, or repeatedly asking for clarification. These moments produced a heightened reflexivity in teaching practice, where instruction became not only about delivering content but also about monitoring how one's speech was being received in real time. In this sense,

authority was not inherent to the instructor's role but co-constructed through ongoing interaction.

When these experiences are read alongside contact zone pedagogy, a significant shift emerges in how the contact zone must be understood. The assumption that instructors can function as "tour guides" who seamlessly facilitate linguistic and cultural negotiation overlooks the reality that they may simultaneously be navigating their own legitimacy within the same space. Rather than occupying a position outside the contact zone, multilingual instructors are embedded within it, experiencing the same instability, negotiation, and asymmetrical power relations that the theory has traditionally attributed to students. This is further illustrated in contrasting classroom contexts: in linguistically diverse classrooms, my authority was less contested, while in predominantly monolingual classrooms, my accent became hypervisible and destabilizing, despite no change in my teaching practice. These moments demonstrate that authority is not fixed but relational, shaped by student expectations and linguistic ideologies.

Thus, what changes in the contact zone is not simply who participates, but how authority, power, and legitimacy are distributed and experienced. The contact zone can no longer be understood as a space where instructors guide students from a position of stability; instead, it must be reconceptualized as a shared, dynamic environment in which both instructors and students engage in the negotiation of meaning, identity, and authority. This reframing extends the past two and a half decades of student-centered contact zone scholarship by revealing that the very conditions, miscomprehension, instability, and asymmetrical power, that scholars have used to describe student experience also shape the experiences of international graduate instructors. Recognizing this not only expands the theoretical scope of the contact zone but also exposes the need to reconsider how linguistic authority is constructed, perceived, and contested within writing classrooms.

This is not to suggest that linguistic identity is the only way instructor authority is contested. Monolingual instructors may also face challenges to their legitimacy because of race, gender, age, disability, or other aspects of their identity. The contact zone, understood as a space where authority is negotiated through social interaction, can account for these different forms of contestation. Rather than arguing that linguistic identity is uniquely destabilizing, this study focuses on one dimension of instructor authority, accent and linguistic identity, to show how it is negotiated within the contact zone. Future research might examine how linguistic identity intersects with other social identities to shape perceptions of instructor legitimacy across different classroom contexts.

Although Horton (2021) serves as a key example throughout this article, the assumption that instructors occupy stable positions of authority extends beyond a single source. Scholarship on classroom facilitation more broadly often portrays instructors as responsible for creating inclusive, productive learning environments, implicitly treating their authority as stable and unquestioned. At the same time, research on non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) and international teaching assistants (ITAs)

(Moussu & Llurda, 2008; Ramjattan, 2020, 2022) has begun to document the vulnerabilities multilingual instructors experience, particularly those related to accent, legitimacy, and classroom authority. However, this work has largely developed outside the framework of contact zone theory. Building on these studies, this article brings multilingual instructor experiences into conversation with contact zone theory to argue that instructors, like students, are participants in the negotiation of meaning, power, and authority.

Central to this reframing is the idea of relationality: authority, legitimacy, and meaning in the classroom are not fixed qualities that instructors possess but are produced through interactions between instructors and students. While contact zone scholarship has largely explored these negotiations from the perspective of students, this study argues that they also shape the instructor's experience. My authority did not exist independently of classroom interactions; rather, it was continually constructed through everyday exchanges, including requests for repetition, laughter, eye contact, and other responses to my speech. Viewed this way, relationality becomes more than a description of classroom dynamics. It provides a way of understanding instructor authority as something negotiated in practice rather than guaranteed by institutional credentials such as oral proficiency scores, teaching certifications, or academic degrees.

Conclusion

This study reconsiders the contact zone by shifting attention from its predominantly student-centered application in writing studies to a more fully relational understanding that recognizes the instructor as an active subject within it. Drawing on critical autoethnography, the analysis demonstrates that multilingual international graduate instructors do not simply facilitate encounters across linguistic and cultural difference; they are themselves positioned within those encounters, where their authority, legitimacy, and intelligibility are continuously interpreted and negotiated. Moments of miscomprehension, requests for repetition, and reactions to accent reveal that meaning in the classroom is not produced through speech alone, but through listening practices shaped by linguistic expectations and broader ideological norms.

Importantly, this study does not extend Mary Louise Pratt’s original concept of the contact zone, which already conceptualizes it as a space involving “people” engaged in asymmetrical relations of power. Rather, it interrogates how contact zone theory has been taken up within writing studies, where it has often been applied in ways that center student experience while positioning instructors as stable facilitators of linguistic and cultural negotiation. Within this framing, instructors are implicitly constructed as linguistically secure authorities capable of guiding students through difference. By foregrounding the experiences of multilingual international graduate instructors, this study restores the relational scope of Pratt’s framework and demonstrates that instructors, too, are implicated within the contact zone as participants whose authority is contingent and negotiated. In doing so, it complicates pedagogical models that position instructors as facilitators or guides by showing that the instructor’s role cannot be assumed to be stable or outside the dynamics of the contact zone.

Situating this argument within more than two decades of student-centered contact zone scholarship highlights a critical gap in the field. While prior work has been essential in demonstrating how students develop critical awareness through negotiating linguistic and cultural difference, it has largely left unexamined how instructors, particularly multilingual international graduate instructors, experience those same dynamics. As a result, the contact zone must be understood not as a space managed by instructors for students, but as a shared and unstable environment in which all participants are engaged in the ongoing negotiation of meaning, identity, and authority.

These findings carry important implications for writing studies and institutional practice. Writing programs must move beyond assumptions of instructor linguistic neutrality and critically examine how authority is produced and perceived in multilingual classrooms. This includes rethinking evaluation practices that privilege dominant language norms, developing pedagogical approaches that frame communication as a shared responsibility, and creating institutional structures that more effectively evaluate, support, guide, and train multilingual international graduate instructors within the realities of the contact zone. Without such shifts, multilingual instructors remain positioned within systems that implicitly tie legitimacy to dominant language norms.

One implication of this argument is that writing programs should reconsider how they prepare and support multilingual instructors. Rather than placing the responsibility for successful communication solely on international instructors through accent-focused assessments or remediation, programs might also recognize listening as a shared communicative responsibility. This could involve creating opportunities for faculty and students to engage with a wider range of Englishes while encouraging critical reflection on the assumptions that shape how accented speech is heard and evaluated. Such an approach shifts the burden of intelligibility from the instructor alone to the classroom community, acknowledging that communication is negotiated between speakers and listeners rather than determined solely by the speaker's accent.

Ultimately, this study calls for a reconceptualization of the contact zone as a fully relational space, one that aligns more closely with Pratt’s original formulation, where both students and instructors are implicated in the negotiation of power, meaning, and legitimacy. Recognizing multilingual international graduate instructors as both facilitators and participants does not expand the contact zone beyond its original scope; rather, it restores its relational complexity and reorients writing studies toward a more accurate and inclusive understanding of how authority and language function in increasingly diverse writing classrooms.

It is important to acknowledge that this study is grounded in the autoethnographic experience of a single instructor. While critical autoethnography provides a valuable lens for examining the lived negotiation of linguistic legitimacy and instructor authority, it cannot capture the full range of experiences of multilingual international graduate instructors across different institutions, disciplines, and linguistic backgrounds. Future research using interviews, narrative inquiry, or collaborative autoethnography with multiple instructors could examine which patterns identified here are broadly shared and

which are shaped by particular institutional, cultural, or linguistic contexts. Such work could also explore how linguistic identity intersects with race, gender, nationality, and other social identities to shape perceptions of instructor authority across diverse classroom settings.

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