Dr. Balaji Rangarathnam is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Sciences & Disorders. He received his bachelor’s degree in speech-language and hearing sciences and a master’s degree in speech-language pathology from the University of Mysore, India. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences in 2013 and has been working at ECU since Fall 2013. His professional interests relate to voice and swallowing disorders. He directs the Voice and Swallowing Research Lab at ECU. The focus of his research is to understand the neurophysiology of swallowing and to develop efficacious treatment methods for neurogenic dysphagia and vocal hyperfunction.

What do you like best about working at ECU?

I love the balance between research and teaching. I have seen universities that have a heavier emphasis on research or teaching. Here at ECU, we are encouraged and supported to establish and maintain a productive line of research; at the same time do not compromise on the superior quality of education we give to our students. People are very friendly and work as a team, all of which makes ECU an excellent place to work.

What do you find most exciting about your research and its potential?

My research focuses on developing treatment methods for dysphagia (swallowing impairment) due to neurogenic origins and hyperfunctional voice disorders. Research on functional outcomes that are clearly tied to physiological changes resulting from treatment exercises targeting specific aspects of swallowing or voice physiology is still growing. I am very excited that my research could have a direct impact on improving the quality of life of several individuals who might have disorders of voice production and swallowing. My research also attempts to identify the physiological bases of treatment outcomes. In other words, I not only study what works, but also try to investigate as to why should these exercises work.

What excites you about teaching?

The responsibilities of an educator are several times more in a clinical field like ours where students are trained to take a more important role in the society working with patients and their families. I love the fact that I can impact several students in becoming knowledgeable and empathetic clinicians who can make informed clinical decisions. The graduate Dysphagia course I teach in Spring is generally very complicated and I like the challenge that comes with simplifying it for students, and still maintain the rigor of the course.

What do you hope students take away from their experiences from working with you on your research?
I hope that my students understand the importance of critical thinking, objective interpretation/applicability of data and accountability from their experiences working with me. “Making” students to think is not always easy and I hope I facilitate the process of critically applying information from different sources for appropriate interpretation of data that is neither overly generalized nor underestimated of its scope.

What is your favorite teaching or research moment?

A good news of a manuscript being accepted in a top journal or a grant proposal being funded is definitely a favorite moment. As far as teaching is concerned, I like the cards that we receive at the end of each academic year about the “the person who has made the most positive contribution to a student’s education at ECU”. It is very gratifying to see that we have impacted the education of at least some individuals in a class. I also fondly remember when a student emailed me saying she had decided to pursue dysphagia as a clinical specialty because of the class she took with me.